

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Exhibition Review by Christopher Brown and Helen Omand

A Century of the Artist's Studio: 1920 – 2020

Whitechapel Gallery, London

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We were drawn to this exhibition having just published our co-edited book 'Contemporary Practice in Studio Art Therapy'. We were curious to see what links we might find between therapeutic art studios and studios in the world of fine art, as represented through one hundred years of art history.

This was a big exhibition, with over 100 works, which showed both the art made and the studio where it was created, giving a hint of social context in contrast to the ubiquitous white cube. It starts with some traditional images of artist's studios – photographs of well-known artists in their studios surrounded by their masterpieces, probably familiar to anyone who went to art school. An American woman overheard our conversation in front of a photo of Picasso in his studio. "Isn't it wonderful" she said, "hmmn, I'm not sure about that" Chris said, she replied "are you a fan of Picasso?" Chris hesitated, "well, I wouldn't join his fan club". Her partner offered the insight that they were all about the artist's ego. That seemed to speak to our discomfort about these images, which promote the artist as genius, whose works are therefore valuable.

In the next room the idea of artists' ego is challenged by a number of works. A funny and clever video by William Kentridge shows him interviewing himself as if for a place in an art school, in which the whole process and edifice is subverted. A huge backlit digital photograph in three panels described as 'The Playboy Mansion of Studios' shows the artist Rodney Graham in a plush 1960s interior lounge where he pours paint on an inclined canvas to form runs, which resemble a Morris Louis painting, while smoking a cigarette of course. The more we looked at this the more obvious the pastiche and satire becomes; we spot cult books of the time, classic modernist furniture, African sculpture 'collectables', and the obligatory overflowing ashtray. The artist as celebrity perhaps.

The exhibition then took a different turn with a move away from the cult of the individual artist and a shift towards collective studios where people work together and their social interaction may be as important as the creative making of art. A work from Maria Loizidou caught our attention (Figure 1); a hanging net intricately knotted from thread over 48 weeks in response to its site of exhibition, an old tobacco factory and the vast scale of work that took place there. The work was collectively made by six artists who told stories to each other to relieve 'the tedium of repetitive labour' (exhibition guide) and reflected on their social and political environment. Art studios may be places of political resistance as shown

by the Pinochet arpilleras, small traditional quilts sewn on burlap, made by women and depicting scenes experienced under his brutal regime (Figure 2). These pieces reminded us of the place of craftwork in art therapy as exemplified by the work of Jacky Mahony in the UK and Lauren Leone in the US, as well as the ideas put forward by Savneet Talwar and others of community art therapy as a radical act and means to social justice. One of the themes we explored in the book 'Contemporary Practice in Studio Art Therapy' was that the value of such spaces is not just in the art making but in the social interactions within them. These can be not only therapeutic for the individual but also empower the group. One of our chapter contributors, Zoe Armstrong, wrote about an art studio set up in collaboration with transgender, Two-Spirit and/or nonbinary individuals, which resulted in public engagement, political action and social change.

