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Tough Dough

Tough Dough CIC is an arts organisation in Cornwall founded in 2005. Since then it has worked with artists, communities and organisations, to deliver creative arts projects that celebrate people, stories and the natural environment.

Co-directors Alessandra Ausenda and John Keys are visual artists and educators with a passion for the natural environment and exploring the landscape of Cornwall. They are both firm believers in the restorative benefit of creativity, communication and spending time in the natural world.

Tough Dough has an extensive knowledge of creative and cultural networks in the South West and plays an active role in contributing to the cultural landscape in the region. It has formed influential partnerships across different sectors including education, heritage, health and business, building meaningful connections between organisations and communities.

Previous grant funding has been awarded by Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery Fund and Feast Cornwall.

Commissions & Partnerships include Creative Kernow, Tate St Ives, Porthcurno Telegraph Museum, Kresen Kernow, Cultivator, Arts Well, Real Ideas, KEAP and AMATA.



You can't pour from an empty cup. Take care of yourself first

Message Sent 21: A Tough Dough Project in response to Covid.

Throughout the Covid 19 pandemic, Tough Dough continued to engage with groups and individuals working remotely and digitally. The lockdowns meant their tried and tested methods of delivery were not possible, so they found new ways of engaging and communicating with communities.

Their experience of the first lockdown highlighted the benefits artists get from supporting each other and confirmed the premise '*You can't pour from an empty cup. Take care of yourself first.*' Believing that it is essential to feed one's own creativity in order to support and inspire others, Message Sent was envisaged as a collaborative project in which artists could do this by making and responding to each other's artwork.

Message Sent 21 was set up as a collaborative project between eight artists in the UK in 2021; four artists based in the South West and four based in the North East. It was managed by Tough Dough and in association with John Quinn and Jyl Friggens, two artists who work creatively with communities in and around Newcastle. Rachel Hindley was invited to support Tough Dough through her own research in collaborative practice.

The aim was to establish and develop a dialogue between the artists by exchanging and replying to each other with small art works sent by post. The project consisted of six collaborative exchanges over a six-month period, culminating in a residential weekend at the Barn at Easington near Durham.



Exchange 1 Artists in lockdown

Each artist from the South West was paired with an artist from the North East. The brief was to respond to their partner's work, presented during the initial Zoom meeting, in any form that could be sent by post, no bigger than A5.

Seeing Nicola's very intuitive work and hearing her talking about mindfulness reminded me to focus on the joy of the present. Her exuberant and irreverent aesthetic encouraged me to bring a lightness and humour to my response. I painted three little birds from my garden that captured a moment of calm in the chaos of daily life.

John Keys



Aware of missing face-to-face contact with women friends during lockdown, I was reminded of the women in my life who had died, whom I'll never see again. I made a prayer flag for each one and, with a soldering iron, burnt their names and details into the delicate fabric I'd chosen, creating negative shapes through which the wind would blow.

Mary Oliver

When I received Mary's messages from the dead, I remembered the deaths of my father and my brother who died within six months of each other. I hadn't thought about them for a long time, but was now prompted to make a short film about a closed wardrobe containing unspeakable memories, which I shared with Mary.

John Quinn

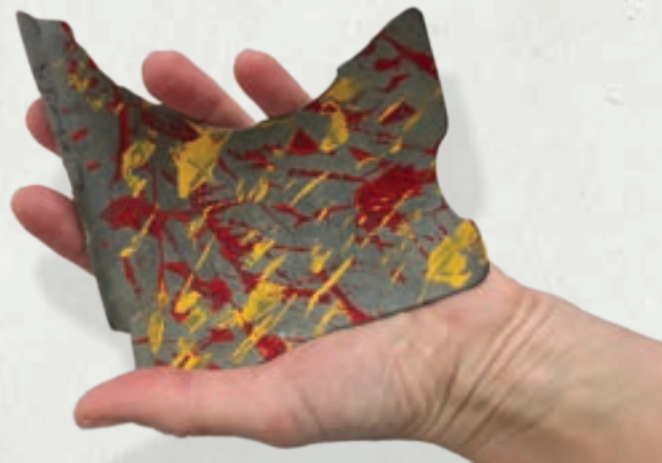




When lockdown came it felt like a line was drawn and I felt a strange kind of relief it was over. . It was like what I'd always put in the box 'one day' was actually here now and this was Day One and I knew this was the only chance I was ever going to get
John Quin

Jyl's message took me by surprise; a box with a nest inside and a scene – the unpacking of which, witnessed by the group on zoom, became a performance of sorts! I responded by sending her flotsam found on my local beach – a gift from a Cornish shore.

Tim Ridley



I made a piece using ear-shaped stones in response to all of Sharon's listening in the care homes. I was inspired by Sharon's beautiful folding of paper and as a result I combined the cast of an ear with a folded hand-written story.

Alessandra Ausenda

I constructed an origami Chinese thread book, in response to Alessandra's ear. I used photographs and objects found on my local beach to mark the surface and form the words 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times', which seemed relevant because they reflected how I felt during that period. I wrote the message 'I hear you' inside the shell - a special message to Alessandra.

Sharon Bailey



Exchange 2 The Ordinary

Each artist was asked to respond to the theme of 'The Ordinary' and send the resulting artwork to a specific recipient in mind in an A5 envelope. On receiving the artwork, they were asked to respond.



Straight away I started noticing how so much of our ordinary lives are rich and extraordinary.

Knowing I was making a piece for John Quin, I considered what we had in common in our day to day lives. This led me to drawing my dog which I had not done before, considering the world through his eyes – blissfully unaware of the complexity of human experience – simply living in the present.

John Keys



Seeing John's painting of his dog asleep in its bed was so ordinary yet the colours and textures, the way the leg bones folded up and wrapped round each other, were fascinating. This made me think how artists see the extraordinary in the ordinary and draw our attention to it. I filmed an ordinary everyday dog-walk but tried to see it from my dog's eyes and go where he wanted to go. This took many diversions from my preferred route, but when we came across a field of lapwings on top of the hill it was all worth it.

John Quinn

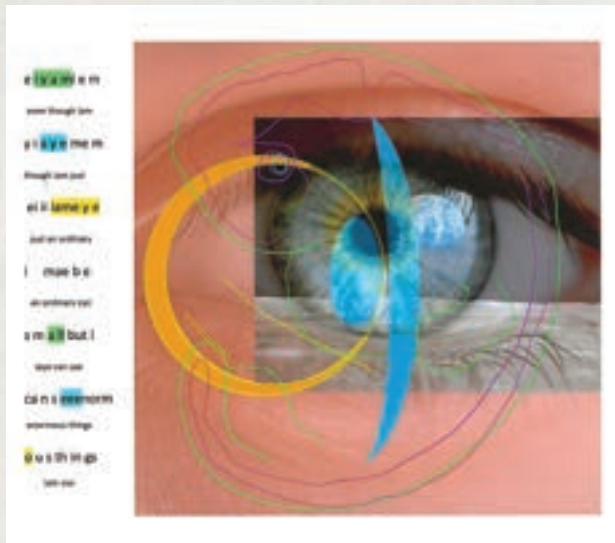
Responding to the theme of 'The Ordinary' triggered memories of my long friendship with Jyl. I printed words onto a band of fabric, which I rolled onto a fork as an expression the love between us and all that we had shared. Being half Italian, I find the sharing of food is closely intertwined with friendship and I wanted to represent that in this piece.

