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**Abstract**

The Community Mural Project in St Paul's, Cheltenham, United Kingdom, reflects on the dynamics of 'us and them' within a community mural initiative. It seeks to develop inclusive social spaces through participatory arts-based research using drawing. The article also addresses the complexities of power and influence in mural arts. Furthermore, it examines the interconnectedness of community and the role of drawing and illustration methods in understanding and addressing inclusivity and exclusivity. The project takes place in St. Paul's, a mixed-class area of Cheltenham known for its annual festivals, where observations and reflections from the interdisciplinary team contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the project's context. The project included workshops, community consultations, and the creation of twelve mini-murals, each a product of diverse images. These phases aimed to break down barriers and facilitate collaboration among community members, addressing power differentials and the complexities of community dynamics.

**Keywords**

artistic research, illustration, community mural project, street art, inclusivity, participatory arts-based research, drawing

**Biographies**

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Omar El Masri (Senior Lecturer, Criminology, School of Business, Computing and Social Sciences, University of Gloucestershire) is a Lebanese-US American criminologist; his research and teaching centre on the intersection of power, epistemic injustice, culture, and arts-based practices and research in deeply divided societies and spaces. His current interests examine state and non-state harms (neoliberal urban development and ethnonational violence), decolonizing criminology and sociology, and participatory methodologies in collaborative knowledge production. His research has been published in scholarly texts on websites and featured in documentaries.

## **Us & Them: We Draw Together – Exploring Inclusivity in a Community Mural Project**

Kimberly Ellen Hall, Omar El Masri

The Community Mural Project in Cheltenham's St. Paul's neighbourhood started in 2022 with the idea of painting on a public wall to explore inclusivity and community. The umbrella terms 'mural' and 'street art' are often used interchangeably, encompassing different practices, including graffiti, stencils, paste-ups, stickers, and yarn bombing. Murals may be considered as 'street art', a form of public artwork that uses site-specific urban surfaces and which has become integral to modern urban discourse, addressing social issues, celebrating daily life, or adding humour to the environment (El Masri 2020).

This article examines the dynamics of 'us and them' within our collaborative community mural project, investigating whether participatory arts-based research using drawing can foster an inclusive social space. We aimed to co-create self-authorized images with community members to explore how collaborative mural-making might build or influence community, both literally and metaphorically.

We created twelve mini-murals, each featuring diverse images, as a step towards breaking down barriers between creators and audience, insiders and outsiders, and leaders and followers. This article acknowledges that fully representing all viewpoints is challenging and highlights the persistent 'us and them' dynamics in community mural projects.

As we define it in this context, in mural arts, control over the process is often diffuse. Not only do artists influence image-making, but town or city officials also control funding for public projects. This complex power division can limit the influence of community members who live where the artwork is situated, as they may face challenges related to consensus, membership, and finance (Hall 2023).

The idea of 'community' as a homogeneous group with shared interests is oversimplified. Instead, 'community' should be understood as a term representing existing relationships and a sense of connection based on location (Williams 1976: 76). This complexity must be considered in community engagement projects like ours. We are exploring whether drawing and illustration methods can help us understand how 'community' functions. This paper will focus on the challenges of creating inclusivity and the unexpected exclusivity that may arise in this work.

In our role as researchers, we originally saw ourselves as outsiders. However, being representatives of a long-standing partner in the community also made us insiders. This dual perspective helped us realize that not everything fits into neat categories. By bringing neighbourhood members together through our experimental illustration methods, regardless of their position in a group, we established a useful line of inquiry to question the concept of community itself.

### **Context**

The University of Gloucestershire's Francis Close Hall and Hardwick campuses are situated in the St Paul's neighborhood, a mixed-class area in Cheltenham characterized by significant social, economic, and educational deprivation (GRCC 2019). Cheltenham, located in the Cotswolds, is known for its annual festivals, including the Cheltenham Paint Festival (CPF). This festival

attracts artists from various locations to create street artwork in the town. However, these artists often lack a connection to the local community, leading to a separation between visitors, festival organizers, the university community, and the local population, despite all living and working in the same neighborhood.

Our observations are based on our reflections and professional experiences. El Masri, a Lebanese-American political sociologist, has worked with street artists in post-conflict cities like Beirut and Belfast. Hall, an American illustrator, has created murals in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. Drawing from our diverse backgrounds, we used mural art as a lens to understand the places we have lived. Upon moving to Cheltenham in 2020 and 2021, we noticed that many of the town's murals, while visually appealing, did not convey much about the local area.

