

ART

PLACE

ARTIST

## ALISDAIR MACRAE



**Alisdair MacRae** received a BFA from the University of Victoria in 1998, an MFA from Bard College in 2002, and completed a graduate thesis in Art History at Carleton University in 2012. MacRae uses plans to examine community and exchange, experienced through a do-it-yourself approach that enables social interactions.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Alisdair facilitated multimedia art workshops with the downtown branch of the Salvation Army, developing various projects that offer tangible benefits.

## PARTNER SITE

The **Salvation Army Ottawa Booth Centre** provides effective, client-centered programs and services, which respond to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the vulnerable in our community.

## ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place, a 3-year professional artist-in-residence program, addresses social issues by placing artists and arts groups in community settings to co-create art projects and provide free of charge arts programming. The 2015-2016 projects enable participants from non-profit groups, in Ottawa, to take creative journeys through theatre, dance, music, storytelling and visual art. Art Place amplifies voices in various underserved communities touched by the project, to tell their stories and share their unique perspectives.

# VISUAL ART PROJECT AT SALVATION ARMY BOOTH STREET - A GOOD MATCH!

**Blog post 1 - December 7, 2015**

My placement with the Salvation Army Ottawa Booth Centre on George Street began on 30 November. I had met with Melissa Weigel, the chaplain, and Cassandra Olsthoorn from AOE Arts Council two weeks prior to see if the placement was appropriate to my proposal, and for Melissa to see if my project was appropriate to the organization. After agreeing that the Salvation Army was a good match, I met Melissa a second time before the placement started to discuss some project ideas, and she gave me a tour of the facility.

I was excited about the potential for the placement. I had proposed projects that would provide tangible benefits to the host organization and its clients. These could include calendars, ceramic mugs and articles of clothing that would feature art work created by the workshop participants. Melissa seemed to think such projects were possible, as well as helping to beautify the location. My main interest was to get clients involved in both of these areas.

The tour was beneficial in orienting me with the space, which includes four floors, and the location for the workshops, which would be the chapel near the main entrance. I also got to meet a few clients, including an elderly Aboriginal man named Rain Dog, and Howard, a participant in past art workshops. Rain Dog requested some small pre-stretched canvases, available from Dollarama on Rideau Street, as he liked to paint. Howard gave me a sense for the importance of the workshops as a place to relax and not focus on anything too stressful, as many of the clients had enough stress in their lives already.

The first week of my placement, I met Lee. Melissa had indicated that he used to be a client of the Salvation Army. He had since moved on with his life, but his experience at the organization had spurred his interest in the arts. Lee had since taken some classes with the Ottawa School of Art, and would assist with the Art Place program.

Lee made coffee in the kitchen adjoining the chapel. Another one of the centre's staff dropped off clear plastic holiday ornaments for decorating, which proved popular. People were welcome to enjoy a warm drink, even if they didn't actively participate in the classes. Both Melissa and Lee had reassured me that if anyone was under the influence of illicit substances, or abusive in any way, I could ask front desk staff to remove them. I was not to get involved in any confrontations with clients. So far that has not happened, and the group seems to keep their own behaviour in check out of respect for the chapel, as well as wanting to make something during the workshops.



*Returning participant Howard's Christmas Ornament features a cartoon*

Attendance was not very high at the end of November. Lee explained a lot of people had received social assistance cheques, and were out to spend them. Howard was there, though, and a man named John. They would both provide a stable basis for the class, returning the second week. I also met Frank, who was interested in making dream catchers. I brought in some materials to work on these during the second week. Frank was not there, but John and

a newcomer named Matt were very enthused. They asked for more materials so they could make larger dream catchers. They both helped me finish a dream catcher of my own.

At the end of the second workshop, Lee suggested creating a mural that could be used

to decorate the common area, but also as a good opportunity for team building. I agreed, and feeling as though I'd established a sense of trust with the clients, I decided to introduce the projects with tangible benefits in the third week.

## RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF WARM CLOTHING

**Blog post 2 - December 14, 2015**

I started off the third week of my placement much like the previous two weeks. At about 5:20 pm, I walked in the entrance with supplies requested from the previous week, and turned left into the chapel where the workshops were held. Lee had already set up the tables, covered them in plastic tablecloths and arranged the supplies. I showed him the wooden panels of various sizes that I'd brought for the mural. The panels could be covered in gessoed canvas, or worked on from the back, in case people wanted to create dioramas or shadow boxes. To that end, I had printed out some information about the American sculptor Joseph Cornell.

As Lee continued setting up, I went up to the fourth floor to knock on peoples' doors and announce the workshop from 6 – 8 pm. Matt was in the kitchen, and said he'd be right down. I saw some unfamiliar faces, and people were helpful in explaining what the workshop was about to others, even if they wouldn't be attending. I'd already promoted the workshop in the lounge on the first floor, and as I walked through, someone pointed me out as the "art teacher". I was humbled, knowing how much I saw myself as the student in this environment.