Alessandra Ausenda

Receiving Alessandra's artwork was overwhelming; it was intimate and heavy with the weight of memory. I responded to Alessandra by making 'a hand of friendship' a symbol often used in Folk Art, which is defined as 'made by the common people, notably from rural areas.'

Jyl Friggens

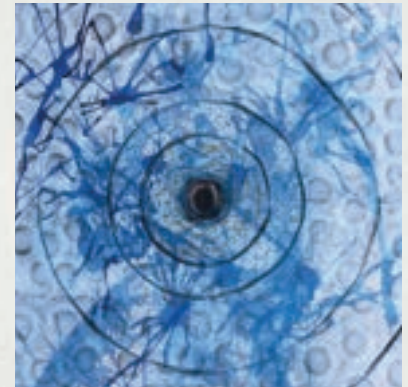




I received a poem from John presented as a closeup image of an eye. At the time I had just had an eye operation, so I was moved by receiving an artwork that showed he was thinking of me.

My response to his piece was to express what I had experienced during the operation, an unfolding of patterns and emotions.

Alessandra Ausenda



Alessandra

I started thinking what is ordinary? And everything I thought of seemed to not be that ordinary after all and then I thought of life itself, giving birth is extraordinary but it's also very ordinary, it happens all the time and everyone and every living mammal is here because of it. And how miraculous is The Ordinary. Then I came across this Rumi quote "I am so small I can barely be seen. How can this great love be inside me? Look at your eyes. They are small, but they see enormous things." And this made me think of seeing huge things, planets, stars and small things cells and microbes. So I was drawn to the ordinary eye and how it evolves and grows and sees enormous things then I played around with I and eye and the cards you read when you get your eyes tested and came up with

i
am
eye



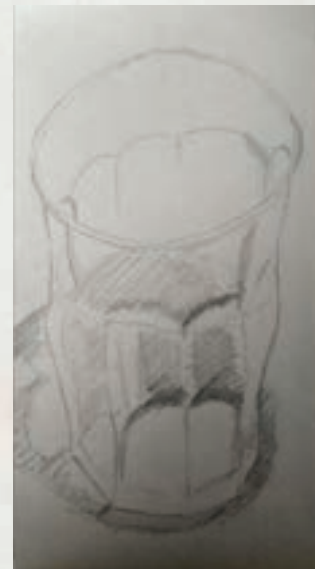
An everyday journey around
my house and garden.

Nicola Balfour



I loved creating drawings of everyday
objects, it made me realise that we
are surrounded by clever design and
that we all share a very common
quotidian experience.

Tim Ridley



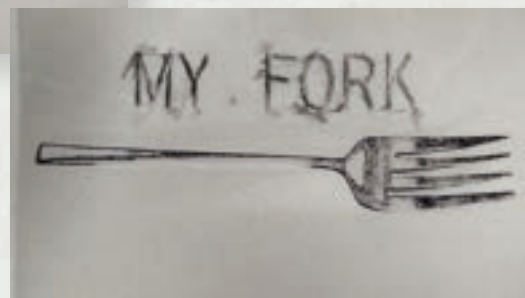


I sent a fold-out pocketbook of everyday things referencing Pablo Neruda's 'Odes to Ordinary Things'. I aimed to capture a few everyday things that represented that day, on that day.

Sharon Bailey



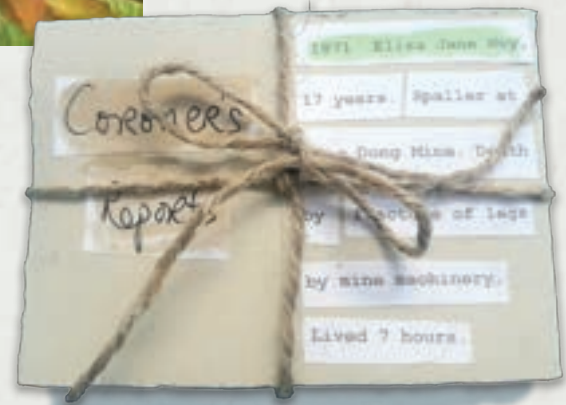
*'Awake, arise,
open your eyes
and hear the
time of day.'*





I researched old records and newspaper reports, finding names, dates and causes of death of six Bal Maidens who had worked and died in Cornish arsenic and tin mines. I made a banner of prayer flags dedicated to each one and sent them to Nicola.

Mary Oliver





Jyl sent me a concertina book of small compartments containing objects she had gathered during one day; a tea bag, a bottle top, a pencil sharpening. Random everyday objects given new meaning by their selection and presentation.

I was inspired to go out and capture a snapshot of one day in my garden.

[John Keys](#)

Exchange 3 Going on a walk

Artists received instructions by post. They were to go on a walk and then represent this walk to a specified recipient in any form or medium.



When I listened to Tim's audio of his walk, I tried to replicate a similar walk here in the North East. I went out and took photographs of the busy road, the lane, the bridge, the trees that would somehow reference Tim's walk. This was a way to connect our experiences of at last being able to go out for walks and to find common ground. I then used the road sign symbol of two children crossing the road and stepping off the bridge and eventually off the planet into the unknown, for a story.

John Quinn

John's walk recording instantly gave me an idea, and a comedic animal commentary spewed forth. I felt enabled and happy with this message exchange.

Tim Ridley





Sharon and I both chose a walk through a bluebell wood, which we documented by a series of small photographs. Whilst the subject was similar, the difference in compositions, colour palette and presentation highlighted how distinctive an individual artist's perspective is. Interestingly Sharon's response to my walk focused on an image of my son and the subsequent piece of work she made was about a precious time on a coastal walk with her own son. Which, in turn, reminded me of how significant it is to notice who we are sharing an experience with.

John Keys





On a familiar walk, I stopped and painted three watercolours in three different locations. The effect of doing this was that I became more aware of the details and complexities of the regular. I collected plants as a way of gathering textures and smells associated with the places I had chosen to sit.

I wrote about what I was feeling, hearing and smelling in each place. I found tuning into the sensory a very calming experience.

I was reminded how important all the senses are to an artist when creating a connection to subject matter.

Nicola Balfour

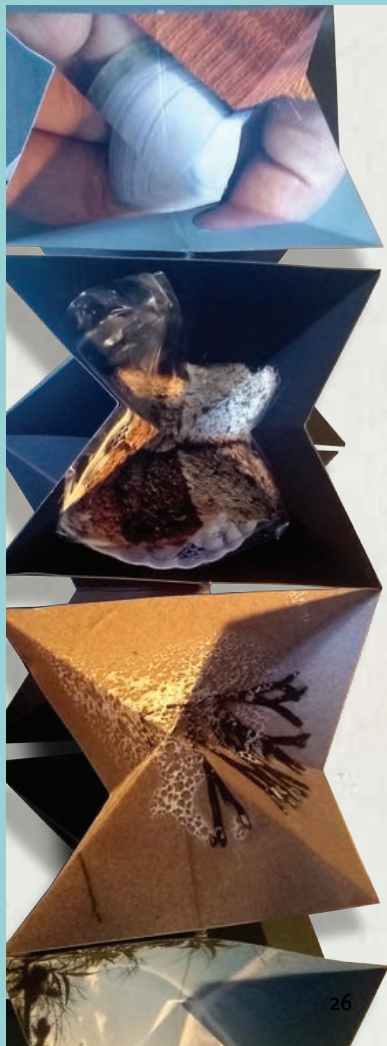


I received paper bags from Nicola describing three sections of a walk, three packets of seeds, three paintings and pressed leaves and flowers. Going through them I felt I was joining her on her walk in the North East.

