

Laughter Lines

Kate Munro

Laughter Lines was commissioned by the London College of Fashion to accompany the conference “Mirror Mirror: Representations and Reflections of Age and Ageing.” The outline brief was to explore image and identity with residents of a care home.

I worked with the residents of Silk Court Care Home in Bethnal Green for five days over the summer of 2013, alongside artist Keara Stewart and artist/musician Tara Baoth Mooney. Initially, I took along a couple of suitcases of hired hats, wigs, and jewelry from the 1930s-’50s, with the idea that these would promote discussion with the residents about their youth, their changing image, and when they may have felt their most beautiful. However, it soon became clear that the residents were happy to throw themselves into dressing up and playing about with their identity, and they were much too absorbed in the immediate moment to

be interested in reminiscence.

To establish the essential sense of trust, we spent time chatting, drawing, listening, singing, and simply sitting together. As trust developed over the sessions, we donned flamboyant hats, silly wigs, sang, danced, and above all, laughed together. The residents clearly enjoyed their altered or embellished appearance when they saw themselves in the mirrors, and while a few reflected that they reminded themselves of their mothers or older relations, most instinctively tapped into a playfulness and buoyancy that seemed to



ANN



HELEN

stem from a much more youthful self. Even where language or the ability to organize thoughts were perhaps lost, the instinct to play, purely for its own sake, like children, seemed to be absolutely intact.

The photographs show Helen and Ann. Helen is a true cockney, charismatic and witty, with a magnetic laugh. She burst into lilting song with the lush, lettuce-like green hat perched on her head. Ann is quiet and observant, accepting of the scarlet hat and boa that she had chosen with a twinkle in her eyes—eyes deep set amongst lines etched from the expressions of a long, long life. There was a profound sense of freedom that lay far beyond words, in simply being playful with our own images, all together. These photographs are a record of some of these extraordinary moments, shared with people who are largely unseen in society.

Kate Munro is an artist and maker with a particular interest in participatory arts with people of all ages, especially those who exist on the margins of society. She is interested in offering opportunities to give people a voice, and she is fascinated by the stories people have to tell. Munro trained in sculpture at Wimbledon School of Art. She has made permanent pieces of site-specific work for hospitals, schools, and communities across the country, and has participated in many collaborative projects across Europe. Munro's work is widely varied in terms of subject, materials, and method. It is stitched together by the belief that creativity and playfulness are essential as modes of communication and powerful tools for forging links among communities and between people and their environment. Readers may write to Kate Munro at kate@katemunro.orangehome.co.uk.

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