The regulars had arrived, including Howard, Matt and John. There were a few newcomers, including Aren, Jason, an elderly gentleman who wanted to make a dreamcatcher, and later on, Jeremy. As Lee explained to me, Jason was a very talented photographer, but was shy about sharing his work. I asked him about what he liked to photograph, and he explained that he needed to be given a subject. I asked him that if we provided him with a camera, that he might like to photograph some of the buildings in the market. Jason said he had camera equipment, but he just needed a subject.

I tried explaining the opportunities open to people for contributing work that involved tangible benefits. The panels would be used to create a mural in the lounge, and artists would be compensated with a \$25.00 gift certificate to Dollarama if they provided a finished work. John took up that challenge right away, but Howard seemed skeptical. I also described how people could offer designs for cards, calendars and embroidery patterns for articles of clothing. In exchange, they would receive \$10.00 gift certificates.



*Making a dreamcatcher with help from Matt and John.*

I wasn't sure how successful these projects with tangible benefits would be. I didn't want to be seen as "putting people to work". I realized the importance of compensating people for their

artwork, and thought the projects might offer people a sense of self-worth. The cards and calendars were an immediate way for people to show off their art, but the gloves and hats would have an added practical benefit. Given what I overheard from conversations, I understood the importance of warm clothing.

Aren described his interest in selling his artwork. I tried to direct him to work on the mural, but he didn't seem that interested, and eventually left. However, Jason started passing me drawings that he was quietly working on. One

was a comical face drawn with green and blue felt markers. The other looked like a colourful Easter egg, but given the additional candy cane and snowflake, it seemed related more to the upcoming holidays. I asked him if the images could be used for cards or articles of clothing. He smiled and said it was fine, but didn't seem very interested in the gift certificates.

Regardless, it was a start, and by next week, I'd hope to share the results with him, as well as \$20.00 worth of gift certificates.

## PIVOTAL EXPERIENCES WITH A LACE MAKER

### Blog post 3 - December 21, 2015

For the fourth week of my placement, I was very excited at the progress made with the projects that would offer tangible benefits. Various companies could embroider Jason's drawing onto some toques. However, I struggled with the opportunity to produce a worthwhile number of hats while offering the chance for others to contribute designs. There was also the issue of paying more for a warmer hat. In the end, I'd estimated that roughly 70 hats could be produced within my budget, and 6 people could contribute designs. That seemed better than ordering a large number of cheap hats with fewer design options.

I had purchased some hide that Matt had requested from Zelikovitz Leathers. I also picked up a hoop for a really large dream catcher, some white and blue sinew, and aluminum cones for attaching feathers to strands of hide. I was really pleased about buying a lace maker. The lace maker allows a person to cut strips of

leather, working the material in a circular motion. Up to 8 feet of lace can be cut from a 4 inch square.

Somehow, the experience with the lacemaker was really pivotal. It drove home how I was learning from the group. That learning experience started when John and Matt had shown me how to work on a dreamcatcher. Each time someone shared one of their experiences working on various projects, it also made clear that I wasn't the only artist or teacher present. I had an open idea about creativity when starting the project. However, it was nice to see that idea play out.

Jason arrived towards the end of the class. I had arranged the cards on the table, and showed him the sample photo of what the hats would look like. He was very pleased, and couldn't stop talking about the various possibilities for the images he had created. I learned about his experience working with UNICEF, and how artists created cards to help raise money. He was still very humble about his contribution, but he seemed happy to receive the gift certificates, saying he could use them to buy new headphones. Jason showed me some more of his artwork that he had stored on a phone. The drawings were very colourful and imaginative, and his style was consistent with the work that he'd already done. I was only sorry the hats wouldn't arrive until 5 January, that he couldn't see them sooner.



Towards the end of the class, I shook hands with all the participants and wished them a happy holiday. I assured Lee and the rest of the group that I'd be back on 4 January, as I'd be out of town on 28 December. Lee indicated that there would likely be more people showing in January, as it would be colder. He explained that some of the clients would rather sleep outside of the shelter if they could, even if it was under a

bridge. I didn't ask why that was, but could only guess that, like anyone else, it had to do with a sense of independence. In some cases, maybe that sense drove some people farther away from society then most would consider comfortable, or normal. I would never ask any of the clients why they came to be at the shelter. I was just happy that I could share the time that we had together.

## COLLECTIVE CREATION FORMS A BOND

### Blog post 4 - January 4, 2016

The break from my placement over the holidays was bittersweet. I sensed that people would miss the workshop, at least as much as I did. However, I needed to leave town to visit my family, and it was a good chance to recharge. When I came back on 4 January, there were a few surprises.