I walked out into my garden in the South West and wanted to share my sensations with Nicola so I found five examples to represent the senses and labelled them sending them back to her. She in turn added them to a sensory box, which brought together our experiences in opposite parts of the country.

Alessandra Ausenda





I sent Mary a folding book containing photographs of a familiar, local walk. As a result of lockdown's limitations on travel, I'd become even more intimate with the walk, producing quiet images which reflected my increased spiritual connection to my environment.

Sharon Bailey

In response to Sharon I made a series of images on parachute silk that recorded the 27 walks I'd taken with a friend during lockdown. Text and washes of colour distil memories of place, experienced in an unusually charged context. I then sewed the series of images onto a bright red ribbon and strung them between two trees, where they're slowly disintegrating in the wild weather of West Penwith.

Mary Oliver





I sent my piece of work to Jyl, who I felt had looked sad at our last meeting and I'd wondered if she was missing Cornwall. Walking head down in heavy rain, forced to look at the ground rather than at the sea or the horizon, I noticed how many limpet shells had been thrown up by the last high tide. I collected a variety of them (tall, squat, holed, damaged, dark as night or pearly light), realizing each one of them had once been a safe home. I wrote words inside the shells and collated them into a poem for Jyl.

Mary Oliver



I walk with my dog two to three times a day, often in silence as we know the way so well and are sometimes just waking up! Less of a walk, more of a potter, walking with my senses. As I walked I collected. I wrote down words, listened, watched, scratched and sniffed. Actually, it's something I often do! The concertina book was made back at home, using the record of that time to piece it together. The words were 'North minded' in my response. Like the charm of finches I wanted it to be simple, like a common language, this Edge land, this nearby nature at the back of my house.

Jyl Friggens

Exchange 4 Collaboration

The four artists from each region were asked to work collaboratively to make a piece of work that could be sent to the four artists in the other region.

South West Collaboration

This was very different from working on an agreed theme and sharing outcomes. Participating simultaneously on the same piece of visual artwork representing the ultimate test of the collaborative process.

The four of us in the South West sat in a studio surrounded by a wide range of materials. We made instinctive marks in response to a theme suggested by each one of us in turn. Then we passed the four boards around and worked on each other's images multiple times until we had four collaborative paintings.



We discussed how these four paintings might be presented as one. The process was stimulating and scary. What do you sacrifice for the sake of artwork? How do you add to or obliterate someone else's marks? It was a bonding and valuable experiment.

It was clear to all of us that the value of the process, which was full of surprises and challenges, outweighed the quality of the outcome.



North East Collaboration

We created a book 'A Sense Of...' for the artists in the South West. A book of prompts, inviting them to respond to a sense of belonging, place, wonder, injustice, self, humour and impending doom.

Making a piece together felt both collaborative and volatile which was surprisingly rewarding. What we produced was definitely greater than the sum of its parts. It was fascinating to see how ideas whizzed round the group and eventually settled on a book.

Collaboration can be a hard process. We needed to spend considerable time planning and talking before we were able to incorporate all our ideas into an agreed format. Discussion and negotiation became easier the more we worked together.





Keeping in touch

During the summer holiday period
each artist sent four postcards to
the four artists from the other region



Exchange 5 A Sense of Place

Artists were asked to respond to the theme 'A Sense of Place', a location, a psychological state, an experience or imagined narrative.



The image of rusty railing leading down into the sea is a place where I swim regularly.

I filmed it as a place where I go to feel replenished. Entering the sea restores the body and soul. One is entering another world, a realm of cold salty water, a place that demands one be completely present, totally in the here and now.

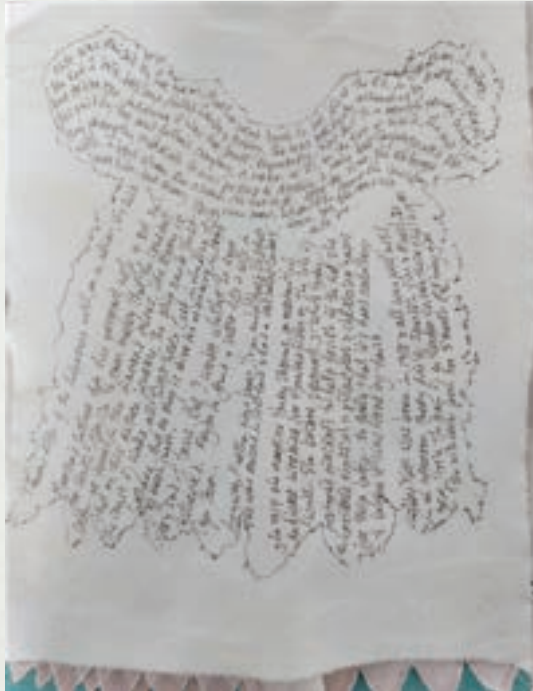
John Keys



Sharon and I discovered that we share a love of plants and gardening. For the sense of place exchange, she created two small, bound books covered in one of my paintings from a previous exchange, titled 'yours' and 'mine.'

She filled hers with exquisite photographs of flowers and words that told of what her garden meant to her. She left my book empty for me to fill in. One full book, one empty, and together such a generous gift.

John Keys



I decided to focus on the sense of place that one feels within the family. I've been fascinated by my absent grandmother, Martha, and a nightie she made and embroidered in 1917, for the baby she was expecting.

Five months after the baby was born, Martha's husband died suddenly in the 1918 'flu' pandemic. The shock was such that she never made loving contact with her baby again.

Mary Oliver



I received a story from John after a visit he made to a beach I have lived nearby since childhood. To me, his story highlighted how differently we can connect to place, particularly when memory is involved. This beach has been the backdrop to my Cornish summers since I was born and I wanted to distil the many experiences. I decided to collect seawater and shells in a test tube, adding card and paper to form a pod-like object. It contains the potential to germinate and grow or it could be used as a brush to sweep together fragments and construct something new.

Alessandra Ausenda

I developed a surreal piece of writing which was about my trip to the South West connecting to the landscape there compared to all the walks I'd been doing in the North East.

John Quinn





The animals I see in photographs are my sense of place, my archive of reference materials. They directly inform the images and drawings I make, which in some way is also how I experience the world. Our

contemporary environment has been so efficiently denuded of wild animals that we seldom experience the wild. I am nostalgic for a time when we were not so separate from other species.

Tim Ridley

Nicola Balfour

Jyl Friggens

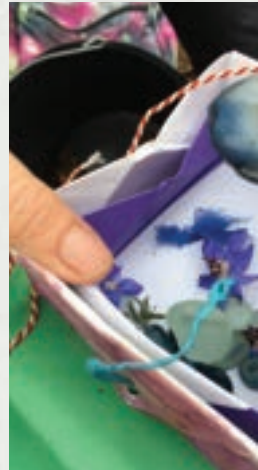


The Barn at Easington Residency

Towards the end of 2021 the Barn at Easington hosted a residential long weekend for the eight artists. Time was spent exploring the local environment, leading each other in art and well-being workshops and sharing the work that had been produced in the previous six months of exchanges. Getting together after all the lockdowns and isolation was tremendously uplifting and rewarding.



