

'Turning it on its head':

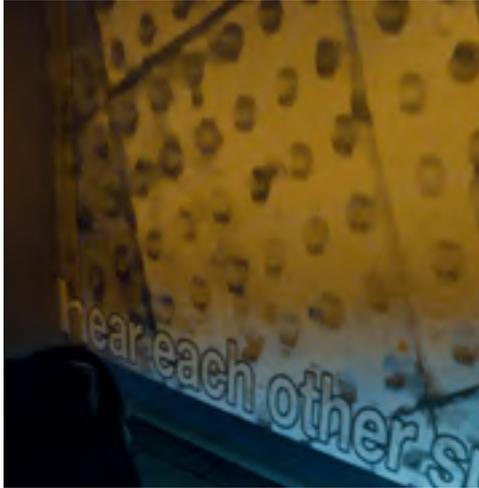


Image: First Impressions
by Zoe Partington

This is Zoe's second commission with DASH and partner galleries to create groundbreaking new work. In 2013 she co-produced 'Sound Canvas' which won a Jodi Award for Innovation and has toured Shropshire and the borders after leaving The Public.

Zoe tells us about her new commission:

"Tu Fewn and 'Turning it On its Head' is a series of images and oral descriptions, commissioned as part of the Diffusion festival around the theme 'Looking for America.' The work provides an insight into my work around Disability Arts. I've been developing this work for over 25 years, observing and experimenting with accessibility to visual imagery for blind and partially sighted people in different ways.

Diffusion is a biennial, month-long international festival of photography which takes place in Cardiff, Wales. In 2015 **ffotogallery** selected the theme of 'Looking for America', an investigation of the status and meaning of the American Dream in relation to contemporary experience in Wales, America and the rest of the world. The festival flourished with stunning and thought-provoking images, and through the link below I share some of my favourite photos and collected images of the work of Stacy Kranitz, the images by Ken Griffiths of Patagonia, and the work of Jona Frank and High School/Right, amongst hundreds of images from the Diffusion Festival 2015. To access these go to the website address below. <http://diffusionfestival.org/>

I'd encourage you to view this work that I believe has many parallels with many journeys and insights of disabled artists, and their work in Disability Arts.

I felt at home with the festival content as a tool to challenge myths and misconceptions of America, and at times I found some images challenging and some phenomenal. In a sense seeing and hearing about individual photographers' journeys, and the life they captured through the lens has given me an appetite to continue capturing disabled people's lives in a style that works for me. I started this journey as an outsider and quickly felt welcomed as part of the [ffotogallery](#) team and as a disabled artist - a term I am proud to use as it is relevant to my ethos, practice, investigation, and my interest around the social dynamic of how disabled people are received by others, and how disabled people are represented, discussed, assessed and analysed.

I spend a lot of my life not mentioning my impairment and my chronic condition that impacts on my life 24 / 7, but in this context it felt relevant and valid to include the reference, along with the terminology, symbolising of disability and the barriers



Image: Sound Canvas II by Zoe Partington, Photograph by Graham Peet

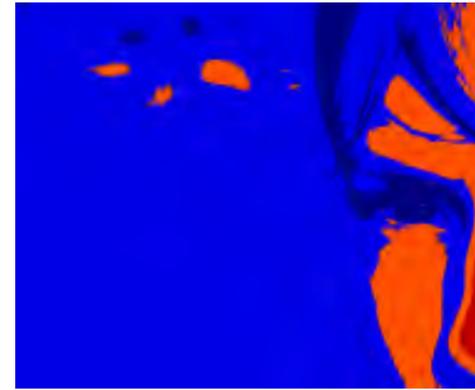


Image: Turning It On Its Head by Zoe Partington

disabled people meet regularly, through the lack of understanding of the social model of disability. The barriers disabled people face are the external factors such as lack of access to the environment, support, education, housing, employment, discrimination, attitudes and inaccessible information; all these are barriers, not the actual condition or impairment.

During the past 20 years I have managed with sight loss and used it to enhance my experience of the world around me, and to challenge those who continue the myths, misconceptions and exclusion of blind and partially sighted people.

