

Reflection on Glass Painting Workshop Delivered at Chorlton's Big Green Festival on 27.03.10

This was one of three arts workshops offered at the festival which gave visitors an opportunity to get involved in a range of crafts activities. As many of the responses to the survey had raised participation in arts events as being influential on a positive relationship between an individual and their local area and the nature of workshops in general lends themselves to participation and in this case, community engagement, I was interested to become involved in order to further explore this potential method for interaction rather than to develop or promote the craft outcomes. Statements from the survey which supported this include:

"cultural events make you feel a part of your environment"

"they (cultural events) can offer people(sp) purpose, sense of belonging"

"when I can participate in events" (response to 'What makes you feel most in control when in the urban environment?')

"participating in arty events" (response to 'Can you give an example of a time when you interacted with a place in which you lived?')

With the theme of the day focussing on environmental issues, the inclusion of re-used materials in the painted glass work allowed me a justification to participate and it was due to the fact that I had been involved in the previous year as a stall holder selling these items that I was invited to apply to run the session. Despite previous involvement, I was keen to ensure that my participation in this event generated as much opportunity as possible to fully explore the issues of public relationship with urban space that I am now referencing and did not become a 'throwback' to a previous stage in the development of my creative practice. For this reason, I devised a specific theme for the day and while I did make sales of painted glass, I did not produce any new pieces and the display of these were not central to the layout of the space or particularly promoted. The workshop plan required participants to work with images of their local area that they were asked during the booking process to bring. The hope was that this would encourage participants to give some thought to their environment before the day and in being asked to provide photographs, there would be some requirement for them to interact directly with the same. In event promotion, the outcomes to be generated were described as 'Local Souvenirs' which seemed to not only be the most direct way way to describe the concept in simple, accessible language but also referenced some discussion that had risen in a tutorial in October.

The event was advertised online and in promotion on www.greenchorlton.org.uk/workshops.php which led to eight places being booked in advance via my website. As the workshop was subsidised the organisers were keen to keep the session free, however I was concerned that as the event was in the relatively wealthy area of Chorlton there was less of a need to keep it as financially accessible as if it had been in a poorer location and that a small fee would encourage those who had booked to actually turn up. A refundable deposit was suggested, however as I pay an administration fee for transactions through my website this was not viable and so it was agreed to run it without charge. As only two of the eight bookings attended, I did feel my concerns were rather validated. Thought there were 2 additional participants that joined in on the day I was disappointed that I had not been able to engage more people and they were left to work with my supplied images rather than using their own sources which slightly negated the personal possibilities. They engaged with the content nonetheless and as they were both much younger than the age group I had anticipated working with this lent an alternative tone to the outcomes.

Despite the disappointing turnout, the day was useful as an opportunity for reflection and some of the main issues which were raised are as follows;

Recruitment/Attendance

How does one best go about selecting, finding, approaching and engaging the right audience? In this instance there was a specific section of the community that would be likely to get involved and given the nature of the event (cachement area, focus on green issues) it seems likely that these individuals would already be open to

the concept as presented in the workshop and it might be more effective if engaging an alternative group of individuals who were also less likely to access the arts regularly. Despite this, issues of public ownership apply to everyone regardless of their lifestyle and it should be noted that all the participants clearly communicated enjoyment of the content as well as the process during verbal discussion of the subject matter.

One issue already raised briefly which relates to attendance is that of the cost. My concern that a free workshop did not encourage those who pre-booked to attend seems validated and it is possibly not a coincidence that the two booked participants who actually turned up had already been refunded after the cancellation of an earlier workshop in December. The fact that they had been involved in a monetary transaction related to the workshop suggests they identified a value in the session which perhaps those who had never been asked to pay had not. How then does one give such an event a sense of value without making it inaccessible? Perhaps the wording of the promotional material can play a part here, possibly by stating that the workshop is offering subsidised places (indicating that *someone* has paid for it) rather than suggesting that it is totally free or without monetary value.

I also realised throughout the course of the day that expecting people to take time out of their weekend, even for leisure activities should not be taken lightly; many people have so many 'life' issues to facilitate that participating in a crafts workshop at the weekend is surely some way down the list of priorities for most. I have often felt that the arts can only really come after all our other needs are catered for (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is called to mind here) and though they may be a method by which to cater for some of these needs, the way in which we go about addressing this will impact upon the popularity of the event. This may have an even greater impact in poorer areas where people have generally less of their essential needs met effectively.

Suitability of Process

The process of glass painting was used in this case in order to specifically relate to the theme of the day (through the reuse/recycling element) and as it was for use of these techniques that I was previously known to the organisers. It was also suitable for the ease of which these techniques can be picked up by participants and for the 'craft' qualities which make it an easily pursuable hobby, however, practicalities relating to drying times and a strict 5pm finish meant that several people who wanted to join in did not have time to get an outcome finished and this prevented wider participation. One element which related the process to the concept was the nature of the re-used glass which meant that as well as working with images of the urban environment, in some cases the object had been salvaged from the same. This feature might also have been explored in other ways too though and it was hard to relate the process to the concept beyond this which led to it feeling incidental at best and arguably irrelevant. If I pursue the running of community workshops further I would be much more interested in working with the projection methods as in the current installation work. Unfortunately, though I have applied to a few events for which it might have been appropriate, so far my submissions have not been successful.

Discussing the Content more Directly

Though there was some discussion of locality during the session I felt that the concept could have been used more effectively to draw ideas and dialogue into the workshop. One way I might have done this would have been to pose direct questions which participants might answer before commencing certain stages. For example, having selected an image, I might have asked them to state how they felt about the place and then used these answers as a vehicle to address use of visual language in communicating that. If a participant had said the area they had provided an image of made them feel at home, we might then have talked about use of colour to convey mood such as feelings of serenity. Alternatively, there may have been some discussion of compositional devices such as use of scale or repetition to emphasise certain features or objects within the images. This lack of conceptual engagement was probably encouraged by the disconnection between the idea

and the process and if I were to run a workshop using projection and drawing this might be less pronounced as I have already developed the spacial connections. An additional failing on my part was neglecting to include reference to the concept on the feedback sheet, concentrating instead on general workshop issues. It would have been useful to get some feedback on the ideas and I might have done this by asking participants to write a paragraph about their images before starting and then perhaps an additional few sentences at the end which might have enabled me to establish if the process had encouraged any new thoughts. Though it would be exceptionally naive to believe I might considerably change an individual's feelings toward their environment through one five hour workshop, it might at least have provided some evidence that it had encouraged further thought or exploration of the issues presented. It should be noted however, that the feedback was overwhelmingly positive with each participant stating that they were very likely to use their new skills and that they could identify that they had learnt something new through the session.



Above: Images being prepared

Left: Transferring to glass

Below: Four finished outcomes

