

The keys to Coventry

Liz Hingley is a photographer, and anthropologist who is fascinated by objects. Her work is investigative and concerned with sharing the stories of others. Her process is collaborative, responsive and inquisitive. She researches, delves and connects to people and places to develop projects with social issues at their heart.

One of the strengths of Hingley's research based practice is that it considers the present filtered through the experience of the past. We never solely exist in the here and now, history and context are always important. This work is a timely piece considering refugees current experiences and attitudes to their new lives in the UK.

Coventry is a diverse community. For many generations it has welcomed visitors and encouraged those from overseas to quickly make the city their home. Historically Coventry's large industrial base made it attractive to a wave of Asian and Caribbean immigrants from the Commonwealth after the second world war. In recent years there has been a resurgence of relocation to Coventry from EU accession states, Asia the Middle East and Africa. Coventry's migration rates dwarf the national average of 18.9 per cent.

The city has welcomed hundreds of Syrian refugees. Until recently, only three councils in the UK had welcomed refugees through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, which was launched in January 2014. Now, as dozens of local authorities scramble to plan for new Syrian refugees – a promised 20,000 by 2020 – Coventry offers a model of resettlement for other councils. Each local authority can develop its own approach to resettlement, and Coventry relies on three non-profit organisations. The local Citizens Advice bureau, Coventry law centre and the Coventry refugee and migrant centre. Between them they enlist private and social landlords to house refugees, provide interpreters and English classes, collect donations of clothes and household goods, as well as register the refugees with GPs and schools. Staff from the three organisations also serve as caseworkers, linking each family to the services and support they need during their first year. This tradition of hospitality is one which the city can be proud of. In the medieval ages this sort of welcome to outsiders was described as giving people the freedom of the city or giving the keys to the city. It was a resonant symbolic gesture.

Liz Hingley is experienced in making work sensitively with groups and vulnerable people. She is keenly aware of how overwhelmed many people are and how much they have to resolve in their lives. Hingley feels it is important not to label people or limit them to a single portrait. Although it became clear early on that she did not want portraits to be the focus of this exhibition they remain in the background of the work.

Grain projects commissioned Hingley to make new work in Coventry, in collaboration with refugees now living in the city, to be exhibited at the Herbert Museum & Art Gallery. Fittingly this show includes historic objects from the Herbert Art Gallery's extensive archive and collection alongside contemporary new works designed by Hingley in collaboration with Syrian refugees. Liz was drawn to keys, dating from the 12th century through to the 19th century. These keys are basic and complex; large and small; some fragile and intricate, others solid in design. Kept and stored these precious yet everyday functional objects resonate with stories. Exhibited - and quite

literally taken out of boxes and put under the spotlight – the meaning and appropriate reading of these objects shifts significantly. They become artefacts and sculptural objects narrating the history of the city. These keys here have a wonderful symbolism in a city where remnants of the medieval city walls still stand amongst modern construction.

As part of her research process Hingley was keen to understand the significance of objects brought to Coventry by refugee families, when limited to a 20kg suitcase. It became clear through conversations that for many the mobile phone is their actual suitcase and the most valuable and meaningful key to their new life is a sim card. Aware of this, Coventry council gift them a Sim card with £20 credit on the day within 4 hours of arriving in the UK. The phone is a way to contact and keep in touch with families back home and to develop networks and communities here in the UK. The phone locates and orientates. The phone number gives a permanent location and contact base that works far better than a postal address today. Whereas earlier generations of migrants turned to photo studios to record and send images back home of their new lives – now it is a quick snap on the phone camera posted onto WhatsApp that immediately communicates everyday life wherever you are.

Hingley became fascinated by the SIM (the Subscriber Identity Module) as an object – a mass produced microchip and key to contemporary city life. She discovered a silver smith who runs a jewellery shop in a medieval building close to the city walls. Silver smithing is a traditional and historic craft with which the city of Coventry has long associations. The jeweller coordinated a chain of local craftsman specialising in engraving onto small objects to make replica SIM cards in silver.

Syrian participants ranging from 5- 60 years old collaborated with the artist to create personal designs that act as messages. These messages illustrate aspirations for their new lives in the UK and the skills that they want to share with Coventry. One man aims to set up his own barbers – like his business back home. The silversmith translated these designs onto the solid silver gold plated sim cards. Ten of these will be on display in the gallery alongside the historical keys from the Herbert Museum archive.

Just as the layers of Coventry's history of trade and craft weave across, through and around this work so do the echoes of life past and present in Syria. There was a point in history when cities in Syria were essential parts of the ancient Silk Routes. These trade routes linking Asia to Europe were tremendously significant not just for trade and commerce, but also for bringing literature, culture and art across borders and continents. Syrian cities like Aleppo and Damascus were stop off places with thriving markets and bazaars. It was said there was nothing you could not find in the maze of bazaars in Aleppo – spices; silks and fabrics; food and clothes and metal ware of all descriptions. Syrian coins are made with silver and there is a long tradition of keeping silver goods, which could in times of trouble be sold for their weight value. There have been accounts of families, selling their silver to finance travel to Europe in recent times. In this work the SIM card is transformed into a cultural artefact made of silver and engraved with the hopes and aspirations of recently arrived Syrian refugees.

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