

## **On working with Artel Artists**

Working with artists with complex physical disabilities is initially daunting. It requires that you are open to a lot of experimentation and lateral thinking to develop the best way so each individual artist can 'reach' their work. The first and most important step is to meet the artist and get to know who they are. Ask the artist questions and find out how they communicate, what they can physically do and empathise with who it is that wants to draw/paint/print/etc. Once you have established a connection with each other, you will need to determine the best way for this person to create, and that involves a lot of masking tape, a fist full of drawing tools, clear and open communication and a good sense of humour.

I have provided detailed examples of working with two of Artel's artists, Elizabeth Saunders and William Hunt, in the touring exhibition *Reasonable & Necessary: prints and artist books by Artel Artists*.

### **On working with Elizabeth**

Elizabeth Saunders is an artist who is in a motorised wheelchair. She is left-handed. Elizabeth is able to manipulate objects with her right hand, but she primarily uses her right hand as a way of stabilising herself and what she is working on.

Over the years that Elizabeth has been working in the Artel studio she has made drawings, paintings and prints. Each medium calls for a different set up. When Elizabeth draws, she uses a cardboard triangle support that can be fastened to her wheelchair tray with masking tape so it doesn't move. A board is placed on the easel-like construction and paper is attached to it. Elizabeth still needs a little more to stretch to reach this surface, so a paint brush or piece of bamboo is attached to her drawing tool so she can make contact and draw. Once the drawing is completed and Elizabeth is happy with the results, she then colours it to provide a working plan of how she wants the final image to look.

This drawing is kept as a reference throughout the entire process for her to follow as she develops her work. The drawing is photocopied and made into a mirrored image of the original so that when it is traced onto lino and printed, it will appear on the paper as it did in the original. When Elizabeth carves her lino, she uses an electric engraver. This provides extra strength, as standard carving tools are too difficult for Elizabeth to use as her hands are not strong enough to push them through the lino.

Once Elizabeth has finished carving the lino, she refers to her colour plan before the first colour is printed. Elizabeth's chair and tray are covered with a cloth so that no ink will get on it, she then wears an apron to protect her clothing and a board is placed on her tray and balanced on something of a similar height so that her surface area is increased and she can roll the ink onto her block. After she has finished inking up her block, the creative technician then places the block onto the press and lays the paper on top. Elizabeth is then invited to roll the block through the press, and the technician lifts the print from the block for Elizabeth's approval. The technician places the print into the drying rack, the block is returned to Elizabeth and the process is repeated for the entire edition.

Fifteen artists in the exhibition, *Reasonable and Necessary*, are non-verbal. When you work with an artist who is cognitive and non-verbal, it is important to find out how they communicate. Talk to them first, talk to their family, read any documentation they may have, so you can begin to make a meaningful connection with them.

Some artists can indicate 'yes' and 'no' by looking to the left or right; some artists use a communication board with pictures or icons that they can choose to show what they are thinking about; some artists have pages of words that they can select from to create sentences, or a selection of words relating to what they are thinking about; some bring in photos/newspaper cuttings/magazines/books and sometimes objects that they want to include in their creative process; and some have electronic communication devices that they can manipulate to create complete paragraphs about what they are wanting to do.

William Hunt is an Artel artist who has been exhibiting for 18 years. William is an artist who has a disability as a result of an ABI (Acquired Brain Injury). He is in a manual chair, he is right-handed and he is cognitive and non-verbal. Will communicates with eye blinks. One blink means no and a flutter of blinks is yes.

When I first met Will, I was told that he was very interested in the environment. William created abstract landscape collages of torn hand-made paper. He enjoyed the process, but wanted his concepts to be clearer, more didactic. I have found using the internet image search tool to be essential when working with nearly all the artists. For Will, the internet provided a space where I could ask closed questions about 'the environment' so Will could answer yes and no; then using image searches William was able to find pictures of what he was thinking about. In my first year of working with William he created works about the destruction of waterways through pollution; he followed this theme with richly printed canvases with boldly cut lino prints of '\$' to symbolise how corporate dollars destroy landscapes.

William's themes over the years became more and more confronting as our abilities to communicate with him strengthened. His themes included: anti-nuclear waste and the impact of chemicals on the environment; disappearing species due to urban sprawl; thoughts about suicide; and images that responded to the act of terrorism.

It is of paramount importance to be sensitive to a person's desire to communicate through their art and it can be done successfully if you always consult the artist first; question the artist to clarify what you believe they are wanting to do – never assume that you know what they want and never impose your ideas or beliefs on them. Always remember to leave your ego at the door.

Louise Taylor

### **Louise Taylor, Visual Art Coordinator, CPL**

Louise has been working in the adult disability sector for 14 years as a Visual Art Coordinator for CPL. In this role, she has developed an innovative and unique program for artists with profound and complex disabilities that aims to represent them as artists equal to those within mainstream contemporary creative

communities. Previous to this role, Louise taught printmaking informally and formally, as Teacher, Tutor and Assistant at various galleries, studios and universities, and for regional community programs. She has been involved in a vast number of significant visual art projects and exhibitions and she has a background in both Fine Arts and Education.