** EXHIBITION GUIDE (Word)**

**Small Worlds**

AirSpace Gallery (Andrew Branscombe, Anna Francis, Glen Stoker), Graham Chorlton, Rita Donagh, Richard Forster, Cameron Galt, Andreas Gefeller, Stuart Layton, Naiza Khan,

Lucy McLauchlan, Laura Oldfield Ford, Mark Power and Rashid Rana.

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Today, we live in a fluid culture where, within our towns and cities, different languages are spoken, different cultures and religions prevail and we can consume materials and goods from throughout the world. TV, the Internet, advertising and new technologies bring the whole of the world to our doorstep. Many of today’s high streets are home to a proliferation of global brands, peppered with Pound shops, pawnbrokers and empty shop fronts.

The artists in this exhibition focus their attention on the changing urban environment. Their work allows us to reflect on a variety of considerations. How do we understand the concept of the local within an increasingly globalised context? What impact does the transformation of our local environment have on our identity and our communities? For some artists, Walsall, the Black Country and the West Midlands provide a focus for a consideration of the impact of social and economic change in those areas on the periphery of our major urban centres.

Many of the works that form the core of this exhibition have been selected from Walsall’s Collections which are becoming increasingly strong with regard to urban themes. Existing strengths were enhanced recently by our involvement with Art Fund International (2007-12) which enabled five consortiums across the country to develop an international collection of contemporary art. Supported by the Art Fund, The New Art Gallery Walsall worked alongside Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and Ikon Gallery to collect works on the theme of the modern metropolis. For the first time, this exhibition brings together some of these international works alongside significant works by artists from the UK. Importantly the conversations and connections between these works are further elaborated by the addition of new works by artists based in the West Midlands. Lucy McLauchlan was commissioned to create a brand new, large scale, site specific wall drawing, Stuart Layton is showing a new film and AirSpace Gallery is presenting evidence of an ongoing project which directly engages with the urban environment and its communities in Stoke-on-Trent.

In 2011, artist and writer **Laura Oldfield Ford** (born in Halifax, lives in London, UK)was commissioned to create a series ofdrawings for the exhibition *There is a Place...*(2012) which was subsequently acquiredfor the Collection. Laura is known for herpolitically charged yet poetic drawingswhich are inspired by her “drifts” throughthe urban landscape. A drift, originatingfrom the French word *dérive* and relatedto the practice of psychogeography, is anunplanned walk directed by an emotionalresponse to the landscape and its impact onothers. Laura’s drawings offer a counterpoint to the optimism of urban regeneration and the sites she responds to include neglected housing estates, old industrial sites, disused wastelands and overgrown pathways. Her drifts in Walsall took her to the edge of the Borough, to the blurredboundaries between Brownhills, Pelsall and Bloxwich, through canal networks and the unclaimed land under the M6 motorway near Bescot Stadium. Now neglected, these sites were occupied by travelling communities in the 1950s and 60s, and then again, by ravers and the free party movement in the 1980s and 90s. The delicate washes of bright pink and yellow are a reference to the rave scene in which Laura was closely involved. Overlaid onto her observations are references to historical events such as the strikes and industrial action of 1979 in “the winter of discontent” and the decline of Britain’s industrial landscape in the early 1980s. The present is both haunted and shaped by the past.

Like Laura, **Naiza Khan** (born Bahawalpur, Pakistan, lives in London, UK and Karachi, Pakistan) is interested in the transformation of the urban environment, the effects on

communities and the failings of developers. Her practice has involved a long-term investigation of Manora Island, historically a defence port facing the Arabian Sea, forming part of an archipelago off the natural harbour of Karachi, Pakistan. Once

colonised by the British Empire and still hosting a naval presence, the island has been dramatically altered by the neglect and apathy of its administration. In contrast to the congestion of the ever-growing city of Karachi with its 20 million inhabitants, the island offers beautiful sandy beaches and uninterrupted views out to sea. Its potential as a site for tourism was realised and its communities evicted and displaced. Buildings were demolished and sites cleared but developments still remain incomplete. The island is caught in

a period of stifled change where the past has been partially erased and the promise of a bright future remains uncertain.