Our interdisciplinary team also included a member of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) team at the University of Gloucestershire, who had prior experience with Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH). We recruited two postgraduate researchers (PGRs): a Ph.D. student in Humanities and an MA student in Illustration. They helped conduct workshops and community consultations and managed the Community Mural Project Blog (Pittville Press Substack 2023). Additionally, four undergraduate student helpers from Sociology and Illustration assisted with gallery invigilation during the exhibition and painting days.

Our team's relationships with the local population varied. One PGR resided in St Paul's, and Hall lived adjacent to St Paul's with her children attending the same schools as the neighborhood's children. The team spent significant time working, dining, and engaging with the neighborhood as part of our university roles.

This led to challenges in relationship-building: fluctuating between feeling like insiders and outsiders, facing the community's skepticism towards the university and our affiliations, and not being involved in the CPF for mural placement. Cultural differences also posed challenges, with our team's direct communication style contrasting with the locals' more reserved approach. Initially, we believed we had communicated that the murals would be created from drawings by children and non-artists, but it later became apparent that some expected professional artists to repaint the drawings. Additionally, our project faced setbacks due to a Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) reorganization amidst a cost-of-living crisis (Rowe 2023), and CBH was absorbed back into CBC (Limbu 2023).

Other local academics and art practitioners have established connections with the community through research on Lower High Street's heritage (O'Connell 2020) or art interventions like the edible community garden on Hardwick Campus (WeCreate 2022). However, as noted by a confidant, many of these projects were short-lived or relegated to online archives, leading to community feelings of abandonment and skepticism (hooks 2021; Oejo 2013; Smith 2021). This context prompted us to develop a methodology grounded in participatory arts-based research, focusing on drawing and images.

An advantage of our approach was the existence of the Paint Festival, which familiarized people with mural art and facilitated community engagement. Additionally, the funding from university faculties meant the mural project incurred no financial cost to the community or partners. The team's cross-disciplinary experience in mural making, community organizing, and visual culture theory further supported our efforts.

## **Methodology**

When considering our approach, we aimed to bring together interdisciplinary expertise from Sociology and Visual Culture. We wanted our team to focus on democratic forms of image-making rather than promoting the practice of bringing renowned street artists into Cheltenham (Cheltenham Paint Festival 2023).

While the technical quality of the Cheltenham Street artworks is high, the style is relatively narrow. The existing murals in the town mainly feature a realistic style and subjects such as animals, flowers, and anonymous women. Some pieces reflect the town's history (for example, *The Killing Joke* by Dice69 off Swindon Road or *RIP* by Inkie on St Paul's Road) or businesses (for example, *Blue Tailed Bee Eater* by Peachzz on the side of the Coconut Tree restaurant). Still, many are created by artists outside the town who only come in for the project. The CPF organizer said, 'Artists are free to express themselves as they see fit [...] My feeling is that they produce their best work when unhampered by others' expectations' (Moran 2018: n.pag.).

On Cheltenham's Swindon Road, several artworks, such as *Output* by epod3000 and *Peacock and Flowers* by Curtis Hylton on the east and west-facing sides of the Holiday Inn Express, reflect an approach that prioritizes self-expression over collaboration in image design (Young 2014). This highlights the broader tension between an artist's vision and the community's expectations. While some artists place their work in public spaces without much consideration of the surrounding context, others are aware of the need for site-specificity, tailoring their work to the unique characteristics of the location and its community (Kwon 2002).

Our project is similar to a mural project conducted by Hall in Philadelphia, United States, (2021), where she was invited to draw neighbourhood icons suggested by residents that she then combined onto a large wall at the East Passyunk Community Center. Residents told stories, shared memories, and directed the work. This South Philly Bulletin Board project is now a permanent fixture within the Fanny Jackson Coppin Elementary School and the East Passyunk Community Center communities (Figure 1), and it was featured in the local press (*Passyunk Post* 2021).



Figure 1: Community activities taking place in front of the South Philly Bulletin Board mural by Kimberly Ellen Hall, East Passyunk Recreation Center, United States, 2021; 2023.