As always, Lee was setting things up when I arrived. We chatted about the holiday and how winter was now in full force. There were more people at the entrance to the building as well as in the lounge. I wondered how that might be reflected in the workshop. I announced the workshop in the lounge and on the fourth floor, then came back downstairs.

Remmy, an elderly man who had been working on a dream catcher for the last two sessions arrived. Matt and Howard came in, as well as Brian, a newcomer. However, John did not show up. Some people suggested he had left his treatment program and returned to Toronto. It was a challenge of the population in the workshop, that their lives could be very transient in nature. John was a very talented artist, and seemed to have some very ambitious projects under way. His absence was palpable, but activity soon picked up.

Howard was tired due to a poor sleep the night before. He said the snow removal equipment had kept him awake. Lee suggested lightheartedly that with four months of winter left, he'd need to get used to the noise. Matt was in good spirits, and had worked on two medicine pouches over the holidays. He had asked me if I could recognize cedar, tobacco, sweetgrass and sage as four Indigenous sacred medicines. With the help of the leather punch

that I had brought in that week, he was quickly stitching them together with sinew.



*Holiday cards featuring Jason's drawing*

Brian brought in a portfolio of drawings with him. He was not shy about sharing them with me, showing many of the tattoo designs that he had created. Some were for other people, and he had even tattooed Remmy girlfriend's name onto his arm. I asked him how he did the tattoos. He explained how he used staples and a pencil to create a needle, which he sterilized with hand sanitizer and orange peel.

I learned that with many of the clients at the centre who had been in prison, creativity kept a person busy during that time. Frank, who had had shown up for the first workshop but had not returned, had fashioned dream catchers out of plastic bags. Brian was talented at giving people tattoos, including the one's on his own

forearms. He was also working on a number of drawings, including one that looked like a view through prison bars. He put the finishing touches on another one, a very detailed drawing of a heart with a dagger and flower.

I mentioned the opportunity to transfer some of his art to other objects, including clothing, and he offered up the drawing with the heart and dagger. Some of the other participants became very enthusiastic about the possibilities for the

image, how it could look on different articles of clothing. I smiled at their excitement, but knew I would have to negotiate the technical capabilities of reproducing the image. Brian had the foresight to spray the drawing with fixative so it would not smudge. After the workshop, I took the drawing to an Internet café to scan it, and began to consider the possibilities as soon as I got home.

## PRIDE AND HUMOUR IN THE GROUP ATMOSPHERE

### Blog post 5 - January 11, 2016

Possibly the most important lesson I'll take away from the workshops is to expect the unexpected, and learn to work with that. I was looking forward to picking up the toques I'd ordered with Jason's drawing embroidered on them. The weather was much colder now than when I'd ordered them before the holiday break. So, I was equally excited to see how they looked as well as get them to people who would really need them.

The package arrived on 7 January, a few days after the first workshop of 2016. The quality of the material was good, however, there was a very slight difference between the proof and the original drawing. One of the eyes was coloured green, and the other was coloured blue. However, there was no sign of the green thread on the finished hats. I was really concerned about disappointing Jason, as he'd been so excited about seeing the proofs for the embroidery work.

I contacted the company about the difference, and they were very understanding. They agreed to re-do the order, and suggested I could either return the hats, or pay for them at a discount. I had already distributed the hats I'd received at the workshop on 11 January. Fortunately, Jason was there so I could explain what had happened. He was not upset in the slightest, and when I asked if I could take his photo wearing one of the hats, he slyly said I could take his photo with the ones that were properly made.

I wasn't able to get the elevator working to go to the fourth floor to announce the workshop, and a bad cold kept me from making an audible announcement in the lounge on the main floor. Fortunately, Lee said he would go to the fourth floor, as he had a key to the stairwell. Like clockwork, Howard and Matt arrived, and I was able to get Howard to model one of the toques. In exchange, I gave him the hat, plus a word search puzzle book. Brian was also back, so I showed him the proofs of the screen-print featuring the drawing he had provided. He seemed pleased, and joked that he would be able to sell these to people. I gave him the \$10 gift certificate to Dollarama, and he soon returned with something he had purchased.



*Mixed media works by Jeremy*

Both Brian and Matt had expressed some frustration for trying to make something in the limited time that we had. The art therapy workshop was also on Monday afternoon, and I think some of them were tired from making

projects during that time. However, I felt enthused about finding a way to photograph people while modeling the clothing that was produced. Howard was still engrossed with the collage piece he had started, and I would bring in some examples of work by Robert Rasuchenberg to share the next week. Also, Lee and I were determined to get people working on a group project.