At the time I lost my sight I was studying an M.A. in the History of Art, Design and Architecture and undertaking a lot of research into photography and architecture in the UK and Dubai. But on losing some of my sight I found continuing this research incredibly hard. At times I was accessing images with a small magnifier and found this exhausting. So I stopped looking and using cameras and enjoying images in detail as I did not want to be reminded of what I could not see.

At the time, lack of awareness about Disability Arts and the lack of opportunity to meet other disabled artists was devastating. It is only 20 years later that I have been supported by organisations such as DASH.

It hasn't been easy deciding to continue making art in a traditional sense and using my creative perspective to inform my work. The social model was enlightening as it taught me to forget tradition; to literally abandon it and create and feel that my own way of playing with art and its associations and the free play of ideas my own.

I am constantly juggling and balancing the impact of my medical condition and the sight loss with the images and installations I create.



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What I mean by this, is that how I see an image is not necessarily how others view it. The reason for this is that the receptors in my retina that take information to my brain are damaged, and over 20 years I have learnt to see things in a different way. The immediate impact of sightloss meant every time I looked at an image I was judging what I couldn't see, and it has taken me a long time for my brain to stop doing this and feel comfortable with what I am viewing. My brain views images so rapidly now I don't know what I can't see, and I've also stopped caring about what I cannot see.

During the Tu Fewn commission, I have had access to high quality contemporary photography from other festival photographers and disabled volunteers, artists and their work. This has driven a passion in my work to continue to develop my photography through 'portraits, words and images'.

I have been creating new types of workshops with images and words and drawing techniques, to observe and encourage participants to share what they can see with blind and partially sighted people. What is apparent is that people do view images differently, but can share a common perspective which provides a way in for blind and partially sighted people to experience contemporary images. For me this is personal; having had sight I still want to know what the visual is even if I cannot see it. I also want a conversation at an intellectual level about the work.

The workshops are continuing to develop, and a culmination of my ideas, by working with another disabled artist introduced to me by Ulrike Smalley, uses the idea of 'Renga', a collaborative poetry to create meaning through words. We will work together to create 'Renga' and image workshops through words and photos.

In conversation when starting this project I didn't dream of concluding it at the Turner Gallery in Penarth with artists with head injuries and beginning a new journey, but this is why I do what I do, because as soon as I mention being a disabled artist other disabled people openly begin to share their lives with me. I've really noticed this during the audio description workshops I provided during the festival, and the open call attracted many disabled volunteers to come and work with me.

As the festival theme was 'Looking for America' I wanted to investigate this relationship with disabled artists. This was my starting point, and the process began with exploring their perspective of a notion of an American Dream through email, messenger, facebook, instagram and conversations with disabled people.

The project also deals with my experience as a conceptual artist about the issue of sight loss and developing new ways to describe visual images to blind and partially sighted people.



Image: Disabled Lost Child by Zoe Partington



Image: From Turning It On Its Head by Zoe Partington

I designed creative workshops developed as part of the festival called 'Talking Images', which enabled exchanges of ideas about interpreting and translating visual images into words. This has supported my international work in Brazil, Iceland, and Australia, and has enabled me to continue to develop 'Talking Images' for all audiences in the cultural and heritage sector in progressive ways.

The photos created for the festival centred around these conversations with disabled artists, across the Americas and world wide, about 'The American Dream' and its relationship to disabled people. The outcomes were a progression of the consequences of descriptions and perceptions of visual imagery through the eyes of individuals. I am fascinated by how we interpret images for others and convey information.

Many photographers programmed in the festival held beliefs that were similar but different to the concept and notion that inherent flaws can be constructed to create a land of dreams and idealised state. I used words to change meaning in my photos. The language that relates to the photo is shown beneath it, and I built this in as part of the creative process to enhance the images for all, using creative audio description. Involving disabled people in the creative process provides a welcome change to the 'mainstream', another perspective and significantly an equal society."

Zoe Partington, 2016.

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