

What and Where is home?

Pete Codling - *Wherever I lay my hat...*



As an artist I have dedicated my life's work, so far, almost by accident, to helping to build a sense of place, of belonging, of home, mostly for others. With thirty years of making commissioned public artwork, I have had to look carefully at the idea 'home' and 'where' it is, indirectly or as part of a site-specific artist's brief.

Also, on a personal level I have often had the existential angst that blights most artists, of where do I fit in, where do I belong, where am I from, where am I going, where is my home? And the weighty decisions behind those life changes, and location, or state of being. As a young artist I spent some time 'NFA', a term used by the Department of Social Security – for 'No Fixed Abode', 'signing on', whilst sleeping on Wimbledon Common, studio floors and sofa surfing, whilst ironically studying for a masters in 'Site Specific Sculpture'. This dichotomy became the starting point for much of the politic of my artwork ever since.

The two notions or states of being, are not mutually exclusive and in between them is a wonderful creatively ambiguous space. The emotional state is not always the same as the physical address, the legal, the national status, or personal identification via cultural, biological, or spiritual allegiance to the idea of feeling at 'home', true to and comfortable in oneself. A perhaps romantic notion that we belong to one place more than any other, a sense of place where we have 'roots', family, friends, routine, patterns, work. Where we have a 'life'. Where we hopefully feel safe, secure, full of local knowledge and geography, a sense of belonging both to, and of, a home.

Drawing, started with mark making in its most primal sense, the scratch, the pointing finger, the tool, the cave painting, the territorial marking, the story telling and idolatry of others we belong to: our patterns in clothing and textiles, the motifs and symbols, the language and accents of our family,

our tribe, our nation. Indeed, locating that very first mark, homing it, locating it, seeding it within a series, a composition of other marks. We give the first mark a 'home' and build around it.

Art in its traditional forms has also expressed 'home' in a sense of time and belonging to/coming from a period. But not always based in its immediate moment, it might be a replica, a copy or 'inspired by', derivative of, when referred to as something that is contemporary, modern or classical. These measures, signifiers or labels help us to 'address' to locate and describe an artwork, or artist. All of this before we even talk about the subject matter or content of the artwork - we are decoding the drawing into our 'home-language' or mother tongue, to make it legible, within the split seconds of our first encounter. Our visual language translator has tried to tell us, how far away from 'home' we are.

I am currently Artist in Residence at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, creating 'a portrait of the city' which has a lot to cover on the 'home' theme. This huge drawing is 17m X 20m on canvas sail and has taken three years already. This drawing explores identity, celebrates connection and sense of place. It is about my 'hometown'.

I have just completed a project with the National Portrait Gallery - *Creative Connections - Southampton*, working with students on identity and the portraiture, through the *Kinship Drawing*, a canvas sail 10m X 3m, that explores many themes and current affairs regarding refugees, migration, war, climate crisis, and the journey to find a new 'home' or sanctuary in a time of displacement and rehoming.

The title 'Kinship' is an interesting vehicle in relation to this symposium's key question of 'where and what is home?'. Dictionary definitions offer a broad cultural, biological, and geographical, definitions that point to family, clan, lineage and the acknowledgement that all societies past and present have a concept of kinship, each society has a different concept of who is and is not related, how they are related, and what that relation means in terms of social groups, economics, politics, religion, and networks of social support.

The drawing itself is conversation, a homage to, Pablo Picasso's iconic Guernica painting from 1937 and is the result of a collaboration with The National Portrait Gallery and The Southampton City Art Gallery. The brief was to find 'Creative Connections' with a local school and broader population with the national and local portrait collections related to their city. I was to teach portrait drawing and explore the idea of portraiture and story telling through an exhibition with the GCSE students. A 'school of sanctuary' that has 60 plus languages with many contemporary refugees from Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

As part of this project a 'signature piece' by the artist was to be created that reflected a creative connection. Southampton has an obvious international maritime history and with a diverse cultural demographic. It is home to the Sea City Museum, The SS Titanic collection and host of other maritime stories from leisure, fishing, trading, to the dockyard and war. A poignant part of this local history is the SS Habana arrival in 1937 of 4000 refugee children evacuated from Guernica and Bilboa at the height of the Spanish Civil War. The children were 'housed' in a city of canvas tents, a refugee camp, before being sent across the UK to settle or repatriate later. Many stayed in their new forever home, as part of the rich multi-cultural community of Southampton.

The Guernica Children, Basque Refugees, or 'Los Ninos' have become a strong part of the city's cultural history. This was also the 50th anniversary of Picasso's death and global exhibitions of his work. A connection that took me to Madrid and Paris in 'conversation' with the great artist and to

understanding of his masterpiece. Itself an artwork that was 'refugee' in its status and relationship to its spiritual 'home' of Spain. A home it eventually found post Franco.

The *Kinship Drawing*, w, was on exhibition in Southampton City Gallery this summer. It is the same size as the original painting but created on a canvas sail as a contemporary maritime Guernica. Something that expresses the horrors of war and persecution at home, of migration, turmoil and displacement, and that journey to a new 'home'.

The drawing will now be exhibited in Paris in Spring 2024, just a stone's throw from the place where Guernica was created. A homecoming, in a way, of another generation of this artwork, of a drawing that is kindred and hopefully has 'kinship' with the original.

Kinship – the book – exploring this artwork in great detail is now available on my website.