



## Breaking the Boundaries

### MOHSEN KEIANY IN LADYWOOD

*'This art project is seeking to engage the Muslim community and to value their traditional art as well as open up new avenues to art making as a means of increasing greater understanding and tolerance ...*

*... I am particularly interested in respecting cultural and religious differences under the golden rule of 'humanity to others' which can be found in any culture.'*

**Mohsen Keiany, Artist in Residence**

#### About Mohsen

Born in Iran, Mohsen has studied, worked and exhibited in the UK, Iran and Turkey. His work is deeply influenced by his Persian background and explores ***'historical, religious and cultural themes, especially the influence of Sufi spirituality and [his] experience in the Iran-Iraq War.'***

Resident in England for over a decade, Mohsen has developed a strong awareness of the barriers to intra-cultural working:

***'Although Muslims have a high level of taking up British citizenship, they still seem to be outsiders in this society. In my personal view ... I believe that unawareness, anxiety and racism rather than facts or personal experiences have formed the negative image of Muslims.'***

To Mohsen, one of the most important elements of his residency was ***'becoming we' ... 'finding common ground for removing the boundaries between us and them.'***

During his residency, Mohsen's created over 60 new works for exhibition in Pakistan and the UK.



## What happened?



This case study focuses on Mohsen's residency at Aston Hall during 2010-2011.

From October to March 2011, he ran workshops for South Asian women from Saathi House which explored the theme of marriage.

A key output of the workshops was the creation of a series of works which will be hung in Aston Hall in a recently refurbished room dedicated to hosting weddings.

Aston Hall is a community museum run by Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery.

## About Ladywood

Ladywood is located to the west of Birmingham and includes part of the city centre. It is the city's 2<sup>nd</sup> smallest constituency in terms of area (2,046 hectares) and 72% of Ladywood is within the 5% most deprived SOAs in the country.

Aston and Nechells wards display the most acute deprivation although the entire population of Ladywood falls within the 40% most deprived areas. The vast majority of the constituency is characterised by 'hard-pressed' and 'limited means' households although there are small pockets of 'urban prosperity' in the city centre. In 2001

- It was home to the highest proportion of BME groups across the city: 40.5% are Asian, 17.3% are Black and 7% are classified as other. 28.75% were of the Muslim faith, compared with 14.3% from Birmingham.
- 27.6% of the population were born outside UK or the EU, compared with 13.42% from Birmingham.
- Over 45% of the population were under the age of 25, the highest proportion of young people in the city.
- The employment rate in Ladywood was the lowest of the four priority constituencies at just 48.2%. The employment rate was lowest for women and ethnic minorities at 39.9% and 43.7% respectively.
- In addition, 43% of Ladywood's working age population had no qualifications, compared with 37.09% from Birmingham



[Socio-economic context based on 2001 Census, and data provided by *Identifying the Barriers to Cultural Participation and the Needs of Residents of Birmingham, a Final Report to the Birmingham Cultural Partnership* by Ecotec, 31st March 2010.]

## About Saathi House

Saathi House is a charitable foundation which supports Asian communities in Birmingham and *'promotes the advancement of education, ...health and the provision of facilities ...with the ultimate aim of enabling individuals to generate sustainable income and stand on their own two feet'*

Charity Commission website, accessed 1 April 2011

Mohsen was introduced to Saathi House by Rosie Barker, Community Development Officer at Aston Hall. Rosie has worked with Saathi House in the past to provide a holiday club and support for ESOL lessons.

Rani, a group leader, who has worked at Saathi House for 13 months, had never participated in a community arts project prior to this. *'It never occurred to us to do it at Saathi House. We are not funded to deliver this. [We] never thought it would bring such good outcomes.'*

## GENERIC SOCIAL OUTCOMES: Stronger & safer communities

### Outcome 1: Supporting cultural diversity and identity

*'Mohsen's delivery was absolutely excellent. Culturally it's difficult for an Asian man to lead a group of Asian women, but Mohsen did it well. He put them at ease.'*

Shazia, Health Promotion Worker, Saathi House

Mohsen identified 5 key boundaries that enclosed the women from Saathi House:

- Religion & Culture
- Gender
- Language
- Geographical / regional
- Age



Respectful of the religious and cultural etiquette limiting interactions between men and Muslim women, Mohsen was introduced to the staff and participants at Saathi House by a woman: Ginnie Wollaston, Birmingham City Council Community Arts Officer.

