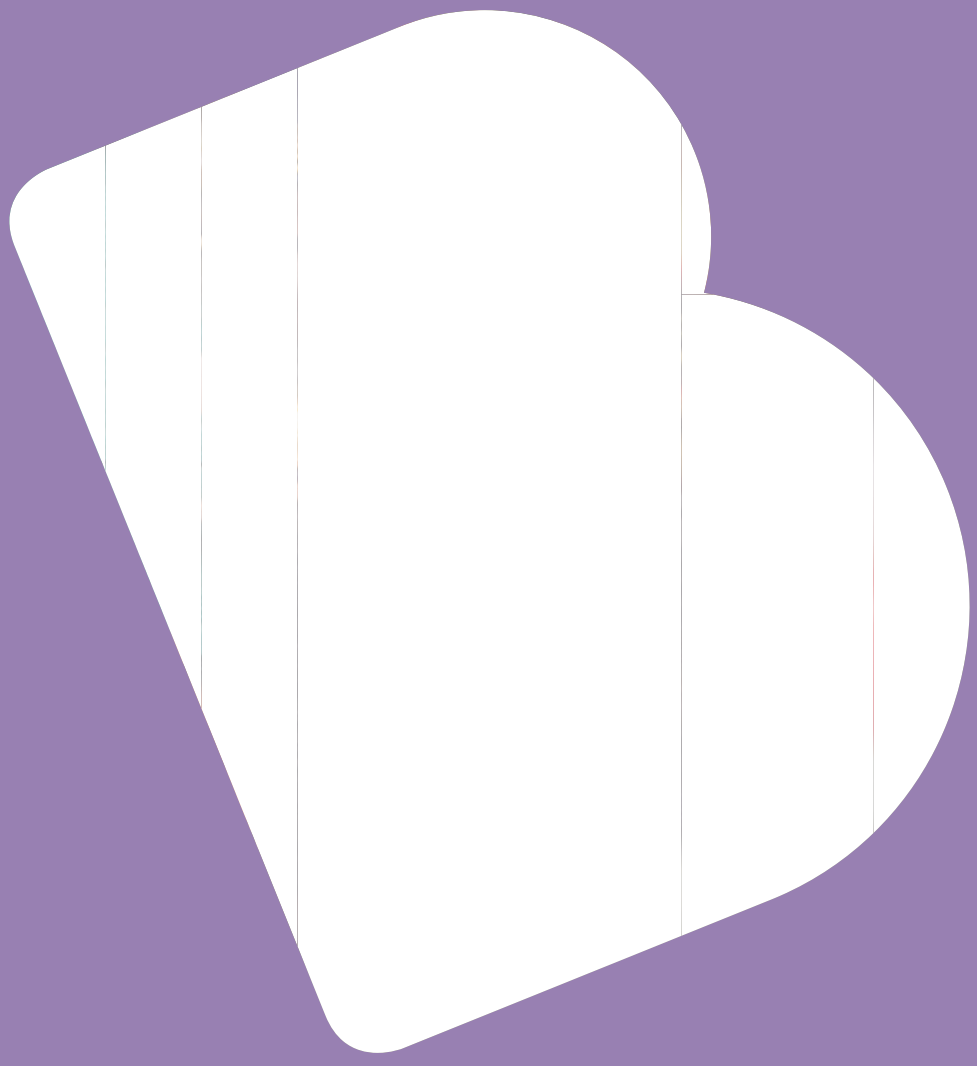
THE DRAWING ROOM

The Lost Room



The Lost Room, Nicola Flower and Mark Hewitt

What is The Lost Room?

The Lost Room is a unique arts project with Kent based arts organisation FrancisKnight, The Beaney House of Art and Knowledge and Porchlight, one of the foremost charities supporting vulnerable and homeless people in Kent, Medway and Croydon.

Collaborating with The Beaney, FrancisKnight have commissioned two artists to work alongside the charity to explore the relationship people have to belongings; what they represent both in terms of collecting/collections in a museum and those personal items that people carry or keep.

Visual artist Nicola Flower has taken on the role of 'The Lost Room Girl,' an interpreter and user of objects. She has based herself at the museum sharing her creative skills with participants from Porchlight. Nicola uses everyday objects and embroidery to elevate objects to a new status. She is interested in the process of making and being immersed in a purpose. Using the technique of embroidery with its meditative, unassuming yet sensitive response, she encourages the maker to tap into the subconscious spirit and lose time.