“The residency reinforced my experience of the collaborative painting experiment in John’s studio; it paved the way for trust. Once trust was established, sharing ideas and pooling outcomes became an energising stream of exchanges.”





"I learnt so much during the residency, not just about the other artists, but also about myself. I am getting better at listening properly to people and meeting up was a really valuable experience."



"Our practices are different in many ways and this is what makes the interchange so beneficial to us as individuals. The collaboration we have undertaken has been a fresh and exciting process. It was inspiring to finally meet up with the artists in the North East to compare experiences and find ways of working together in the future."





“Bringing the artwork together under one roof gave us the chance to reflect on the quantity produced and the many overlaps. In my case I have witnessed how our tasks and subsequent responses have broadened out my approach and I’m in no rush to let any of these threads drop.”



“The exchanges that took place over the six months leading up to the residency provided the real connection between us all. There was an understanding of shared experiences which the regular meetings helped to establish and so when we did finally meet face-to-face we reinforced those connections.”





"It's been so encouraging to be with people who are passionate about creativity and the arts and I really value this connection. I've enjoyed having someone to make work for; it really shapes and guides the nature of what I make. Seeing all the work together during the residency really made sense of the project and it's impact on us all."






“Message Sent helped me to explore new ideas in a supportive space and pushed me to experiment, play, take risks and try new methods of making. This became apparent during the residency when we consolidated our relationship as artists.”



“Message Sent has stimulated me, allowing me to focus on my own work and have a more conscious engagement with the natural, sensory world. I have greatly valued the simple act of doing in response to prompts; seeing and receiving work from others and the stimulating conversations which felt like supportive tutorials.”

A photograph of a person standing at night next to a large, bright bonfire. The person is wearing a light-colored jacket and glasses, and has their arms outstretched. The bonfire is made of logs and is burning brightly, with sparks flying upwards. The background is dark, suggesting a wooded area.

“The social occasions didn’t necessarily produce the most significant work, but they created the climate in which significant work was subsequently produced. I’m sure this experiment could be carried out entirely remotely but, without the level of trust that was engendered through shared social time, I don’t believe my practice would have taken the radically new directions I’m now so happily pursuing. “

Rachel Hindley was invited to participate with Message Sent 21, due to her particular interest in the dynamics of collaborative practice. In her essay, based on her interviews with the eight artists, Rachel seeks to place the Message Sent experience within an art historical and contemporary art context.



Collaboration: The Power of Creative Exchange by Rachel Hindley

During the initial stages of the pandemic, the isolation, fear and the instability of an unknown future, emphasised the need for collective engagement and solidarity, if nothing else but to reinforce a sense of survival in the face of what felt like an uncontrollable dark force. Across the globe, creative collaborations formed, some investing in and expanding upon their pre-existing networks, whilst others evolved from less formal beginnings through friendship and shared practice; it was from the latter that the Message Sent collective grew and established itself amidst the turbulence and trauma of a national lockdown. Message Sent combines a plethora of collaborative experience, both nationally and internationally, with that of individual studio practice and it was this collective vision that inspired four artists living and working in the Penwith peninsula in South West England to form an alliance with four artists living and working in North East England forging creative bonds, with which they expanded their practices both individually and collectively.

Art history, as curator Ellen Mara De Wachter states, has “glorified the individual (usually male) artist as the ideal type. An alternative art history would involve an account of the constant interplay between the individual and the group” whereby

collaboration and individualism continue to be “two sides of the same coin”.¹ It is the latter that is pertinent to Message Sent, which is as much about the individual as the group. Collectively Message Sent is multidisciplinary, each of its eight members working within and across the fields of community arts, sculpture, painting, photography, film, performance and writing through interaction and dialogue. Message Sent defines the essence and meaning of its collaborative quest through creative practice itself and the transformative relationships between its members.

Message Sent is by its very nature non-hierarchical and its leadership collaborative, making way for creative practice to play out across a network of possibilities, forming a myriad of conceptual threads - meeting, diverging and reconnecting to form a mycelium of fruitful perceptions and interpretations sometimes through intuition and at others through happenstance. It's driving force is not just a psychological state of commitment to work towards a group goal, but an appreciation of the value of the qualities, desires and needs of individual members as equal to those of the group as a whole. It is this humanist belief in individualism that gives Message Sent its creative momentum.

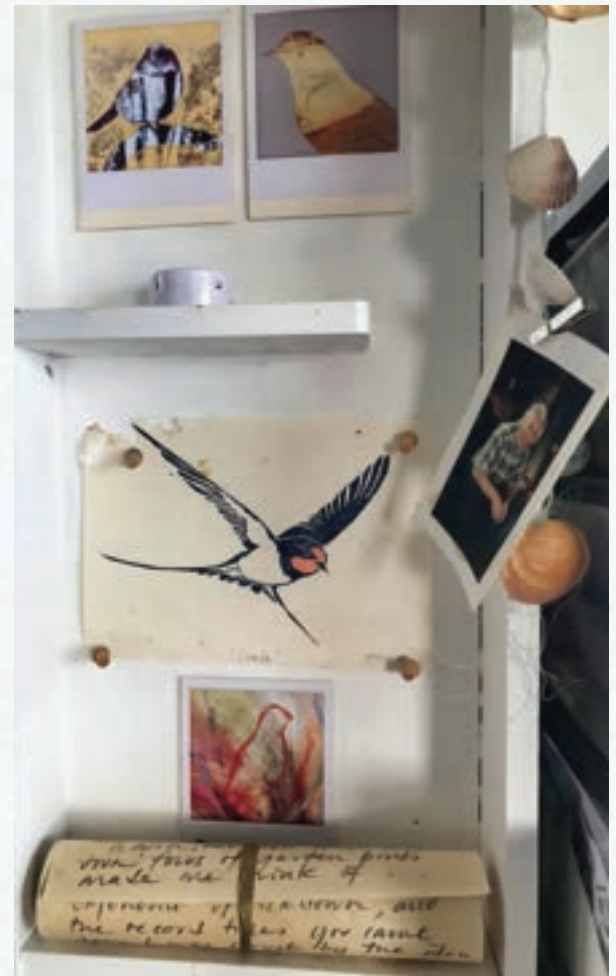
There was a collective need to quench a thirst, break new ground, take risks and in doing so foster a dynamic of mutual support and innovation – for as they themselves declare “you cannot pour from an empty cup....”.² Their work embraces a particular kind of creative sustenance through the ebb and flow of reciprocal exchange – reconfiguring trajectories of creation, inspired by anticipation, expectation and revelation. It seems that humans can survive and thrive better by working together and in this sense, Message Sent plays a principal role in maintaining the creative resilience and emotional wellbeing of its members, engendering a form of presence in absence, in a world suspended in isolation.

With its focus poised upon creative process and exploration, ideologically, Message Sent is not interested in a fixed end product (art object) or the trappings of public scrutiny and consumption. Each of its individual members traversed and collapsed time and space both virtually and metaphorically through social media platforms and the unfolding trajectories within both imagined and real landscapes, embodying rather than disembodied presence in absence.

