

Seen - Unseen — A Touchy-Feely Art Experience

Seen – Unseen is an art project by artist Clare McLoughlin. It deals with the non – visual exploration of art and allows the blind or vision impaired person to experience artwork through touch.

Clare's thesis, for her first class honours BA (Hons) in Visual Art, explored the haptic experience of art. Clare started to investigate the art landscape of a visually impaired person, in particular in the gallery space. In a predominately visual art world, Clare began investigating how people with a visual impairment could access art and what could be done to highlight and improve their access.

"I enlisted the help and cooperation of NCBI. They were very helpful and gave me access to a lot of research material on organizing an event for people with sight loss — sighted guiding, and some international websites and organizations with very helpful research material. Arts & Disability Ireland also were very helpful in sharing their research and putting the open call for participants to the gallery visits on their website".

Clare made contact with art galleries throughout Ireland and set about organizing a schedule of VIP Gallery visits with the help and cooperation of the gallery employees. An open invitation was then issued to all visually impaired people to attend the gallery visits.

The first Seen – Unseen visually impaired gallery visit was with a blind person from West Cork, in May 2014, to the West Cork Arts Centre 'Bealtaine' exhibition. This was a community art exhibition, with various exhibits including painting, sound, installation, found objects, printing, and text. Clare did the tour herself and she got permission from the gallery to touch some of the exhibits, this was a great help for the collaborator as it gave a greater sense of exploration for the participant.

**Artist,
Clare
McLoughlin,
Bandon, Co.
Cork**



Since then there have been 14 successful VIP gallery visits to galleries including The National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, The Crawford Gallery in Cork, The Butler Gallery in Kilkenny, The Irish Museum of Modern Art IMMA, in Dublin, The Glucksman Gallery in Cork and more recently, The Douglas Hyde Gallery in Trinity College Dublin. The interest has grown considerably to the extent that two sessions are necessary for some of the gallery visits due to numbers. Clare praises the management and staff of the galleries where she has organized VIP visits, and looks forward to collaborating with them, and indeed other galleries, in the future.

The VIP gallery visits formed the research for Clare's final year degree show on Sherkin Island. This was a performative, participatory installation that gave the participants the experience of exploring an art space in a non-visual way. This experience culminated in an enclosed video piece portraying the touching of art in the gallery space, which was filmed during the gallery visits, but which did not disclose the identity of the collaborators. A number of the VIP collaborators in Seen – Unseen made the journey to Clare's degree show to visit the installation. Clare was really appreciative of their terrific support and their tremendous contribution to the art project and indeed the contribution of all of the collaborators, galleries and organizations.

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Brenda Behan

Brenda Behan, NCBI's Community Resource Worker was involved with Clare and the National Art gallery sessions from the beginning and she encouraged and supported blind and partially sighted people to take part in this project.

"I think it is very important that blind and vision impaired people have the opportunity to explore the visual arts, if they wish. Equally important is the chance to explore their own creativity and the possibilities that may come from that.

The Sherkin Island art exhibits offered so much in terms of being accessible; in that they included materials that were accessible, tactile, sensory, interactive, thought provoking, memory stimulating, promoted conversation and questioning, and were inspiring. Eileen, a guide dog user and I were blown away by the experience.

Claire has done so much to encourage blind and visually people to consider Visual Art, to revisit an interest in Art, to get involved in Art and much more. She also challenges the views that many sighted people hold about people with sight loss. ■



Participants in the haptic experience of art.

"The comments from participants were very positive and included 'Really interesting experience, made me 'see' things differently'; 'What a lovely tactile experience very soothing — smooth, rough, soft, flat surfaces'. '...really interesting work, certainly makes the viewer think differently'; and 'Thank you, it was good to slow down the visual and explore how little we respond in a tactile way'."



Clare lives in Bandon, Co. Cork, with her two young adult children. If you are interested in participating in the gallery visits you can contact Clare by email claremclaughlin@eircom.net or by telephone on 086 3091653. ■