Mark Hewitt is a writer, director and theatre maker and works in theatre and performance. His time with Porchlight has been spent with participants working on a guided tour of Canterbury from a homeless person's perspective. The 'My Streets tour' is a starting point for Mark, and the basis for his residency working with Porchlight hostels in Canterbury. He has offered creative writing sessions to service users. Mark's interest lies gathering, through conversation, 'memory pictures', as a psychological counterpart to the personal physical objects that are the focus of Nicola Flowers' work.

Items on display

The Lost Room Embroideries installed with the work of Nicola Flower

Collections from The Lost Room

Collection 1: 'We are held among the Twigs'

Date: 12 July 2013

Materials: Personal objects, wool, twigs, binca, thread, haberdashery, china figurines.

Description of exhibit: Personal objects embroidered and embellished, held among a structure of bound twigs and watched over by china figures. This exhibit includes the embroidered object titled 'Cheerleader pompom'.

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Collection 2: 'Snug safe in glass vases'

Date: 16 August 2013

Materials: Personal objects, binca, haberdashery, glass vases.

Description of exhibit: Personal objects embroidered and embellished, snuggly captured in a familiar domestic vase from the home. This exhibit includes the embroidered object titled 'Moomin Mama Bambi horse'.

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Collection 3: 'Caught in the Woods'

Date: 13 September 2013

Materials: Personal objects, binca, haberdashery, tape, wool, twigs, china figurines.

Description of exhibit: Personal objects embroidered and embellished, caught in the branches held by china figures. This exhibit includes the embroidered objects titled 'Love of music and the price of art' and 'Traveller from the heart'.

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Collection 4: 'Cradled in a net'

Date: 26 July 2013

Materials: Personal objects, binca, haberdashery, net, china figurines.

Description of exhibit: Personal objects embroidered and embellished resting in nets held safely between china figures. This exhibit includes the embroidered objects titled 'Give me a ring' and 'Zombie shoeless girl'.

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Collection 5: 'Installation of bound twigs, plastic, fabric and china figurines' (temporary exhibit, photograph only)

Date: 13 September 2013

Materials: Personal objects, wool, twigs, plastic spacers, fabric, tape, china figures.

Description of exhibit: A temporary installation of objects, found materials and china figures.

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Further information about Nicola Flower and the work for The Lost Room

Before I started developing ideas for The Lost Room I asked myself many questions:

What kind of objects do Museums exhibit?

Why are we interested in collections of objects?

What is it like to be a Global traveller, mercenary or missionary, with worldwide stories and interesting 'finds'?

Can personal objects be witnesses to life events?

Are there objects in the collections that remind us of events and things that we have owned?

How can the way an object is displayed change its status?

Can age lend an air of authority to an object?

Which objects do I carry and why?

Can appreciating another person's object help us to understand that person more?

Working in residence at the Beaney as the girl from The Lost Room

Working with Porchlight participants I have explored the idea of objects: tiny; intimate; secretive; decorative; functional; valueless; personal. It's made me realise that many of the objects we hold dear could be reflected back to objects at the Beaney and relate to men and women with similar human concerns from long ago. There is a history of humans carrying objects and of elevating objects to a higher value and status as talismans, anchors or keepsakes.

I wanted the work that was created for the Lost Room to be integrated, a sharing of thoughts and skills between me, as an artist, and the service users of Porchlight that worked alongside me. We explored ways of interpreting the objects importance through embroidery, canvas stitch and embellishment and then developed ways of displaying and 'holding' the objects. The small installations displayed in the cabinets elevate the objects in status, protect and cradle them. By placing them in an unfamiliar setting, the china figures bestow quiet recognition of their importance, watching over as keepers.

As an artist I resolve and produce work by drawing, writing and making in textiles and mix media. I use traditional materials and objects and materials that are found and or serve to communicate my ideas. The following are illustrations from my Lost Room sketchbook.

Nicola Flower

The Lost Room is funded by:

THE BEANEY HOUSE OF ART & KNOWLEDGE

FrancisKnight

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Porchlight
Changing attitudes · Changing lives

What is the Lost Room?

