

The painting sessions that help refugees forget trauma

Each week, people who have fled war and rights abuses visit Islington Arts Factory – to forget. *Jessie Williams* finds out how

Inside Islington Arts Factory, chests of drawers are stashed with paintings, collages and sketches. In truth, they look pretty normal to a regular viewer. But these pieces of work carry a deeper meaning than they suggest.

For a few hours earlier, this studio was bustling with life: life hard fought for.

The New Art Studio, based inside the factory in Parkhurst Road, Holloway, is a gathering point for refugees and asylum seekers. It is a place where they forget their harrowing journeys and immerse their imagination.

New Art Studio is a therapy scheme founded by art psychotherapists Tania Kaczynski and Jon Martyn. Their students have fled conflict and human rights abuses from countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Russia and Ukraine.

It launched in October last year. "I think art can say things that are really hard to put into words," says Jon. "We offer something where their voices can be heard and their experiences can be acknowledged."

Two weeks ago, a student told Jon the only place she felt free

“He had the most horrific journey. I think art allowed him to step into a world he hadn't known about before.

Tania Kaczynski

was when she's painting. "She can move freely in this city but also she's like a prisoner here," he says.

"She has no rights to work, no rights to travel or actually leave the country, and people are often waiting for five years for a decision on whether they will be deported or not."

One student, a smartly dressed Ukrainian asylum seeker who wishes to remain anonymous, tells the *Gazette*: "I go to art therapy classes two times a week, and spend almost the whole day there.

On Wednesday I did life drawing there and

that's an excellent experience."

He demonstrates his portfolio of work and announces he would eventually like to teach art to children.

Meanwhile, Tania describes how one of their clients, from Afghanistan, has now been exposed to the world of YouTube as he tries to develop his craft.

"He had the most horrific journey. I think art allowed him to step into a world he had never known about before.

"Now he's very prolific. He's painting at home and we've got a thick wedge of portfolios of his work."

She points to a few of his paintings: large swirling masses of colour and texture. "He's learning about different artists and techniques on YouTube.

"It's a world he never even knew existed but that he now feels quite at home in, even though it's quite alien to the culture that he came from. So he's united in this new language and new way of being."

Tania describes refugees' experiences as "the grit that makes the pearl".

"Powerful imagery can come out of adversity," she says. "And more importantly it can help rebuild lives."

■ Visit newartstudio.org.uk



■ Tania Kaczynski and Jon Martyn launched the project in October



■ 'Powerful imagery can come from adversity': Tania Kaczynski and Jon Martyn inspect some of the refugees' work they have overseen during the classes

Pictures: Ken Mears



■ Right, below and left, a sample of the refugee artwork, which class tutors say is helping their students rebuild their lives



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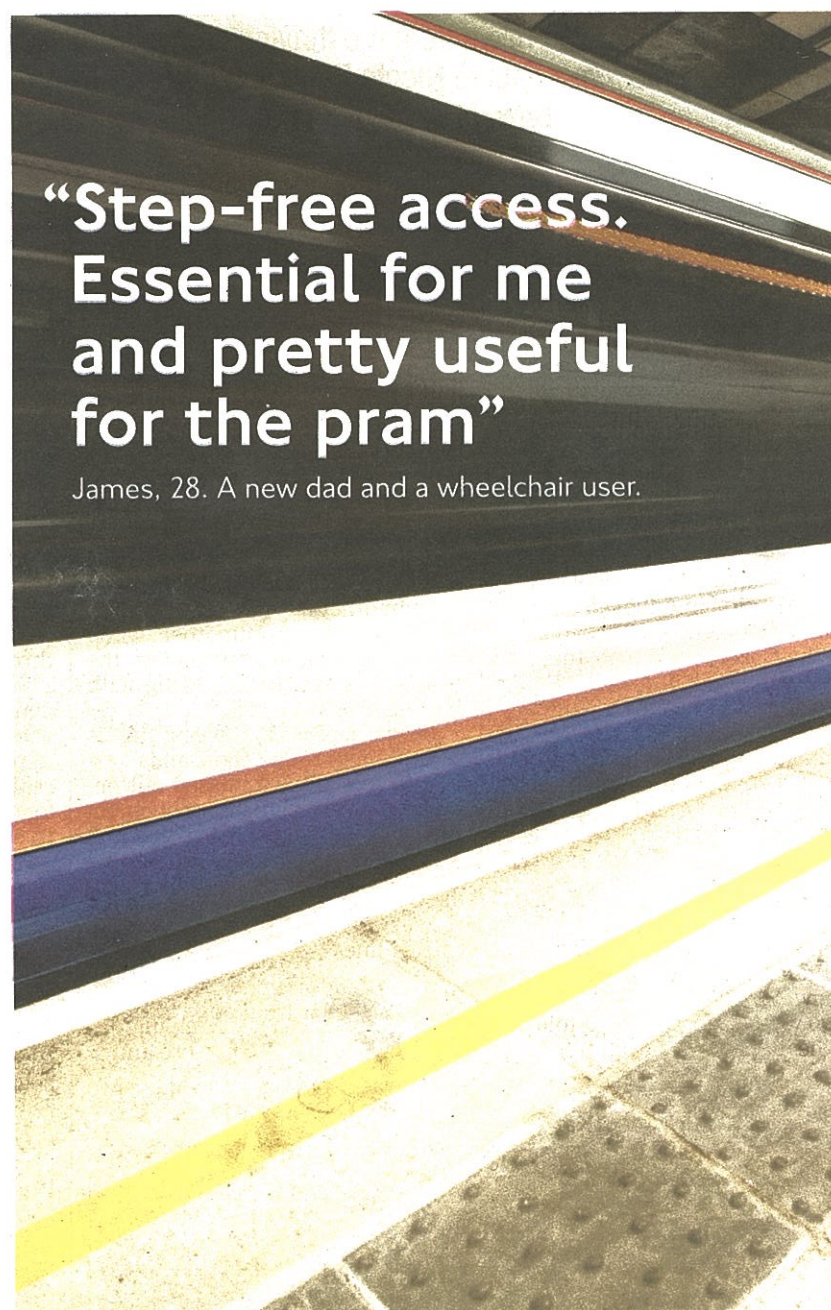
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