The workshop had a few new faces, including Jeremy, who was working on three drawings at once, experimenting with different media. Another person named Jeremy showed up near

the end of the workshop. He had appeared before, but seemed shy. He admitted that he didn't always feel comfortable in groups, but he avidly described how he wanted to make a drawing of impossible objects using four-point perspective. He explained what that would look like in a quick sketch, with non-sensical lines of perspective similar to works by Escher. He asked to borrow a ruler, a pencil and some pieces of paper. I gladly let him have these meagre supplies and looked forward to what he would come back with the next week.

## SUPPORTING THE SALVATION ARMY BOOTH CENTRE

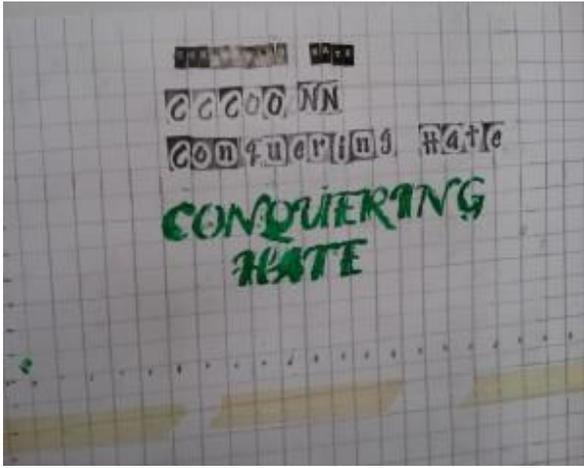
**Blog post 6 – January 18, 2016**

My cold hadn't improved too much from the week before, so I was a little tired heading into the seventh workshop. I showed up with the box of hoodies and t-shirts that had been screen-printed with one of Brian's drawings. They looked good, and I was pleased that the company that did the work was able to complete such a small order. As usual, I helped Lee set up supplies, and then I announced the workshop in the lounge and went to the elevator to get to the fourth floor. I stepped into the elevator with an elderly man, and we sat there without the elevator moving until the door opened again. We tried pushing the buttons, but same as the last time, we stayed in place. I took the stairs up to the fourth floor, but unfortunately the entrance was locked from the other side for security's sake.

When I got back to the chapel, I explained what had happened to Lee. He offered to go to the fourth floor, and may have had keys to the door. I thanked him, and started connecting the radio to the PA system. Melissa, the organization's chaplain, had showed me how to unlock the cabinet with the sound equipment and set it up so we could listen to music. The locks on the cabinet were not that durable, but as I learned, people were generally respectful of the chapel space. The lounge was another story, and Melissa had indicated that even though it would be nice to make some artwork for that space, it could easily get destroyed by some of

the clients. One of the employees who came through the chapel due to a broken door wondered aloud how long it would take to get fixed.

Tonight turned out to be very busy during the workshop. The weather may have influenced the attendance, and some people were possibly more interested in a free cup of coffee than making art. However, James returned after a brief appearance in December. He had finished the poem about water, and read that one to me along with one on music and another about overcoming hatred. His format was very consistent, using rhyming couplets to discuss a particular topic. He liked asking me to guess what each piece of writing was describing, similar to a riddle. He also mentioned that he had been trying stand-up comedy, and shared a few jokes. His interest in working with words really amazed me.



*James making some test prints before transferring his poem to a canvas.*

I had asked him on his first visit if he'd like to contribute something to the group project. He had agreed, but needed more time to work on his poem, which was the one about water. Now, he had a few pieces of writing to choose from, and he wanted to somehow use the one about hatred. It was roughly two pages long, so we decided to cover one of the wooden panels with canvas. He wanted to copy the poem onto the canvas, but he thought he might need a stencil. Besides a badly fractured wrist, he had severed

his index finger with a saw, and although it had been reattached, his handwriting was not as neat as he wanted it to be. He suggested to another visitor, who had just broken his wrist slipping on ice, to get physiotherapy as soon as possible.

James asked if I was familiar with a Genesis album called "Trick of the Tail". He described the calligraphic writing used for its cover design, and asked if I could get him a stencil similar to that. I told him I would certainly try. We also figured out the size the letters would need to be to fit his poem on the canvas. As we worked, he described several other injuries he had received from playing soccer. Like many of the clients of the Ottawa Booth Centre, his life had been neither straightforward nor easy. However, James had recognized that he was able to overcome his circumstances, and worked hard to do so every day.

In focusing on James' experiences for this blog post, I am seeking resources for the Salvation Army Ottawa Booth Centre. To find out how you may offer support, please visit their Web site – <http://www.ottawaboothcentre.org/>

## INTERVIEW WITH ALISADAIR MACRAE

January 21, 2016

### **How would you describe yourself as an artist?**

I typically work in sculpture and installation. However, I like to involve other media, including audio, video, photography and drawing. I appreciate interactive art work where the viewer activates or becomes involved in its creation.

### **What inspired you to pursue a career in the arts?**

I enjoyed art very much in high school, and wanted to become an art teacher during my undergraduate degree. I worked and volunteered in museums and galleries during that time, and have been involved in the arts ever since.