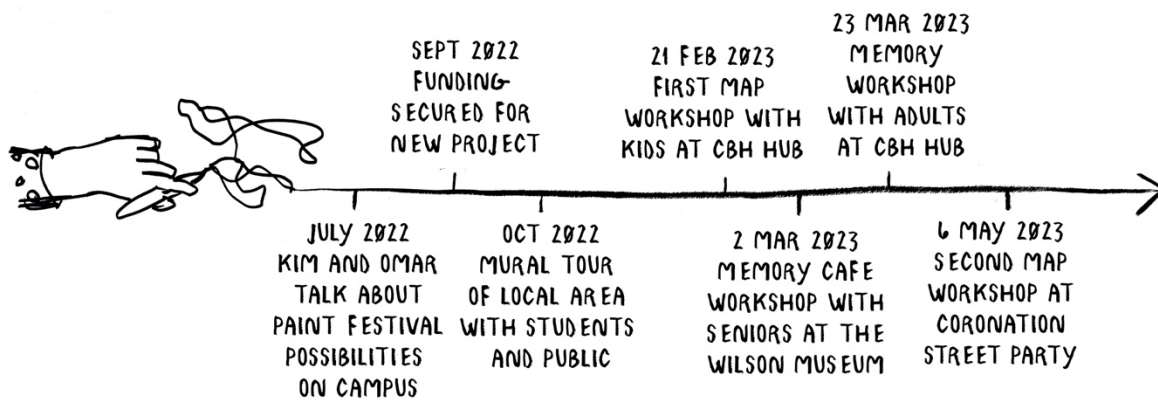
As such, drawing as a form of knowledge can deepen our understanding of relationships with unfamiliar people and offer valuable insights into how social spaces are shaped. Creating a mural democratizes image-making by allowing diverse, even dissenting, voices to collaborate and be visible together (El Masri 2020; Zukin 1995). Our series of drawing workshops cultivated a democratic social space, where a variety of decisions collectively influenced the final artworks

## **Methods**

Our method of making mural art began with Participatory Arts-Based Research (PABR) (Cahill, 2007; Erel et al. 2017; Nunn 2022; Tarr et al. 2018). This differs from other approaches by situating research neither exclusively within the arts – as artistic research about and for the arts (Borgdorff 2006); nor mainly in between art and science – as producing a different kind of knowledge that is disqualified by established academic research standards (Busch 2009). Busch explores how various forms of knowledge are marginalized by established academic research standards, particularly under the influence of neoliberal policies in higher education (2009). Established academic research standards promote an understanding that ‘dominant positivist social science research as the only legitimate and valid source of knowledge’ (Maguire 1987: 10).

Instead, PABR recognizes research primarily as a triangular relation and interaction between art, science and society. It understands the arts as providing crucial resources, toolboxes and opportunities to change the relationship between research and the public and to create research practices in and for society.

The act of drawing together became crucial in helping us focus on the process itself. The physical movement of hands and manual drawing tools gave our bodies the time and space to process ideas and emotions (Carney 2021). Through drawing, we were able to deepen our connection with each other and the world as we navigated, creating together within a shared space and on a common page. The outcome of the drawing was irrelevant; it was the act of drawing that provided us with insights (Barry 2015). This openness to the final result allowed us to focus on the process throughout the workshops. We encouraged participants to prioritize the experience of working together, allowing their drawings and marks to tell their stories without concern for the final appearance.