Whilst this endorsement was important, Mohsen found the boundary of language harder to overcome. The first group, of older Asian women, included many who had been *'in this country for more than 30 years but do not speak English'*.

Although he could speak a few of the community languages, Mohsen needed to use sign language, sketches and two extra interpreters, Bengali and Pakistani, in order to communicate. He found that the situation served to emphasise the women's *'isolation and disengagement with wider society'*:

*'The essence of your work can be easily lost by working with two interpreters... It is not easy to transfer your feeling and build trust with a group of people ... when someone else is in the middle translating your words'*



By inviting the women to his studio in Aston Hall during the coldest month of the year, Mohsen literally took the older participants outside their comfort zone. According to Priah, Manager of Saathi House, *'the older people ...required a different time of year... more direct support and a driver ... They also ...required transport to pick up and take to Aston hall as they all suffered from arthritis.'*

Attendance dwindled and Mohsen had to rethink his approach.

Shazia, a health promotion worker from Saathi House, *'took a firm approach and supported women to become involved, stressing potential outcomes.'*

Mohsen chose to meet this new group of women, aged 20-35 years, at Saathi House: *'The good thing was that there was no language barrier and almost every one could speak English, but I easily realised that [there were] other boundaries such geographic, cultural, gender and religious.'*

Although the women were all Muslim, he found *'it was indeed a multi-cultural group ... from various countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia and Iraq.'*

Mohsen used his own personal experience to help break the ice and encourage the women to talk about the sensitive topic of marriage: *'To [assure] them that I am a Muslim family man, I started with welcoming words in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu and then talk about my family and how and when I got married'*. He also introduced the group to his own children.

Mohsen could not directly ask about the participants own weddings so he encouraged them to draw related artefacts and events until *'gradually most of them got involved in discussion and debate about the marriage ceremony...'*

Participants felt much more comfortable with this approach and made the decision themselves to go to Aston Hall:



*'I came to the Aston Hall studio to be inspired by his paintings and felt comfortable in the studio.'*

*'From the first class at Saathi House I didn't expect I could do it and then pushed myself to come to Aston Hall. I liked coming and agreed to come in studio.'*

feedback from participants

## Outcome 2: Improving group and inter-group dialogue and understanding

<b>No of participants</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>No of individual engagements/repeat visits</b>	<b>166</b>
% of Bengali class members	55%
% of Pakistani class members	32%
% of Kurdish class members	5%
% of Somali class members	5%
% of Arab class members	5%

% of participants aged 20-45 yrs	68%
% of participants aged 45-55 yrs	36%

Relaxing into the new space, Mohsen observed that the women *'have begun to find common ground of interest in the topic as well as the artistic endeavour of drawing and painting.'*



Most importantly, it was her *'first opportunity to meet new people otherwise [she] would be at home without any contact.'*

Another participant said: *'It progresses slowly so we got to know each other but teacher Mohsen helped us.'*

When asked to describe what they did in their spare time, several participants described their isolation:

*'I don't do anything during the week but would love to do this on a regular basis as it helps me to get more organised, get out of the house and meet more people. My head gets overfull looking after children.'*

*'I don't go into the City Centre - too scared to go out in town.'*

*'Swimming I would love to do but I haven't since school. I need someone to come with me.'*

*'At the moment looking for a job. Worked in retail in the city centre in Primark - finished 2007. I want to work again.'*

Mohsen described how the women were so enthusiastic about the workshops that they would arrive half an hour early to chat and remained well after the class ended.