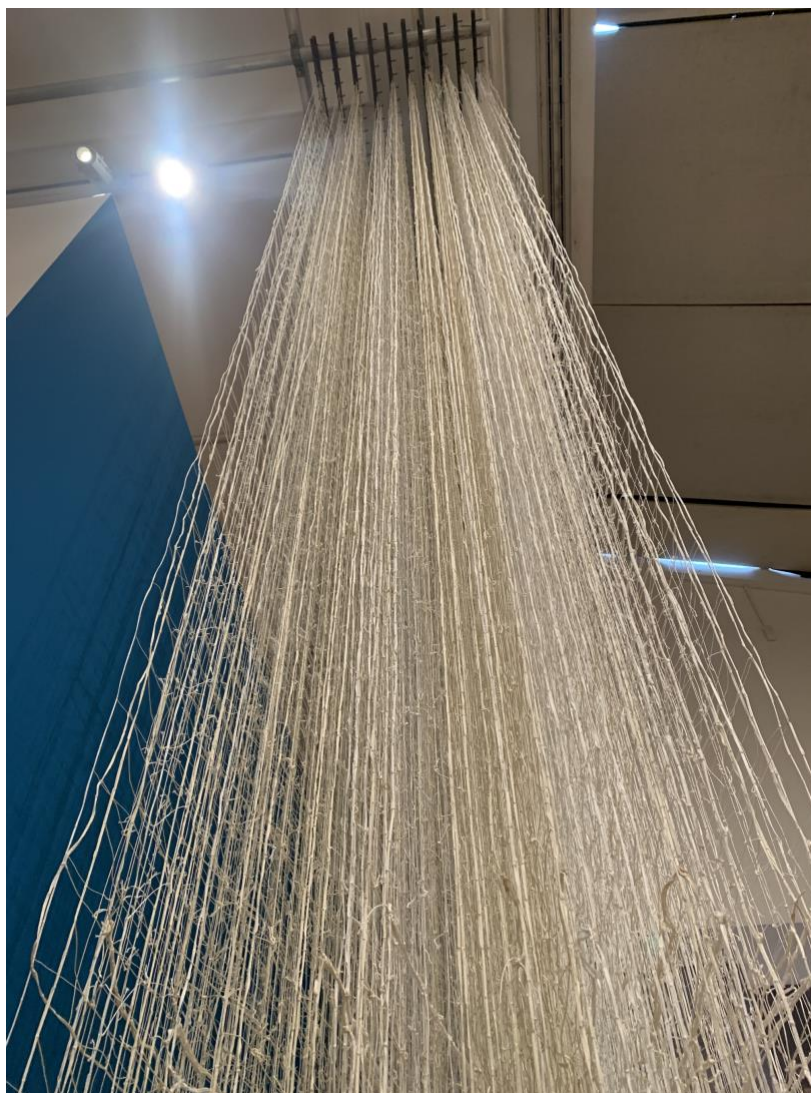


Figure 1: Maria Loizidou. A Monumental Lightness, 2021/2022.
Site-specific installation: Cotton, Linen, silk threads and metal.



Figure 2: A selection of burlap tapestries embroidered with recycled fabrics, made in Arpilleras workshops by women living in Chile, 1970s-1980s.

Documenting the studio as a social site took another twist through a movie projection of life in Andy Warhol's Factory and Wolfgang Tillmans' 'After party' which shows the studio littered with empty bottles the morning after and two big mirrors suggesting a need to reflect on the experience. The Factory was both party venue and output generator of art. Tillmans' large scale photographs straddle the boundary between fine art and his fashion assignments for magazines. Here we find the studio as a social site that embraces pleasure in living, not sealed off from the world outside.

In the upper gallery the studio space becomes more intimate and private. Here we see fine art starting to fray around the edges as we encounter scenarios that echo what we may find

in art therapy. For example the Canadian shack where Maud Lewis lived and painted images on every surface and object – the studio as total environment and sanctuary from the world. Or the obsessionality that drove Tehching Hsieh to document himself in his studio, punching a time clock every hour for a year and whose growing hair marks the passage of time.

This exhibition shows the need for studio spaces where art can be made and refuge found, with or without others. Most of these spaces and their creative activities are enabled by a monetised culture of art that is controlled by market forces. But what about the need for therapeutic art studios, how are these to be enabled? This is a pressing question because therapeutic art studios are on the endangered list in the UK after decades of ideological changes in art therapy provision and it's funding. One of the survivors is Portugal Prints, which has been running in London since 1979. They contributed to this exhibition in 'The Living Studio' Galleries 5&6, by donating tables from their studio whose surfaces show the patina of over forty years of art making and where exhibition visitors are invited to make their own art. We were interested to see art therapy *giving a table to art history* but would rather see it being *given a place at the table of art history*. We wondered what it would be like to go to a large exhibition about studio art therapy, with a display of artwork that provokes the viewer into thinking about the artistic process, aesthetics and personal meaning involved in their making.

The final piece in the exhibition is a film by Ai Weiwei of the destruction of his Beijing studio by government forces. The irony was not lost on us.

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About the Authors

Chris Brown is an experienced art therapist, educator and supervisor. He currently works in private practice and freelance to organisations.

Helen Omand is an art therapist who works in a therapeutic studio and teaches on the MA Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths.