

# The Art of Belonging:

## How art therapy is changing the perspectives of refugees in London



LSESU STAR Refugee Week Special  
4–8 March: [bit.ly/refugeeweek2019](http://bit.ly/refugeeweek2019)

Paintings from the programme

### LSESU STAR

*New Art Studio is a therapeutic art project in Islington, which provides refugees and asylum seekers with the opportunity to create and display art-work in a safe space. We met with co-founder Jon Martyn to learn more about the project and its benefits for refugees in London*

We meet Jon at 'Room to Breathe', a temporary migration exhibition tucked away on the upper floors of 'The Workshop' in Vauxhall, just a stone's throw from the London Eye. New Art Studio, Jon's project alongside fellow art psycho-therapist Tania, has taken up a period of residency within this quirky workshop, which provides insight into generations of new arrivals to Britain. For a few weeks, the work of Jon and Tania's project is open to the public, providing an opportunity for visitors to create their own art whilst gaining insight into why the initiative is such an important part of life for the refugees involved.

As we enter the residency, our eyes are immediately drawn to the myriad of artwork which lines the walls, from an abstract landscape in vivid blues to a painted fox, peering wistfully from behind its bushy tail. A ballerina perches delicately against a sundry of grey and a woman smiles invitingly from within a canvas, with a warm expression that somehow reminds you of home. It is striking how varied and professional the artwork is. It would be easy to mistake the exhibition for one in the Tate Modern. All of these pieces have been created by refugees working within New Art Studio and all tell a different story, from adversity and pain to hope and renewal.

Jon shows us the array of art supplies, from acrylics to charcoal, and encourages us to pick some materials to create our own art. As the interview begins the room is empty, but before long it is bustling with

both regulars to the project and interested members of the public. The conversation intensifies and it is warming to see people coming together from all walks of life with the common intention of creating art.

#### What do you do at the New Art Studio?

Jon: The New Arts Studio is a weekly arts studio that is run every Monday by two art therapists. We operate from a community Arts Centre called the Islington Arts Factory.

In the group there are a mixture of people. Some haven't had much experience of art before and some people have had more formal art education so it's an interesting combination of members. Participants stay in the group for as long as they need, and some members have been with the project for up to ten years. At the moment we have a regular group of 15 members, some who create lots of art and others who come mainly for the social element.

What we offer is a place to make art, a place to build relationships and a place to feel safe and explore difficulties. We don't really have a set structure; the studio is just a place to be. We want people to have time with art and time with each other, and that is really a core thing we can offer, that helps members build up a sense of self again.

#### How does the project help people?

J: We work with people who have had very difficult experiences, both in the journey to achieve refugee status and the difficulties which continue afterwards. There are all sorts of problems that people face in life.

The wait for refugee status and all of the pressures that come with that are around for a long time. We've had people waiting 9 years for refugee status and 4 to 5 years seems to be quite a common wait time. During that period, you are on half the amount of benefits that you and I would get, £37 a week, in marginal housing and marginalised from things that we take for granted.

We wanted to offer something that gives people meaning in life, people who may find it difficult to engage with things and those who have maybe lost their trust in others.

The environment of the studio helps people build relationships



and find meaning through art. Our work is not just about recovery and it's not a formal treatment; it's an ongoing experience, where people can explore things at their own pace and in their own way.

### Why do you think the medium of art is so effective?

J: Art is always something I have been interested in. It has definitely helped me when I have had moments of distress. Art has always been something I will go to. You can explore a lot of feelings in art-making. I might be quite full of a feeling, but painting makes me think about that feeling in a different way. It becomes something to channel, rather than something which overwhelms me.

Art gives you a way of looking at the world differently; painting is a way of looking at the world in an aesthetic way and it brings things to life. I think we can lose that sense of joy in life, of looking for things out of interest.

How we approach art therapy is that we give people space, we don't lead, which gives the opportunity for unconscious thoughts and ideas to come out through the artwork, things that can often take you by surprise.

There is a lot of feeling in the work and I think it is quite interesting to explore what pictures are saying, what they are communicating. Some artists never have a plan for their artwork, and they create quite a range of pieces, I learn a lot from the art-making process. There are lots of pictures about home, or that internal sense of what home is, which can be quite mixed in the moods they show.

Jon invites one of the group members, who has been part of the project since October, to describe why she finds painting to be such a valuable tool. She tells us that she used to paint frequently when in Iran but stopped painting when she arrived in the UK.

"Mindfulness is one of the things that helps you to feel better, and if you like art and you enjoy painting then it is a form of mindfulness, as it takes all of your mind.

"For me it stops me from thinking of anything else, everything is just the painting. During the week, I will think about what I want to do, about the colours, about the sort of design I want to make.

"Even when I am feeling ill I am still looking for a way to come to the project. Today I wasn't feeling fine but going to the studio was a way to get out and leave all of that behind. I am always looking forward to the next week and making sure I don't have any appointments that day. The studio is great."

### What difference have you seen in the members after a period of attending art therapy?

Progress never operates in a straight line. There are a lot of difficulties and bumps on the way. When people are living with uncertainty for so long it takes its toll.

But I guess we would have an empty room if the project wasn't helping people, and instead we have a core group of members, many who have been with us for many months, if not years. Likewise, people are becoming more aware of the work we do, we used to be approaching organisations and now they approach us.

Exhibiting has become an important part of our work and is encouraged by the members who take ownership of the group. There is something valuable about meeting the public through galleries and helping to change the perception of refugees, especially if the members have experienced hostility. Likewise, exhibiting in a gallery to a supportive audience provides members with a more positive experience of the public, so it works both ways.

At the end of session, we gather in a circle to discuss what we have created. One of the members presents an acrylic drawing: a woman clutching a baby in her arms as she wades through freezing cold water. The faces are yet unfinished, but while the mother is afraid, we are told that the baby is consoled, content by his mother's love and prepared for the future to come, a life beyond the violence of the past.

Another painting shows the vibrant landscape of a home the artist has left behind, an ocean filled utopia which fades into the grey of a wet and dull place she describes as London. But at the end of the artwork a ray of light emerges again, a splash of colour breaking through the darkness.

"This is life now", she informs us, pointing at the emerging light 'because, it gets better'.

After experiencing a single afternoon at the studio, it is easy to see how Jon and Tania's project instils a sense of meaning and belonging that can be difficult to find. In a world that works so hard to ostracise refugees, the project provides a space of acceptance and community, a place where years of adversity and difficult emotions become works of art.

New Art Studio is an art therapy group, but for members it is about more than just putting paint to canvas- it is about exploring your identity, building relationships and finding a place to belong.

More information about New Art Studio and the work they do can be found online at [www.newartstudio.org.uk](http://www.newartstudio.org.uk) and [www.facebook.com/thenewartstudio](https://www.facebook.com/thenewartstudio).