Mark Hewitt is a writer, director, theatre maker and collaborative artist. Some of his time with Porchlight has been spent with participants working on a guided tour of Canterbury from a homeless person's perspective. The 'My Streets tour' became a starting point for Mark, and was one of the main points of focus during a week long residency working with Porchlight hostels in Canterbury. He also offered creative writing sessions to service users and conducted a number of interviews. Mark's interest lies in gathering - through conversation - personal stories and 'memory pictures' as a counterpart to the personal physical objects that are the focus of Nicola Flowers' work.

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items on display in The Lost Room

Lines from the Lost Room

Materials: luggage labels, ink, typography

Description of exhibits: text taken from interviews with Porchlight service-users on the 26 and 27 September 2013, edited by Mark Hewitt.

Further information about Mark Hewitt and work for The Lost Room.

Many of my thoughts about the working process that I undertook can be read about in more detail in the online blogs that I wrote for The Lost Room which are available to read on The Beaney website. The lines of text on the labels that I have contributed to this installation are all taken from conversations with five individuals, three of whom were involved with the My Streets guided tour, which offers an alternative vision of historic Canterbury from a homeless person's perspective.

In the interviews, each told me their personal story and how it led to them becoming homeless in this city. All were from very different backgrounds and were remarkably candid, open and generous with their thoughts and with their time.

I chose 'labels' as a medium for conveying messages and allusions that I found within these stories as a way of evoking transitory existence, impermanence and the dissonance between lives lived and the assumptions attributed to people from the outside, which is always a kind of labeling.

As one of my interviewees said: "you're still pretty much despised by the rest of society because of the way your life has worked out. And it really is a roll of the dice."

On the following pages I give examples of some of the pieces of writing that came out of the creative writing sessions at the hostels and some sections from the interviews that I was unable to include amongst the labels – either because of their length or because of available space within the displays. All of the words used are those of individual Porchlight service users, edited by myself.

Mark C.Hewitt
October 2013

Creative writing session: The Room

Date: 26 September 2013

Words by Papillon, edited by Mark Hewitt

The Room

The room has a fading carpet which I put down nearly twenty years ago.

The room has the slightest aroma of the sea, it being so close to it.

The room is full of junk, which is normal to me. Mum is a hoarder and apart from bathroom, kitchen and bedroom, she hardly leaves this room.

This room reminds me of when I was sick in the corner after being forced to eat cabbage and mashed potato. Mum never forced me to eat greens again and I never have.

This is the room where I saw my dad very angry. I think that was the only time. But I won't bore you with the details.

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Creative writing session: In The Lost Room

Date: 27 September 2013

Words by Kevin Borlase, edited by Mark Hewitt

In The Lost Room

In the lost room, I leave the happy memories of family holidays, visiting my grandparents in Cornwall and Scotland. I would place those memories in a display case, to be visited often. In a locked bin in the corner, I would leave behind the squabbles between my siblings and myself, far too often the chief protagonist. In the same bin, the unrealistic and overbearing expectations placed on me, (compared to my younger brother and sister), by my mother in particular.

In the lost room, I leave my first abiding memory of schooldays, the enjoyment of discovery and learning, which has stayed with me to this day. And in the bin I leave the memory of that teacher in primary school who never tired of telling me - and the rest of the class - how useless and stupid I was and how I would never amount to anything.

In the lost room, I display - without shame - the dream in which I am the lyricist of a top-selling album, whose songs touch and move hearts in the same way that my own favourite songwriters touched and moved mine. My songs are written under a pseudonym as I want neither publicity nor attention, just a comfortable and quiet life.

In the lost room, I leave the memory of my partner's death: eight blissful years then dead on the living-room floor. In the bin I deposit my contempt for her squabbling daughters, who froze me out of their mother's funeral, then out of my home and onto the streets.

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Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"There's real misconceptions about what homelessness is. It literally can happen to anyone.

My own personal story – ending up in Porchlight - was pretty much mental issues, and breakdowns in relationships ... and substance abuse, mostly alcohol. And it took me nearly 50 years to work out why, and I'm still not even sure that I have.

I would have said I had a really happy childhood, but unfortunately my father was ill; he was schizophrenic, and my mother did an excellent job of covering it up.

I remember we had to go and hand in our dinner money every Monday morning at registration. It used to be 5 shillings. And when my father was absent through his illness – (basically, he was sectioned) – we were entitled to free school meals. When your name was called out you didn't have to go and hand in your 5 shillings so you became sort of separated from the rest of the class. Word soon gets around. You become an easy target. So from about the age of 8 or 9, right up through my early teenage years I developed a set of skills to protect myself. Unfortunately, I carried those techniques I'd learnt into my adult life, and it just didn't help. So although I was reasonably successful at what I did and had friends and relationships and everything normal people do, there was an underlying bit missing. And when life turned really tough I didn't know how to deal with it.