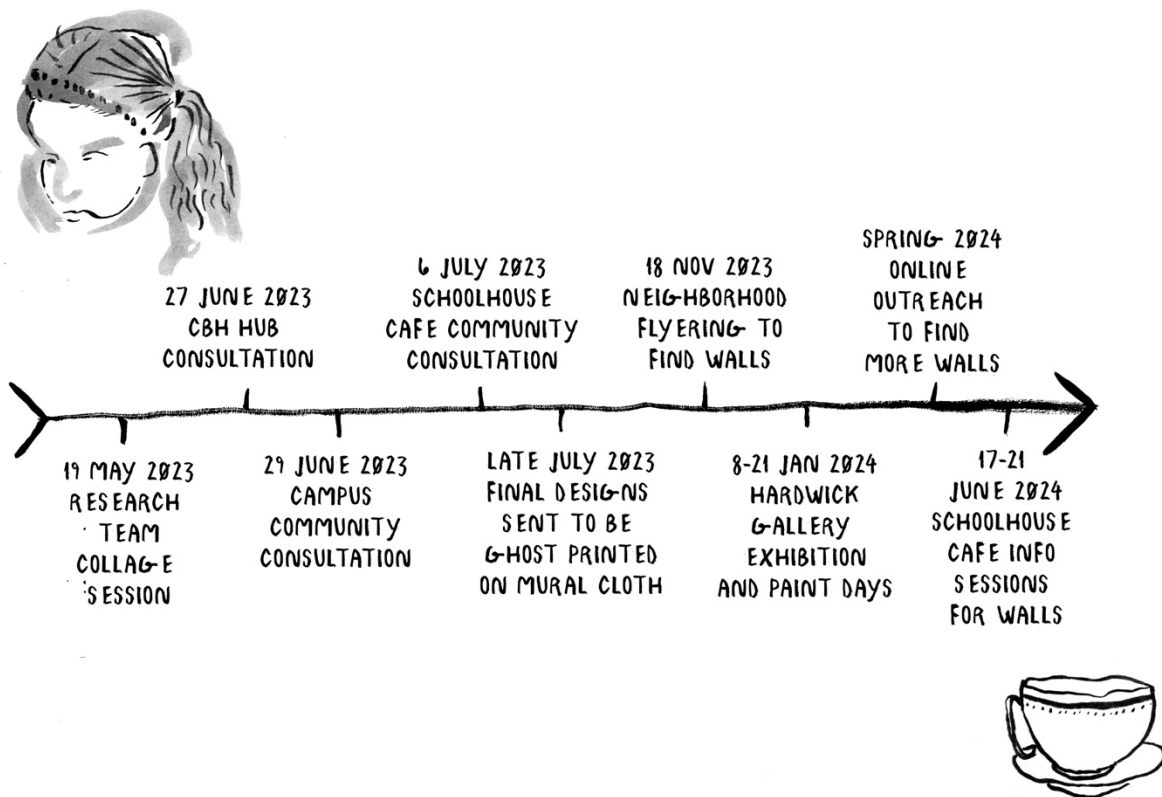


Figure 2: Timeline of the project. © Kimberly Ellen Hall. **NOTE TO DESIGNER: THIS TWO-PART IMAGE IS INTENDED TO BE A DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD**

## Implementation

### **Part One: Planning and Initial Community Work**

As we began organizing meetings, we found we had to work discretely with different groups rather than bringing diverse groups of people together who would not normally meet. While many of the residents had initially expressed interest in attending on-campus events, we struggled to get attendance on campus. A question began forming in our minds about whether we could explore inclusivity if we could not bring people together to make the drawings for the murals.

In October 2022, we began by touring existing mural projects in Cheltenham, led by El Masri, open to both students and community members. The university's EDI coordinator organized outreach efforts and invited local community members to a series of workshops and knowledge exchanges conducted by Hall. A key challenge was deciding who to recruit for these workshops and defining what 'community' meant in this context. Active and engaged community members were easier to reach, but we focused on connecting with those not already involved in other community projects. Our participants included young people, their

guardians, adult residents of the larger St Paul's neighborhood, and seniors. They were not particularly involved in the arts or local leadership, but they participated in some community activities and were willing to share with us, though not necessarily ready to take on a more active role in the project.

We held four workshop sessions in spring 2023, themed on mapmaking, storytelling, and drawing memories. Our community contacts at CBH Community Hub invited us to attend and run our workshops during specific culturally significant days, such as Pancake Day in February 2023 (Figure 3), and St Paul's Church invited us to the Coronation Street Party in May 2023, when they felt many community members would be present. These first two workshops allowed us to visually imagine the neighbourhood through mapmaking. We wanted to capture people's memories of the places they live and how they ascribe meaning to their everyday lives (De Certeau 2011).

The artistic process was joyful but also challenging and emotionally charged. We developed boundaries and practical considerations to protect all involved, obtaining informed consent from participants and their guardians and ensuring that no personal information appeared in their drawings. Our goal was to maintain ethical standards while fostering trust and meaningful engagement (Ocejo 2013: 9). This was especially important as we navigated our dual roles as both researchers and participants.

On Pancake Day, we worked with children and their caregivers at CBH Community Hub to help us map the St Paul's neighbourhood. These participants were already friendly and connected. We presented children and adult participants with a 2-metre-long blank sheet of paper and asked them to draw with markers and coloured pencils what they think of when they think of their neighbourhood (Figure 4, top left). We also drew with them during the workshop. Young people freely drew and wrote about their priorities, memories, and opinions. The outcomes were everything from carefully rendered homes, plants and people to words and scribbly mark-making.

