



Birkenhead Central Library

Rachel Brewster-Wright

The last two months have seen magical happenings at Birkenhead Central Library as Rachel Brewster-Wright of Little Vintage Photography has been our resident artist demonstrating fascinating photographic and chemical processes to local groups as part of Make It! In Libraries.

The series of public workshops delivered by Rachel as part of her artist residency have seen participants from organisations such as Wirral Change and The Spider Project as well as historical, craft societies and individuals take up the opportunity of creating their own unique artwork whilst learning about the traditional photographic process involved in the creation of 'cyanotypes'. The cyanotype process itself is credited to Sir John Hershal as being discovered in 1842 and is one of the earliest forms of photography. It utilises a reaction between certain chemistry and UV light in order to create a permanent print. Anna Atkins, the daughter of Hershal's close friend John George Children, is widely considered to have been the first woman in history to produce a photographic book and used the cyanotype process to capture a selection of botanical specimens, therefore aiding the advancement of scientific study.

As an analogue photographer, Rachel's interest in this process grew from looking at ways of combining traditional and modern technologies in order to show how the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) can be brought together with the arts to produce creative output through education.

Each workshop began with an introduction to the artist's background of analogue and hybrid digital photographic processes. Participants then created their own word clouds capturing some of their thoughts and experiences of the surrounding area, thinking about what they love about the place, the things which make the neighbourhood unique, the role that the library itself has played in their lives and what it means to them to capture or tell a story.

- *"This place is home. I first docked here when I was in the Navy. I found people here who became my friends and family and eventually I realised that I'd never want to live anywhere else."*
- *"I only moved back here a few weeks ago to be closer to family and although it's been a big change, it's been wonderful coming back. I used to use this library as a child and now I'm excited to bring my son back here and share that experience with him too."*
- *"The coastline, the nature and the green space around here make it feel like I'm constantly on holiday! That's a pretty lovely way to be able to live."*
- *"To me, in my country, libraries are such serious places. You cannot talk or feel relaxed and safe. The library here has such nostalgia. It is a beautiful building and a peaceful place. It is amazing to see it being used for things like this."*
- *"Use it or lose it. So many libraries are being put under pressure to close, seeing this kind of activity happening here brings a new lease of life to the place."*
- *"I'm ashamed to say that I haven't used the library for many years, but after doing this, I'm renewing my membership tomorrow!"*

- *"It's a lovely way of incorporating objects from the place itself, by getting us to forage for items to use in the artwork. It's made me look closer."*

Quotes from workshop participants



After creating the word clouds, participants got dressed in their health and safety equipment (gloves, goggles and aprons) in order to mix and work with the raw, liquid chemistry, coating heavy-weight watercolour paper by hand. The coated paper was then dried and each person chose a small selection of objects to place on top of the coated area. These test strips were then exposed to UV light using sunshine (not always available in the UK!) or under a lamp. The chemical reaction between the light and the chemistry took place, creating cyanotype photograms. With it being a library space, it seemed only appropriate that these test strips were to go home with participants at the end of the day to start life as a favourite bookmark!

After exposure, each of the bookmarks were then washed in water to show the really magical part of the process. The wash removed the residual chemistry and revealed an instant colour change, turning the exposed areas of the paper to blue and the unexposed areas (those blocked from UV light by objects) white. Each of the bookmarks were then hung up to dry and participants went outside to forage for objects from the site itself, to be incorporated into their final pieces.

Having tested out the process, each person then created two final pieces of cyanotype artwork, one to take away and one, which will become part of the collective public exhibition launching at the Williamson Art Gallery on Saturday 17th November. Following the exhibition, these pieces will also form part of the permanent archive collection at Birkenhead Central Library.

The final artwork being produced by Rachel during her residency will be a pair of images capturing the essence of Birkenhead Central Library, the people and the place. These pieces will directly use, or be inspired by, elements of the individual workshop prints, along with the images, words, architectural drawings, objects from site and vintage photographs which were created over the course of these free public workshops or chosen from the archives, in order to create two larger composite digital negatives and unique cyanotype prints.

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