



The initial responses to the word *Inhabit* which began the *Relay, Respond, Relay* art project. Left ©Sarah Nelson. Right. Detail. ©Helen Savage.

SoCo artists pass the baton in *Relay Respond Relay*

It has variously been referred to as *Chinese Whispers*, a *Conversation* and now a *Relay*; the art of taking a piece of art, sending it to another and them responding to it in their own inimitable way. It is a great way of opening a debate, stretching the artist and creating a body of work. HOT's *Lauris Morgan-Griffiths* was excited to see SoCo Artists' latest iteration, *Relay Respond Relay*, as they pass the baton from one to another.

Because of time constraints the participants were divided into two groups – Group A and Group Z. Twenty eight artists have contributed to a visual relay over a period of 14 weeks from 20 March to the end of June 2022. The medium ranges from painting – abstract and pictorial – through 3-D, textiles, ceramics and photography to glass. Each artist had one week to make a piece of work before handing on the 'baton' via email to the next 'runner' in their group.

To begin, only the first artist in each group received a sealed envelope containing the same word, *INHABIT*, to be interpreted in any way they wished. Each artist only saw the one they had been sent, so it is interesting that certain themes echo along the *Relay*.

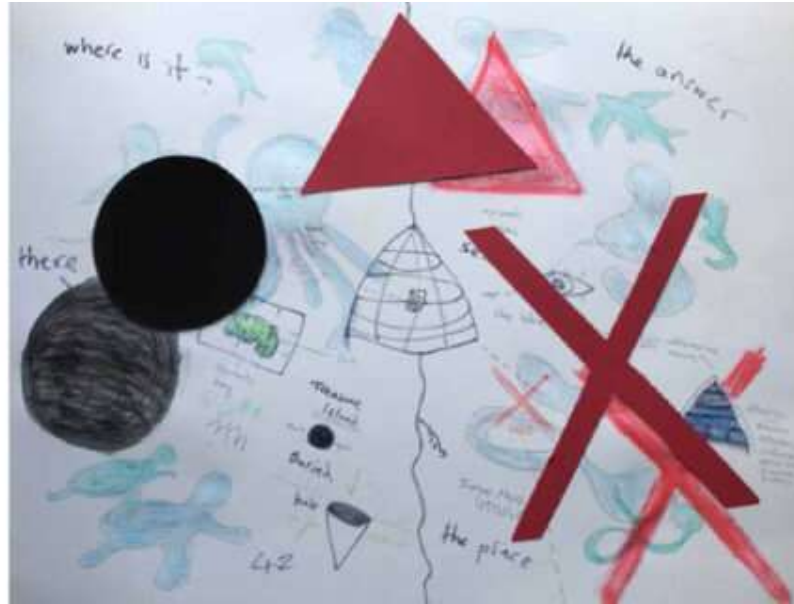
Sarah Nelson started group A (see above). She explained, "The word *INHABIT* immediately suggested a Catholic nun in habit. As I drew, I began to consider the habits of nuns, prayer and that they inhabit the house of God, the Cross. Using a repetitious print seemed appropriately habitual, the 12 rows representing the disciples and the seven columns the seven days of Creation."

Helen Savage kicked off Group Z. "I started with how I inhabit my allotment – my private space of paths, beds, nests, corners, ponds and woody glades. The paintings came quickly – with ideas of wombs, nests, trunks and branches; collaged and layered, the dissolving and merging of body and nature; cycles of growth, decay and rebirth. The vertical triptych of an altarpiece suited the work. I stopped while the paintings were still a mystery to me."

Not knowing what the other was producing it is extraordinary and exciting that both artists instinctively felt a religious resonance to the word.



Left © Alison Munby



Right © Roz Cran

Relay Respond Relay plays with the idea that we all interact and influence each other. Common ideas seem to reside in the ether. The images laid out, week by week, show how artists make their personal, individual reactions to outside influences and how each artist has answered the work of the artist before them and then, how the ‘alchemical making process’ created their response. Even when somewhat stuck by an image, the creative process expands and bends giving the artist something new and unexpected in the creation.

An example above is of Alison Munby’s contribution from Group A. “My Mother wore necklaces like those in Sinéid Codd’s previous piece. The Golden Thread reminded me of The Three Fates, weaving, measuring, and cutting the thread connecting our Past, Present and Future. The Cage of Thorns, held by the tension of the Golden Cord between the bird’s feathers rising towards the afterlife, and the bones and claws of what remains descending to the underworld, contains a book bound from the words of love my Mother wrote to my Father for the 25 years after he died.”

Roz Cran responded with “A mind map: cages, treasure maps, booklet, searching for the golden chalice, the answer to life, 42, seeking, X marks the spot, Black Spot from Treasure Island. I made red X’s, black spots, and an arrow. Went where you might dig for treasure, to search for the answer to life.”

What is so refreshing about the project is that by its very structure, *Relay Respond Relay* is about play. The artists only had a week to make their artworks. In the case of sculptors and textile artists this was extremely challenging in itself.

At times, the relay took unexpected turns, as artists made the choices of what to focus on, what they found interesting. *Relay Respond Relay* plays with the idea that artists interact with and influence each other. Many were stretched, and used the project to extend themselves out of their normal practice. Consequently, the process freed up artists from usual creative processes and styles, leading them to find new creative directions which the curators hope will give them future food for thought.



Left © Cheryl Bell Right Fi Brown

In group Z Cheryl Bell says, “This imaginative project allows artists to learn and grow by studying colleagues’ work and responding to it in our own way. My passion is nature; fractals and infinitely complex patterns repeated over and over. This is what struck me with Josie Barnes’ beautiful image; shapes repeating and undulating, like bubbles, or a cracked landscape, or scaly skin from a dinosaur or a bird. Skin and follicles and feathers – complex, repeating, protecting. ‘Flight Risk’ is about birds and their feathers, risking all for survival.”

And Fi Brown’s intriguing response was: “To contrast with Cheryl’s lively monochrome assemblage, I wanted to focus on the juxtapositions of colours in plumage. I was reminded of the simplified shapes and patterns used in bird-like representations in many indigenous artworks. I also refer to the notion of collection and classification and the use of birds within clothing, decoration and design. The vertical, coloured strips hint at swatches and labels on exhibits, hung game, and the commodification of these beautiful creatures.”

With three SoCo Artist curators, Charlotte Snook, Stephanie Fawbert and Samantha Guertin, all good artists in their own right, it seems the project couldn’t have been in better hands. SoCo is a group of 65 artists, though for this exhibition these are not all members. Wanting to attract new members, there was a callout on Instagram for younger artists to participate. That brought in eight new members, five of them recent graduates who have been offered a year’s free membership if they would like to join.

It is an interesting exhibition with a real insight into artists’ creative processes.

Relay Respond Relay is at Electro Studios, 5 Seaside Road, St Leonards-on-Sea TN38 0AL. Open weekends 2-3 and 9-10 July, 11am-5pm. Curated by the SoCo Artists members Charlotte Snook, Stephanie Fawbert and Samantha Guertin.

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