

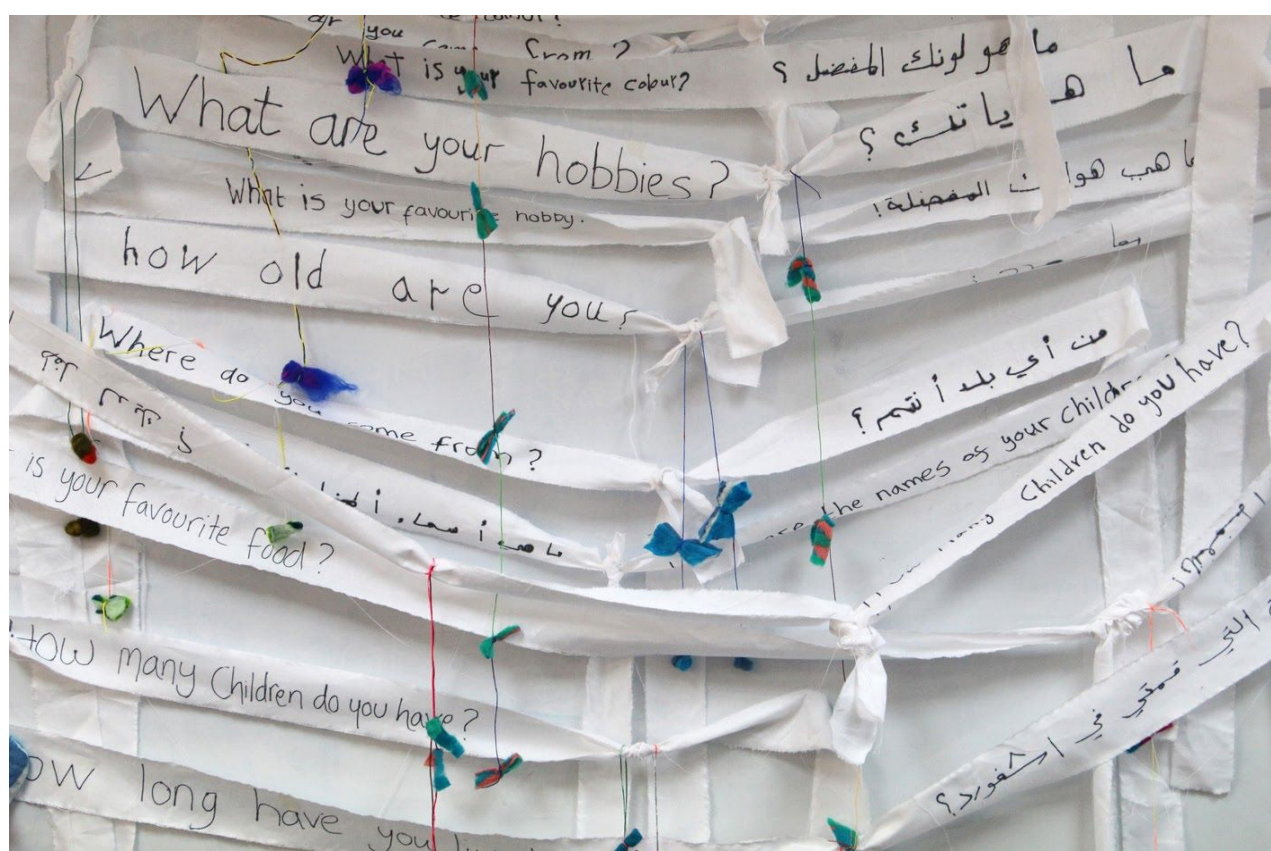
Home Commission by Anna Ray, 2018

People United, Diocese of Canterbury, Ashford Borough Council

Home Blog 1: Discovering 'Home' with Syrian mothers

In my research for the 'Home' commission I have considered the wealth of making and artistry in Syria. Queen Elizabeth II was gifted 30 yards of Nassan Brothers' silk brocade from the Syrian government for her wedding gown. Indigenous crafts can also be found in the humblest of dwellings; in the painted, patterned, woven bamboo screens and the quirky childrens' embroidery of the nomadic Bedouin tribes.