The second session of this workshop was for adults and children at the street party celebration of King Charles' coronation at St Paul's church (Figure 4, top right). Although some were connected, the attendees were less known to each other than at Pancake Day. This session was much more freeform as it was part of a more comprehensive celebration, not like our first workshop. The benefit was that we had adults and children drawing together and encouraging one another.

Our third workshop was a storytelling event with only adults/caregivers at the CBH Community Hub (Figure 4, bottom left). We worked through a 'Drawing as Memory' exercise based on one of Lynda Barry's prompts in her book *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (2015). Barry teaches a method of storytelling that focuses on the relationship between the hand, the brain and spontaneous images, both written and visual, which she started teaching in 2011 at the University of Wisconsin. Working with adults meant working through people's fears and worries about drawing well enough. Barry says of her students and methods: '[...] only about a quarter of the students feel really comfortable drawing, and maybe a third of them don't feel terrified. Two-thirds feel terrified and want to start crying, and those are my favourite people to work with' (Brown 2017: n.pag.). The adults we worked with came up with stories in words and pictures about what the neighbourhood was like for them as children but also presently, sometimes similarly to the young people in the workshops.

Our final workshop happened at a series of events at the Wilson Museum in the town centre (Figure 4, bottom right). The Memory Café is a social group and creative session for seniors, those living with dementia and their caregivers. Our team attended sessions, spoke to participants, and asked if we could draw some of their memories. These conversations led to many drawings of the past and present. Working with seniors was important when considering including unrepresented voices in public art. While this group of older adults was not specifically from St Paul's neighbourhood, their stories lent further consideration to Cheltenham's history, contributing to the mix of residents' experiences in our neighbourhood. Because these participants had some physical impairments, we approached this session from a more traditional practice in illustration/visual journalism, where the illustrator/researcher draws the participants' stories.

After the workshops, we added a collaborative collage session by just the research team's illustrators to formalize the design structure because we needed a way to organize and synthesize the collection of images that people produced, which we describe in the next section.



Figure 3: Invitation poster for Pancake Day workshop 2023. © Kimberly Ellen Hall



**Figure 4:** First (left), young people working on the map at St Paul's Hub. Second, the Coronation celebration at St Paul's church. We had a table to the right of this photo for mapmaking. Third, storytelling from Memory workshop with adults at St Paul's Hub. Fourth, narrative elicitation was primarily verbal and recorded by illustrators on the team at the Wilson Memory Café, seen with our PGR Jessica Mure.

## **Part Two: Working with the drawings**

Once we had collected all these varied drawings from all four workshops, the team spent some time collaging them. Intending to incorporate the drawings into one mural, we explored making all the loose drawings into one. The artists' visual journaling of participants' stories from the last workshop for participants with impairments became important because they facilitated visual connections between the participants' diverse direct drawing styles. These drawings and collages acted as bridges or nodes connecting the wider variety of images and words we had collected.

We worked in the computer lab in the Illustration studio of the university, with each researcher having access to the raw images. In Adobe Photoshop, we digitally cut out the drawings from the scanned pages and organized them in layered files so each team member could explore them, move things around, create. Researchers chose and collaged participants' raw drawings, looking for stories, narrative elements and connections about inclusivity and belonging while considering the pieces' aesthetic outcomes and creating many iterations (Figure 5). Hall facilitated these sessions to support the team's decision-making and structuring of the images they were collaging.



Figure 5: Left to right: top row, initial raw community artwork, formalizing design structure; bottom row, version one, version six, version eight, combined version two.

The relationships between illustrators and non-illustrators working together to collage these images meant that the creative process teetered between discussions of visuality from sociological versus illustrative perspectives – often on the edge of misunderstanding. For example, El Masri emphasized the cultural and historical meanings of symbols like clasped hands, focusing on how they convey unity across different contexts. Meanwhile, Hall prioritized design elements like colour and composition to evoke an emotional response and guide the viewer's eye. This led to discussions where El Masri pushed for explicit symbolic meaning, while Hall aimed for a more open-ended, aesthetically driven design choices. The tension between the study of how we see, perceive, and understand images (Mulvey 1975; Pollock 1988; Rose 2001) and the practice of exploring how we make images (Barry 2015; Carney 2021) was central to our process of reconciling these differing perspectives.

As collaborators from different fields, we, as co-authors, shared valuable discipline-specific insights into the significance of image production and social spaces. The illustrators gained a deeper understanding of visual culture and the significance of images within their social, cultural, and historical contexts. At the same time, the sociologists became familiar with the illustration practices and the design choices involved in image construction for communication purposes.