One of my coping mechanisms was always alcohol. The temptation's always there. They always say 'one day at a time', but it's not, it's every second at a time. If you're not constantly thinking about alcohol, it's very close to the surface.

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Anyway ... I fell apart. I started drinking myself to death. It was a death wish, I think. I just gave up. I ended up on the streets, in a bad way. No one wanted me. It was total surrender to not coping. You drift downwards and literally end up in the gutter. It can happen to anyone. And that's the scary thing. How easily it can happen. However intelligent you are."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"A lot of young people it stems from troubles at home. I find that one difficult, because I would never dream of throwing my children out – whatever they did.

They end up sofa surfing, until it gets too bad ... "

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"When your family is a dysfunctional family and your Mum and Dad divorce when you're 13, and you're left with the old man and your two brothers and your dad's an alcoholic and all he wants to do is go and get pissed with his giro and leave you enough money to do some shopping for a week, you start finding your own ways of doing things."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I'm very very fortunate to have been allowed into Porchlight and, on top of that, to be accepted. My life pre-Porchlight basically involved living around seven bedroom Georgian farmhouses, a few acres, ponies and all the rest of it. My life with Porchlight has been far more simple."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I used to go out for walks at 11 o clock at night, because where I lived I could. I used to walk 50 blinkin' hectares ... I could be out for 6 hours all night just walking the dogs. "

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"Me and my mates would just do all-nighters for the sake of it. For some reason we'd educate ourselves on how to sleep homelessly. We'd do silly things like making cardboard shelters. We'd sleep behind dustbins and all sorts. I don't know why. We had homes to go to, we had beds to sleep in."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I had two horrible nights in a B&B the other side of Canterbury West Station. I cannot tell you how awful it was. It STANK."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"When I first moved to Canterbury I was moving around. I was sleeping behind Lidll's, ... well, the church opposite Lidl's ... places like that. There was a bit of a building site going on ... bit gritty ... because up above me was all this scaffolding with stuff on it ... yeah."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"Me and Harry we walked past some homeless fella last night. He was in a cardboard box. I looked at him and I thought myself 'you poor bastard'. I've been there and I know how that feels. I know exactly what he's going through."

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Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"Basically, one night it'll be St Thomas's ... another night it'll be a church down that way ... a church down that way ... a Methodist church ... a Catholic church ... this church ... that church ... you get a big old blue bag to carry and in that bag you'll have a quilt, a pillow and a blanket ... and when you get to the church there'll be volunteers there with tea, coffee, biscuits, cake. I really enjoyed it actually. I quite liked it. Free tea. Free food. Fantastic."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I started off as a chef. That's all I ever wanted to do. ... And I was quite good as well. I loved everything about it. You can touch your artistic side but you have to be very practical as well. And I used to love the chaos of the kitchen. ... I worked at Claridge's and The Savoy."

Thank God that there are people who care. The shame of it is that you're still pretty much despised by the rest of society because of the way your life has worked out. And it really is a roll of the dice."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"It was me, my two brothers, my Dad and my Nan, all in a two bedroom house. Not ideal.

Every year of a new school term, I was like, 'right, I'm going to do it this time, I'm going to be good, I'm going to be the best', but before you know it, I was the class clown again."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

