

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode Two

Home:
Live > In Room

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

RO: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery, here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators, and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks.

My name is Renee Odjidja, curator of Youth Programmes, introducing you to today's episode, featuring members of the Whitechapel Gallery's youth collective, Duchamp & Sons. Over the course of lockdown, Duchamp & Sons developed a new exhibition titled 'Home: Live > In Room' considering the impacts of the pandemic on experiences of art, culture, and the home through artworks selected from the Hiscox Collection. Here, they consider the key questions raised by the exhibition, asking:

What role might art play when our freedom is interrupted?

How do we imagine a space where we have spent so much time over the past months?

Can confinement trigger new creative processes and networks of solidarity?

Alongside this are readings by Duchamp & Sons on their poetic responses to the selected artworks.

The exhibition is free to view in Galleries 5 and 6, and is on display from 25th August 2020 to 3rd January 2021.

So, who are Duchamp & Sons? Duchamp & Sons is Whitechapel Gallery's youth collective made up of 15-23 year olds from across London. They meet regularly to explore art, curate exhibitions, music and performance events, alongside artists and other creative practitioners. We have ten members taking part in this project.

For this project, the collective met online over a two-month period, working in groups and individually, to discuss and select artworks from the Hiscox Collection. A series of talks and workshops with Whitechapel Gallery's staff and other creative professionals enabled them to gain an understanding of the curatorial process. Through writing sessions, they deconstructed the notion of home and its significance to them.

Here, Sara, Sonam and Ellen introduce the exhibition and discuss some of the artworks selected.

Sara: Hi, I'm Sara.

Ellen: Hi, Ellen.

Sonam: Hi, I'm Sonam.

Sara: So, guys, let's talk about the exhibition. What do you first see when you walk in?

Ellen: So, the exhibition is divided into two spaces: one is a light pink room which sort of responds to the imagined or unconscious notion of home, and the other room is a dark grey and speaks to ideas of confinement and sort of the starker realities of home. Throughout both spaces, there is an audio recording that we made of our creative responses to the theme of home, and in response to the artworks can be heard.

Can we talk about some of the works in the exhibition and why we chose them?

Sonam: I think one of the first pieces that stood out to me was Barbara Kasten's series of images. There were three very vibrant, geometrically structured photographs of these...yeah, just geometric shapes and triangles and swirls. And while we were choosing the selection of images, my group spoke about how it sort of represents the internal struggle in the mind about self-reflection and time in the home during this period of lockdown. We thought that was quite a strong concept to go with, and was in keeping with the sort of pink conceptual space for that room.

Sara: Okay, so if we're talking about the kind of like projected world in the pink room, I want to speak about the Peter Doig, Canoe Island. That was one of the pieces that really spoke to me throughout the whole of the Hiscox Collection. With that one, you see this sort of pink and yellow sunset set above this dark, massive water, and then in the centre there's this large, pink canoe with this kind of shadowy man in the centre. I suppose what I really liked about it was that it's almost quite magical. It has this kind of, I don't know, suspended kind of reality sort of feel. 'Cause there's this kind of figure and he's isolated away from the island in the background, there's this kind of moonlight on the water, but there's no moon, so there's a real kind of disconnect from the earth but at the same time it feels attached.

For me, in terms of thinking about it with home, it represents how...when we might be stuck in a place that we might not want to be, or just home in general, maybe amongst like kind of chaos and tension we kind of create our own alternate realities.

Ellen: I was also very taken by this image. But I think what resonated with me was I saw this figure in this canoe with this island in the background as a...like, venturing forth and bringing with it questions of what home might mean to me or to anyone when they move from place to place. Like, is this island in the background a previous home, or is this where this man and this canoe is going to, and whether we shape our home in our mind when we sort of go forward and when we move from place to place? Do we have an already conceived idea of a home, or is it sort of, this is what comes about later on? And all these sort of questions of, I guess, belonging and place is what it sort of brought up for me.

Sara: That's interesting though that yours is...when you see it, you think more about the kind of inward feelings, things about kind of where you might be grounded or where you belong...

Ellen: Mm.

Sara: ...and for me it's more about kind of this, like, outward projection of kind of imagining where you could be or where you want to be. Sort of similar, the same stream, but...

Ellen: I guess that pink room is very much what we're trying to sort of...

Sara: Exactly.

Ellen: ...convey, is this imagined... Like, whether it be you're confined within a space and you imagine this idea of potentials, or you are either within a space or not within a space and then sort of having these imagined ideas.

Like, that's sort of I think what we were trying to create with that room specifically, everything that's unconsciously happening when you're trying to conceive of what home means to you within your certain living situation.