In the silkscreen and graphite work *Membrane*, the skyline of Dubai and the derelict buildings formerly occupied by the Karachi Port Trust are fused together. Outlines of broken, abandoned furniture are evident in the centre of the image,

relating to the demolition of a school on the island following a fatal accident in which four children were tragically killed. A pile of old school furniture remains piled high in the middle of the rubble. For Naiza, this work is about forced eviction, homelessness, displacement and the presence of invisible power structures.

At the far end of the longest gallery is a brand new wall work by **Lucy McLauchlan** (born and lives in Birmingham, UK). Lucy works with a range of media but is frequently commissioned to create mural works in her distinctive, bold yet lyrical graphic style. She has worked throughout the world creating large scale works which become an integral part of the urban environment. Closest to home, a large mural adorns the side of the old Central Library in Birmingham. Implicit within her work is a deep respect for nature and the environment and an interest in human intervention and this is evident in her choices of subject matter, materials and processes. Lucy’s ambitious new work is inspired by frequent visits to Warley Woods, a regenerated urban parkland near her home in Bearwood. Since it opened in 1906, it has witnessed many changes. Tennis courts and a family run ice cream business have now disappeared. A series of stunted beech trees were felled due to the saplings being planted too close together. Earlier studies draw on the deep scars of the saw and the fluorescent orange bruises from the sprayed markings indicating which trees were to be felled. Having spent time studying the area, Lucy then embarked upon creating paintings in situ within the woods. Pulling a sledge to carry her paints, brushes and equipment, she has directly transferred some of the details and textures of the environment onto canvas to create the background for her subsequent drawings. Her approach is spontaneous, allowing the environment to inform and direct what is an experimental and explorative process. The drawings are then created in the gallery, evolving and emerging intuitively and in response to the accumulated marks and textures. Aside from black and white paint, found materials such as charcoal, earth and brick dust are applied, further connecting the work directly with both the natural and built environment.

**Richard Forster** (born in Saltburn-by-the-Sea, Cleveland, lives in Darlington, UK) claims his love of drawing was nurtured from being “an anxious teenager alienated in an English suburban bedroom”. In 2005, he was commissioned to create a new work for Walsall’s Collections and two new drawings were subsequently created and acquired.

For one of his drawings, Richard used a photograph he had taken in the lighting aisles of Walsall’s B&Q DIY superstore. However, inspired by Camille Pissarro’s etching *Soleil Couchant (Setting Sun, 1879)* from Walsall’s Garman Ryan Collection, a lone figure is added at the top of the aisle. Richard’s use of scale and perspective evoke a cathedral-like space and give an ironic sense of grandeur and spirituality to an otherwise mundane scene.

Whilst in Walsall, he searched the local archives and came across a photograph of the town taken in 1968 which he then drew in meticulous detail. Richard is a fan of 1960s films such as *Billy Liar* with its industrial settings and representations of working class life. In this film, 19 year old Billy lived with his parents in a small fictional town and indulged in fantasies of a glamorous life in the big city as an escape from his humdrum life. 1968 was also the year of student uprisings in Paris and this significant historical moment adds a further resonance and intensity to the work.

As a view from a rooftop, the depicted view invites comparisons with the Walsall of today as seen from the Roof Terrace of the Gallery. Indeed **Cameron Galt** (born in Greenock, Scotland, lives in Walsall, UK) is a resident of the town and in 2009, painted a series of exquisite watercolour paintings observed from the Gallery’s Roof Terrace. The Gallery subsequently acquired two of these paintings. Already we can witness a changing landscape. In *Smalltown*, the iconic BOAK building is significant, both historically and aesthetically within Walsall’s urban landscape. A former leather factory built in 1903, it had been closed and poised for transformation by developers into 31 flats but was destroyed by fire in 2012. This was one of several buildings, key to Walsall’s industrial heritage, which was lost to fire or neglect. As with Richard Forster’s roofscape view, the artist’s choice of titles hints at a dissatisfaction with provincial life.

