

Drawing Research Network

Drawing Matters 2021

FROM THE GROUND UP: DRAWING RESIDENCY FILM

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'From the Ground Up' is a short film made in response to an artist's residency hosted between February 12–28, and funded by the Institute of Social Justice at York St John University. The residency was part of pilot of the same title, conducted in collaboration with Barnsley Museums and the Heritage Trust's Education Dept, the Cooper Gallery Barnsley (BMHT), The Civic Arts Centre Barnsley, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and Horizon Community College, one of the largest secondary education providers in Barnsley.

The residency gave extensive access to the collections of Barnsley Museums and Heritage Trust, including 200 drawings (18th–20th century) bequeathed by arts patron and collector Sir Michael Sadler. The residency drew on the Borough's municipal collections and galleries to stage a series of six workshops with 25 Year 9 (13–14 year old students). The workshops were hosted by Karen Wallis and Vanessa Corby (YSJU) and included sessions in the Cooper Gallery, Experience Barnsley, Horizon, and a half-term sketchbook project. These workshops encouraged the students to use drawing as a process of reflection on their daily life, rather than a means to achieve an accurate representation of an object or the world. The students were encouraged to draw their homes and pets, as well as their family and friends, in order to think about their place in these relationships. The finished film is the first output of an ongoing collaboration, which synthesises drawings and sound recordings of the conversations between by the artist and students as they move through this process together.



FIGURE 1: KAREN WALLIS, FROM THE GROUND UP, (2020: FILM, 9:13) [CLICK IMAGE TO WATCH](#)

Introduction

'From the Ground Up' is a film that explores sketchbook drawing as a way of recording the everyday world, in which observation and drawing skills can develop naturally without the pressure to produce 'finished' artwork. It is the outcome of an Artist's Residency with Year 9 GCSE Art students from Horizon Community College in Barnsley in February 2020, which was a part of a pilot project with the same title that was devised by Vanessa Corby and funded by the York St John University Institute for Social Justice. The pilot was the first step in a wider HEI and Third Sector collaborative project that investigates the potential of materials and drawing as tools of non-verbal forms of communication and enquiry. In the context of the significant regeneration of Barnsley's infrastructure (2017–2020), this major project explores art's potential to meet the educational and social needs of this post-industrial community's children and young people by illuminating the complex inflection of the past in the present and the present in the past, as well as the way that they shape the future.

The material for the film was gathered in six days over a course of three weeks and it includes drawings made by the artist and the students. We began in the classroom, where they were asked to draw each other as a starting point. This took them right out of their comfort zone but paved the way to the more enjoyable activity of drawing their surroundings. At each stage, they were encouraged to talk about their drawings with each other. A day later, we all visited the Cooper Gallery and Experience Barnsley, which is part of the Barnsley Museums and Heritage Trust; they were encouraged to draw anything that took their fancy as a starting point to examining the exhibits. Then there was an interlude during half term where the students were asked to use sketchbooks as diaries to draw their everyday lives at home. They were encouraged to draw their homes and pets, as well as their family and friends, in order to think about their place in these relationships. In the week following half term, there were further visits to Experience Barnsley and the Cooper Gallery, where we had access to the 1932 bequest of 200 drawings made by Sir Michael Sadler, including works by Augustus John, Corot, Cozens, Millais, and Millet. These visits enabled us to test the project's materials-practice methodology to see if it would engage the students in ways that more historically-focused curriculum approaches to the arts are unable to achieve as they are often irrelevant to young people's lives.

Throughout my time in Barnsley, I made my own sketchbook drawings and watercolours, together with sound recordings, which followed the students' journeys both physically and artistically. It was most rewarding to witness their progress, to listen to the stories behind their drawings, and to see a growing enthusiasm for the freedom to be found in collecting visual information. In the first session in the Cooper Gallery, the students began drawing from individual works in the collection in a tentative way, anxious to know if they were doing it 'right'. By the last session, the students were creating their own works by mixing up elements from different artworks, taking far greater ownership of their drawings and the Gallery's space. The pilot's drawing exercises, which emphasised drawing as a means to process daily events and relationships, have been used by Horizon Community College as the basis of its home school arts activities, which were sent out to their 1456 students at the start of Lockdown.

A selection of all the material, both mine and the students', has been combined in the film with the aim of giving a sense of our working process, rather than a documentary of how we did it. The hope is that this is the start of something, both for the students' drawing practice and our continued journey together.