Sonam: Yeah, and speaking on that, I also think the Trevor Paglen, The Shape of Clouds image, that's the first image you see when you arrive into the gallery. That, to me, was really striking because of the...initially, for the vibrant blues and the just amazing shapes and details within the image, and then as you step closer, you see the geometric patterns that are laid on the top of the clouds as well.

I was just reading, Paglen was saying that he was applying industrial-scale AI software that would generate shapes over the images. And he was speaking about how the software basically freaks out when you apply it to images that aren't very straightforward, so you get these incredible details all over the images.

I thought that was really interesting in the way that it could be seen also as the sort of frequencies or the radio waves that are spreading across the world, and how we sort of use all this software within our home. And how does it get to the next person's house? It travels through the clouds, through the sky, and that was a very interesting analogy for that sort of concept.

Sara: We're going to move onto the dark room now, the dark grey, which is more about the idea of home, confinement, reality.

I want to start with Lisa Oppenheim's Calendar piece. So with that one, it displays small fragments of a...from

a negative, of a smoking bomb site, and it's organised into this sort of multi-tile panel. When you look at the piece, it's organised and chaotic at the same time. For me, it represents what it feels like to make sense of a chaotic environment, the kind of world around you. Because it is made up of these kind of little bomb site squares, it does remind you of this kind of wider, violent past. I think Lisa Oppenheim has spoken about this before; it's kind of like a timeline of war and peace for Britain. The context is really important when you acknowledge that, but I also think it's evocative of the individual struggles, the kind of madness that happens in our life. Especially when you call something like that a calendar, it makes you think about how you kind of have to pick things in your life, put them down, kind of organise them yourself, and make sense of it all.

Again, talking more about the kind of individual aspect, I think when you first look up at the piece, you're kind of directed to look upwards as if you're looking at the sky; it's almost peaceful. But then when you look closer, you can kind of see those violent images, they're quite contained; it's kind of like why I call it a confused sense of peace.

I think in comparison to the other pieces in that room, it does look quite abstract. It kind of sits in between the two rooms, I would say. The Crewdson and the Billingham are photographs. If you look at them, they're quite literal in terms of thinking about home. But with Oppenheim, it is technically...well, it is a photographic piece 'cause it's taken from negatives. Yeah, and I think it just sits really nicely in that space.

Ellen: Yeah, and it sits next to Cornelia Parker's Loadstone (Elegy for an English Country Graveyard), and I think those two both work well as an in between, which

they're the first you see when you walk from the pink room into the dark grey room. Cornelia Parker's work is a rectangular Blue Lias stone with the poem, This Be The Verse, by Philip Larkin engraved into it. It's very much about a quite negative or harsh take on ideas of family and what you inherit from your parents, and so I think it works quite well with that work in sort of the lead-in between this imagined space into this more hyper-realistic image of home.

I think it worked quite well in this space, I guess, to challenge the viewer and whether they agree with this, and to, I guess, promote your own self-introspection, like, is this how you feel about your family, and is this how you take things from your own parents? Like, would looking at this work make you think, I don't want to do what my parents have done? Which I think fits in quite well with this idea of confinement and introspection within a confined space, which is why I think it fitted quite well within this darker room.

Sonam: I think that leads really well into the sort of opposite corner of the room, which, as you already said, is a lot more literal. You have the Richard Billingham and the Gregory Crewdson pieces that are far more...well, they define their concept of home in a much more obvious way.

The Gregory Crewdson work is one of my favourite pieces in the show. I think instantly you notice the technical ability of Crewdson, and the style of the image where you have this twilight scene. You have staged people throughout this print, which is about 3m wide? Three metres or so. So within that, you see so many small narratives, so many micro-stories, which instantly to me was reminiscent of sort of walking through my communities and what my home...and the

twilight period where you see one window with the light on and you see one thing going on. Instantly, I was drawing parallels between the work and my feelings of that space.

I think the lighting and his ability to create a sort of film set-like stage is also amazing. The fact that he micro lights every single space, every building, creates this very...it's like a twilight zone, you know, like a space that is almost like a memory, like a dream, but still very literal.

Ellen: It's such a beautiful piece.

Sonam: Mm.

Sara: Definitely.

Ellen: But it definitely... Sort of it fits in with the rest of the room in the darkness. Even though there's incredibly bright colours and extreme detail, it's very...yeah, as you say, it is like an episode of a sort of gloomy TV set or something like that, but it's so beautifully done, that it's so striking.

RO: Here, we have three members of Duchamp & Sons, Sammara, Ellen and Iñaki, discussing the theme of home explored in the project and exhibition.

Ellen: So guys, why home?

Iñaki: The concept of home was particularly pertinent at the time because we were in a moment in the UK where we were in lockdown, and so we were confined in a place that could be considered home for some. And yeah, home is a much broader question, a much more foundational question. Few concepts speak of a

person as much as home, and with our large and very diverse group, it presented us an opportunity to explore that.

