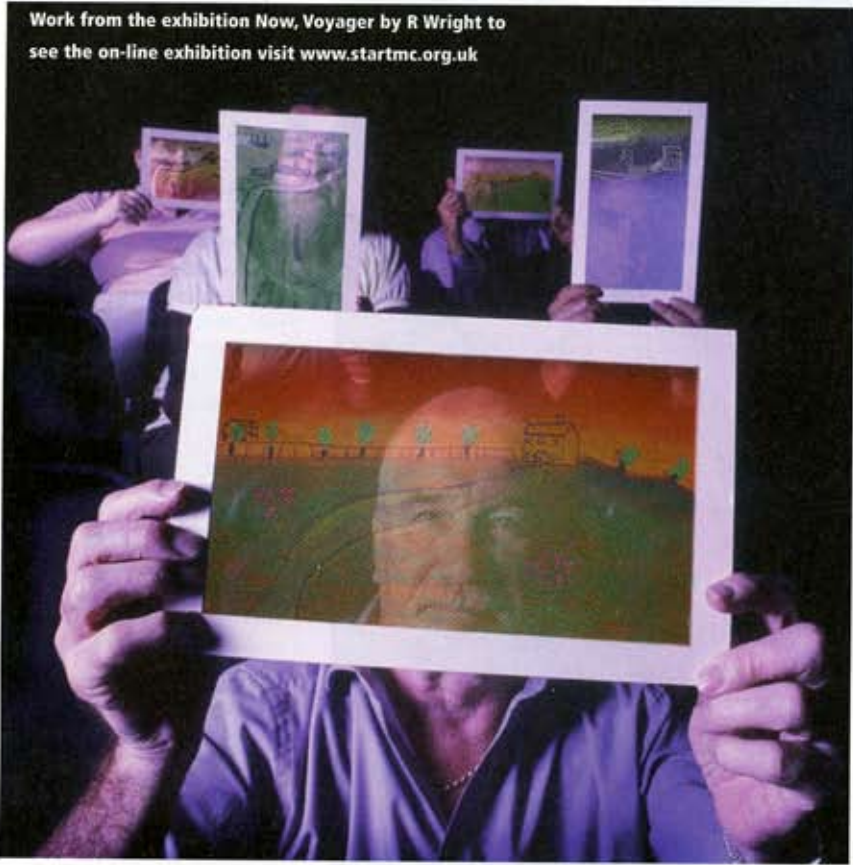


PROJECT REPORT



Work from the exhibition *Now, Voyager* by R Wright to see the on-line exhibition visit www.startmc.org.uk

A PICTURE OF HEALTH

An exhibition of the work of people with mental health needs in Manchester has proved a huge success. Graham Hopkins explores the role of the Start Manchester project in using art as therapy

For Jane Evans* a traumatic childhood had made adult life a struggle. A long series of hospital admissions led to the then 38-year-old being referred to Start Manchester – an art-based mental health project in the North West. Six years on, she has surprised herself: “I thought ‘artwork? me?’ Now I can’t believe the things I’ve achieved.”

Art has long been recognised as an outlet for the emotions of people with severe and long-term mental distress, and as a

help towards recovery. The team, part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust, includes artists, a horticulturist and occupational therapists.

“We use art as a tool to rebuild and reinforce good mental health. We believe that everyone, given the right support, has the potential to succeed,” says lead artist Wendy Teall.

It recently teamed up with Manchester University’s Whitworth Art Gallery to run courses in art appreciation for service

users. “We studied, in depth, one painting – *The Island* – by the Cornish fisherman-turned-painter Alfred Wallis,” says Teall. “We chose Wallis because he turned to painting late in life, for solace after the death of his wife. He was self-taught and his work, because it is naïve, tends to arouse strong emotional responses. We thought both his work and his personal story were good starting points to explore feelings, thoughts and ideas.”

And so it proved. “At first I thought the painting was rubbish,” says student Marcus McNamee.* “But then when I knew about Wallis and had explored the whole art course, I realise that things had changed and I liked the painting. I had changed though, not the painting.”

The courses ran at the gallery and included discussion, art history, art criticism, practical art, and creative writing. This might seem run of the mill stuff but was, according to Teall, unique in three ways.

“First, it brought together mental health, art and curatorial expertise to offer an extraordinary self-development experience to students,” she says.

“Second, the course was specifically structured to improve students’ confidence rapidly and their ability to cope with and manage mental health issues.

“Third, the course culminated in a high-profile art exhibition, full of drawings, paintings, photographs, personal stories of journeys taken throughout the project, and mental health information.”

The project thus gave people something they don’t usually have: a strong public voice to tackle stigmas and educate. Teall continues: “We helped demedicalise experiences of mental health services and gave Start students new choices as to how and where to receive support. We literally moved into the wider world together, and students found the experience to be powerfully inclusive.”

Mike Taylor,* a student, agrees: “I liked working in a place where the public were, rather than an NHS environment. I felt nobody was judging me; I felt accepted as part of the mainstream.”

The six-month exhibition, entitled “*Now, Voyager*” proved to be so successful – with 42,000 visitors – that the gallery requested an extension. One exhibiting student said:

“Seeing the exhibition was one of the proudest moments of my life. I felt more important than the Queen!”

One, possibly less regal, visitor reflected the general acclaim: “This is a heart warming exhibition. Art is the way forward out of the prison of mental illness. More paints, less pills!”

An evaluation revealed that all the students felt empowered to hold and express an opinion. Also 70 per cent felt more socially confident, and now see themselves more as “people” rather than “patients”; while half reported significant gains in anxiety-management.

“Since the project,” says Teall, “eighty per cent of students have made positive life changes including getting a job, volunteer work and enrolling in college courses.”

Art can certainly colour the steps along the road to recovery, and for people such as Jane Evans the work of Start Manchester is putting the finishing touches on building a stronger inner-self: “I have a sense that I am starting to make a new identity for myself, which involves valuing myself and feeling good about myself for the first time in my life.” **CC**

*Not their real names

● To find out more and to see some of the art online visit www.startmc.org.uk

LESSONS LEARNED

- The art course improved the confidence of people by helping them overcome fears connected with public spaces and group situations, to form and express opinions, speak in a group, analyse emotional responses and balance these with intellectual responses, make decisions and manage anxieties.
- Treating “service-users” as people with equal potential to anyone else made expectations, and achievement, across the student-group soar.
- Art is a universal language so is inclusive to diverse cultures.
- Structuring the arts courses to include critical analysis and self-reflection made art a powerful learning experience.
- There was an intense learning curve: “We felt the fear and did it anyway,” says Teall.