

No More Submarine Art!

A description of one month as artist-in-residence with Art Gene, Barrow-in-Furness

When I first arrived in Barrow-in-Furness I was astounded by its military industry. This small town, often described as being at the end the longest cul-de-sac in the world has devolved from being a booming ship-building town to a critically under-resourced small town which is every NIMBY's worst nightmare. It houses BAE Systems submarine solutions which manufactures nuclear submarines in a shed large enough to be seen from space, a munitions factory (land guns and missiles), a gas refinery and a (small) nuclear reactor. In addition, it harbours 3 redundant warships, a decommissioned submarine, a huge prison boat (built as a template - never used) and regularly receives nuclear waste exports from Asia.

I still am astounded, in fact, but thanks to a good guided introduction to the town by Art Gene co-founders, artists Stuart Bastik and Maddi Nicholson I realised that what is so astonishing to outsiders is the landscape of local people. As an artist, it will not be interesting to re-represent it to them. In a nutshell... no submarine art. They could have filled Art Gene three times over with art referencing submarines if they had wanted to and they don't.

Art Gene is a particularly interesting arts organisation (aside from giving me money to make art for a month) because of its active involvement with the social and built environment of the town. My residency coincides with that of Mikan, a Japanese artist architect practice. They have been invited by Art Gene because of the quantity of small, low-quality terraced housing in Barrow that is no longer considered suitable. Art Gene want Mikan to apply Japanese architectural ideas to endemic local problems which they will present to the Borough Council as practical recommendations.

Art Gene are also involved in upgrading local school recreation areas, public parks and are intent on being involved at the planning stages of future urban development. Recent redevelopment of Barrow has resulted in a superficial red-brick pastiche of every other town centre, with more than the usual hint of Disneyland. Buildings of architectural interest are ignored and new brick walls (with wavy line patterns to denote the sea) run parallel to old walls still topped with cemented, broken glass. Art Gene's agenda is to achieve better quality design in Barrow-in-Furness. Good, affordable, aesthetic design which respects the town's history and people. In addition, Art Gene run a large art gallery which presents excellent contemporary art exhibitions¹



'Oh I do like to be beside the seaside...' photographic collage

¹ this program is threatened, like most English arts organisations from the lack of public funding available for arts as a result of the UK hosting the 2012 Olympic Games.

I am at Art Gene as an artist in residence. It is the first time I have visited Barrow-in-Furness. I have the 'Landing Strip Residency' which means I work in the area immediately outside the art gallery. I am there to interact with people visiting the exhibition, to give them a visible insight into the process of making contemporary art. I am also here to make artwork that is relevant to the town but I am not quite sure where to start. The problems are that I don't yet know the area and the people. The massive munitions industry does define the town for me yet I don't know how I can describe that in a way that could interest local people. I am also beginning to doubt if there is in fact anything I can do as an artist that could make any impression on this hardened, industrial town. Stuart and Maddi are busy telling Manuel Tardits (the first of the Mikan architects visiting from Japan) about different architectural (and social) problems in Barrow. It is not made clear what my role is in this discussion, but I am very interested in the problems and I want to be able to contribute. I begin by painting fantastical architectural plans, inspired by the town centre.



'House to Deter Pigeons,' An architectural proposal for Barrow-in-Furness



'Proposal for bollards, town centre, Barrow-in-Furness².

² This form refers to the harbour-like bollards in place in the town centre - but refers to industrial accidents which are a huge, but unromantic side of ship building.

Sympathetic Explosion³

I am in Barrow for the month of November. On November 5th we (Maddi, Stuart, Manuel and I) drive over to Barrow island and look back at the town as fireworks explode across the skyline. There is a remarkable quantity considering the poverty of the area. Next day, I chain my bicycle and follow an interesting looking footpath through a wood. I come across a grassy clearing with large slabs of sandstone in the centre. The area contains a scattered constellation of used firework boxes, with a cluster of Bacardi Breezer bottles resting on the stones. This careless chart offends me. I gather up the firework boxes. One of the slabs has a plaque informing me that this was the site of the Barrow-in-Furness nuclear bunker - dismantled at the end of the cold war. One of the fireworks in my hand is called the 'Atomic Blast.' I feel shock, which is replaced with dull excitement. I have found an analogy to describe the way people of Barrow-in-Furness exists within military industry and history. I return to the Landing Strip to chew my paintbrush and work out how to express this.



