

Grayson's Art Club – Surviving Lockdown through Art

During the peak of lockdown, from the end of April through to June, there began a show which brought us together in appreciation of art. When it felt as though no end was in sight, Grayson's Art Club gave us a show that reminded us of the indomitable spirit of our nation. Aside from giving us something to look forward to every week, it promised us an exhibition at the end of lockdown; a dream of once more being in a room with physical artworks.

Each week was an exploration of a different theme, these were Portraits, Animals, Fantasy, View from my Window, Home and Britain. Viewers were invited to make responses to these themes, to use whatever was around them to create artwork. There were no restrictions on what one could make; and thus, Perry received a huge variety of interdisciplinary works. There were intricately designed birds from wire, a cast of a pregnant woman's bump, collages, a sculpture made from a radiotherapy mask and more. Each work was a response to the lockdown, a reaction to the unprecedented times we have, and still are living through. Perry is, in his own words, "Creating a lasting memorial to this year we have all been through together".



Sculpture by Paul Green

The format of the show is repeated throughout each of the episodes; Grayson begins by making his own response to the theme. There is a celebrity guest each week, such as Harry Hill and Vic Reeves, who he chats to over zoom. We are then treated to a video depicting their response to the theme, with perhaps the most memorable being Noel Fielding's fantasy party with cardboard guests, which felt like a glimpse into an alternate, yet seemingly increasingly possible future where lockdown never ends. There are videos from professional artists who describe their process, and then a look at the submissions from the public, who Perry then talks to. The conversations are informal, reminiscent of a gentle chat between Lorraine Kelly and a talk-show guest, but with the easy humour synonymous with Grayson Perry. At the end of each episode, three works are chosen by the celebrity guest to go into the exhibition, and three more from Grayson Perry.



Noel Fielding's Fantasy Party

The audience of the show is invited into Perry's studio through the camera, with his wife Philippa and their cat Kevin; episode after episode this begins to feel like going round to a friend's house for a cup of tea and a chat. There is something innately British about the show, that shines through despite the clunky zoom meetings. Britain is actually one of the themes/episodes of *Art Club*, where photographer Martin Parr shared his lockdown project where he has captured socially distanced queues, an element of this 'new normal' that the British have taken to with innate enthusiasm.



Grayson and Philippa Perry in Episode One

The theme, 'view from my window' is quite possibly the epitome of lockdown. Responses ranged from beautiful nature in gardens and wildlife, to the block of flats opposite. It is a view we have all become intimately acquainted with, fantasising with what is beyond. Perry's directive makes us appreciate what is actually there. It is a celebration of the mundane. One of the most humorous submissions to the exhibition is from Clare Warde. It is a painting of the view of the bins outside her flat, onto which someone has graffitied, the phrase 'Nuts about Life'. Oh, the irony!



Painting by Clare Warde

At times, the show was immensely poignant. One of the most tear-jerking moments of the show was in episode five, where Grayson talked to a young boy named Simran and his mother Mandish Khebbal. Simran had created a collage of his family, with his parents both wearing Gucci, which he had cut from a magazine, his brother Cash in a karate suit, and his twin brother Sorian in a photo frame on the wall. Simran explained that Sorian was his twin brother who died when they were both four, going on to say, “Home is where the heart is, my heart is, and the heart of my family”.



Collage by Simran Khebbal

Hannah Grace Deller, an ICU nurse, was featured twice in the show. The first, for her wonderfully quirky photograph of a dog at a show, and again when Perry had commissioned

her to take photographs on the frontline of the NHS. Her photograph of Arman, a domestic at the hospital, is particularly striking. She gives context to the photograph, writing in an interview, “He’d got trapped clearing rubbish away, because most normal routes around the hospital had been closed off, or made one-way. I was struck by how he was doubly isolated: behind the door, behind his PPE.”. The photograph looks as though it could be straight off a scene from an apocalyptic horror film, rather than a corridor in St Marys, London.



Photograph by Hannah Grace Deller

It was inevitable that *Art Club* would be highly emotional. Lockdown has stripped people of their daily routines, their pleasures, their friends and sometimes their family. It has left people in a situation where both reflection and hope for the future is the only way to survive. This is why *Art Club* holds such importance, because, as Perry describes it, “Creativity inspires and consoles us”.

Joe Lycett, one of the celebrity guests, praises *Art Club* and its success at inspiring the nation to get involved again with art, saying that “The Art World is for everyone”. This is at its most evident in the exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, which we get a view of in the final show. Works from the public are displayed against works from renowned professional artists such as Maggi Hambling and Antony Gormley. Indeed, the curating of the exhibition is clever in the way it becomes difficult to tell the distinction between amateur and professional. They all become one team of works, exemplifying Grayson’s words; “We are all facing the Coronavirus together”. Just as the exhibition at Manchester was set to open to the public, the blow of another lockdown came, threatening once more to break the spirits of the nation and closing the gallery to the public. However, the unwavering strength of human nature will, I am positive, ensure it will re-open and will be viewed, in time, as a memorial to a period we will hopefully never re-live.