Gripped by the concerns of the pandemic, Message Sent members welcomed the move back to their own studios, despite its initial challenges. As natural collaborators many had nurtured the creative development of others through differing narratives and community projects for many years, whilst others had had to prioritise family and work, leaving little time for studio practice. The first set of postal exchanges were about their initial reaction to the Covid pandemic lockdown. These exchanges were like gifts, beautifully constructed and carefully packaged with love and empathy and became powerful tools to support and reassure during uncertain times. These small-scale artworks are imbued with a particular kind of emotional significance, but whilst they deepened the emotional connections between the individuals within the group, they also incited excitement and awe.

The initial constraints of the lockdown induced a strong need to impart a sense of hope and freedom. John Keys' images of garden birds alighting are an expression of weightlessness and the embodiment of freedom itself. Accompanied by a recording of Bob Marley's Three Little Birds, "Don't worry about a thing, 'Cause every little thing gonna be all right..." an anthem of hope and freedom, they symbolise a form of liberation, which when received by Nicola Balfour were turned into a shrine, to which she added her own objects of personal significance.

In his paper 'Touching the World – Vision, Hearing, Hapticity and Atmospheric Perception' the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa emphasises the importance of the relationship between touch, vision and hearing,³ which generate sensory sensations and can trigger deeply felt emotions. This could not be more evident than in the exchanges between Sharon Bailey and Alessandra Ausenda, which through their tactile beauty invite one to touch and hear imagined voices, drawing attention to the importance of listening, being heard and cutting through the silence of isolation.





Sharon had done a lot listening during the lockdown while talking to people in care homes; this prompted Alessandra to create her assemblage of stone ears, nestled in the palms of nurturing hands, emerging from the soil as if the earth itself was listening. Her delicate cast of an ear, like an ancient Greek relic rescued from a ruin, sits in a box, cushioned by a concertinaed text, where only partially visible words whisper between the folds.

Sharon's origami Chinese thread book, *It was the Best of Times, It was the Worst of Times*, with its folds beautifully crafted with tender care, although inscribed with happiness at having time to reflect in nature, equally expresses her deep sadness about the grief that unraveled around her. The coal rubbings within, created from sea coal from her beach of comfort, beauty and space, echo how the tide made its own coal drawing along the edge of the shore. The single shell within whispers the words 'I hear you' like Sharon's recorded whisper, *Things I've been Told this Week* – and her film *Covered*, which are poignant portrayals of old age and isolation during the lockdown.

It was the experiences of and responses to the natural and home environment that became the cornerstone of the Message Sent narrative throughout the lockdown. Through a series of dialogues, it became evident that trust influenced the exploration of undiscovered creative territories through investigation and experimentation. Message Sent made room for individual as well as collective playfulness, humour, tenderness and theatre through intimate exchanges of alchemic imaginings. Within domestic as well as outdoor natural spaces the quotidian and imaginative worlds formed a chiasma, whereby the ordinary became extraordinary and the warp and weft of the everyday and artistic practice constituted the fabric of life itself, balancing individual desires with a collective commitment to a creative dialogue of stimulus and response. The time and space of the lockdown afforded a reflective meditation upon the creative act itself.

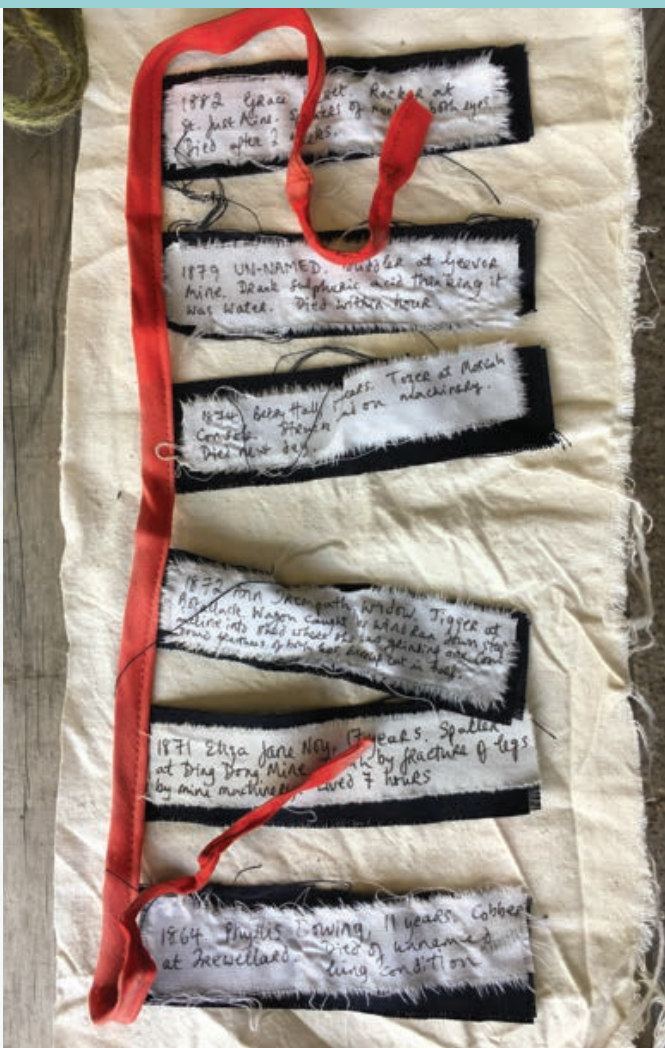
The home as a sanctuary and nesting place, became increasingly important to the Message Sent members, as their geographical frame of reference became progressively localised. This revealed itself beautifully in the exchanges between Jyl Friggens and Tim Ridley. During the first zoom meeting Tim expressed an appreciation of his immediate friendship group,



the view from and the comfort of his attic studio throughout the first lockdown. Jyl saw how this sense of safety within the inner sanctum of the home was analogous with that of a nesting box. She had been industrious throughout the lockdown, making and sending activity boxes to groups in readiness for nature-based activities. It was March and the nesting season, so she was, as she herself describes, “outside with the birds, busy making and doing.” So, it was with thoughts of Tim, boxes, birds, and nests in mind that she created the ‘nesting box with a view’, exquisitely constructed and composed, not nursing an egg, but the music of the hedgerow. Tim reciprocated with an offering of flotsam expelled from the Cornish seashore near to his home, triggering Jyl’s memory of Cornwall, as she went on her morning dog walk in the North East, collecting blue and white ceramic fragments redolent of Cornish pottery which she gifted to Tim in the shape of a heart.

The lockdown brought the ordinary increasingly closer to one's attention. Whilst forced to spend more time inside, the objects of everyday existence, once just 'part of the furniture' in an internal household landscape, started to take on a new significance, the domestic space becoming a *mise en scène* in which new creative dramas might play out. The essence of ordinary everyday objects manifested itself in delicately drawn studies and specimen collections like that of museum archives. However, the fascination with the prosaic moved beyond the boundaries of home in the literal sense, towards a more conceptual notion of the ordinary within history and friendship, bringing the past into the present and vice versa. The ordinary had become fertile ground for a new set of secret exchanges, charged with the excitement of anonymity.

