

Katrina Moss Chaiya Art Awards Interview: Where is God in our 21st century world?

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A Thousand Bottles of Tears by Deborah Tompsett

Interview with Katrina Moss, the founder of Chaiya Art Awards by Revd Jonathan Evens

A recent exhibition in London explored the question 'Where is God in our 21st century world?' yet described itself as being 'for the curious and open-minded, for people of all faiths and none.' Bursting with 'richness and diversity, vulnerability and exploration, colour and fragility, treasure and beauty', the exhibition featured 40+ artists probing meaning and understanding through their care about our world and the life it sustains.

'Where is God in our 21st century world?' was the theme for the inaugural Chaiya Art Awards, the UK's newest theme based biennial art awards with a top prize of £10,000, and generated over 450 entries in a variety of mediums including painting, sculpture and video, resulting in the exhibition at gallery@oxo (which was visited by more than 2,700 people over 12 days) and a related book.

Katrina Moss, the founder of The Chaiya Art Awards, has said that the Awards are 'about continuing an age old conversation with an age old medium, in a modern setting through contemporary eyes.' That it's 'about asking a big question and looking for inspiration from the wealth of our nation's creatives.' That conversation was taken forward together with the Awards judges: Marcus Lyon, Ghislaine Howard, Laura Gascoigne, Mark Dean, and Katrina Moss, plus exhibition curator Sophie Hacker.



Maxwell Rushton – 'Left Out' Chaiya Art Awards

Having this group of well-respected experts in the arts arena contribute skills, expertise, time and faith in this project was clearly key to establishing the credibility and viability of these new Awards.

I asked Katrina about the inspiration and design of the Awards, as well as exploring her reflections on the impact of the inaugural Awards.

JE: You are someone who has always been passionate about creativity and, as a result, have extensive experience in the Arts and marketing. What aspects of your background and interests have particularly come into play in developing the Chaiya Art Awards?

KM: I have worked as a project manager, so big vision projects excite me and my enthusiasm and passion has attracted others to the project. My ability to keep the big picture alongside managing the details of each individual part, thinking outside of the box, coming up with solutions to do things differently have all come into play.

JE: The vision for the Chaiya Art Awards came to you in 2016 at a conference. Can you tell us more about where this vision came from and how it has developed as you have acted on it?

KM: I was at a conference called New Wine, and was impacted by various speakers, one of whom mentioned a book "Wide Awake" by Erwin Raphael McManus. The first chapter was all about asking God for new dreams. So I went to bed asking God to give me a new dream for this stage of my life. My mother had been terminally ill with stomach cancer for 5 months, and I had to leave the conference early as the hospice team phoned me to say they thought she would not last the week.

The day my mother died, I woke with the vision to use some of Mum's inheritance to set up the Chaiya Arts Prize, an arts competition with a big £10,000 prize. I then spent the next 6 months researching art awards and speaking to artists, curators, and people whose opinion I value, and each person brought additional clarity and shape into the Awards as they are now.

JE: Why do you think a new art award is needed? Why do you think spirituality has been absent from the mainstream art arena and why does it need to be brought back?



Sheona Beaumont – 'Natal' Chaiya Art Awards

KM: I think spirituality is very important to many people, and there didn't seem to be any major platforms where artists could explore this in their work and for that work to be seen in a high profile gallery. One artist emailed me saying "I have struggled to find people in the visual arts today who are interested in the subject of God. So as a young artist who has chosen to explore faith in my work, being a part of this has provided me with a great sense of hope and encouragement."

JE: The Blake Art Prize is the longest standing and most prestigious prize which encourages conversation about spirituality and religion through art. Have you learnt anything in founding the Chaiya Art Awards from the history of the Blake Art Prize?

KM: It is amazing that this prize is now in its 65th year, and has grown from a vision to provide art for churches to Australia's longest standing and most prestigious prizes which encourages conversation about spirituality and religion through art. I saw from the Blake prize history the importance of putting in place strong financial foundations and ensuring the vision could pass successfully to the next generation.

JE: How does Chaiya Art Awards complement or add to the existing organisations and exhibitions which explore connections between faith and art?

M: There are some fantastic organisations and exhibitions exploring the connections between faith and art, but they are often in church settings and I wanted to bring art and faith inspired creativity back into mainstream galleries.

JE: How did you recruit your judges and how important have they been to the success of the inaugural Chaiya Art Awards?

KM: I wanted a panel that brought a variety of expertise to the table, and I feel the panel I invited were a brilliant mix – well respected practising artists, an art critic, an interfaith advisor and chaplain at University of Arts London, one of world's Top 6 universities for art and design. The judges came on board because they believed in the project, and one of them commented to me that he was really impressed that I was passionate enough to put in my own money.

JE: How was the theme for this year's Chaiya Art Awards chosen? On one level it seems quite direct and in-your-face but could also be read as an acknowledgement that, for many, the answer to the question might be 'nowhere'. What did you hope to achieve in the choosing of this theme?

