



Meltdowns :: making space for art

Amongst the excitement and debate about the arts in East Kent, there is one success story that gets overlooked.

Oddly, this is mostly because it is a success. There is no controversy to report, no building plan under rigorous scrutiny and it currently doesn't cost the public anything for its existence. In fact, the artists' studios are full, the workshop is rumbling with foundry activity and bookings are being made for courses as far in advance as October next year! It is so rare for an arts organisation to be fully self-funded, that Meltdowns has difficulty even fitting within its own sector. However, with funding cuts promised within the arts whilst the government tries to recover the financial economy, there is one thing for sure, and that is Meltdowns won't be affected.

Since March 2004, artists Sarah Craske and Stephen Melton have quietly been working

towards Meltdowns being an innovative International Arts Centre. Over the past 6 years they have continued to make their own work and have opened up a sculpture studio with project space. From this first studio they operate a bronze casting foundry and deliver their education programmes which are now run by artist Stacy Keeler. In 2006 they bought another industrial property which they renovated themselves. This is now a set of professional studios rented to artists, enabling them to establish their practice in the area as they are much cheaper than commercial units. If that wasn't enough, within the 6 years of growth they also support artists' research and development through a residency programme for artists worldwide and allow artists to use all their equipment.

This philanthropic activity is driven by their genuine passion for the arts and a desire to position arts activity as an important part of and contributor to the UK's economy.

Sarah, the founding director said: "Many people don't realise how important the creative industries are in this country. From a purely financial perspective, recently this sector has grown twice as fast as other areas of the economy and accounts for over seven percent of the gross domestic product. That aside, the value of creative practice should never be underestimated. It has huge effects on communities, can have profound effects on research and development within all sectors and artworks can make important statements about endless topics."

With this marrying of both commercial and artistic activity, you may be forgiven for wondering how it all works. Basically, the practical skills of all the artists who work at Meltdowns are put to good use in the sculpture studio.

As an organisation Meltdowns has been commissioned to create and fabricate sculpture for public and private space worldwide. Their clients vary from BAFTA, Royal Caribbean Cruise Liners, English Heritage to the retail and industrial sectors. They also fabricate works of art for other artists and galleries. The profits from this activity in turn support the education and art programmes.

The most recent and indeed exciting projects include working in partnership with the Aspinall Foundation. This project



An exhibition of the bronze casting students' work



Bronze Casting in the workshop



On one of the life casting courses

involves trying to take a hand cast from a live gorilla. Using harmless materials that are made from seaweed, they have been attempting to take casts from a gorilla whilst it is going through its veterinary checks. Once a successful cast has been made and the mould produced, many plaster copies will be found in shops, raising money for the conservation of the species.

From a fine art perspective, they will be working with acclaimed artist Cornelia Parker, producing an artwork for the Folkestone Triennial. Parker has proposed that a Mermaid is to be installed in Folkestone Harbour. A competition was launched in Folkestone to find the Mermaid and Parker chose from a selection of volunteers. The Mermaid's identity will be announced in the New Year.

The process will include taking a full body cast from the model using silicone rubber and the model will then be immortalised in bronze. You will be able to see her in situ during the Triennial which opens on the 25th June 2011.

Since 2008 Meltdowns has worked with over 200 people in the new and developing Education programme. This has included working with Hartsdown Technology College and King Ethelbert School, whilst offering internships to graduates from the University for the Creative Arts.

The Meltdowns course programme itself, is aimed at anyone interested in the various creative processes. It is both challenging for those with some experience and accessible for those who haven't had any. The award winning bronze casting course is probably their most exciting opportunity. Over six days you join a roller coaster of

a journey, learning about every facet of this 4000 year old tradition. It isn't an easy course, but it is certainly rewarding. When speaking to a student, Susan Forsyth said:

"Despite the distance it's the best day of my week – the work ethic, skills & general atmosphere are amazing".

The residency programme has been supported by The Fenton Arts Trust. A five week placement in the summer is offered to an artist to devote their time to a particular research and development aspect of their practice.

Stephen said: "The Residency Programme aims to encourage research & development activity in a supportive & inspiring environment. As artists ourselves, we recognise the importance of artists' research & development without the pressures of an exhibition or final product. We therefore aim to create a space in which an artist can develop ideas whilst not being restricted by studio space, technical issues or time."

Meltdowns has also been used as a case study in a variety of pieces of research and have been cited as examples in a number of conferences and symposium by organisations such as the Arts Council of England and the Local Authority.

In 2009 Meltdowns was short-listed for the Creative Industries category of the Kent Excellence in Business Awards.

For more information please visit www.meltdowns.co.uk