

PORTIUNCULA UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

VISUAL ARTIST IN RESIDENCE



Age Suitability:

intergenerational

No. of Participants:

DURATION

over
5 Months

Project led by:

Aoife Barrett

Summary

As the **inaugural Visual Artist in Residence** at Portiuncula University Hospital, printmaker Aoife Barrett engaged the hospital community in diverse printmaking techniques over a 5 month period. Working across all ages and a variety of contexts, the residency allowed the artist to hone mobile printing techniques and public engagement skills towards developing her emerging Arts and Health practice.

Description :

One of the artist's intentions for the residency was to explore the practicalities of printmaking in the clinical setting, refining her experiments with mobile printing techniques. With unprecedented access to a variety of clinical contexts she was able to adapt and minimise equipment and processes accordingly. Her focus therefore became about finding processes that involved compact equipment that was easy to use and offered sufficient versatility and scope to respond to diverse needs and interests.

Easy to use, fast drying, and offering immediate results, the artist built on her collection of hand-carved rubber stamps and coloured ink pads in response to the themes of her dialogue with participants. These were used in a variety of approaches. For many people the urge to make gifts for loved ones often helped to overcome any reservations they had about 'doing art' and the rubber stamps allowed participants to make multiple cards and artworks to this end. At times the artist would work collaboratively with patients to create their desired outcome, and where patients were too ill or fatigued to physically make prints, their instructions and conversations guided the marks she made for them.

Organising the rubber stamps into metal boxes according to the themes of her residency conversations, the artist was able to draw together her interests in printmaking, bookmaking, and storytelling as kits for use with future participants. Each **'tinned story'** included a selection of hand-carved rubber stamps and a handmade book which illustrated the story behind the set and suggested how it could be used. The engraved tins included : **'The Sheep Farmer,'** with stamps inspired by sheep buyers from Tipperary and the myth behind the lucky penny, and **'Jennifer's Story'** about a lost star looking for its family. The 'tinned stories' were previewed and used by participants in a final public drop-in workshop in the hospital foyer.

Commissioned by:

PORTIUNCULA UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

VISUAL ARTIST IN RESIDENCE



Observation:

Despite the artist's determined efforts to make printmaking accessible to everyone, the residency proved that her innovative, custom-made equipment was not universally appropriate in the acute hospital setting. In response, the experience allowed her to evolve one approach which could be adapted to any public or private context and individual needs.

Longer Description

In an attempt to integrate herself, the artist occupied a chair in the seating area and set up her print-case on a small stand, creating prints in response to her observations of the waiting room. This sparked curiosity, at times leading to adults and children making prints themselves or leading to significant conversations. Where those engaging with the artist did not make prints, the artist gifted them a print she had made in the course of their dialogue to acknowledge the generosity of the exchange.

The Paediatric Inpatient Unit supported longer one-to-one engagements allowing young patients to explore multiples and bookmaking using pre-carved rubber stamps as tools to create their own stories. Her interactions in the adult wards varied considerably - from a 4-bed ward which transformed into an industrious studio with all patients participating in a range of relief printing processes to individual engagements which focussed on storytelling. Between designated engagements with patients and staff, the artist spent time in the hospital's public spaces and waiting areas, observing, drawing, making notes and carving rubber stamps. The final day of the residency took the form of a drop-in printmaking and bookmaking session in the foyer informed by the artist's previous engagements. This was an opportunity for patients, visitors and staff to make a print or a book and learn about what had been achieved during the residency.

Each context the artist worked in had distinct parameters and challenges to respond to. The drop-in nature of activities in the foyer meant that engagements were often fleeting but they allowed the artist to reach more people and gain a broad experience. Here, the short engagements still allowed poignant moments like a father making a first artwork for his new-born son as he awaited his discharge, a grandmother making a card for a child, and tender family stories shared over the printing process whilst waiting for transport. For staff, the activities were the source of unexpected excitement and pride on their way to or from tea break.

Through this experience she discovered that her own process of making could be a catalyst for meaningful exchanges where she would then gift an artwork, and that this form of engagement was just as valuable as a participant actively making a print. This became an important method she adopted throughout the residency. Indeed, working in the hospital's waiting areas and public spaces in between designated engagements became an integral part of her process and helped her to develop confidence and skills for working in public.

“These spaces and periods of reflection became a vitally important part of the residency for me. It was here I was really able to see and understand the day-to-day workings of the hospital. Later in the residency I was able to interact and work with patients in these spaces in a relaxed, informal way”.

During one of these occasions the artist overheard a child say that she intended to draw a map to her house so her new friend in the waiting room would know how to find her again. This inspired the artist to develop a laser cut woodblock plate for a ‘how to’ booklet about the methods she developed throughout the residency. Her intention is to use this plate in future live printing events as a means to introduce new communities to both printmaking techniques and her creative process.

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“When it came to working on the wards each session was completely unique. It was through these sessions that I was really able to hone my mobile printmaking processes. At first, not knowing what to expect or who I would be working with, I packed as many materials and tools as I could manage. I would have the print-case and then another two or three bags packed full of objects, bookmaking tools, materials for rubbings and cyanotypes.... just in case! As I continued with the sessions on the wards I quickly realised that my bags and cases of materials were not practical and after each session I worked to reduce my materials. During busier times even the compact nature of the print-case wasn’t compact enough. Sometimes I would have to pack everything up quickly and leave due to impromptu doctors’ visits or infection control deep cleaning. It also wasn’t practical trying to manoeuvre everything around corridors full of trolleys and bins and I felt conscious of getting in the way of staff. There were other days when I came prepared for one-to-one engagements but needed to set up in the foyer because patients were suffering from illness and fatigue. I became very conscious of the need to be flexible and being able to adapt to every situation. I needed an activity that could work in the foyer but not have so much that I couldn’t manoeuvre around wards. I found the rubber stamps the most accessible, versatile technique and tools”.

Easy to use, fast drying, and offering immediate results, the artist built on her collection of hand-carved rubber stamps and coloured ink pads in response to the themes of her dialogue with participants. These were used in a variety of approaches. For many people the urge to make gifts for loved ones often helped to overcome any reservations they had about ‘doing art’ and the rubber stamps allowed participants to make multiple cards and artworks to this end. At times the artist would work collaboratively with patients to create their desired outcome, and where patients were too ill or fatigued to physically make prints, their instructions and conversations guided the marks she made for them. Organising the rubber stamps into metal boxes according to the themes of her residency conversations, the artist was able to draw together her interests in printmaking, bookmaking, and storytelling as kits for use with future participants. Each ‘tinned story’ included a selection of hand-carved rubber stamps and a handmade book which illustrated the story behind the set and suggested how it could be used. The engraved tins included ‘The Sheep Farmer,’ with stamps inspired by sheep buyers from Tipperary and the myth behind the lucky penny, and ‘Jennifer’s Story’ about a lost star looking for its family. The ‘tinned stories’ were previewed and used by participants in a final public drop-in workshop in the hospital foyer.

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Aoife Barrett