Concepts of the local and the international collide in **Mark Power’s** photograph *Walsall, 03-2011, The Hole in the Wal*l. Mark (born Harpenden, lives in Brighton, UK) was originally commissioned by Multistory to explore the social landscape of the Black Country using his large format plate camera as part of *Black Country Stories* shown in Walsall in 2012. Four works were subsequently acquired for the Collection. The Hole in the Wall is a traditional haberdashery shop selling rolls of fabric of all kinds and it occupies a prime position at the top of the Market and in front of St Matthew’s Church in Walsall. Established in 1990, it remains a thriving business and is a key landmark within Walsall’s urban landscape. Its front shop facing appears very traditional and belies the scale of the business. On the back wall is a distinctive brightly coloured mural with its world wide web address emblazoned boldly across its surface. Another work shows a traditional shop selling bras in West Bromwich. These images appear to celebrate the survival of these small and distinctive businesses amongst the dominance of the global brands on our high streets today.

The local and the global are also key aspects of **Rashid Rana’s** work (born and lives in Lahore, Pakistan). *Language Series* *3* reveals itself initially to the viewer as a serene representation of a landscape. In this instance, the specific reference point is Claude Monet’s painting *L’église á* *Vetheuil* (*The Church at Vetheuil,* 1880). On approaching the work, literally thousands of images reveal themselves, depicting shop signs and advertising hoardings photographed across the city of Lahore. Written or painted in a wide variety of colours and styles, the signs include both English and Urdu languages. The local meets the global, high art meets popular culture, wholeness meets fragmentation, painting meets photography, East meets West, abstraction meets representation, the historic meets the contemporary. Rashid Rana’s works are loaded with opposing elements, endowing the work with complexity and tension.

Also using digital photography, **Andreas Gefeller** (born and lives in Dusseldorf,Germany) has modified satellite images ofurban settlements, to create compelling aerial views of towns and cities as seen from space. Brightly illuminated by electricity and framed against a deep black ground, these forms appear almost viral, as if viewed through a microscope. They are indicative of humanity infecting the earth with its presence and the relentless force of colonisation and urban growth. We are also reminded of imaging tools such as Google Earth through which we can locate ourselves in the centre of our worlds. Our fascination and intrigue is matched by the unsettling awareness of such powerful surveillance

systems. Like Rashid Rana, Andreas Gefeller playfully perplexes our sense of scale, as these forms hover perceptually between micro and macro entities.

**Graham Chorlton’s** series of works *A Short History of Concrete* was purchasedfor Walsall’s Collections following itsinclusion in the 2012 exhibition *There is a Place..*. Graham (born in Leicester, lives inBirmingham) is interested in architecture,civil engineering and urban design and hefrequently looks to subject matter such as buildings, roundabouts, pubs, car parks or petrol stations, the kind of subjects that might usually be regarded as mundane or unspectacular. He is an avid collector of old postcards of urban scenes and these provide inspiration for his paintingsalongside film stills, magazines, photographs and personal memories. In this series of paintings, Graham has represented examples of modernist architecture, manyof them tower blocks. Each one floats against a coloured ground, with no human presence, disconnected from its original context. They appear almost icon-like with a certain spiritual quality. The use of concrete and the tower block were intrinsic to 20th century utopian thinking around solutions for public housing and communal living. However, these very same tower blocks and the ideals that inspired them have come to be demonised as failed social experiments. The tower block has now taken on a new mantel as the face of capitalism as ever-more ambitious and iconic steel and glass towers arise amongst the world’s major cityscapes. Implicit within Graham’s work is fascination with the shifting value of aspects of our urban environment.

