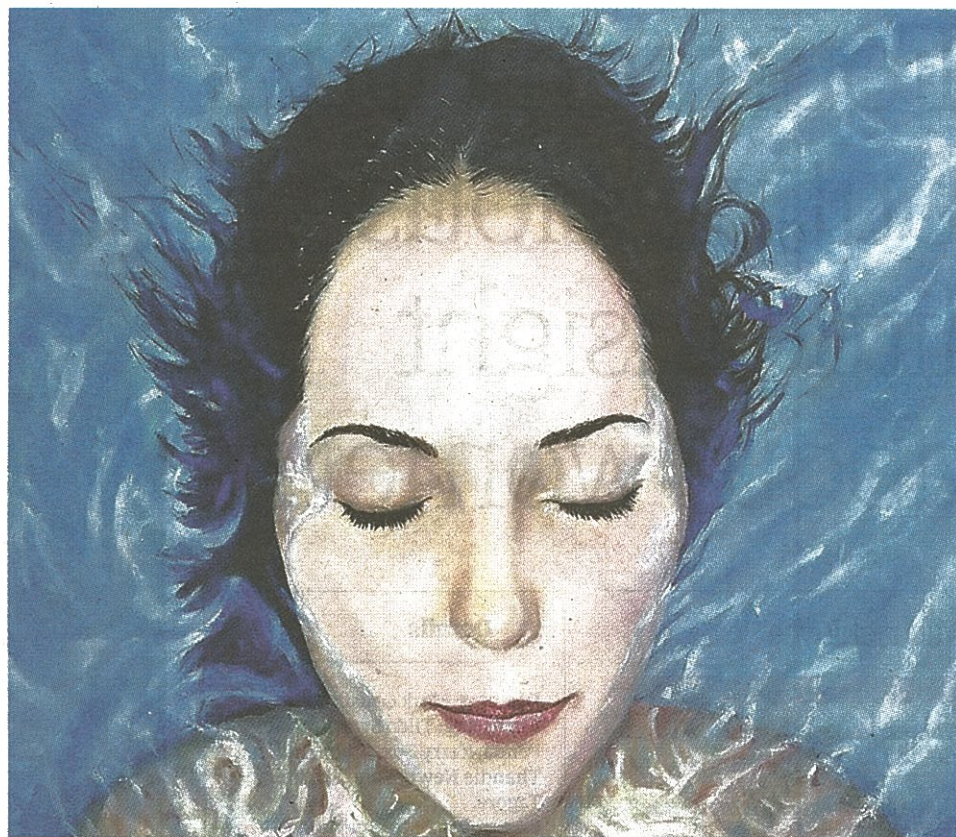


WHAT'S ON

Images from lockdown by art therapy students at the New Art Studio in Islington

Picture: COURTESY OF NEW ART STUDIO



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The New Art Studio is a project that provides a therapeutic studio space for asylum seekers and refugees.

Based at Islington Art Factory in Parkhurst Road, it was co-founded in 2014 by Tania Kaczynski and is the only organisation of its kind in the capital.

In international Refugee Week - whose theme this year is "Imagine" - Ms Kaczynski, the lead art therapist, writes about the impact of lockdown on her members and how they adapted to run remotely:

"The lockdown has had adverse effects on our vulnerable artists. Many live alone; many depend on food banks and charities to make ends meet.

"It affected the most vulnerable the most. 'Stay at home' has many different meanings, depending on one's home. Our members either live in cramped conditions or in isolation; most don't have access to outside space. Old traumas were revisited. During the lockdown we kept everybody connected by sharing paintings on our Whatsapp group.

"Art is a powerful container for extreme emotions and an alternative

form of communication, especially when our physical meetings were suspended.

"The images would appear through the ether onto my phone and then communication could begin. These links were vital for our members: a reminder that despite our separation we were still connected. Familiar themes were revisited, isolated figures in lonely rooms, large landscapes devoid of people, repetitive patterns that reflect the relentless life of asylum living.

"The lives of asylum seekers and refugees are often experienced on the fringes of society. They feel outside mainstream life; due to government restrictions, asylum seekers are not allowed to work, study or integrate until they receive their refugee status.

"The problem is, this process can take 10 years, which means that limbo living and suspended time are familiar places for them. This only highlights the importance of our studio, which is a weekly meeting place of creativity and solace.

"Our members know too well that real freedom exists in our imagination, which

is why art-making is so important for them. When all is taken, creativity is the only place of liberty and solace.

"In May we were extremely relieved to be able to meet in person for the first time in ten weeks. The New Art Studio reopened at Islington Arts Factory and we separated the tables, wore masks, used hand sanitizers, picked up the paint brushes and resumed, just like before.

"There was a quiet, peaceful atmosphere and members of the studio were able to reconnect with each other, and their own personal creativity.

"These brave and courageous souls have suffered so much: war, human rights violations, imprisonment, loss of family, culture and language.

"They are survivors and through their adversity have become extraordinary artists, confirming the notion that it's the grit that makes the pearl."

Tania Kaczynski's Who Am I?, a book about the studio, will be published in September by The History Press. www.newartstudio.org.uk