

Halifax OCA-North Meeting 17 November 2018

This was my first OCA group meeting since starting the OCA journey, in August this year and was held at the Dean Clough Mills (<https://www.yorkshire.com/view/culture/halifax/the-dean-clough-mills-125291>), in Halifax. Nine of us took part, including Rebecca Fairley, Programme Leader for Textiles, who gave an excellent talk on her work. The format was simple and effective. Fellow OCA students arrived and met for an informal chat over sandwiches in the Loom Lounge café, starting our session in Fletcher's Mill at about 1pm. The space was conducive to a productive afternoon, finishing at 5pm.

Our group comprised textile, painting/drawing and photography students at all three levels. This, in itself, was an important factor contributing to open and critical discussion. Added to this was Rebecca's excellent talk on her own practice and formation as an artist and tutor. Following this she led a discussion on work that several of us had brought along. The diverse practice and approaches were energising. Students' comments in emails afterwards characterised the benefit of and learning from the session:

"It was great to meet you all and I think it was a really successful, thought provoking and inspiring meeting. The cross disciplinary nature was something that I found particularly interesting and has given me food for thought."

and

"I really appreciate your insights and comments on my work and I love seeing your creative endeavours - very inspiring, I came away buzzing."

Fellow students have written learning log entries already and add to these reflections and learning from our group experience. Here are the ones that have been communicated already, in email exchanges. Also there are images by Rob Townsend, photography student:

Helen Jones

<https://paintpractice509207196.wordpress.com/>

Julie Bancroft

<https://contemporarycontext514640.wordpress.com/2018/11/19/oca-north-study-visit-17-nov-18/>

Everyone attending will have their own reflections and learning points. Below, are included some of my own.

Reflections on Rebecca Fairley's talk and discussion

Rebecca, gave an engaging and disclosing talk on her art education journey and how this progressed through her postgraduate practice. Her strong commitment to material engagement and understanding her own drivers and emotional commitment to art process, making and materiality were all articulated very well. This was evident from the questions fellow students asked. One message arising from discussion was the controversial concept of OCA students developing their "voices"; when all the time our individual emotional drivers connect directly with our developing practice, giving voice to our process and making. There was a discussion about whether or not it was wise or a good thing that OCA course material should be referring to the notion of students trying to find their voice, when it is there all the time. What seemed more relevant, from Rebecca's talk was that our engagement with simple ideas and material led investigation was central to learning, understanding and development.

Rebecca spoke eloquently on how she felt about her work and her emotional connection with materials. She encouraged us to value and reflect carefully on what does not work and to not see this as failure, but as precious learning. She also spoke about the importance of choosing the difficult over the comfortable. This will lead to much more learning and development. In my own case this might be to choose subjects where I find difficulty in identifying appropriate and effective media to make equivalent marks, gestures, tones, movement and so forth; things like soft fabrics and fur, for example.

Rebecca showed us work that investigated and explored the unpleasant; "*icky*", as she put it. This may be transferable to all of us in some way. It may be that the unprepossessing sometimes offers the more interesting subject. The selection of subject was a theme or strand running through Rebecca's talk as were choice of and experimentation with materials. Interesting and exciting was Rebecca's explication of her work with concrete. This was fascinating and led to discussions relating to experimentation, developments in technical knowledge, collaboration and the exploitation of the intellectual property created. Rebecca explained concrete curing as similar to cake baking.

Rebecca explained, in some depth, a piece she had brought with her. This appeared as an asymmetrical knitted garment, with a "sculptural" element, integral to the form. This was produced using crochet following what appeared to be an open-ended curve algorithm. There is a large literature on mathematical knitting. There are basic geometries of three types of surfaces: Euclidean, Spherical and Hyperbolic. I think the geometry in Rebecca's crochet was an hyperbolic surface and thus inherently open ended. This appears in natural forms, such as the brain, brain coral and so forth.

Reflections on our work discussions

I have not attempted to detail the discussions around our work, as these would be best addressed in fellow students' own learning logs/blogs. However, some personal reflections on the review of our work may be shared by others.

Some of us had brought work to discuss. Actually, in the café, prior to the talk and further discussion, we all engaged in fruitful exchanges and there was a real observable value in cross-disciplinary discussion and the fact that we spanned all three levels.

There were three different disciplines addressed: textiles, photography and painting/drawing. Although not everyone had brought work, everyone contributed to discussions and I think it fair to say found these discussions energising and enjoyable. There appeared to be a consensus that future events could involve a workshop, in which the group could produce or make and that this would work across different levels and disciplines.

An interesting discussion emerged concerning the importance of being able to communicate about art, the artefact, process and emotional response. Rebecca reinforced the need for us all to work on this and to think of the importance of writing about art. Williams (2014) was cited as a useful source. Williams said, in an interview with Yerushalmi (2017): *"....students not only have problems with the writing itself, but struggle with the notion that they might invent their own framework through which to think about the work. And of course there are an infinite number of potential frameworks."*

I found the respect and interest of fellow student inclusive and everyone seemed to find critical and emotional engagement with the various works on the table. Rebecca gave positive clear reactions and this encouraged discussion.

Key messages included:

the importance of being open to "failure" and valuing it as a learning opportunity;

openness to our emotional engagement with materials and processes;

experimentation and following ideas;

valuing simple ideas;

drawing on our own background and experience and understanding how that plays into our creative vigour;

choosing the difficult or unwanted.

Reflections on the session as a whole

Reflection and reflective learning were discussed on several occasions, directly and indirectly, during the session. Personally, I have adapted, Gibbs Cycle (1988) to use as my methodology for reflection. I used this professionally, prior to studying with the OCA. It seems to relate reasonably well to the approach described in the OCA's ***Introduction to Higher Education*** course, forming part of the OCA induction. However, some researchers question the application of Gibbs Cycle to art practice (Middleton, 2017). Middleton (2017), citing (Finlay, 2017), argues that whilst the Gibbs approach is structured and does not enable reflexive and critical approaches in its simple format. Also, it is argued that it does not enable the practitioner to “*explore values, quality and maintain respect for diversity*”. Notwithstanding, this criticism of Gibbs, it may be possible to adapt to take account of this. **Section 6(a) Developing you learning log** in: ***Introduction to Studying in HE***, is worth reviewing.

Some of the sources mentioned during the session are listed below:

References

Finlay, L. (2008) Reflecting on 'reflective practice'. *PBPL*. Paper 52. pp 1-27.
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Middleton, R. (2017) Critical reflections on practice development, *International Practice Development Journal*, 7 (1) [4] [fons.org/library/journal.aspx](https://www.fons.org/library/journal.aspx)
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https://www.amazon.co.uk/How-Write-About-Contemporary-Art-ebook/dp/B00LJ2V3HW/ref=dp_kinw_strp_1

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