### **What are some recurring themes in your art practice?**

I want viewers to feel that there is no distance between them and the work, that the work is

accessible and that there is no distinction between artist and non-artist. I place the importance of the viewer above the art object.

### **What are your most important influences?**

I enjoyed working with Sandra Meigs and Mowry Baden at the University of Victoria. I think they were very grounded and also make work that is accessible. Studying First Nations art has given me an appreciation for saying something of importance with my work, and recognizing the context I'm working within, though I would hesitate to say it influenced my work, as most people think of that in formal, material, or theoretical terms.

### **What is your experience in art projects engaging social practice?**

I have been involved with social practice or socially engaged art projects for the past fifteen years. I have used art projects as a framework

for addressing a social issue. For instance, I held raffles to raise money for non-profits. I have also used projects to give people access to the creative process, including workshops for public art components, or collaborations with various groups.

**What did you gain from your experience?**

I feel that the experience can be extremely humbling, but very worthwhile. Although I might have preconceived ideas about working with a group of people, I typically find that I need to start all over once I meet them. Through that process, the work that gets produced is more direct and honest.

**How long have you been active in the Ottawa arts community?**

Over eight years.

**What interested you about working with AOE Arts Council?**

AOE Arts Council is an incredible resource. Art Place is just one example of their many efforts at making art a vital part of society. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to participate in this amazing program.

**What made you want to participate in Art Place?**

I was struck by the incredible opportunity that Art Place offers to both artists and non-profit organizations. The program also benefits the community of Ottawa in general, providing much needed resources to groups that might not otherwise be considered.

**What inspired you to pursue this project with this community?**

In the spring of 2015, I submitted a proposal for a future public art project with the City of Ottawa's cARTE Blanche project. The proposal considered the development of a public art project for those without proper housing and would offer tangible benefits to homeless people based on their direct input. However, given that the project was only meant to present a conceptual project that may only be realized in the future, there was no opportunity to seek input from the homeless community on how homelessness may be addressed. Art Place provided the opportunity for me to work with those living without adequate housing to affect

change for themselves based on their own creative ideas.

**How would you describe the project you will be working on?**

Creative activities will be informed by the ideas brought forth during the first two workshops. Two-dimensional media including drawing, printmaking, painting, mixed media, and photography will be made available as a means for self-expression and to develop design ideas.

Ultimately, the group will be engaged with the design and development of one or more objects that will serve as resources for the homeless. The range and number of objects produced will depend on the budget and schedule for the project. However, any prototypes will also be documented and considered for publication.

At the start of the project, and even more than halfway through it, I can't be specific about what the resources will be. That information comes from the participants in the project, and it's a negotiation process with them. I can say that holiday cards, toques, hoodies and t-shirts have so far been developed while incorporating artwork from the participants. I'm not sure what will happen next.

**As an artist, what do you hope to get out of this process?**

I hope to make the most of the resources available to the homeless community I am working with, and to develop some projects that they can be proud of.

**What do you hope participants will gain from this process?**

There is an opportunity for people to creatively express themselves in an open manner, which society tends to regard with respect as art. Offering participants the chance to show their artistic efforts to the public can provide a given community with a greater sense of dignity and humanity. There is also an opportunity for people to develop very practical resources that can improve their respective situations, and for others who might face similar circumstances. I believe both aspects of the project offer the chance for participants to realize their potential in a variety of ways, and show this to a broad audience. Society tends to bestow value and dignity on arts and culture. When art is made by

homeless people, perhaps people may look at them with greater respect.

**How do you anticipate this work will have an impact on the community?**

I anticipate the work will have an impact on the community by providing a model or framework for future projects. Given the transient nature of the community that I am working with, participants will invariably move on. However, the organization that serves the homeless community will remain, and it will be able to replicate the project as resources allow. I have already met one person who used to live at the shelter where the project is happening. Since gaining more stability in his life, he now volunteers there with the art workshops, and has taken classes at the Ottawa School of Art. It would be incredible if participants in the project are able to eventually achieve similar goals that they aspire to, but only time will tell.

**How will your project give voice or expression to the social issue(s) you will be exploring?**

The project will give voice or expression to social issues explored by the workshop

participants primarily because they are creating the work. However, if they choose to draw attention to their particular circumstances through the work, then that is certainly another opportunity for expression.

**How will you know your project is a success?**

I will know the project is a success if members of the group have had a chance to work with media or ideas that appeal to them. For instance, in the first workshop, one of the participants asked for materials to make dream catchers, and another was interested in working with charcoal. So, I will make sure these materials are made available. As mentioned previously, the objects that get created are determined by the participants in the project. I don't have any preconceived ideas about what people should make, or how they should make them. It's a constant negotiation process. I would ultimately like to see the resources used to create tangible benefits for the participants. Evaluating the success of those efforts will be determined largely by the group and the host organization. If they are happy, then I will be happy.