Mary Oliver's *Bal Maiden's Prayer Flags*, despite expressing a deep sadness about historical suffering, are imbued with a universal grief, not unlike that caused by the pandemic itself. Every day during the lockdown Mary trod the path, previously trodden by ordinary girls, the *Bal Maidens*. Her prayer flags recognise their pain, the horrific conditions in which they worked and as Mary states their "harsh, extraordinary, uncelebrated lives". Saturated with compassion, the prayer flags hang melancholically in the breeze, as a memorial to forgotten tragic lives, stating the names, dates and cause of death in the mines, each flag a dedicated prayer. On receipt of the flags Nicola recognised how similar fatalities had been echoed in the lives of those who had worked in the mines in the North East and in doing so strung them up in Durham as an acknowledgement of their grief and loss.



‘The Ordinary’ triggered a tender and intimate response from Alessandra whose fork delicately bound in an ode to friendship, symbolising the shared laughter and sorrow of many years and how the sharing of food is, in her words “inextricably” linked to friendship and inherent in her Italian blood. Jyl deeply touched by what she describes as, “A snapshot of [a] friendship over 40 years!”, responded with a hand, which holds, collects and represents friendship, love, and truth.

In the prayer flags we see how a deep wound from the past is not only opened in the present but mirrored in another geographical location and in the shared symbols of friendship we see how the present reflects the past. In these different creative exchanges, the past is not only active in the present, but the present also revives the past, the memory being a force that constantly reconstructs the past, giving new meaning to the present.⁴

The ancient Greek concepts of Chronos and Kairos represent two opposing experiences of time. Whilst Chronos gives us the sense of chronological measured time, perceived objectively, Kairos offers us the unmeasured subjective sense of timelessness often experienced during the artistic process.⁵ During the lockdown, Chronos, to some extent, gave way to Kairos, where the edges of objective and subjective temporality became blurred and a sense of timelessness ensued. Whilst the gravitas of the pandemic seemed to deepen the demarcation between home and the outer world, for *Message Sent* the power of the imagination and the sense of timelessness seemed to dissolve the boundary between the two. At a time of questioning and searching, the act of walking out of one's front door into nature offered both solace and freedom, which inspired a new combination of exchanges.

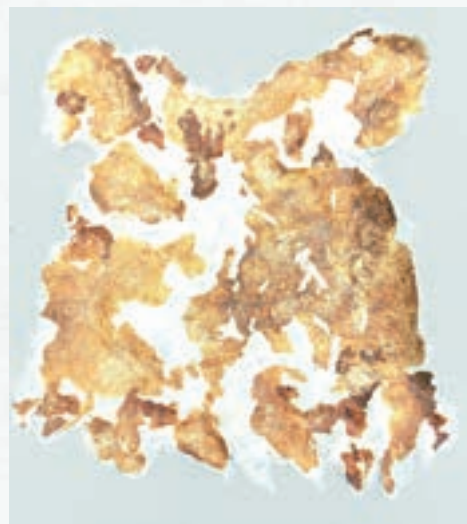


In John Quinn's and Tim's walking narratives we see a shared joy of the pleasure of performance and light-hearted fun. After listening to Tim's recording, John had a desire to connect to Tim's walk in Cornwall, which he explored by photographing landmarks not unlike Tim's, attempting to capture the essence of his wanderings. John seized the opportunity to find similarities in their experiences of walking freely in nature. His school sign of two children crossing the road, "stepping off the bridge and then off the planet into the unknown" as he puts it, simultaneously tragic and comic, seems to point towards the uncertainty of humanity's future.

In response to John's film, Tim's recording of himself as Elmo, (John's dog) going for a walk with John, explores the relationship between humour and animals with a playful wit. Not only did Tim want to conflate the animal and the human using language and projection but also express his affinity with John's humour.

John Keys' exchange with Sharon was one of surprise and kinship. Unbeknown to each other, they both photographed the experience of a bluebell walk, John in Cornwall and Sharon in the North East. Bewitched by nature, there was a meeting of minds as they both witnessed the unfurling of the joys of spring with their respective sons. Nicola responded to Alessandra's cornucopia of sensory garden offerings of lavender, rocket and dried flowers, with a box of photographed eyes, an appreciation of Alessandra's newly acquired sight, to which she added moss, growing plants, rocks and fragments gleaned from the sea. Embedded in nature and enhanced by all her senses, a walk she thought she knew, revealed the delights of the unfamiliar.

It seems evident within these exchanges that the experience of being in nature, was not one of being surrounded by it, but rather immersed and hence embodied within it, "thinking with rather than about the world, not seeking to define it but treading along with it".⁶ Here we see an integration of the senses forming a continuum between the self and the surrounding world, becoming the "flesh of the world"⁷ and "fusing a sense of self with the experience of the world".⁸



A Sense of Place became the inspiration for the last of the paired exchanges, before the national lockdown met its final demise. Mary offers us a highly emotive conceptual interpretation of the 'sense of place' that one feels (or does not feel) within the family and how grief can steal a mother's love. A baby's tragic little garment, replicated in paper made from seaweed and petals, delicately articulates an understanding of loss transmitted from one generation to another. Whilst John Keys invites us to immerse ourselves in crashing waves where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Cornish coast, a place of replenishment that in his words "demands one to be completely present."

It could be argued that Message Sent successfully achieves what the social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey refers to as “compression of time and space”.⁹ In her essay ‘A Sense of Place’ she argues that places are not static, they are processes, which do not necessarily have boundaries that form simple enclosures or possess single identities, yet although unique, can be global and local, close and far.

‘A Sense of Place’ seemed to represent an ending with a new beginning as Message Sent prepared to embark upon the creation of a single collaborative artwork, followed by a residency which saw the four artists from the South West migrate to join their North East counterparts for a long weekend of creative experimentation and revelry – a final celebration of the meeting of minds.

Like any passage of time, one’s journey through it unfolds as a narrative and testimony to one’s existence and experience within it. The pandemic and the lockdown have left their mark on all our lives and it is hoped that this brief insight into a unique model of collaboration will throw some light on how it is possible to produce moving and

incisive artworks through intimate creative exchange, in the face of a world crisis and its consequential complex emotional demands.

Message Sent reveals how creativity can be mapped along lines of flight which do indeed collapse time and space, and engender presence in absence. Neither static or contained, but framed within a structure Message Sent was able to facilitate the sharing and exchanging of work without determining its form and content. The small scale of the artworks together with the intimate interaction of sending and receiving through the post, generated continual new points of creative departure. As the art historian Amy Tobin’s description of postal art so aptly states “The conceptual boundaries between each piece [are] porous and the actual object mobile....The process of sending it through the post not only transfer[s] ownership, but [is] also meant as an inspiration as well as a channel for emotional, affective responses”.¹⁰

The Message Sent model of collaboration offers a unique way for artists to nourish their individual art practice, whilst supported by an infrastructure which is shaped by those sustained by it. It’s framework is resilient yet mutable, allowing

for a multiplicity of creative methodologies to conflate and enrich one another, without privileging one over another, forming new divergent pathways. Message Sent helps us to recognise the potential of future collaborative practice as it continues to evolve through the process of exchange, each artist equally determining the direction of its destiny.

Rachel Hindley
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Rachel Hindley

With a first degree in fine art (Canterbury College of Art) and a postgraduate teaching qualification, initially, I taught visual art to young people in education and on community arts projects in London for ten years. I moved to Cornwall to complete an MA in art history and theory (Falmouth University), which influenced the course of my career in both teaching, and research. Having been a university lecturer in art history for the last twelve years, my current practice as an artist is rooted in collaborative projects working with artists both individually and collectively. My collaboration with Tough Dough and Message Sent has been very exciting and inspiring from both an art historical and research point of view and will continue to feed into my future work.