³ Industrial term for one explosion igniting subsequent explosions

Lady Bell (ii)⁴

Stuart organises a trip to Piel island. The island is only accessible a couple of times a day when the tide is out (or by boat). We drive to Walney Island and begin the walk across the sands (me slipping around inside borrowed boots). Our guide is Rimsky (Clinton Rimmer, artist / gallery staff) who shares a cottage there and knows the way well. Nearby, across Morecambe Bay on a similar stretch of sand 24 immigrant Chinese cockle-fishers recently drowned. We think of them as we walk past a submerged car swallowed by the shifting sand.

Looking back towards Barrow-in-Furness, the town is flat, grey and the BAE Submarine System's shed immense. In the far distance, the peaks of the lake district are visible. I am reminded that there are plenty of areas of special scientific interest around Barrow; five islands, wild bird sanctuaries, beaches, natter-jack toads, seals. It's easy to forget. The lake district is only matter of miles but tourism is missing; warned off by remoteness, heavy industry and a reputation for the social problems associated with poverty. Barrow currently lies 29th on the European indices of deprivation. I survey the sand and surrounding islands, and I think that a DWUK amphibious vehicle would be a good way to engage tourists with Barrow. I look at the shed dominating the town and I think BAE submarine solutions should buy one as a gift for the town.



Stuart and Rimsky on the way to Piel Island

⁴ Named after a pleasure boat which was built in Barrow and converted into a mine sweeper during WW2

The next evening I have the opportunity to meet a representative of BAE systems. He is camouflaged inside shiny shoes and suit at a local job recruitment event. I present him with my idea. It makes him nervous. I see myself through his eyes. Unknown. Scottish. Artist. Critical. Teeth a bit stained from generous complimentary wine and waving a bite-sized square of quiche around. He isn't prepared for me. I argue that "'arms dealers to more than 100 countries'⁵ would have no problem supplying the town with one or more ex- combat DWUK or other amphibious vehicles'. He agrees. I point out that BAE systems needs Barrow-in-Furness. 'They can't move. 'There's no other place in Britain which would now tolerate an industry in which houses and schools are provided with iodine tables incase of a nuclear leak'. His eyes are now darting around the room rapidly. I add encouragingly, 'you guys just need to shake the right person's hand and you'll have one....!', smile, and leave. I write a letter to the head of public relations, BAE Systems Submarine Solutions making the very same suggestion.



⁵ a fact taken from the BAE website (they are proud of it!)

Terms of Endearment

It is Sunday and I am talking to Rimsky. The gallery has been quiet all week so we chat quite frequently. Yesterday he drew diagrams of the old atomic bunker and told me his friends used to put glue in the key hole. Today, because it's the weekend he is sitting in the reception area of the building and I am leaning over the balcony of the 'landing strip'. Art Gene shares the same renovated building as some council departments. It's an unusual mix. Roughly; on one side there are four artist studios, the Art Gene office and Barracuda (a carnival company). On the other side is the town's registrar office (births, marriages and deaths), a couple of large offices and a room where people get married. Upstairs is the Art Gene gallery and the education department.

We are discussing the local habit of calling people 'love'. Rimsky tells me there are places where there is a policy against it. Perhaps in this building, where he is sitting it is prohibited but where I am standing it's okay. I make an edition of stickers reading 'can say love' and 'can't say love'. We divide the building into different zones, placing 'can say love' stickers in the art areas and communal corridors, entrances and toilets and 'can't say love' stickers around the council areas.

Next day I speak to council workers in the building. They are not sure if there is such a policy about saying love, and have mixed response when I ask if it is something they would say. I take the stickers out in to the town of Barrow. I go into shops, banks and businesses and the town hall... anywhere there are people serving the public. I ask people what their own opinions are, and receive mixed replies. I discover that Barrow people have strong, differing opinions on the subject. The endearment 'love' has strong associations with regional pride, perhaps also class pride, and people express a strong identity by explaining their opinions and choice of language.

I ask these people to choose one of the two stickers for their workplace, to be displayed as a temporary installation all over Barrow. I also ask them to pose for a photograph, which will make an interesting photographic collection about people working in Barrow. Ultimately, it is my intention to provoke thought and conversation on the subject of language, locality and love (especially comfort within a romantic love situation). Simply, it encourages pride in the locality and love; two very generous messages which can help effect positive change in the town.



My challenge was to make artwork about Barrow and for Barrow (without making sculptures of submarines). I have made artwork for this peculiar, industrial town which references the conversations about urban and social improvement I have been so interested in. My contribution is minimal, but Art Gene exists to collect ideas, energy and solutions of many people and, over time, make powerful changes. Good luck Art Gene!