

The Magic Money Tree

Kirsty Mackay

9 March — 28 July 2024



alongside Poppy, Dylan, Alex, Maddy, Ava, Tulisa, Alandra, Angie, Lacie, Tanya, Joey, Ebony, Felicity, CJ, Jensen, Iris, Cora, Elise, Daisy, Jonathon, Lilith, Elijah, Kaleb, Lola, Jack, Holly, Dennis, Jacob, Macie, Arthur, Lily, Kieran, Ebony, Cora, Zade, Dakari, Robert, Olly, Andrew & Paul.

Robbie Murrie, Jade Carr-Daley, David Brunton, Nikki Gough, Cath Farrant, Ilayda Arkarca, Gregor Ritchie, Michelle Budding, Leighanne Jackson, Katie Austin-Morgan, Eunice Hodgson, Tia Leonard, Marie Burnett, Jacqueline Garvin, James Marsh, Despina Maria Francesca Zografithou Spiteri, Anna Wredenfors, & Emma Jane Hudson.

Exhibition guide

In 2023, I set out to document the UK's cost-of-living crisis in England. The resulting work is titled *The Magic Money Tree* after Theresa May's words on BBC Question Time. *"There isn't a magic money tree that suddenly delivers all the money everybody wants"*.

Drawn to working class communities like the one I grew up in, I made work focusing on Tipton in The Black Country, South Shields in the North East and my own community in South Bristol. I photographed what I found there and collaborated with the people I got to know. Compact film cameras were handed out and I taught photography workshops to children and young people. Altogether, photographs, drawings, paintings, banners and testimonies tell the collective story of the cost-of-living crisis.

At the food bank, I met people who jumped at the opportunity to pick up a camera and be creative. An older woman showed me the drawings she made as a child, some on wallpaper, because she didn't have anything else. I posted her some charcoal, and she started drawing again at 74. A woman in Bristol with terminal cancer spoke to me. She was a single parent having to visit the food bank to feed her family. I was shown paintings made by Dave, stored in

a church hall. I learned about his experience of being evicted and then homeless. There was the old lady in South Shields that could no longer afford her favourite Red Leicester cheese, parents struggling to buy baby formula, a 17-year-old campaigning for universal free school meals and a woman who lived in a tent for two years.

By the summer of 2023, I had found my collaborators. For a month I visited the North Bristol Food Bank. One of the questions I asked people was *"Does the UK still have an adequate safety net?"* Hazel told me *"At a very basic level, there probably is a safety net, but only for people that either fight to get the attention themselves or people that have somebody that will draw it to somebody's attention. So, there is a safety net, but it's got great big holes in it."* I asked people what they had for dinner the night before coming to the food bank: *"nothing for three days", "a can of tuna", "toast", "a bowl of cereal", "nothing, I only cook for my son"*.



Tipton, The Black Country © Kirsty Mackay

Gareth told me *“I think the country is at breaking point. Especially with the NHS and mental health.”*

As I write this, even the IMF have advised the government to fund essential services over tax cuts this election year.

To all the people who collaborated and shared their experiences I am grateful. Mostly, I feel relieved to have made this work. If I was to make it this year, I’m not sure I would be able to. I hear from colleagues that 2023 was the worst year for assignments. My personal finances have become increasingly precarious. My partner and I, both self-employed, are struggling

with late payments as everyone struggles with increasing costs.

It is said that politics is about choice. I witnessed the choices, made by our politicians, in the lives of people across the country. Like the choice not to raise Healthy Start vouchers so low-income families can afford baby milk and not be forced to water it down or steal it from the supermarket. Poverty too, is a political choice. Theresa May claimed there wasn’t a magic money tree, but in 2020 we saw the Bank of England use quantitative easing to print money to cover Rishi Sunak’s furlough scheme and the Universal Credit uplift. As a result, poverty

decreased during the pandemic, momentarily. Over the past years we have seen the money go further away from those most in need. In his book 'Shattered Nation', Danny Dorling writes "*it is possible that, in 2022, the UK became the most unequal country in Europe in terms of income inequality. Elsewhere on the continent, development in the opposite direction can be seen*".

The Magic Money Tree tells a story we all know. My hope is that this work will provide more detail for some people and that all these experiences, seen side by side, paint a true picture of this time. I hope it's a story about to change.

Kirsty Mackay

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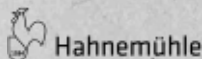


A woman gives her spare change to a man rough sleeping, East St, Bristol, November 2023. © Kirsty Mackay



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