**PROJECT CHECK IN WITH ALISDAIR MACRAE**

**February 9, 2016**

**What changes did you notice in the participants through the course of your workshops?**

Unfortunately by the 8th week of the program, two people had left the workshop due to not maintaining their standing with the Salvation Army Ottawa Booth Centre, for various reasons.

The one person who has been to each session except one had developed more complex ideas about the art work he was producing. At first, this person had only worked on small projects, and didn't seem to think he was "artistic enough" to work on anything larger. He did take the opportunity to work on a large collage when given the chance, and has become very invested in it.

Another person who appeared during the first sessions in December returned in January, and

began creating some very impressive work. However, he did not appear on 1 February, but will hopefully return this week. Otherwise, some new people have shown up in January, sometimes just for one session. I think it is fair to say that everyone has enjoyed themselves, and are pleased to have the space and materials to work with. I also think they are very pleased when they ask for a particular material, and we can provide it by the next week. At the very least, it gives them some sense that they matter, and have some input into the workshop.

**What issues were the participants able to voice through this artistic expression in their participation in Art Place?**

The issues can be fairly personal, given their situations and interest in various types of art work. However, I think that overall the participants have been able to give voice to

their ability to come to terms with certain obstacles in their lives. Many of the participants are in addictions treatment programs, often for very complicated reasons besides simply being addicted to a particular substance. So, their work might express dealing with challenges that have affected their lives, and how they overcame those challenges. For instance, one participant was worked on a piece that offers ideas about many religious beliefs. I think in addition to his own Christian beliefs, he wants to offer viewers something they can contemplate from their own perspective.



Another participant is working with a poem about overcoming hatred, transferring the text onto a large canvas surface. The lines of the

poem serve as reminders about the destruction that can result from giving in to hateful emotions.

**How will the items that the participants created have an impact or be useful to others at Salvation Army Booth Centre? Will they be displayed, distributed or otherwise shared? How will this affect the space or the participants?**

Some of the items created by participants will be displayed in the organization as art work. There are not many pictures or objects on display at the Ottawa Booth Centre, possibly due to the difficulty in maintaining them. The other items that were created so far offering more tangible benefits, including greeting cards and articles of clothing, are distributed to the people who have helped create them and the staff of the centre for further distribution. The people that have helped create some of these items have so far been very pleased with the opportunity, particularly having access to the resources. Given that the Ottawa Booth Centre is a temporary point of transition in all of their lives, I think some are happy to give something back. Others might just be happy to receive something while they are there.

## A STEADY PLACE AMIDST CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

**Blog post 7 - March 7, 2016**

The last day of February would be the 13th workshop since starting the [Art Place](#) project at the Ottawa Booth Centre. Some things had changed, while others had remained the same. The weather was milder, and the evenings were brighter. Melissa, the chaplain I had started the project with, was off on maternity leave. A person named Rick was filling in for her. As I approached the centre, I walked past a metal container about the size of a small refrigerator. It was a drop box for used needles, but somehow I hadn't noticed it until now. The sidewalk was typically crowded near the entrance, with people smoking cigarettes or otherwise socializing. Just inside, a man was slumped on a circular container. He was unconscious from drinking too much, and several people were trying to rouse him as an

ambulance arrived. Some of the clients made remarks about the ambulance type, indicating their familiarity with such events.

As usual, Lee was already inside the Chapel setting up tables, chairs and the art supplies for the workshop. I knocked on one of the small windows in the doors, and he approached to let me in. The previous week was very busy, with a lot of new people that I hadn't seen before. Only some of the regulars were there, or only made brief appearances. However, it was always encouraging when making new contacts, that word of the workshops had spread. The front desk staff had asked us to put a sign on the door indicating that people needed to be working on art in order to get a free cup of coffee or tea. When the sign first went up, there

was a noticeable drop in attendance. But, people's curiosity or boredom seemed to win out, in spite of the distractions that they could find elsewhere. Of course, there were also the clients who were pre-disposed to making art, whether it was painting, drawing, or writing.



Some of the workshop participants used the time to make something they would later share in their group counselling sessions. As Howard had mentioned, he appreciated the workshops as a time when people didn't have to think about their circumstances, whether that involved living in the shelter, or trying to stay sober. When announcing the workshop in the common area or on the fourth floor, I became aware of how little privacy people had. The rooms were shared, and a person's living circumstances could change dramatically depending on who could be your roommate each night. I overheard one of the clients describing to the front desk staff how he had to

move due to bed bugs. I was sympathetic, having almost been driven from my apartment by them last fall.