**Rita Donagh’s** works (born in Wednesbury, lives in Oxfordshire, UK) were acquired for the Collection following her 2005 solo show at Ikon Gallery. Born in the Black Country to an Irish mother and an Anglo-Irish father, her Irish heritage and Black Country roots have had an enduring influence on her work. She is renowned particularly for her engagement with the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1968-98) and her eloquent combination of the personal and the political. The play between abstraction and figuration is also an enduring feature of her work. She frequently employs found elements to interrogate the ways in which we receive and understand information and to connect with real events and experiences. Maps often feature as a way of connecting with geographical sites and historic moments. In a series of works drawing on her memories of growing up in the Black Country, the canal networks provide a key focus. Personal memories of exploring the urban landscape are combined with an acknowledgement of the significance of the canals for the region’s industrial heritage. Many immigrants came to the region to find work in its workshops, foundries and factories, including the Donagh family from Ireland. In *Black Country*, a map of the area is combined with a target, referencing the explosion of two bombs which exploded on the M6 motorway near Walsall in April 1997 as part of the IRA’s bombing campaign. In *Ordnance Survey*, Birmingham, a map of Ireland is overlaid onto a map of Birmingham. The names of Wednesbury and Darlaston appear as references to her place of birth and the place where she grew up.

*The Act of the Spartan Boy* is a new film by **Stuart Layton** (born in Walsall, lives in Malvern, UK). The title was found on the internet but is fitting as the film draws on Stuart’s memories of growing up in the Black Country. However, this is not a linear narrative. The film is constructed of both shot and found footage and both written and found texts. The viewer cannot settle as scale and viewpoint continually alter and the screen size constantly changes. The sound incorporates both Stuart’s vocal contributions with what sounds like an absurd commentary by a TV or radio presenter. As the film gathers intensity, a pulsating sound based on the Taos Hum ramps up the tension. (A strange humming was heard by inhabitants of Taos, New Mexico. Despite scientific interventions, there has never been a clear explanation for the humming, which has since been heard in other places, notably in Cradley Heath). Sometimes funny, sometimes touching, at others sinister, Stuart offers a complex and layered exploration of time, memory and history where seemingly random recollections, both real and imagined, collide and conflict.

**AirSpace Gallery** is a trio of artists, running an artist-led space in Stoke-on-Trent. Their engagement with the urban environment extends to direct action in order to improve

their environment and importantly to advocate the re-thinking of neglected urban space. Here they present documentation of their ongoing project, *The Spode China Rose*. During the British Ceramics Biennial in 2013, the artists renovated a slice of the original rose garden of the Spode Factory, which, in the 19th century, was one of the two largest potteries in Staffordshire employing over 1,000 people. This partial renovation acted as a proposal for a total restoration of the garden and to demonstrate the potential and possibilities of partnership working between members of the public, artists and the public and private sectors. Part of the plan would be to develop and name a brand new, living rose both as a commemorative nod to the factory and its workers and as a symbol of new life, development, and the future. The artists sought out a rose breeder, Gareth Fryer, whose family has been breeding roses for over one hundred years, who they could work with to identify, name and market a rose - traditional in form, fragrant and importantly, bone china white. Once the perfect variety had been identified, they worked with master ceramic flower maker Rita Floyd who has been making ceramic flowers in the Potteries since leaving school at 15 in the early 1970s. Rita created a bone china prototype for the new rose, a potent symbol of the reimagination of existing skills and resources, which was shown under a dome amongst the newly renovated section of garden at the last Biennial. A crowdfunding campaign has enabled the project to grow and phase 2 of the project is now underway where further renovation of the garden, landscaping and planting is taking place and a new flower bed has been created using found and broken china from the site. *The Spode China Rose* has also been planted on the Gallery’s Roof Terrace for the duration of the exhibition.

Although this exhibition is primarily about responses to the changing urban environment, other undercurrents are also at play. For many of these artists, an exploration of the concepts of time, history and both personal and collective memory is central to their practice. For all these works, the conversations they will continue to create will change and evolve in response to the transformation of our environment and the development of ever new histories. The value and vibrancy of these art works will continue to resonate for generations to come.

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**Events**

**In Conversation**

Saturday 13 June, 2pm - FREE

Join artist Naiza Khan for an informal discussion of her work.

Book your free place at the gallery reception desk or call 01922 654400.

Saturday 25 July, 2pm - FREE

Join Head of Exhibitions and curator of *Small Worlds*, Deborah Robinson

for an informal tour of the exhibition.

No booking, just drop in!