

Julie Arkell: Away

Education Pack



Ruthin Craft Centre

27 September – 30 November 2014

Julie Arkell: Away

Introduction

27 September – 30 November

Gallery 3

The magical world of Julie Arkell is populated by hand-made 'creatures' in papier mâché and mixed media. For the main body of works for the *Away* exhibition, she made 100 of these figures, one a week until July 2014. Taking the idea of a vacation or being away from one's usual environment *Away* follows the acclaimed *Home* exhibition at Ruthin Craft Centre of ten years ago. Individually crafted, each creature has its own story and its character also reflects the mood and emotions of the artist on that particular day. Together, they not only document the stages of planning, packing and going away, but from the first tiny, timid creature to the final one which seems to stride off with confidence, they also visually map out a difficult period of the artist's life. The self-imposed regime of creating these figures helped Arkell through the months of mourning that followed the death of her mother at the end of 2011.

This pack is designed to support teachers and educators in planning a visit to the exhibition with suggested ideas, workshops and points for discussion. It focuses on the idea of travel and 'being away' as a means of engaging with Arkell's works and exploring the relationship between personal associations, memories and making art. The activities are suitable for all age groups and can be adapted to your needs, before, during and following your visit.



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Julie Arkell: Life and Art

...‘Words and phrases I hear, read and put together inspire my creatures’...



Contemporary folk artist Julie Arkell was born in London and she studied at West Surrey College of Art and Design in Farnham before gaining a diploma in textiles at St Martin's School of Art. Since then, she has developed a unique way of working which combines both craft and fine art techniques and process.

For many years she has also taught at schools, colleges and run workshops and describes her approach to teaching as 'friendly' and encourages her students to 'play with materials to see what happens with the information I give them and their own abilities.' When asked what participants on her courses will achieve, she says, 'they will be able to construct creatures out of papier mâché and hopefully feel that they have given their creativity a place to grow.'

Arkell's work straddles the boundaries of art and craft. On the one hand, they follow traditional folk art techniques of making doll-like figures from scraps of any available material, a creative practice which is common to cultural groups worldwide and reaches back to the beginnings of civilisation. On the other hand, her work engages with art history and continues in the vein of 20th century artists such as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, CoBrA, Pop Art etc by shunning traditional 'fine art' techniques and materials, adopting a more democratic approach to creating art and often finding inspiration in the art of children.

Highly personal, her work is inspired by stories, old art, fabrics, words and phrases that she overhears and other things that she comes across during everyday life. She loves 'old stuff' and collects ephemera which can be incorporated into her models, such as arms and legs from old dolls, ribbons, vintage fabrics, buttons and accessories that bring a history of their own to her art. She is interested in how materials and objects are affected by age and use – fading, fraying, darning, moth-eaten and bearing the ravages of time. She even dresses in old clothes that have been pre-loved, repeatedly repaired and embellished, such as the old jacket that was her father's before she altered it to fit her frame.

For her subject matter, Arkell chooses animals rather than the human figure, although these 'creatures' with their neutral expressions and clothed bodies, have become vehicles for the artist comment on the human condition and perhaps, for the viewer to endow with his or her own emotions. Often accompanied by accessories or props and arranged in carefully crafted settings, the figures have a powerful narrative potential. They offer a blank canvas for the imagination which perhaps explains their popularity with a wide range of ages, but particularly children.

The artist's unpretentious approach to making art also contributes to her accessibility to a wide audience. Her processes involve traditional domestic craft techniques such as pasting glue and paper to form a head and body, combined with knitting, sewing, crochet and embroidery to create a unique character. Everything is made by hand by the artist in her London studio and the result is wistful, curious and magically appealing.

Activities

Research the art of Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, Joan Miro and discuss the influence of children's art in their work. What qualities does their art share with Julie Arkell's? Why would an artist choose to create childlike art?

Visit your local museum and discover examples of folk art and the art of other cultures. What are they made from? Who made them? Why were they created? Ask the museum staff about them or read the gallery texts. Make sketches, collect postcards or pictures and use the images to design and make your own figures in the classroom.

Try traditional craft techniques such as knitting, sewing, carving, papier mâché, quilting, modelling with clay etc. Watch videos of craftsmen on YouTube. Talk about how and why these crafts have evolved. Is there a difference between 'craft' and 'art'?

Watch a video of Julie Arkell making her creatures:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p010sd4w>

Collect a wide range of fabric scraps, paper, buttons, beads and other materials from home and create your own papier maché figures with costumes, accessories and environments.

Experiment with different types of printed paper such as maps, sheet music, graph paper etc for your creatures. Keep a notebook with sketches and photographs to document and record your works in progress.

Make a collage or assemblage that incorporates animal heads and human bodies. Use magazines, leaflets, fabrics, old toys, packaging or other recycled materials. Use PVA glue to stick the bits together and provide a shiny, varnished finish. Add paint or use marker pens for additional colour or details.