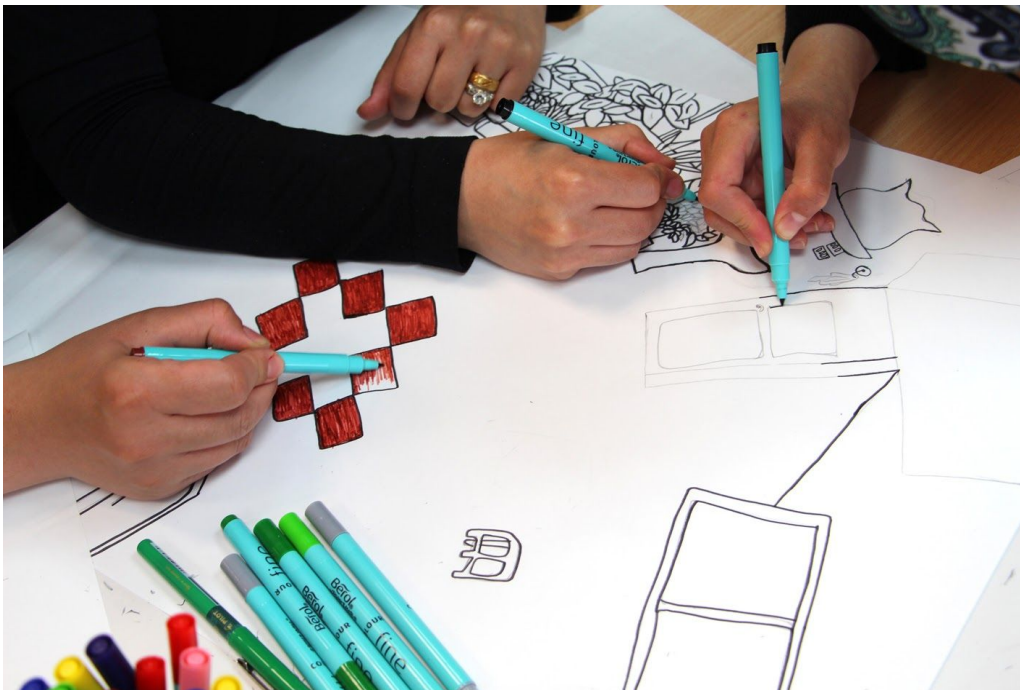
As an artist I understand what a pleasure it is to make. I want to create a relaxed atmosphere in the 'Home' workshops, to engender a sense of freedom and play. My aim is to offer a space where the women can find new ways to express themselves, while at the same time developing new friendships. In the first session we worked collaboratively using torn fabric ribbons, handwriting, hand painted threads and felt-making - asking each-other questions in English and Arabic as a way to introduce ourselves.



As a point of departure in the next session, I referred the group to the common language of textiles; the use of block printing and stencils as methods of imprinting motifs onto cloth, which is a practice seen across the world. Once the fabric has been marked up, shapes and patterns can be filled with stitch, appliqué, coloured inks or beading. I showed the group examples of the blue tissue paper transfers used in UK households in the last century for domestic hand embroidery. I related this to the block printing of cloth in Damascus in the production of Syria's chain-stitch Aghabani textiles. The stamped cloth would traditionally be sent outside the capital to Douma or Harasta to be sewn, on machine, by local women in their homes.



With these ideas and processes in mind, the group began creating motifs and drawings inspired by 'home' and the feeling of being at home somewhere. What are the colours and scents that come to mind when we think of home? We spoke about our hands, how much we use them in the maintenance of our homes and home lives, how much strength we need as mothers. We touched on the importance of music and songs. A Syrian mother spoke about the impossibility of recreating the smell of Syria, and then went on to draw her terrace back home.



My creative process involves absorbing what is happening in the sessions, what we speak of in our conversations, the feelings and atmospheres that are conjured. In my studio, between each workshop, I have created dozens of hand made stamps inspired by the participants' artwork, objects and ideas; flowers, leaves, musical notes, ladders, crosses, stars, zig-zags, hearts, tea cups, flames, waves, letters. This vocabulary of marks and symbols will continually expand and form the basis of our work over the coming months. It is an open, experimental process that I hope will provide the women with time to reflect and a sense of joy and community.

Home Blog 2: Exploring Stamps and Colour at Create Festival



As part of the Create Platform Festival in Ashford, we exhibited work in progress and offered free art workshops for members of the public in a vacant shop space. Over three days, passers by were invited to try out some of the stamp and painting techniques that we have been experimenting with in the 'Home' project. It was lovely for the participants to bring along their families and friends to see what we have been doing; to meet, chat and join in the making.



I installed a series of large-scale textiles based on different readings of the theme 'Home', all displayed on a washing line. Among the prints were hung three scaled-up drawings. The drawings were originally made by participants and I had re-created them on cloth, by hand in my studio - Hanin's tiled terrace in Syria, Ellie's Gumamela (Hibiscus) flower, common in the Philippines and Sally's family tree - all images that warm the heart.



The striking 'Two Trees' panel was central to the installation. This large repeat print was constructed by the whole group. It is closely based on artwork by two of the Syrian women, who had met for the first time during one of the workshops. One woman instinctively began to mimic the artwork that the other had made by using similar stamps and colours, in slightly different tones and arrangements. As the women got acquainted, they continued to make. I watched as they adopted each other's ideas, adding yellow, jewel-like dots and birds to both pictures. For me this artwork symbolises the project, as it is a wonderful example of making, while making friends.



Over the weekend we had dozens of visitors to the exhibition, of all ages and backgrounds. Some were curious to hear more about the project in general, while others were more hands on, keen to work with the paint and the stamps. People used the English alphabet stamps and the Arabic letters to write their names and to create abstract shapes and patterns. On Saturday, Anne Forbes from Ashford Council spent the day with us. She spoke in depth with visitors about the council's ground-breaking work with refugees in the area. Anne was awarded the British Empire Medal for her commitment to the resettlement of refugees earlier in the year.

