

CHURCH TIMES

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Creativity amid Covid

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Vicky Walker talks to artists who are responding to the pandemic



inhale/exhale by Elisabeth Rutt

FOR Katrina Moss, who launched the Chaiya Art Awards in 2018 to explore how contemporary artists represent the divine, the global [coronavirus](#) crisis presented an additional challenge. The 2020 prize, which invited [artists](#) to submit work on the theme of “God is. . .”, had to be postponed until 2021.

Instead, shortlisted artists were asked to respond to the effects of the pandemic “around the world, on families, society, health care, and beliefs”. Selected works were chosen to form an online exhibition, “Impact”.

Mrs Moss described the emotions that, she believed, many artists felt at the start of the lockdown: “If you’re a key worker, or someone very involved in the public response to Covid-19, you’re playing your part. But, as an artist, [you’re] offering the chance to express — whether it’s positive, negative, confused, frustrated — and other people will feel the same.”

Although a statement of faith is not required, she believes that she receives work from “people who have faith, from different faiths, no faith at all, are searching, are not interested”. The Chaiya projects, and the arts more widely, she says, provide a “positive environment and platform to discuss faith and spirituality, because it’s so unthreatening to people”.

The artists who submit work to Chaiya may have a faith, but choose not to explore it explicitly in their work. “Often, artists want the work to speak for itself rather than telling people ‘This is how I want you to see this,’” Mrs Moss explains. “You get people who are really wanting to share their understanding; others who want to give people the opportunity to explore; and artists who are exploring.”

She notes that the increased interest in online church suggests that people are using the uncertainty of the pandemic to look again for meaning and “look at faith in a different way”, and hopes that people who visit the Impact exhibition online will see things that they feel moved and challenged by. “Art bypasses logic and goes straight to your emotional, heart response,” she says, “And I’ve learned, over the years, that, rather than tell people, it’s better to ask questions.”

The pandemic offers a potentially surprising source of hope, too, Mrs Moss believes. “Times in life that have been stressful or confusing often coincide with release of creativity. It seems to be released in times of national difficulty as well as personal difficulty. God can access our attention.”

The [Impact exhibition](#) can be visited online until September. The postponed 2020 [Chaiya Art Awards](#) will take place at gallery@oxo, in London, in April 2021.

ELISABETH RUTT lives in rural Suffolk and creates works in stitched textiles.

I WAS very moved by the news of the devastating and overwhelming effect that Covid-19 has on the lungs and breathing. This quickly led me to think about the breath of God, the breath of the world and its peoples, and the dichotomy between the minute virus and its enormous impact on our planet.

I started to think about satellite photos of the earth alongside Petri-dish images of Covid-19 and the infographics we are seeing all over the media now. I had pangs of guilt in making *inhale/exhale* (main image), which completely absorbed me for a few weeks; making something to be

aesthetically pleasing out of such a terrible world event seemed wrong in some ways, but, as I stitched, it helped me to think through a lot of the issues we have all had to confront.

TERESA CHLAPOWSKI is a former knitwear designer who now creates artworks in glass.

WHEN the pandemic happened, time just stopped. On one hand, I was at peace: the future was out of my control and I just had to let go. I am a practising Catholic, but, with mass going online, not being able to go to church, even, it's dented my need for the Church as an institution; but I still feel, personally, that Christ's teachings and the concept of our soul is more relevant than ever.



Contained Chaos by Teresa Chlapowski

A lot of my work has always been to find a way to express my need to understand our soul, the hidden part of us — maybe even the God bit in us, maybe where we go to after this world. I definitely feel there is more to life than the physical world we live in.

The idea of *Contained Chaos* was to create a circle that somehow contained my emotions. But then the world suddenly changed, and the work acquired its own direction and purpose. I love blue and turquoise, but the feeling of chaos all around me needed to disrupt; so I added the red.

However much I plan a work, glass does its own thing in the end. It's like a partnership, and it never fails to surprise me. I hope the future owner will see something positive in it, through their own experiences; see something new and different and make it "live" for them — mutate into what they want it to express for them.

Art is something not quite of this world; it gives both the viewer and the artist a glimpse into something much more precious. It comes from deep inside of us. During these uncertain times, art can help us focus on more important things: on beauty, on pain that might heal, on memories that we'd forgotten. Art is what makes us complete.

DEBORAH HARRISON is a sculptor based in Gloucester who specialises in stone carving.

I SPEND a lot of my time observing and then expressing my responses through carving. I have seen positive and negative effects of the pandemic. On the positive side, I have seen an increase in parents and children being able to enjoy each other's company; in the park, playing, laughing together, and sharing picnics.

I have lost a few [elderly friends](#), and it saddened me that they [died](#) without friends at their bedside. To carve all day without seeing a soul demands a level of internal resilience and faith in God and yourself to survive. I have had to dig down to find new resources inside my soul.



Touch by Deborah Harrison

I would wear a cross to remember that Jesus was a *tekton*, which, correctly translated, means artisan, or craftsman: in particular, a carpenter, stonemason, builder, or engineer. Jesus would most likely have used many of the same tools as I do today, which has brought me closer to him.

The inspiration for ***Touch*** was in the stone. In these strange times, touch is something we all [miss](#); hugging a friend when we greet them into our

home, or when they need comfort. Our relationship with God is like this. When we cry out in need, he is there to bring us the touch of his Spirit to bring solace and peace. As the Desert Fathers said: “God is not elsewhere”, God is with us — Emmanuel.