Find examples of other artists who have included 'creatures' or anthropomorphic subjects in their art. (eg Rodney Peppé, Paula Rego, Walt Disney, Banksy, Aardman etc). Discuss your favourite cartoon or fictional characters who have been based on animals. Invent your own animal/human cartoon characters.

Being Away

'One of my favourite things to do is sit in a café sticking in all the various tickets, sugar wrappers, bills into my journal and writing up the stories.'



Away (dictionary definitions)

- : to or at a distance from a particular person or place
- : in storage for safe-keeping
- : playing at an opponent's home ground (in sport)
- : on holiday

All of these definitions have probably been considered by the artist during the evolution of her 100 pieces for the Ruthin exhibition: having recently lost her mother, she was away from someone she loved and cherished; each finished work was carefully tucked away in a box with tissue-paper whilst she continued with her project; the exhibition is taking place in Ruthin – miles away from her home town of London; and of course, Wales is a popular holiday destination. It is this last definition that most inspired Julie Arkell as she packed her art, materials and belongings for a journey to Ruthin with her creations.

The idea of 'going away' or taking a vacation has developed over the past two hundred years as a result of increased leisure time, improved transport and travel routes. In the past, only the wealthy had the time and could afford to travel. Nowadays, most people experience a break or time away from their everyday routine, whether staying with friends or relatives for a few days, going on a package holiday or independently exploring new places, home or abroad.

Arkell enjoys the feeling of freedom when away from her studio. Whether travelling by train or simply walking in a different environment, her mind is allowed to wander and her imagination is fired by new sights, sounds and experiences. She records her impressions in 'holiday books' and scribbles down words or makes sketches which help her 'to remember events, a meal, a hotel, a particular place or simply to look back on being away.'

In the Away exhibition catalogue, she describes her memories of family holidays in detail: the chalets at the holiday camp in Croyde Bay; the activities for children that she took part in; the rough sea on the North Devon coast and the cafes and museums that she visited with her parents. She also evokes the different textures, smells, sounds and tastes that she experienced on her holiday.

Throughout October, Arkell will be in residence at Ruthin Craft Centre, where she will lead a variety of workshops and events for all age groups. For schools (key stage 2 pupils) she will develop the theme of 'What you find when you go AWAY' which could be a favourite souvenir, a toy bought on holiday, postcard, an item of jewellery, ceramics or natural forms such as twigs, shells etc. These bits and pieces will be the starting point for creative activities in the studio, using cardboard, paper, glue, fabrics, wool and paints to make an artwork as a reminder of time away.

Also for the Ruthin exhibition, Arkell has invented a new 'creature' based on the form of a crow, a bird common to the Welsh landscape. She has adapted the features of this bird to resemble traditional Welsh women in their shawls and black stovepipe hats (see 'Work in Focus' below)

Activities

Compile your own holiday journal with sketches, leaflets, photographs, memorabilia, maps, phrases you see and hear etc. You could also collect found objects such as shells, feathers, pebbles, driftwood etc to make an assemblage.

Write an account of a favourite holiday. Where did you go? Who were you with? What smells, sounds, textures or tastes do you remember?

Research the history of holidays or vacations. Find out about 'The Grand Tour', the origins of package holidays, the development of leisure resorts and the tourism industry. Is your home town or region a holiday or tourist destination?

Make a list of words and phrases that you associate with 'being away.' Use this list to help you to compose a poem or add the text to a collage or painting about holidays.

Discuss sounds that you associate with holidays (eg fairground music, the sea, railway announcements, seagull cries etc) Source these sounds on YouTube (see for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oX2Yxzm7MI> ,) or record your own! Use samples of sounds to compose a sound collage.

Interview family and friends, particularly older people, about their holiday memories or experiences of 'being away' to find out about changes that have taken place in society, tourism, leisure and travel. Compose a questionnaire to find out what their ideal holiday or travel destination would be.

Choose a destination on a map and plan an imaginary journey to that place. How will you get there? Who will you travel with? Where will you stay? What will you need to take? You could work in small groups to plan an itinerary and present your proposed trip to the rest of the class.

Time travel! Plan a similar journey to the above task, but choose a different period in history to travel there! Find out as much as you can about your destination. Write an imaginary account of your journey back (or forward) in time. Describe what you see, where you go, who you meet, what they wear...what would you bring back as a souvenir?

Design your ideal holiday home. Make sketches of the rooms from different elevations or viewpoints. Draw a plan of its lay-out. Make a model with cardboard boxes. You could display your group's models together to form a holiday village.

Make a list of animals you associate with certain holiday locations eg the seaside, countryside, cities. Create a Julie Arkell-inspired 'creature' based on one of these animals. Design appropriate costumes for your character for different leisure activities.

Compile a playlist of holiday songs – music inspired by vacations, travel, days out or songs that you personally associate with being away. You could play your group's selection in the classroom while you work. Vote for your favourites and make a cd. Have a competition to design a cover and think of a name for your collection of songs.