Home Blog 3: The Home Within Ourselves

Everything about the 'Home' project has surprised and inspired me. We have invited the women to make artwork from their own ideas and tell stories about themselves. As we near the close of this project, with just three more workshop sessions to go, I will encourage the group to look back at what we have achieved, to reflect on this experience and how it makes us feel about our community and our sense of being at home. Each week we have new participants join us; we are a community that is growing and evolving. Recently there have been tearful farewells as two of the Syrian women have relocated away from Ashford with their families. But the good news is that we can all still keep in touch on WhatsApp.



Each workshop has been based on a different theme relating to home: 'The Colours of Home', 'Rituals and Celebrations', 'People and Places', 'The Home Within Ourselves', 'Toys and Games', 'Songs, Poems and Sayings'. We have explored different techniques: painting, printing, stamp-making, drawing, collage, felt- making, embroidery and weaving. Some of the participants have taken the 'Home' project home with them and have made artwork in their own time.



In April, early on in the project, I began a hand embroidery of Ruba's pencil drawing of her home town in Syria, unbeknown to her. Long term resident Sally-Ann then offered to finish sewing the scene; she ably and seamlessly replicated my punctuated stitches. Weeks later, when I introduced the two women for the first time, I was able to show Ruba the embroidery that Sally-Ann and I had made for her and she was absolutely delighted. Inspired by Ruba's reaction, I then invited the group to try hand-embroidery. Anyone keen was given a small piece of white cotton fabric, a wooden embroidery hoop, a needle and a box of embroidery silks to choose colours from.



I traced a selection of the participants' drawings from previous workshops onto pieces of fabric in blue pen. Some of the women adopted an image that they related to or chose their own work, while others simply took the drawing that they felt they could manage to sew. Valerie stitched Mayhde's image of home in Syria, Melissa stitched Charlotte's tree, bunting and table, Ellie stitched a memory of her grandparent's home by the sea in the Philippines.



'It was where my grandparents lived in one of the many islands in the Philippines. We used to spend our summer holidays there, with my siblings and cousins. There was no electricity then and we'd swim in the river during the day and play traditional games under the stars at night'. Ellie



Deborah stitched over houses that she generated in stamped paint, adding her daughters name and key words relating to her perception of home. This embroidery work is ongoing, it has been thrilling and moving to be presented with these beautifully stitched textiles.

Home Blog 4 : Making a Community

At the beginning of the 'Home' project I purchased fifty metres of white cotton fabric to use in the workshops. Over the course of seven months this cloth has been torn up, written on, painted, stamped, drawn on, projected over, folded, hung, draped, layered, tied, punctured, stitched, appliquéd and gathered. We have expressed our feelings, explored our memories and imaginations, and made connections with each-other through this material.



This project has created a community, a sense of home for all involved. The women, both long term residents and Syrian mothers now bump into each-other in town and chat, while their children play happily together. Memories of the shared experiences and achievements of the group will last and will, I hope, inspire all of the women to reach out to others in the community in the future, even if they are unfamiliar.



I have seen the strength and resilience of the women on this project. I acknowledge the challenges that we face as women and mothers, in the creation and perpetual reinvention of home, a process that is not only for ourselves but also for those around us. Home is not just a place, it is a part of who we are, something that we strive to protect, and learn to adapt in myriad ways.

At times I have felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of representing so many voices in the creation of this commission. My hope was to reflect all who have participated within the final artwork. In the process of making my work, I try not to reach for an answer too soon, to take risks, however it is important for me that the work is resolved and refined at the conclusion of the making process. I am always looking for something new, and the only way to achieve this is to play and experiment, right up to the last moment.



The artwork central to the final installation, 'Gather', is soft, delicate and sentimental, which corresponds to my experience of and feelings about the group. I selected, edited and arranged the participants' imagery in thirty three digitally repeated patterns. Once printed onto silk, linen and cotton, I incorporated these unique fabrics into an appliqué panel, inspired by traditional Bedouin textiles. In 'Gather', each ribbon of pattern can be gathered or flattened by manipulating the threads that hang from the bottom edge of the textile, dynamically shrinking the cloth, creating volume and form.



In the film 'Home', the women present their work to us, laying each cloth in turn over a table. The film begins with a traditional Syrian Aghabani tablecloth being laid over a hand embroidered tablecloth made by my grandmother. The cloths transform as they are folded and unfolded, opened up and closed. In turn, each surface reveals and conceals the details of our stories and experiences. The work is anecdotal in its arrangement of patterns, symbols and marks. Each piece of material reminding us of a particular session or individual; lasting, intimate expressions of our feelings about Home.



Sixty people were involved in the Home project. Each participant, partner, and volunteer has been given an edition of prints as a memento of this special commission.