Artists



Alessandra Ausenda

Whenever I am asked about where I come from, I struggle to give an accurate answer and realise the reasons for my ambiguity. The pattern throughout my childhood was to feel I lived both in Cornwall, where I spent the summers, and in Rome, where I was born and went to school

Over the years the balance has shifted to spending most of my time in Cornwall, but the issues of cultural duality and belonging are reoccurring themes in my work. I am a visual artist and educator whose practice involves collaboration and participation across artforms. As a founding director of Tough Dough, I continue to address the role of creative activity and its wide-reaching benefits. I'm inspired by the many ways in which we respond to the seed of an idea and find ways to make it grow.

Message Sent evolved from regular video exchanges during the pandemic between artists in two geographically distant parts of the UK. It became a way of sharing observations and experiences of working in our respective, mainly rural locations. It has been extremely valuable to share each other's creative drives during a time of restriction and re-evaluation. The pure joy of unwrapping an artwork freshly landed on my doorstep gave me a heightened concept of what constitutes a gift. I allowed myself to play with materials, enjoy process above outcome and enter into multi-sensory conversations with myself and others.

I am grateful Message Sent gave me the time and space to reflect on some fundamental questions about why and what I make. One of the main highlights has been the open ended nature of the project, how it has led to surprises, crossovers and connections that I'm now excited to build on.

ausenda.com



Mary J. Oliver

I grew up in Cornwall but ran away to Scotland, where I raised two daughters on the beautiful peninsula of Kintyre. As soon as they left home, I returned to Cornwall, as most of us do, and now live in Newlyn with my beloved.

My background is in the visual arts. I've taught in universities and prisons

and all sorts in between. I've exhibited in England and Scotland, mostly collaborative projects; I like best to work with various others, coming together to share and resolve issues of content and form.

However, some years ago, a dark event occurred in my life that motivated me to write a book about my Dad. He was a hobo in Canada during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Writing was mostly solitary, very different from my collaborative artwork. But I loved it. The book was published by Seren in 2019. I spent lockdown adapting it for the stage and the play is due to tour Cornish venues in 2023.

Also, during lockdown, through my long-standing association of exhibiting and teaching with Alessandra Ausenda, I became involved with Message Sent. This gave me the opportunity to not only return to making visual art after a long break, but also to working collaboratively again.

The tasks we set ourselves were not outcome-based; I loved this freedom to experiment and explore, and to share the processes with a group of innovative artists. It was like being a student again, but with a load of life-experience to bring to the table. And what a feast it's been!

It's provided me with a wealth of starting points that will keep me busy till the end of time. I can develop them when it feels right. Meanwhile, I have a massive sketchbook jam-packed with shared ideas and responses, a heady mix of text and image; far richer than any I've produced in my life so far.

jimneat.com



Tim Ridley

I make work around the human/animal relationship through painting, drawing, assemblage, collage and performance. Mostly made using salvaged materials to respect the environment and not to impact on biodiversity.

There is an 'antique' or 'eroded' style to my work which is made with a DIY punk ethic. The animal is always put centre stage, as a counterbalance to the ubiquitous placing of humans first. After completing a BA in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art, I moved to live and work in Penzance, West Penwith. Penzance has been critical to my progress as an artist. The strong and diverse art scene here has nurtured my progress over the last 8 years. I believe that Cornwall, despite being on the geographical periphery, curates a contemporary creative culture which is neither parochial or insignificant.

I am currently completing an MA in painting at Plymouth College of Art, researching how tension and ambiguity can be imbued into an oil painting made from a photographic reference.

For me Message Sent has simply allowed for new and nourishing artist relationships to blossom, regardless of physical distance. New outcomes and processes have been explored and have fed back into my studio practice. Collaborative practice is for me a delight, and chances like this do not come along very often, hence there was no hesitation on my part as to whether or not to get involved. Other artists always have a fresh and 'outside' perspective on what I do, and the exchange is reciprocal. We have come a long way, but as part of Message Sent I feel we have more to learn, give back and share now we are more able to meet in person. My special moment came while we were all together in the North East and making a sound bath for each other in a wonderful wood, just magic.

timridley.co.uk



John Keys

I grew up in Belfast and moved to England as a teenager. I studied Art at Liverpool John Moores University. Landscape was the starting point for my work at this time and prompted me to move from London to Cornwall in 1997.

I lived and worked on the North Cornish coast for nine years painting abstract landscape, and worked across the South West facilitating educational and community arts projects and multi-disciplinary arts events. In 2005 I moved to Penzance where I still live and work. In 2012 I took on a managerial role at St Ives School of Painting and a year later adopted two boys. During this period my art work developed in a more figurative and narrative direction, with human connection and interaction as a dominant theme. Being an adoptive parent has been a profound experience. The nature/nurture dynamic has become a primary concern as well as an investigation into child development and attachment.

Participating in Message Sent gave me a fresh perspective on the work I make and a sense of connection that I really appreciated after a period of relative isolation from other artists. It was enriching to hear others approaches and invigorating to be part of a group that was open and generous. The set tasks challenged me to work in different ways without being too constrictive and the time deadlines sharpened my focus. Having to make work for specific individuals, to fit certain criteria led me to make work in unfamiliar media and formats. Moreover, receiving responses in such a variety of media (sound, film, writing, sculpture) encouraged me to take risks. As the exchanges progressed it was reassuring to notice commonalities of intention in some of the worksuch as; our relationship with the natural world and of a sense of place and belonging.

johnkeys.com



John Quinn

I live in what I describe as the English Borders. I'm from Cumbria but now live in the North East, all of which lie above what most people regard as the North. It is an out of the way place that has allowed me to wander freely across many art forms.

I have trained in drawing, painting, sculpture, dance, drama, film making, creative writing, clown and physical theatre. My artwork had focussed on exploring our hopes and fears around technology and AI. I created an 'Alexa' character and a series of films and live performances. Then Covid arrived and Message Sent came along. This gave me the opportunity to stop and let go of everything that had had its day. This gave me the chance to move on.

Through the process of Message Sent I was able to respond to the stimulus and input of other artists and burrow down into my own artistic and creative processes. This returned me to a simple process of writing, no Apps or Effects, just a notebook and a pen. It was exciting and supportive to connect with other artists. By responding to what arrived in the post I slowly began to discover, like the green uncurling shoots of a fern, a new way to develop my creative practice.

I was used to collaborating on a theatre production or a film but this was a different way of collaborating. This was with visual artists who mainly work on their own work. It was hugely valuable when we came together and shared what we were doing, but it also gave me the time, space and support to develop my own way of working. The work I produced did end up going back into film but my ongoing daily practice has taken a new direction on a continuously unfolding path.



Jyl Friggens

Brought up in the far West of the South West I now have a home in the North East. I live in the edge land between Northumberland & County Durham. A place of woods, pit villages, big skies, and wild places.

My daily practice involves walking with my dog and filling my pockets with stones, broken crockery and sticks from the local woods. These collected fragments find their way into my collages and mosaics. Finding these lost pieces also feeds into the work I do with the community and schools.