Depicting residents' and neighbours' stories in our drawings was not about conducting a semiotic cultural analysis but about the practical experience of creating something together using tools such as composition and colour. The challenge was that without some formal design

structure, viewers might overlook the images we collected. Even with these design adjustments, we still received negative feedback from some community members regarding the mural's aesthetics (see Part Four: Mural Installation and Reception). Our goal was to make minimal alterations to the images – nothing was redrawn or added. Instead, we organized the composition to improve readability. For example, in Figure 5, you can trace the palm tree's progression: starting in the first image (top left) as it appeared in the original workshop drawing, it moves through the third and fifth images (bottom row) to its final role as an anchor in the bottom right corner of the last image. This placement guides the viewer's eye from the St. Paul's neighbourhood sign toward the centre of the panel. The palm tree references a beloved neighbourhood restaurant, and by moving it from its original, random placement to a more prominent position, we emphasized its significance to the overall narrative

The process of working collaboratively as researchers (and without the broader community) had benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, it helped us become more aware of our shared understanding of the illustration. However, it also revealed that we each had individual biases. We worked to minimize this by having open discussions about our ideas of the design elements. Despite our best efforts, our ideas and interpretations still influenced the final mural. To address this, we sought input from the community through consultations as another way to reduce biased decision-making.

### **Part Three: Community Consultations**

In the summer of 2023, we organized three in-person meetings and one virtual session to present the designs to workshop participants and other community members. First, we met with our original workshop participants, who provided enthusiastic support for the designs. Next, we held consultations with our university partners and the broader community, where we received positive feedback. Lastly, we hosted a session open to the wider community, where feedback was more critical yet constructive, while some support was reluctant or skeptical.

Our first community consultation was held at CBH Community Hub. Participants noted many missing items or components, like birds, scooters, a particular post box, and bikes. When they made these comments, we gave them paper and pens and asked them to draw what they felt was missing. For instance, one respondent noticed no birds in the mural, so we asked them to draw a bird from the neighbourhood. While they were drawing, we asked the larger group if they noticed the same thing, and several people agreed. So, we passed out a few more sheets of paper and pens and asked them to draw more birds. This way, we built up a wider representation of the birds that people noticed in the neighbourhood.

Our second meeting was on campus, with a hybrid component, and it was aimed at university members and students. Some feedback was a call for architectural icons like St Paul's church and the Tesco clock or clock tower. There was also a robust discussion about confusion over symbols, particularly drawings of stars in the Jewish Star of David style that also felt like a child-like beginner attempt at drawing a star with two opposite triangles combined (visible in Figure 5, combined version 2). We discussed it with the group, but no particular action was decided in that session. We also raised the notion in subsequent meetings to see if it was notable among other groups, which it was not.

Our last in-person consultation was at a neighbourhood café that seemed like neutral territory that community members from different walks of life all use. We had a variety of local neighbours and some university colleagues who engaged in a group discussion about how some people were perhaps not included and questions about whether the representation of violence in the neighbourhood was missing. We asked participants what this might look like and whether it could be drawn, but the group had little interest in pursuing this further.

As new drawings were added, we incorporated them into the existing mural panels and created new panels to add to the overall collection. Then, these updates were brought to each subsequent community consultation, making the process exponential (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Incorporating feedback into murals: two panels with new drawings.

These consultations were intended to help us keep feedback and progress open while informing the participatory arts-based nature of our research. Building community through the artmaking process means there must be a kind of conversation, and community consultations were critical. To steer clear of working 'on' a project for the community, we needed additional touchpoints to ensure we were working 'with' community members every step of the way (Ocejo 2013; Smith 2021). It was also a chance to build confidence that we were on the right path to telling the story of what we had experienced with residents. It was another way for the community to get into the project and keep our involvement in check.

#### Part Four: Mural Installation and Reception

Paint Days are a common way to include community contributions to making a mural and a practical way to get a big painting finished. The Paint Days occurred during a two-week exhibition at Hardwick Gallery at the University of Gloucestershire Hardwick campus in January

2024 (Figure 7). We ghost-printed the mural designs on mural cloth so that community members could paint the designs and adjust (or not) as they deemed important. Once mural cloth is painted, it can be applied to a wall with acrylic gel, and it will look the same as if it was painted directly on the wall.



Figure 7: Flyer for paint days at Hardwick Gallery. © Kimberly Ellen Hall.