So many paintings were produced that in the end two pieces were created instead of one as planned. A participant described the work as *'A team effort: one person did one piece - like in a jigsaw, each piece fitted together.'*

Asked to describe the best thing about the project, participants said:

*'Loyalty to group'*

*'The company of women and the art itself and the teacher who has helped me discover art for myself.'*

*'I now have the confidence to do it myself.'*

*'Having a great laugh, mixing with new people.'*

*'Meeting people has given me confidence.'*

*Learn a lot about art, drawing and meet new people.'*



## GENERIC LEARNING OUTCOME: Skills

S3. Communication skills – writing, speaking, listening...

S4. Physical skills – running, dancing, manipulation, making...

*'Many arrived saying 'I can't draw'. Mohsen led them through processes step by step, teaching various techniques. They did a small individual work each, and all collaborated on a larger group piece.'*

*'They learned new skills, made new friends, talked to new people, visited a new place. They were proud of their achievement.'*

Rosie Barker, Community Development Officer at Aston Hall

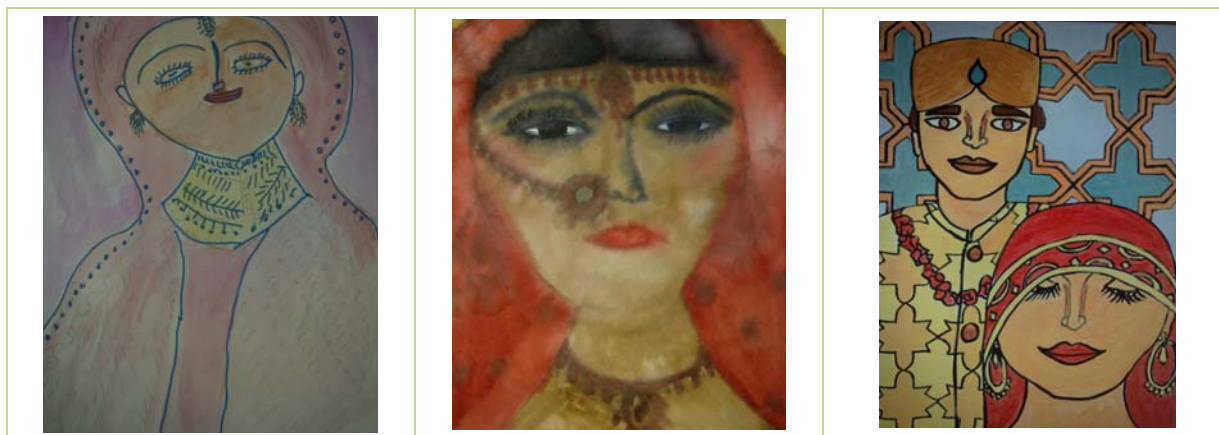
% of participants who have engaged in Visual Arts activity since school	0%
% of participants who have <b>never</b> engaged in Visual Arts activity	25%
% of participants who have visited city centre cultural venues	50%

Mohsen introduced the group to a range of artistic techniques: *I planned different art workshops using various art materials... around the same subject of marriage, including ... watercolour, Islamic patterns, Mendi pattern, sketches and drawing.'*

Participants described what they learned:

*'today's session was really interesting to do, different mosaic patters, light and dark colours are makes the paintings stand out'*

*'Only did mendi before - nothing to do with paints drawings so very exciting.'*



Priah, manager of Saathi House, encouraged the younger women to join the group to develop their communication skills and employability. Although the course was not accredited, participants would gain *'experience of working on a project on their CV. They were encouraged to try out a different course than language course at Saathi House; they were more open to try out something new as a team / group approach to completing a task – so that it would be fun!'*

One participant agreed that the art workshops were *'a good way to learn. My languages are Morpuri and Urdu, but Mohsen found a way to communicate.'*

Rani, group leader, Saathi House said that for her, the high point was *'for me to come out with this art work ... so proud and tell all my friends . It's given me a new skill and I'm definitely proud of what I could do.'*



Rani felt the partnership *'has exceeded expectations. In the beginning, I was apprehensive how [it]... would benefit us and them. [They] won't come out with a qualification but it has helped them in the lives – a brand new thing.'*