Unlike the previous week, there were few attendees during the workshop. Lee had explained on previous occasions that the end of the month meant people had likely received social assistance cheques, and wanted to party. People could also be away due to health reasons, or had simply moved on. Some of the workshop participants actually came from other shelters, but they were clients at the Ottawa Booth Centre in the past. It was encouraging to see people actively involved in changing their lifestyles with such acute awareness. I could think of many instances where I avoided or hid from events that I thought would somehow interrupt or alter my routine. Sometimes it was just a question of vanity, of avoiding new experiences so as not to look foolish. I suppose some of the clients had reached a point where they had few options left, and appearing foolish was not such a priority.

Towards the end of the evening, one of the past workshop participants came in. He had lost his position in the treatment program, and was at a different shelter. He was dismayed about his experience, describing how he had really just wanted someone to talk to. Unfortunately, no one was available, or willing to listen, so he had relapsed. Although his behavior in the workshops was sometimes disruptive, his options had been further diminished, so I told him he was always welcome. If he showed up in the future, it could only be seen as positive.

## CONNECTING WITH OTHERS THROUGH THE ARTS: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS WITH ALISDAIR MACRAE

**April 18, 2016**

### **How would you describe your overall experience with Art Place?**

I would describe my overall experience with Art Place as thoroughly satisfying. I appreciate how and why the program was established. However, I am very grateful for the freedom granted to artists to work with their given

organizations. Although there were site visits, and the blog posts might make any challenges evident, I feel as though a great trust was placed on the artists. From that, I was able to truly engage with my host organization and make decisions regarding the outcome of the project as I saw fit. The provision of funding, time and a willing group of participants was truly luxurious.

**What are some of the most significant things you've learned through out your project?**

I think some of the most significant things I learned throughout my project were very particular to my circumstances. Given the shifting circumstances of many residents at the Ottawa Booth Centre Salvation Army, I learned that my expectations needed to remain extremely flexible. That sense of flexibility was also very important in trying to anticipate what the participants would get out of the project. Since their circumstances could be quite different than mine, I had to be very careful not to assume that a particular direction for the project would give them the same sense of satisfaction or fulfillment as me. Facing homelessness or addictions can present very harsh and dire situations, neither of which I have experienced.

**How was your project a success?**

I think my project was a success based on the response that participants had to the things they created. I was very pleased to see participants enjoy the availability of a space and resources with which they could be creative. I was also very happy when offering the opportunity to take their projects in new directions. For instance, incorporating their art work into displays or articles of clothing. I think my project was a success based on what I mentioned previously in terms of learning, but also the mutual sharing of experiences and interests with the participants. I believe the project provided a space for sharing that allowed people to open up and attempt things they had previously thought were not possible.

**What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when learning about your project?**

I intend for audiences to see the participants in the project as equal to themselves. Likewise, there was no hierarchy between myself and the clients at the Ottawa Booth Centre. In that way, I hope the audience can find the project approachable and something that they could be a part of.

**In what ways did or will the community benefit from your project?**

The community will see benefits from the project in several ways. For the immediate

participants in the project, there was the opportunity to work on art projects that they were interested in. For instance, participants were asked what sort of materials they would like to work with, and I would try to find these materials for them. There were other tangible benefits from the project. If they were interested, participants could have their artwork transferred to articles of clothing through screen printing or embroidery and on one occasion, greeting cards. Several copies of these items were produced and provided to the participants in the program and clients at the Ottawa Booth Centre. Another benefit of the project was the production of four cases in which artwork could be displayed. The cases are hinged and have latches on the side so that the artwork can be rotated after being on display for a while. Some of the artwork produced by participants in the program will be installed at the Ottawa Booth Centre. Whether having their artwork transferred to articles of clothing or cards, or having it displayed on a permanent basis at the project location, gift certificates to a discount variety store were offered as a form of compensation.

**In your opinion, what did the participants learn from the project?**

I think the participants learned about a variety of artistic processes and artists that might be of interest. I think it's also fair to say that participants learned about the value of self-expression, creativity, and through participating in the final showcase, a sense of dignity and self-worth.

**Did the participants feel that arts and culture offerings are physically, financially and/or geographically accessible to them? Did participating in this project change this?**

I think participants saw that arts and culture could be physically, financially and geographically accessible to them. A number of the artists didn't feel very artistically inclined at the start of the project. However, these people were often the most dedicated, and by the end of the program, their opinion of themselves as artists was more firmly established. I think the participants also found that the arts were not just for a select group of people, either creators or audience members, and they saw how they

could connect with other people through their arts.

**Do you have anything else you would like to share about your project or the program?**

Art Place d'art is wonderful, and I am so impressed with the amount of activity. I hope the program is renewed after its third year.