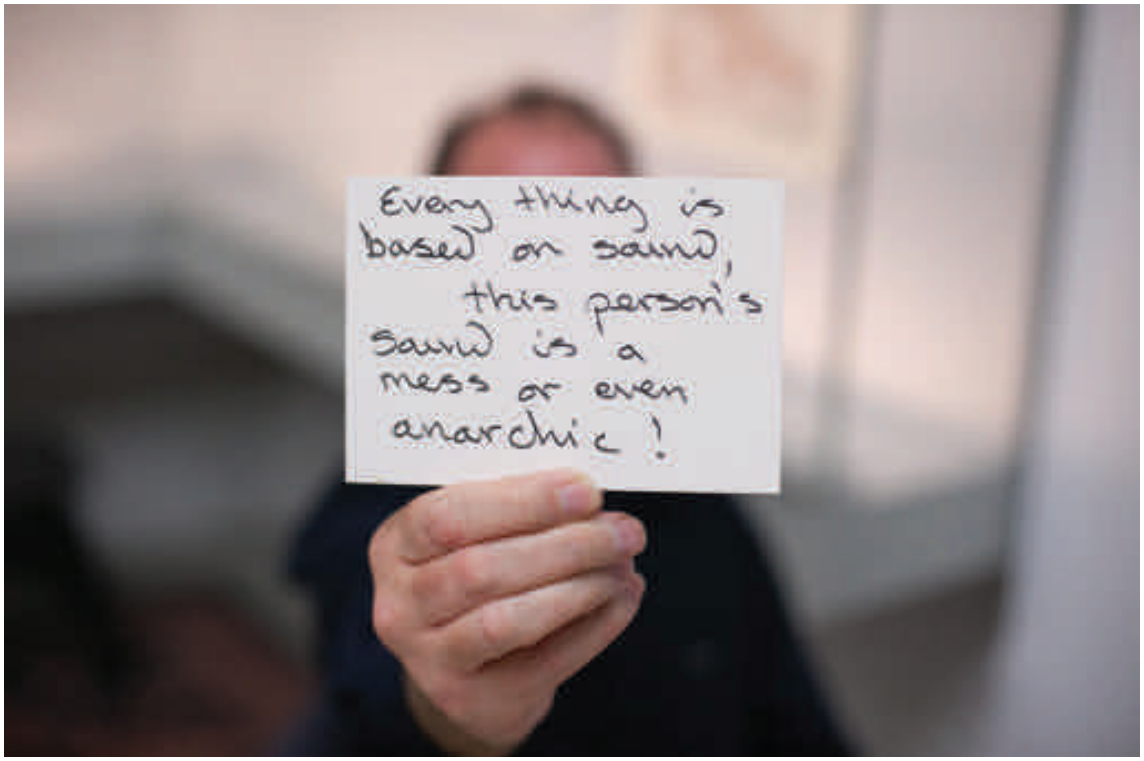
"As soon a I filed for a divorce from the man, he decided to annihilate me, which he duly did.

My son said 'Mummy why don't you just drive round the estate every day, sleep in the car, then we'll see you every day'.

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I've got an addictive personality. I always go to the extremes. But for me ... it was alcohol ... led to this ... being homeless."



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Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"After the divorce, because I wasn't living at any fixed abode, I basically said, when the children come down at Easter we'll meet up, I don't want the children to see where I'm living."

Their Dad got remarried and my daughter took her page down from Facebook and I haven't heard from either of them since. So, being teenagers with a new step-mum and new rules being applied, it gets complicated."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I've met maybe two, three, four people in my life who really seem to have it worked out. And they are genuinely kind and funny and nice, and just almost like the perfect person. And they seem to have the perfect relationships and the perfect children. They seem to have something most people don't have, and it's this ability to cope with life and take everything positive out of it. And I don't know where that comes from, whether you're born with it or you learn it. I think most people just stumble through and hope for the best."

Tips for rough sleeping

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"The best insulation, if you ever find yourself homeless or stuck outside somewhere and you can't get yourself somewhere to sleep, find somewhere quiet, tuck your trousers into your socks, stuff your trousers with newspaper, tuck your t-shirt into your trousers, stuff that with newspaper; that will insulate you. You want to make a wind barrier, so try to find a corner somewhere; palates, wood palates, brilliant, because you can lay them on the floor and you have all the bed space you need and you can also use them as walls, black bags are good for waterproof .. and cardboard, cardboard's a brilliant insulator, especially if you lay it down and you can somehow make it into a blanket. That's my guide to rough sleeping."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I used to have this jacket. I know it sounds weird, but I cut down the sides, pulled all the stuffing out and insulated it with paper. The way to keep warm is just to insulate yourself. You make yourself into a big puffy cushion. You have to change it about every couple of hours though because you start sweating."

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"You don't tell anyone where your spot is. Otherwise they'll take it. Or trash it. Or make it impossible for you to go back there. I used to walk around Canterbury on a reconnaissance. Then, if one spot gets blown off you've got a back-up plan. I actually had about four or five places I could go if I had to."

© Manu Palomeque

Conversations

Date: 26/27 September 2013

"I miss the graveyard. Best night's sleep I ever had. It was the best spot.

Definitely! ... If you're homeless, find a graveyard."

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THE BEANEY HOUSE OF ART & KNOWLEDGE

FrancisKnight

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Porchlight
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