We also distributed a community-wide form to identify potential locations for the murals in the neighbourhood. One challenge we have faced is a lack of interest in hosting the artwork. Our workshop participants are renters from CBH and typically lack decision-making power due to their socio-economic status (GRCC 2019). Observations suggest that those in decision-making roles may not feel compelled to represent socially excluded voices. In contrast, we were surprised to receive interest from outside St Paul's, mainly from the town centre. We feel that keeping the murals in the neighbourhood was necessary, but we are still searching for local walls. Displaying these murals across the neighbourhood is intended to vividly portray the stories of the people who live here and instil pride in who created them, the young people and their families (Bublitz et al. 2019; Cahill 2007).

The true impact of our inquiry is evident in the collaborative process of co-producing artwork, including where the community consultations yielded diverse and often surprising feedback. Participants have responded in a range of ways. Many saw a deeper connection to the neighbourhood when looking at the images:

They [the murals] feel nostalgic. A sense of St Paul memories shared over generations. I am inferring that there is an established community here rather than a transient one'.  
(Comment from an online form)

The spiral on hand made me think about henna and the multicultural nature of the neighbourhood'. (Comments recorded at in-person meeting)

On the other hand, when we shared the designs in our outreach campaign, we occasionally found contempt for the style of the artworks and an unwillingness to see any value in art that did not conform to trends or conventional ideas about technique or quality of style.

One example was with a trusted community member who invited us to events and shared some of our progress via social media. Although this person facilitated our connection to the community, they did not participate in the workshops themselves. A series of email exchanges between this person and the co-authors revealed this ebb and flow of change in the relationships between community members, which now included us. The first part of the conversation is the person expressing concern about the raw form of the designs, which they felt may not meet the high standards of the community based on feedback received by members of the residency association:

**Member:** Feedback is that it looks like children's drawings – something you would put on a fridge for a week, not something you would put on the outside of your home for 3 years [...] I would expect someone else to make it good, or to be given the opportunity to develop it to a finished version myself.

We responded by explaining that while the designs shown were still in progress, the drawings were not. Moreover, we insisted that a professional artist would not redraw the drawings. The workshops and community consultations had provided several opportunities to create 'finished' drawings:

**Hall:** These works do include children's drawings and the work shown in the community consultations was not final; it was only 'in progress' as we wanted more feedback from folks. They are not [to be] finished in that another artist is going to be redrawing them, [but] we have arranged, coloured, and collaged the drawings submitted to us by the community and have tried to show the feelings and messages of the children and adults we met with and learned from. While the drawings are raw, they are also alive, loose, and free.

The member then acknowledges the clarification and notes that the designs can still be improved with additional contributions from the community:

**Member:** I had assumed that, for example, the drawn arc with the word 'RAINBOW' written above it indicated a work in progress (Figure 9, bottom left). If anyone asks me, I can let them know that these are the finished designs – though there can still be the opportunity for additional contributions from the community.

We then told the person that we would have another workshop for their members, but the person declined to participate or show interest in contributing to the subsequent designs. We attribute this phenomenon to an us-versus-them mentality that impedes community work. While we were surprised by the negativity, especially after the positive feedback from our other consultations, we realized that this highlighted a core paradox of representation and inclusivity. The style and content of pieces we created with our community groups were unrepresented in other projects in other parts of Cheltenham, and that newness was a challenge to residents who did not feel represented by these works. We suspect that this handful of residents was unwilling to support or accept different artistic styles not seen in the area, even from members of their neighbourhood. As we shared the drawings and prepared for the painting phase, new narratives of 'us' and 'them' emerged, and we realized that promoting inclusivity can inadvertently lead to exclusivity.

We understood 'community' as a heterogeneous group of individuals with shared needs and values who come together in a specific geographic location to engage in face-to-face collaboration to create art-based community initiatives (Bublitz et al. 2019). PABR projects serve as spheres of belonging through collaborative practices, offering formal, affective, embodied, socio-cultural, practical, and ethical connections. However, they also have the potential to reproduce relations of non-belonging (Nunn 2022). Since we intended to make space for new voices not represented in the murals and street art around town, we did not consult or work with those who had commissioned, participated in, or made other murals or street art pieces in the past. They were excluded. This may have contributed to some negative feedback we have received.