KM: The theme of "Where is God in our 21st century world?" was chosen because it is an important and intriguing question, and we wanted artists of all faiths or none and everyone in between to feel that they could engage with the question and could answer it very personally.

JE: What has been most encouraging for you in relation to the response from artists and others to the Chaiya Art Awards?

KM: That the aim mentioned in answer to previous question happened, that this theme was addressed by artists of various faiths, those who had no faith and those who are spiritually searching for answers.

JE: Thinking about the more than 450 submissions received, would you say this has been a competition which has attracted mainstream artists or has it provided visibility for artists for whom their art is primarily an expression of their religious faith?

KM: I am thrilled that The Chaiya Art Awards appealed not only to those whose art is primarily an expression of their religious faith, but also to mainstream artists, and I am fully aware that the £10,000 prize money attracted artists to explore this theme maybe for the first time.

JE: Were you surprised by the level and range of response? What does this say about the extent to which artists are creating art that expresses faith and spirituality?

KM: The variety of mediums from painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, textile, video and photography was fantastic, bursting with richness and diversity. Artists explored vulnerability and fragility, but also celebrated colour, treasure and beauty. I was moved by a number of artists who wrote to me expressing their gratitude for these awards coming into existence to give them a platform to express faith and spirituality through their creative endeavour.

JE: Your aim was to encourage artists to create art that expresses faith and spirituality. To what extent has that aim been achieved or has the Award attracted entries primarily from those who already create art that expresses faith and spirituality?

KM: The fact we had over 450 entries, many of which were created specifically for this competition was so encouraging, but I was also thrilled that people who had already created exceptional pieces that were relevant to this theme, also found a new audience.

JE: The book you have published invites quest and features many questions, in addition to that of the theme. To what extent do you see the Chaiya Art Awards and the art submitted as being about questions or answers?

KM: I think the aim of the Chaiya Art Awards Exhibition and the accompanying book is to pose questions about God, spirituality and its relevance to today's society. It also allows the public to engage with art that is original and thought provoking, so the viewer can start or continue a journey of exploration themselves to find the answers.

JE: In what ways have you observed the Chaiya Art Awards opening up conversations about art and spirituality?

KM: We had over 2700 visitors to the show over 12 days, many commenting that they found the art very thought provoking and were moved by pieces displayed. I was struck by a number who said that would not normally be the kind of art exhibition they would visit, but they were really glad that they had. One young man, standing in front of a painting of an isolated hut in a remote Swedish Forest "Seek and You Shall Find" by Karl Newman, said that his spine was tingling all over. Over 1300 people took part in the public vote, which they took very seriously. It was won by "Left Out" by Maxwell Rushton whose sculpture of a homeless man in a bin bag really impacted hundreds of visitors and started many conversations.

JE: What factors influenced the decisions made as to the winners of the inaugural Awards? In what ways do the winning works address the theme?

KM: As a judging panel we were looking for Theme Interpretation, Creativity and Technique and Emotional impact. We felt the winning piece 'A Thousand Bottles of Tears' by Deborah Tompsett hit all three. This was echoed by the public who found it a deeply moving piece. Each hand-thrown pot formed from a heart-sized lump of clay from baby to adult, then filled with handwritten message and re-fired. Since 1055BC, tear bottles have spoken of the sacredness of tears as messengers of grief, contrition and love. One woman commented that she just couldn't move away from the piece, it had such a profound effect on her.

The second prize a video piece called 'Modern Wonder' by David Theobald was a humorous piece, of a 3D printer recreating a green plastic miniature statue of Rio de Janeiro's iconic 'Christ the Redeemer', but spoke of how technology can be a double-edged sword.

The third prize was won by Peter Codling for his charcoal drawing 'Naivety', which compacts world geography, real and imagined events and the planes of existence that encompass them, engaging the viewer to ask Where? Who? What? and Why?

JE: What was your favourite work in the show and why?

KM: My favourite piece was 'A Thousand Bottles of Tears', because of the emotional impact it had on me and on so many visitors.

JE: Which artists were you most excited to have included and introduced through the competition?

KM: We were thrilled that the exhibition included high profile artists such as Julian Stair, one of the UK's leading potters, with work in 30 public collections including the V&A Museum, British Museum, American Museum of Art & Design, New York, Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, Japan. Alongside talented artists like Maxwell Rushton, Karl Newman, Sue Lawty, Kirsten Lavers and Bridget Adams whose work finished in the top 5 as voted for by the public, gaining new enthusiastic audiences for their work.

JE: How would you like to see Chaiya Art Awards develop in future?

KM: I would like the Chaiya Art Awards to play its part in returning spirituality back into the mainstream art arena; uncovering some gifted and visionary new artists; and be accepted as a credible and significant event in the art calendar.

JE: You have said that you would like to achieve those goals by 2028. To what extent do you think the inaugural Awards provided a foundation for this vision?

KM: I think the quality of the work chosen and selected for the Exhibition and the accompanying book laid an excellent foundation for the Awards. The huge numbers of visitors to the exhibition have shown there is a real interest in the whole subject of art and spirituality.

Words: Jonathan Evens. Photographs: Jonny Back.

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