Sammara: Yeah, definitely.

Ellen: And with the...especially the task that we sort of did throughout the build-up to actually selecting the works, we were encouraged to write about home. I really felt that with the freedom we had in those activities, things about home that I personally hadn't really thought about but sort of were there in my mind were revealed.

It was very interesting when we discussed all these things together, how different our concepts of home were, whether they were sort of a feeling or a physical place. These were, like, not only because we were such a diverse group in terms of our own backgrounds and living situations, but age as well, and whether people had moved away from the parental home or whether they'd moved country. Like, the concept of home was so diverse, that I think it was very interesting to see that this sort of universal concept of what home might be, and actually it can't be considered this sort of one, singular thing. I think that was especially sort of, as you both said, like, being forced to stay within our living situations, we all had to sort of...not necessarily come to terms with it, but at least address what that might mean to us.

Sammara: I think collectively it was on sort of everyone's mind. Not just confined within our group, but in the wider world. There were these times where you're sort of forced to really, I suppose, take stock of your connections and your intimate connections to your surroundings. I think in that way, the concept of home was...it was very much sort of on everyone's mind.

Iñaki: I can give like a personal example, which is I asked my grandmother who lives in Uruguay, where you consider home, because she is from Argentina, and the first thing she replied was, do you mean *casa* or *hogar*? Do you mean, house or home? I think one of the initial things that the exhibition does in deconstructing the concept of home is we remove it from just the concept of home being a house.

Ellen: Yeah, very much so.

Sammara: Yeah. And in that way, I think by starting off our sessions with a lot of writing and sort of free writing, we really delved into the unconscious parts of our brain and explored where home lies in those parts. And considered how the reality of home was compared to our, like you say, this conceptual idea of home or this emotional belonging of home. That kind of thinking led to a lot of interesting conversations, and eventually those processes were kind of streamlined and so on to finalise our choices.

[POETRY READINGS BEGIN]

Ellen: What becomes of home when we journey forth? Beyond the place we once held close, onwards to another which we know not yet. In this liminal space we may hang, unable to mark in our minds the shape of home. The cliché of the journey into the unknown made all the more real in its intangibility.

Akraam: Truth be told, I don't like this photo. It's too real, too exposed. Life is like this but I wish it was unlike this, trapped in reality, like there is no control, thick tar absorbed in the wallpaper, drenched in mucus. Like

my uncle's room. Memories of the family I try to remember, but the settings I often try to forget.

Sammara: We were all at home when we began imagining foreign places. They came to us like remnants of a near-past, still hanging in the trees like rubbish after a storm. We were their territory and they had come so far to find us. To tell us that our home was not like their home; but to make their home they needed each brick from ours and from our children's homes. They took and took until there was no earth to be found; first we became an island and then we drowned.

Iñaki: Home will begin again when I am newly displaced. When I have to make sense of my surroundings and move from one way of living to another. Only that way will I know if I left a home or began a new one.

[POETRY READINGS END]

Sammara: Just speaking more on that unconsciousness and exploring those thoughts around the way that you hold home within you in contrast to, or rather existing alongside, the physical lived reality of home, we started to think about that duality and the way that confinement also leads to imagination. It leads to a further investigation, sort of a mapping of your surroundings, like I said earlier, taking stock of your, I suppose, lived reality, your emotional state and so on.

Ellen: And I guess we sort of look towards ideas of mapping in the way in which sort of one brings an idea of home with you, and it's not this real space but a kind of imagined space that has infinite potential to belong anywhere. I think that was quite an interesting idea that we thought worked quite well, as you say, with this idea of confinement as an opposition to it.

Iñaki: I suppose it was like a paradox. You were confined at once in a room, but that didn't mean you would be mentally and imaginatively confined, as in you could escape those confines of the room through your mind. Then we heard this, let's say imaginative, more like authentically real understanding of home in one of the rooms.

Sammara: Yeah. And those are within... Keeping those ideas in mind, there are a lot of artworks that... Lucky for us, in the exhibition, there's lots of artworks that correspond to those ideas. I think artists' work, they realise or they scratch at that unconsciousness, and I think that's very well reflected within the exhibition and within the two rooms of our exhibition.

RO: We now have Aasiya, Akraam, Josh and Maya giving insight into their curatorial process leading to the exhibition.

Akraam: I'm Akraam.

Josh: I'm Josh.

Aasiya: I'm Aasiya

Maya: I'm Maya.

How did writing help us to develop the concept of home?