I am a visual artist and Forest school leader. I draw much of my inspiration from the Reggio Emilia ethos and the Forest school approach in Scandinavia. Engaging children and communities with the natural world is central to my work. Whether working in collaboration or by myself, I seek to work in a way that fosters a sense of exploration, beauty, and playfulness. I see myself as an artist enabler, a lender of tools and experience, a partner in the journey and someone to help make the creative process visible.

During lockdown, I found myself really busy keeping communities connected by making and delivering arts packages and creating online activities. This was an intense time where I was becoming drained. Message Sent came and suddenly instead of just 'giving out' and sending out packages, I was receiving packages from other creatives. It was really nice to receive something personal. I felt supported. An opportunity for me to recharge my creativity and focus on my own practise through guided tasks and conversations. A time to think about why I create and for whom. We shared, we reflected, we listened, and we valued each other. My pockets were being filled again!

[Instagram frillyjigs](#)



Nicola Balfour

I trained as a fine artist at Newcastle Poly and graduated in 1994. I then lived in Northern Greece for a year and picked figs. Since then I have raised a family and worked in the North East for 35 years as a banner maker, community artist and early years outdoor educational specialist. I am a painter and mixed media artist and co-created several large-scale transient art pieces along the East Durham coast with artist Jyl Friggens.

My home and workspace are a farm on the East Durham Coast. I am one of the directors of The Barn at Easington, an outdoor arts venue and local community hub that specialises in delivering high quality outdoor arts projects and community workshops.

Of late my personal work has been about creating new mixed media pieces from old paintings and odd artefacts collected throughout my life. I draw upon my personal life experience as a mother, friend, sister and daughter to create vibrant and highly textured art works. The interplay between the beautiful and the ugly is important to me and I use human hair, animal bones, dead flowers to challenge the viewer's idea of beauty. In my book you can't have one without the other.

Message Sent enabled a close-knit group of artists and friends to create a supportive and exciting network, bringing together a mixing pot of ideas and techniques for us all to draw from. The creative challenges inspired new ways of thinking and making art as well as providing a well needed sounding board. It really highlighted the importance of being inspired by other artists, giving me a great sense of freedom to create.

thebarnateasington.co.uk



Sharon Bailey

I'm an artist, photographer and social activist. For almost 30 years I ran an arts organisation, running socially engaged projects internationally but left this in 2019 to pursue my own artistic practise and projects. I want to bring about social change, which sounds

like a grand ambition but I think artists can do this, especially when they group together with like-minded people and organisations.

My work is about bringing people's stories to public attention; stories I collect through talking, listening, recording, filming and photographing; stories that don't often get told and from people who are generally hidden within our communities. Before the pandemic it was with isolated older people who were stuck at home, alone. Lately it's been in care homes across Newcastle. I develop installations and place them within public spaces, preferably busy shopping centres where lots of people gather.

I've been busy all my adult life. I find it hard to stop, to slow down. The Covid pandemic forced me to step back, to stop and think. Message Sent started soon after and proved to be a godsend.

I thrive on connection and collaboration. Message Sent allowed me to spend time with a group of creative people with shared values. It provided a space for reflection, questioning, provocation, experimentation and play. I was challenged to make artwork I wouldn't normally make and to connect with people and subjects that I wouldn't normally.

I remembered that if you don't allow yourself time to feed through new experiences and skills you can starve yourself of any creative energy. Having 'time' to explore and share with other artists has been a great joy. I've been thirsty for it for a very long time, which I hadn't been aware of, and through this project I've been able to take a big, long drink.

sharonbailey.co.uk

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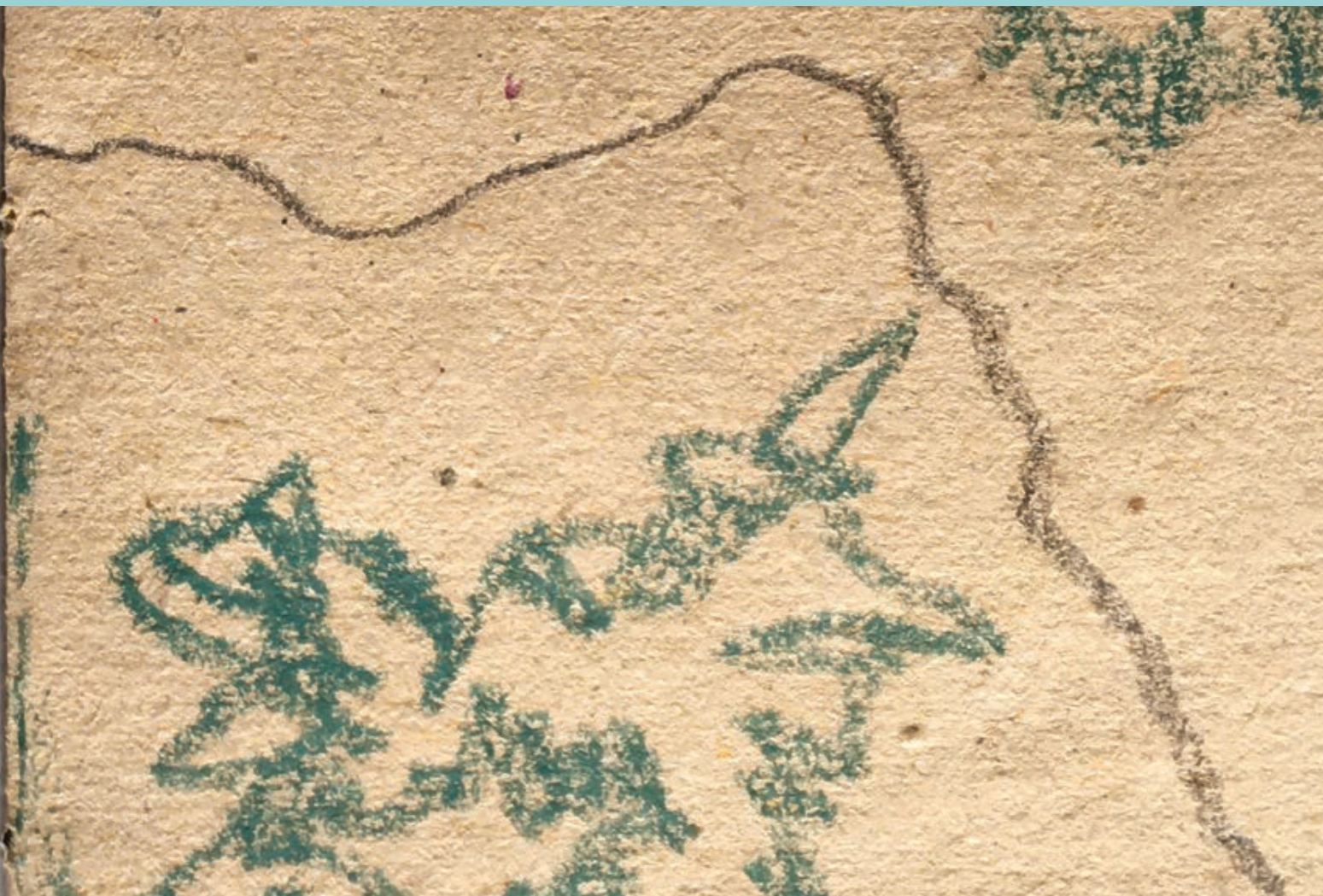


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