The whole world has been brought to a juncture where we need to stop and think where we want our future path to go: whether we really want to go back to stripping the earth, being consumerist driven and slaves to capitalism. It’s time for art to speak truth to power.

THE Revd Matthew Askey is School Chaplain at Worksop College, north Nottinghamshire. Fr Askey trained first in fine art, and has practised as both an artist and an art educator for 25 years, and was previously school chaplain at Southwell Minster.



Hug by Matthew Askey

THE pandemic has been a time for reflection, but stressful also. My usual pattern of prayer has been much harder, and dry, and so I’ve found myself instead going to the studio more often and praying through making art. Painting and drawing forms a key part of my daily prayer life. It’s a close relationship, with one informing the other.

During this pandemic, I have been reminded of just how vulnerable we are, both as a society and as a civilisation. We cling to certain things for

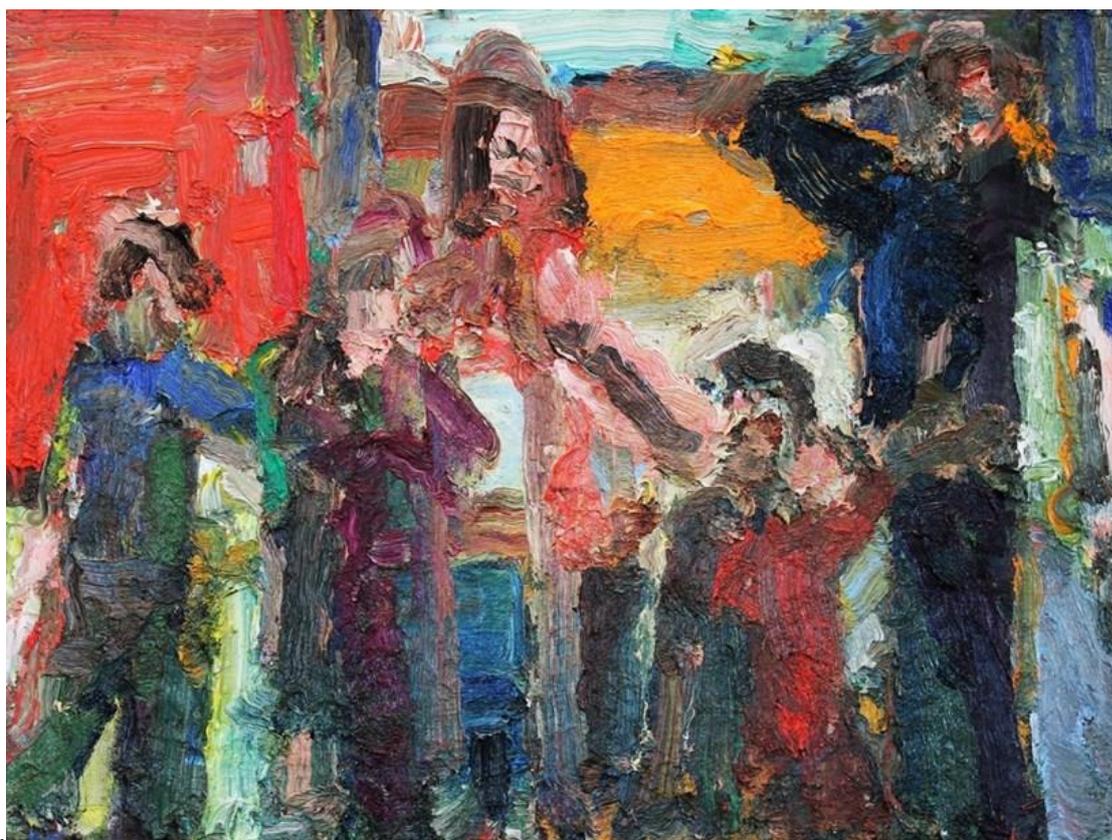
comfort (often the wrong things), and we are in danger of popping them all. **Hug** is a portrait of the state of our civilisation. I hope its future owner feels peace when looking at it.

During uncertain times, art can challenge us out of complacency, to reassess, and it can feed the soul and the [mind](#). It can also function as a shared prayer. It's vitally important. I think the arts will continue to challenge and inspire us to confront our values and behaviours.

CRAIG JEFFERSON is a Scottish artist based in Northern Ireland.

THE pandemic has meant less busyness and rushing around; more time to talk, develop relationships, and spend lots of time talking over the fence to the neighbours. Our experience as a family has been positive, overall, although I find that difficult to say considering the tragedy that has been going on all around us.

Family Portrait was inspired by a collective experience. I have not come through this time alone, but with my family. In a good way, we have been forced together



Family Portrait by Craig Jefferson

My art is deeply grounded in my faith. I create because I am made in the image of a creator. I create because He first created. Without that knowledge, I would have no sense of affirmation or freedom in what I do.

For me, every painting is a meditation. It is a response to what I see and experience as a human being. Very much like a psalm or a proverb, I am making sense of reality. That reality includes my relationship to the greatness of God and his creation, but also brokenness, sin, and pain.

Art is known to be a great therapy, and it can bring people together in communities. I really hope that there is funding and support to ensure that the arts flourish in post-pandemic life. After a long period of isolation and an emotional roller-coaster, we all need something to engage in to lift our spirits and make sense of the new world we live in.