The twelve mini murals created by community members in Cheltenham do have a distinct style that sets them apart from most other murals in the area, but they are not actually total outliers. For example, there is an unmistakable resemblance between these and the *Cheltenham Hug* artwork by MyDogSighs in the car park off Swindon Road (Figure 8, left) in that the drawing style is similarly child-like. We also see similarity in the *St Paul's Narrative Planter* which was based on workshops run by Jane Clatworthy and rendered in steel by Matthew West in 2017 (Figure 8, right). The collected drawings from residents in the community were transposed onto the planter to share memories from the neighbourhood (BBC 2017).



Figure 8: Left, MyDogSighs, *Cheltenham Hug*. Right, Jane Clatworthy, Matthew West, and participants, *St Paul's Narrative Planter*. Photos by Omar El Masri, 2024.

The different reactions to the mural project at its different stages offer valuable insight into the diversity of community members and their aesthetic preferences. We found that as we drew and painted with the people we met, there was a richness and depth within the group that became visible in our work. Ideas and images overlapped, and drawings and stories developed in the ever-changing collaboration process. Looking at the final artworks, there are always new connections between words and pictures to be discovered and noticed as the work proceeds (Figure 9).

While our aesthetic has certainly contributed to this collaborative mural project, it is distinctly different than the artwork of Hall or the rest of the research team. We understand that everyone has different tastes, so it is crucial to provide a variety of styles in town for everyone to appreciate. We acknowledge that these murals may not be everyone's preference, but we still aim to enhance visual communication by making artwork that brings something new to the array of murals in Cheltenham.



Figure 9: Left to right: original drawing of girls' faces at the start of the iteration process; girls' faces in one of the mural layouts as part of the process; mock-up of girls' faces in one iteration of the process; girls' faces in final layout.

## **Conclusion**

The lack of uniformity in communities challenges the notion of community as something that is assumed to have a consistent voice, as in Williams's (1976) portrayal of the comforting and pleasant concept of community. We often perceive communities as groups with shared beliefs, but that is an oversimplified, superficial, or elusive concept in real-life experiences.

When considering how this diversity of images affects representation, we start with the immediacy of images and how they move directly through the eyes and are recognized right away (McCloud 1994). However, we do not insist that the understanding of images is universal, nor do we suggest that they work like language (Cohn 2023). We discovered that working together on a drawing provides an alternative means of communication that can help foster feelings of inclusion, community and belonging. It is interesting to note that even participants who initially opposed the mural are now forming supportive connections and being friendly with others. We learned that drawing together does indeed forge bonds between community members. They did not like the mural, but they are still in touch with us and communicating about other or new community projects. This stands out as a more profound connection formed through the process of working on the mural together, even though not every response was positive.

We also recognize that audiences produce meaning separately from the maker's intention. Suppose we, as makers, allow for what the audience brings to the image? This opens the door for sharing impactful and rich communication between the maker and the audience through the co-creation of images. The role all humans play as meaning-makers is critical to how we approach our community mural-making as inclusive (Nida 2019).

The concept of community is dynamic and not uniform; it evolves and changes with highs, lows, and unexpected gaps, and this is made visible when we consider the community response to the aesthetics of the murals in Cheltenham. Using images, we aimed to break barriers between represented and unrepresented groups. This created tensions, differences of opinions and dissension in the neighbourhood. Our efforts revealed that the idea of community is ambiguous, with different meanings for different people. Despite capturing diversity, contrasting perspectives were unavoidable. There was always an unrepresentable side or point of view.

In hindsight, the project still feels satisfying, even though it might not be called totally successful. The project was not easy – we could not create consensus – but why should our intention to use drawings to reflect underrepresented stories and perspectives be immediately supported? If they are new to the neighbourhood and unfamiliar, of course there would be difficulties in accepting them. Embracing works that are outside the comfortable boundaries is not easy and rejecting them is a form of control (hooks 2021).

The images in our community mural project are rough, they are not schooled, and they do not fit within formal art rules about colour theory or realism. We feel they are also lively, fresh, and bold. We did impose some formal design rules on the final pieces, but we aimed to

be led by the images and words contributed by the community members rather than adjusting their work to our idea of an appropriate aesthetic. And while we acknowledge it was impossible to fully remove our own preferences, the dissension that emerged when the murals were brought back into the community seemed to confirm our light touch.

It might be easy to read this project as a failure in some ways, particularly as we struggle to find walls for the final murals, but we have come away feeling like we are at the start of new styles and works being introduced and accepted by a wider audience in Cheltenham. It serves as a reminder to us, and hopefully to the community members we've engaged with, of the importance of embracing diverse perspectives and experiences, as reflected in the images created by the community.

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