

## A Note About the Cover Art

### *No Show*

Artist: Group work installation, from a workshop with sculptor Cathy Carmen, at Castlerea Prison

Photo by: Eugene Langan, 2019.

The installation titled *No Show*, was created by a group of participants during workshops facilitated by sculptor Cathy Carmen, at Castlerea Prison in 2019. The work reflects the infrastructure established in recent decades to promote art education in prisons in Ireland, appreciated now in the rear view mirror of pandemic restrictions. Cathy built up a relationship with the education centre at the prison, staffed by specialist teachers employed by the local Education and Training Board. Her workshops were funded by the Artists in Prisons Scheme, an arts participation programme, funded jointly by the Arts Council of Ireland and the Irish Prison Service. Carmen promotes a workshop method of hands on learning, and she guided the participants, who had chosen to attend, in a creative process of group activities and discussions, that produced the *No Show* installation and a number of other related pieces. She chose body casting, with the aim of expressing something personal, as a starting point calculated to promote engagement, while preconceived ideas about finished pieces were avoided at that early stage. In response, one man posed for a plaster cast with his arms folded to express defensiveness and tension, in terms of body language. Carmen talks about “playing” with a material as a means of getting in touch with feelings, allowing things to happen, while searching for a way to express meaning in a more developed and finished piece that is truthful to the individual or group. That unpredictable leap of imagination happened, during a group discussion, with the plaster cast of the folded arms propped on a table against the wall. There was consensus that the plaster cast belonged on the edge of a table, and the final shape and meaning of the sculpture emerged when a man suggested that the folded arms evoked the desolation felt, when a partner failed to show up for a visit. The absence of the “no show” visitor was quickly evoked by adding an empty chair, and the disparate elements were brought together when covered in plaster bandage. Finally a poem, titled “For You to be here,” hand written on scorched paper that appeared to have survived a fire, and written by the man who had modelled for the plaster cast, was placed on the table.

Later that year, the installation was included by Irish artist and curator Brian Maguire in Open Minds, a national exhibition of creative work by people in custody. Maguire insisted that a selection of work was photographed professionally to illustrate the catalogue, and the exhibition was seen at Rua Red, the South Dublin Arts Centre, in September, and at the Hunt Museum in Limerick, during October and November 2019. Education programmes at both venues facilitated engagement, by school and community groups of all ages, in active learning discussion groups and practical workshops. Both galleries reported positive feedback and above average attendance, and at Rua Red, a group on day release from an open prison discussed their work in the exhibition with students from the National College of Art and Design.

The group who created the *No Show* installation, embraced an encounter with an artist, and their work generated a genuine impression of “giving something back to society” when exhibited in the community. Rather than playing a role as passive recipients of education, instead as active learners, they made a unique contribution within a national framework of education and culture that does not recognize prison walls as boundaries. Three months later, prison education and regional arts centres were closed by the pandemic. The challenge now is to rebuild that learning infrastructure, from the poster on a prison notice board offering places in a workshop, to the community group engaged in an intense discussion of all the issues raised, during a visit to an exhibition of creative work by people in custody, at their local arts centre.

Correspondence: Tom Shortt, Email: [teshortt@ipsedu.ie](mailto:teshortt@ipsedu.ie)

(Accepted: 14 June 2021) ISSN: 2387-2306 doi: <https://doi.org/10.25771/xykq-1w53>

Except where otherwise noted, content on this site is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