Take a walk! Being away does not have to involve travel or going to another city or country. It can be simply be exploring your own environment and taking time away from your usual daily routine. Go out with your class and look at buildings, plants, trees, shop signs etc. Take photographs of the things you see! Collect twigs, plants, pebbles, found objects. Make a note of sounds and smells that you encounter. Talk about your findings when you return to the classroom and discuss how you can recapture the experience in art or by writing a report, poem or short prose piece.

Work in Focus: Welsh Crows

'The clothes they wear are knitted, sewn and crocheted, with parts of their story embroidered on to them.'



Julie Arkell's growing cast of anthropomorphic characters has included rabbits, mice and horses. For the *Away* exhibition she decided to develop the form of a crow – a bird that is a common sight in the country landscape. The artist has adapted the features of the birds to resemble traditional Welsh women, with their black stovepipe hats and dark shawls.

The costume that is generally regarded as the national dress of Wales is based on garments worn by countrywomen during the early 19th century, that is, a flannel open-fronted bedgown over a petticoat, with an apron, shawl and cap or hat. This form of dress was also common to peasants of England of this time, but was promoted by Augusta Hall (Lady Llanover) in the

1830s in an effort to popularise and promote the Welsh woolen industry and preserve a sense of national identity and culture. There was a growing interest in nationalism in the country during the Victorian age as industrialisation threatened traditional ways of life.

The customary white pinafore is used by Arkell in her models as a background for displaying embroidered phrases in the artist's own looping, cursive handwriting. They add a human touch which contrasts with the machine-produced text incorporated in the papier mâché of the models' heads. The words are not meant to be moralising or conveying slogans, but are there to animate the characters and give them a silent voice.

There is a biographical element to these crows. The funereal tones of the figures relate to the artist's emotional state during their evolution and the style of their costumes with layers of contrasting textiles, textures and tones corresponds to her own way of dressing. Arkell explained that she strongly associates mood with colour in both her life and art. Following her beloved mother's death in 2011, she reinvented her public persona and cleared her wardrobe of brightly patterned garments, either giving clothes away or dyeing them dark blues and greys.

Wool is a traditional Welsh material, but the knitted elements of Arkell's work also relate to memories of her mother who used to make complex shawls. She speaks of 'knitting herself out of grief', resorting to intense domestic creativity in an effort to get through an emotionally turbulent passage in her life.

Though these corvine creations are dressed like women, they are unmistakably crows in their poses and personality. Arkell has obviously spent time studying the movement and behaviour of these birds in order to capture their traits convincingly. The layering of fabrics such as netting and lace, helps to create a sense of the weightlessness of the birds' feathers. Delicate touches with pins and beads, adds an elegant grace which contrasts with the heavier wool, the bulky beaks and lumbering stance of the grounded crows.

Activities

Make a colour chart. Write your associations with each colour and compare your chart with those of your fellow students. Are you all in agreement about corresponding moods and tones or do you have different connotations for each colour?

Make a list of characteristics or traits that you associate with different animals or birds. Do you have pets? Describe their personalities. Imagine how they would dress or behave if they were human.

Discuss animals or birds that you might personally associate with your own country. Invent appropriate identities for them based on traditional costume, uniform, sports kits etc ... or your own ideas!

Reinvent yourself as an Arkell 'creature'! Which animal or bird would you like to be? Make sketches of a creature based on your personality and wearing your favourite clothes and accessories.

Write an illustrated story based on Arkell's crows – give them names, describe their characters, design their homes, create new friends for them! Be inventive!

Find out about the history of Welsh traditional costume. See for example:

<https://www.museumwales.ac.uk/faw/welshdress/>

<http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofWales/Traditional-Welsh-Costume/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/media/pages/h_victorian_welsh_costume.shtml .

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_Welsh_costume

Glossary

Anthropomorphic: attribution of human form or characteristics to anything non-human, such as animals.

Assemblage: artwork produced by assembling disparate elements such as found objects and ephemera – a form of 3D collage.

Collage: term used to describe the technique and artwork produced by arranging and pasting images and ephemera onto a supporting surface.

Craft: work or objects created by hand, often requiring training and skill

Folk Art: art produced by the ordinary people of a nation or region usually reflecting their traditional culture.

Papier mâché: the phrase literally means 'chewed paper' in French. It is a composite material made from paper strips or pulp, sometimes mixed with fabric and bound together with adhesive, such as glue or paste. See: <http://www.papiermache.co.uk/>

Further Resources

Philip Hughes, Polly Leonard, Mary La Trobe-Bateman, *Julie Arkell: Home*, Denbighshire County Council, 2004

Philip Hughes et al, *Julie Arkell: Away*, Denbighshire County Council, 2014

James C. Coltrane, *Paper Sculpture: Over 25 Cute and Quirky Paper Mache Projects*, David & Charles 2008

Jonni Good, *Make Animal Sculptures with Paper Mache Clay*, Wet Cat Books, 2010

<http://www.earthangelsstudios.com/Julie-Arkell-C44.aspx>

<http://www.loopknitting.com/designers/juliearkell.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRbiv_9vDfE

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p010sd4w>

<http://www.papiermache.co.uk/>

<http://www.papiermache.co.uk/tutorials/>

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