## **GENERIC LEARNING OUTCOME: Enjoyment, inspiration & creativity**

### **EIC 5. Exploration, experimentation and making**

***It was a new experience for them and they were taken aback by the results of their work. Without this project they wouldn't have had the opportunity to try these techniques. They really brought out their creative side...'***

Shazia, Health Promotion Worker, Saathi House

Shazia, Health Promotion Worker at Saathi House remarked on the importance of the *'good mental health benefits – women said they found it relaxing and it helped them to unwind and open up.'*

% of participants who rated the activity 'Very Enjoyable'	100%
% of participants attended all sessions offered	100%

The majority of the participants and staff noted how the relaxed atmosphere of the sessions was therapeutic and contributed to their creativity and enjoyment:



***'I found it very interesting, relaxing, enjoyable and also very therapeutic.'***

***'I felt relaxed, and learned how to use watercolours.'***

***'Enjoyed the session – learned new technique of repeating patterns and found out fascinating facts.'***



Rani, group leader, Saathi House observed how the women were inspired by the activity: ***'Ladies have brought pictures in. [A woman who has] never been to any classes has joined. It has empowered them ...Knowing they can do something.***

***They come here independently.'***

## **GENERIC LEARNING OUTCOME: Knowledge & understanding**

### **K&U 2.d. Learning facts or information about myself, my family, my community, the wider world**

***'When I saw their final pieces, I thought "wow, you guys are fierce!"***

Shazia, Health Promotion Worker at Saathi House

This experience of creative activity gave participants new insight into their own lives:

***'I don't do anything during the week but would love to do this on a regular basis as it helps me to get more organised, get out of the house and meet more people.'***

*'This is something for myself so that I can become more in touch with myself I was becoming more like a zombie.'*

*'Great social aspect gave me an adrenalin rush because the art work was so enjoyable.'*

*'Course has given me confidence - opened a door - opened an insight and encourage me.'*

*'I will like to do other courses being creative because I got in touch with myself so I can be creative.'*

Staff at Saathi House were also impressed by the effect the residency had on the participants. The manager of Saathi House said: *'It was an eye-opener to me to see the benefits to the group going through the residency and how much they enjoyed it.'*



### **GENERIC LEARNING OUTCOME: Activity, behaviour, progression**

#### **ABP 4. A change in the way that people manage their lives including work, study, family and community contexts**

*'I have been taking part in this art project for more than ten weeks. I've learned a lot in this time period. It was really good to be a part of this project. It'll be good to start some other projects in future for women. It made me more confident. I'll love to be a part of project in future as well.'*

*Thank you letter from a participant, 9 March 2011*

Participants' engagement did not stop with the last workshop: Mohsen organised a family lunch and exhibition so that the women could bring their families to Aston Hall to see the work they had done.

% of participants who wanted to continue engaging in Visual Arts	100%
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Rosie Barker promised that *'The ladies will be invited back when the works are hung. They're excited by the fact that other visitors will see it.'*

Priah noted that *'Two people from the group have gone out and bought painting equipment and kept it up as a hobby as a result of this experience which is a great legacy for the project'.*

All participants were keen to continue:

*'I will pass it on to my son.'*

*'I would take up another art class at Saathi House.'*

*'I would like to continue to develop my skills in colours / painting.'*


*'It's opened up a whole new world for me and I want to continue'*

*'It has given me confidence to try out another artistic activity - building confidence.'*

Staff from Saathi House were delighted at the success of their first engagement with a community arts project: *'We'll grasp more arts opportunities in the future; this was our first taste of it. This is a foot through the door for Saathi House for future involvement in arts projects.'*



## RESIDENCY FACTS & FIGURES

<b>Artist in Residence</b>	Mohsen Keiany	
<b>Art form</b>	Visual Arts	
<b>Constituency</b>	Ladywood	
<b>Length of residency</b>	2 years	
<b>Based in</b>	Aston Hall (2010/11) Nechells Green Community Centre (2009/10)	
<b>Residency cost</b>		
<b>No of participants</b>	23	
<b>No of engagements</b>	166	
<b>No of sessions</b>	12	
<b>Community partners 2010/11</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saathi House</li> <li>• Aston Hall</li> </ul>	