## ART MAKING AND THE SEARCH FOR SAFE SPACES

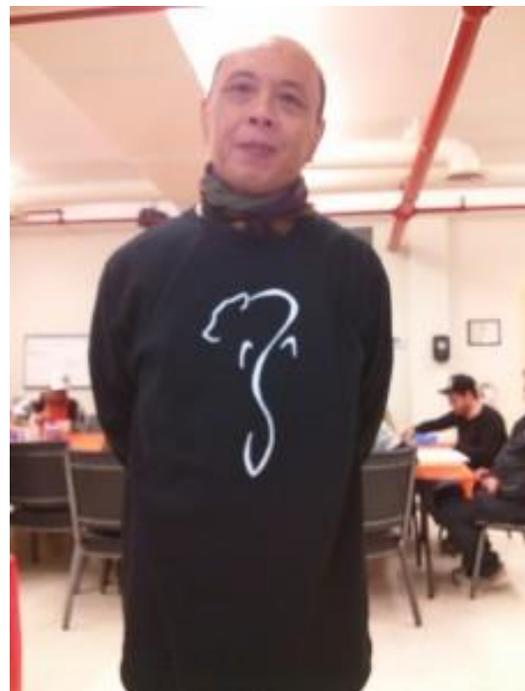
### Blog post 8 - April 29, 2016

This Monday 18 April was likely my last appearance at the Ottawa Booth Centre, at least for a couple of weeks. Jadzia Romaniec and Lee, also known as Chi Wey Lee, were facilitating an art therapy workshop for clients in substance abuse programs. James Jenkins was there to finish transferring his poem, "Conquering Hate", onto canvas. Amongst the dozen or so faces, I also recognized Jason and Sean. I had met Sean a couple of weeks ago during one of the last evening workshops. He was relatively young, and had described not enjoying staying at the centre, preferring to stay outdoors as weather and safe spaces allowed. I can appreciate his stance, as he'd been attacked in his sleep once before by a very unstable roommate. However, the options were pretty harrowing, especially given the weather during the last few weeks of winter. Howard and Lee had tried convincing him it was better staying at the centre.

Since the [Art Place](#) placement started last December, I had met a wide variety of people from an assortment of backgrounds. Many of the clients at the centre were not from Ottawa. As it was explained to me, individuals often sought substance abuse treatment in unfamiliar locations as it allowed them to avoid connections and patterns associated with a given addiction. Relocating provided a fresh start. I had seen Howard successfully complete his five month treatment program at Ottawa Booth Centre, and as far as I know, he had returned to Kingston on 6 April. Others, like Sean, were just getting started. Fortunately there were mentors amongst those like James, who had established a stable lifestyle several years ago, and now actively participated in various sports groups. Both Sean and James played soccer in a team for homeless people, and it had even provided an opportunity to travel as far as Amsterdam. James enjoyed

coaching, and didn't hesitate to offer advice from his own missteps to those who were struggling with their circumstances.

With the completion of the workshops, I definitely felt a sense of sadness, as well as a slight loss of direction. I came to the afternoon workshop the previous week to meet Jadzia and deliver some shirts that were screenprinted with John's artwork. Jason was there, and he was typically aloof, never asking much from anyone, and disappearing before anyone realizes it. However, as the workshop ended, he leaned over towards me, and asked very earnestly if I would be there that evening. I explained that there wouldn't be an evening workshop, but I'd be back the next Monday afternoon. This week, he was excited to show me a drawing he had worked on, and asked if there was a way it could be framed with a purple mat. I agreed with his choice of colours



and took a photo of the work for reference.

The placement at Ottawa Booth Centre had its challenges due to the shifting circumstances of the clients. However, even in the best case scenarios, the clients are meant to move on from the centre, having completed a substance abuse program or achieved some sense of stability. Howard was one such example of a success story, as was Lee, and he still actively volunteers each week with the art workshops and curates exhibitions of the clients' work. My initial goal of being placed at the centre was to provide a space where people could develop projects that would offer tangible benefits. The opportunity certainly gave me a chance to consider the best possible use for funding where it is desperately needed. I really wanted to provide the chance for the workshop participants to access resources that were beyond their means. It was one thing for someone to create a drawing or painting. Having that work transferred to an article of clothing that could be worn offered a new level

of pride and a glimpse of possibilities that weren't previously considered.

Based on feedback from staff, workshop participants and others involved in the project, the grant allowed for the following, in addition to art supplies: 12 greeting cards, 24 embroidered toques, 6 screenprinted hoodies, 18 screenprinted t-shirts, 12 screenprinted long-sleeved shirts, 48 embroidered baseball hats, 6 embroidered jackets, and \$95.00 in gift certificates to a local discount variety store. Four display cases for artwork will be installed at the centre, including three more artworks that do not fit in the display cases. No matter what was produced, or what opportunity was offered, the guiding principle was to instill a sense of dignity in the work, in the project, and amongst those that participated. Although that is a very subjective sensibility, I do believe it was present throughout the project, and may continue with future work.

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