Akraam: Yeah, I think in terms of the creative writing sessions, they really built a fundamental core to our exhibition. Normally, as young artists, I guess you could say we would look at the paintings and all the mediums, the artworks, and we would normally say, oh that's a big

name, or that kind of visually appeals to me. But through the creative writing sessions, I think we found more depth and meaning to the artworks, and we started reflecting more on the concepts of each piece. I think that we started building our collection mainly because of the creative writing sessions, and what home meant to each of us as individuals in our different stages of life that we're in right now.

Aasiya: I think also, having to write about home helped me process my own feelings about it. I didn't have a definition of home before we wrote about it, but then when you were forced to, it kind of made me, I guess, articulate what I thought.

Maya: Fauzia, who was the script writer working with us, she would give us like a small prompt at the beginning of every session; single words like mapping, isolation, escape, displacement. I found they really helped because I was able to kind of think specifically about certain words and how they related to home, and look at home from lots of different perspectives.

I think reading our writing out loud was also a really unique experience because it was never something I really thought about. But you really were...you had to kind of practice how you're going to say your writing, where you're going to pause, the things you're going to exaggerate and properly bring attention to your writing. But I think it really helped just to bring everything to life. I think words sound so much more...they just sound different when it's spoken and you can kind of hear all the meaning behind it.

Josh: Let's talk about our experience working with the Whitechapel Gallery staff and obviously the other practitioners.

Aasiya: I found it really interesting comparing Gary Hume's curation process to ours, and how his was different, and sort of the factors that he considered versus what we did. I think you can really tell through our exhibition that we were thinking about home, and sort of like the restrictions and stuff, and, I don't know, sort of seeing the difference was really interesting. And we met Gary over the Zoom call, and hearing him talk about it was a unique experience.

Maya: I found it interesting working with Sofia, the Head of Education at the gallery. She would ask us loads of questions about how...the specific things we'd want in the gallery in our exhibition, things that I never kind of paid attention to like the lighting, the sound, the seating. I don't know, it kind of gave me new respect for people who do this on the daily 'cause they pay such attention to detail. I just found that process, all the decisions we made, I just found it really exciting. Then coming into the gallery and seeing everything, all the small things that we'd done with her, was really powerful.

Josh: Yeah, it boosted my confidence working with people like Sofia, like Chris Spear from the Zabłudowicz Collection, because he did a virtual hang with us of our exhibition. He allowed us to direct him, so it gave all our ideas a validity, like they were just as important as if a professional curator had done them. One of the first things we did was we thought we had to move the Richard Billingham pieces. We hadn't completely decided where they'd be, but we had to put them on...we tried to put one on a wall which didn't quite work 'cause the work was too big. Then there was one...we also had an issue with the Peter Doig, which again the walls weren't as big as they looked on the

screen. So we worked with Ryszard, the gallery manager, and Sofia, to come up with a way of hanging them that felt right in the space, rather than...which was different from how we'd initially conceived it.

Yeah, so we learnt as a group I think about the challenges of working initially from online, which we'd learnt... During an earlier talk on Zoom, we'd learnt about how curators sometimes do have to work in this way where they discuss the artworks where they're going to go in the show. If curators are working from another country, and they're curating an exhibition in a different country, then they sometimes have to work in the same way that we were working. So we learnt about...that these are not necessarily new challenges, but for us they were obviously completely new.

Akraam: Yeah, I think as young artists, particularly looking for possible jobs and, like, just not sure where we are, because in the education system, the basic one you could say, we're not really told about the art field and what opportunities are available. So when you speak to these practitioners, you kind of ask them, did you start in art, or where did you come from? A lot of them didn't actually start from art backgrounds, and I think that's really interesting.

Even during the process of curating this exhibition, we kind of realised how many components there are, which also means that there's multiple jobs available to us, which I think you just don't get to hear about a lot. I think that was really encouraging, and it just shows that no matter what position you are, you can somehow get involved. I think that's just...yeah, that was really, like, inspiring, not just to me but I'm sure many people. Hopefully, people outside get to understand what roles are available.

Also, I think in terms of the validity that Josh was talking about, our voices really were heard. You know, at the beginning, it's like, it's such a great opportunity to curate at Whitechapel, but it almost sounds too good to be true, like, yeah, there's no way that we actually will have our voices heard. We actually literally ended up having our voices heard in the exhibition.

There were actual people waiting on us for our opinion to be heard because they had to base their role depending on our decision in the end. They had to wait for the colour of the walls, which we chose like a really nice shade of pink, which was quite, you know, it was quite a scary decision. You don't often see pink in a gallery, but I think it was perfect. Decisions like that really showed how important our voices were, and I think this was a great opportunity.

RO: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org. Don't forget to visit the exhibition 'Home: Live > In Room' on display from 25th August 2020 to 3rd January 2021. Bye for now.

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