

A SAFE PLACE *of their own*

A London art studio gives traumatised asylum seekers a creative outlet for their pain, its co-founder tells **Alex Galbinski**

As an art psychotherapist, Tania Kaczynski has heard many truly horrifying stories from the refugees and asylum seekers she meets in her studio. One tale that has stayed with her is of a severely traumatised Afghan asylum seeker, whom she met when he was 16. He had fled the Taliban and, incredibly, had made the journey to the UK on foot – but his parents had perished along the way. He could barely speak or make eye contact with people, and moved in with his uncle, working in his kebâb shop. But, since attending the New Art Studio Tania runs with art therapist Jon Martyn, he has discovered his calling in painting.

And he isn't the only one. "The studio provides a place of creativity and learning. Members can explore materials and express themselves through art making in a safe environment, without anyone passing judgement," explains Tania, whose own history of displacement has informed her desire to help others.

Her father, William Kaczynski, fled Berlin in 1939 with his parents and brother. After arriving in the UK, they were interned on the Isle of Man as 'enemy aliens' for a year. Tania's maternal grandparents left Poland and Portugal at the turn of the century.

"I've also got a story of exile and new beginnings. I live within the shadows of these movements of people due to persecution, so I can relate to the asylum seekers."

Before the New Art Studio was established in



Top: Tania Kaczynski and Jon Martyn with some of the artwork created by members



2014, Tania had run a similar studio at Freedom From Torture, a charity helping asylum seekers and refugees, until the studio's closure. She joined forces with volunteer Jon, and a few of their clients followed.

After funding from The Sutasoma Trust, they moved into their

current home at the Islington Arts Factory.

Some of their members – who have fled persecution in places such as Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, Ukraine, the DRC, India and China – had been artists in their home country, while others had never before picked up any art materials but had an interest in it. They might be victims of human

rights violations and political violence, sex trafficked women or those involved in feminist groups, or gay men in places it is not safe to be different.

"Nobody chooses to be an asylum seeker," she says. "Most have been imprisoned and tortured for activities we take for granted. All live with loss of family, culture, language identity and are haunted by flashbacks, day and nightmares. They have witnessed atrocities we can barely imagine."

Arriving at the studio is a "homecoming," says Tania, a place of solace, creativity and solidarity. "Art is more than a technical ability," she says. "It is the physical manifestation of experience and is the unifying language that surpasses, religion, language, country, gender and age. The desire to say 'I am here' is ever pressing for people whose lives have been in extreme danger."

• *Studio members will be artists in residence as part of Room to Breathe at the Migration Museum from mid-January 2019. They are also exhibiting at Islington Arts Factory from 26 April-3 May 2019.*
newartstudio.org.uk