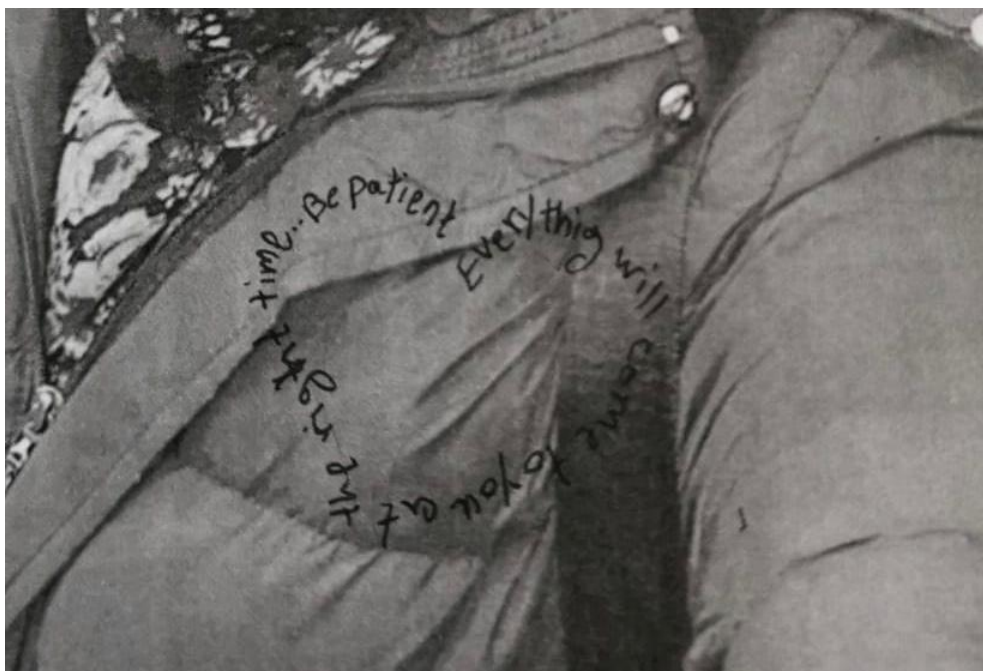


COMING HOME Learning and Engagement Case Study

Portrait of Malala Yousafzai by Shirin Neshat: Birmingham Museums Trust



1. Introduction

Born in Mingora, Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai is a human rights activist for female education. She came to prominence in 2009 after writing about her life during the Taliban occupation of her town Swat Valley, and the ban on girls' education. In October 2012, she was shot on the left side of her head in

an attack by a Taliban gunman on her school bus. She recovered in Birmingham, UK, where she chose to remain with her family.

In 2013, Malala was awarded the International Children's Peace Prize and in 2014, she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize with Indian activist Kailash Satyarthi. She founded the Malala Fund in 2013, which is dedicated to giving all girls access to twelve years of free, safe, quality education. She is currently studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Oxford.

This is one of a pair of portraits by Iranian-born artist and film-maker Shirin Neshat. Neshat took a series of photographs before selecting two, onto which she has hand inscribed in calligraphy a poem by the Pashto poet Rahmat Shah Sayel from Peshawar, written in 2011. The artist recalled: 'I knew of Malala as an extraordinary young woman ... when I look back on our encounter, I am left with impressions of humility, wisdom and a rare sense of inner beauty.'

2. Participants

Service users of Refugee Action, 6 women participated, sometimes with their children.

3. Activity

Activity ran solely as a digital engagement project due to Covid 19 restrictions. The participants took part in four online sessions lasting one-and-a-half hours each on Saturday mornings in December 2020 and January 2021. The sessions were conducted over Zoom and facilitated by Birmingham artist Zoya Ahmed.

The aim of the project was to enable participants to create a self-portrait reflecting their identity and home. All art resources required for the sessions were sent by post to the participants to ensure they could fully participate. During the final session, participants shared their artwork with the group and celebrated their success. All participants spoke Arabic as their first language therefore an Arabic translator was present for sessions to support communication.

4. Outcomes and reflections

Participants

Participants were taught new skills in art making; specifically, how to use oil pastels, Posca pens, watercolours, the basics of portraiture and poetry. They also learnt more about artwork in Birmingham Museum's collection and the developed skills in how to read a piece of art.

Having a translator was essential to enable all participants to share confidently.

Providing a variety of art resources worked well, enabling different options for making. Introducing materials participants had not used before helped make the project more interesting for them.

The artist facilitator was particularly good at teaching simple technics that could be replicated easily.

As well as the portrait of Malala, sharing other artwork in the museum's collection worked really well, in particular Ford Madox Brown's ['The Last of England'](#), which sparked much discussion and conversation.

All participants who completed the project felt that they had learnt new skills. All responded that they had enjoyed the project for the art making but also for the social interactions helping combat isolation.

As refugee women themselves, the participants related to Mala as a woman and her actions as an activist. The theme of HOME was felt strongly through focusing on identity.

The organisation

The organisation had never carried out a project in this way before – Covid-19 restrictions being the catalyst for developing new methods for digital projects. In addition, although they had partnered with Refugee Action before, the participants in the project were new to them and had never visited Birmingham museum before.

Lesson learned:

- Usually this type of project would be carried out in the Museum and it would have been much more successful if that had been possible. It is unlikely that they would choose to work in this way again with this audience. However, given the circumstances they were really pleased to complete the project at all.
- Posting the art resources earlier would have been more successful - due to post delays, some participants did not receive their materials in time.
- The Museum did not make enough allowance in the planning for the participants to have their children with them so could have made the sessions more family friendly.
- More participants could have been recruited at the start to account for the high dropout rate. Our partners Refugee Action recruited 10 participants with the hope that 5 would complete the project. Six people started the project with three staying to the end.

5. Selected feedback

Participants

"This was the first time I have done any drawing since school, so thank you!"

"I am really enjoying the meetings. I love drawing but had no confidence to draw faces. Last week we learned how, and I feel so much more confident now."

"As well as teaching us something new at the same time the group is breaking down the feelings of isolation during lockdown & I have something to look forward to each week."

Reactions to the portrait included:

"When I look at her, the way she looks, I can see she is a wise woman, her eyes give you hope that a woman can do something."

"She tried to change her reality; she went through difficult things in her life, but she tried to change her reality."

"We studied Malala in my classroom, we all need to stay like her. We can't let people bully us, we need to be ourselves".
(7-year-old girl)

"She looks like a confident woman, but innocent."

"My impression is that we should always be educated, we should educate ourselves. We need to integrate and be educated that's the message I get from the book in the picture."

"The poem is really wonderful to go with the art. She is a really confident woman and she is challenging everything. She can pass the challenges in her own country and so we can survive anything. Don't give up until you reach your goal."