

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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'UK's biggest art exhibition' gets underway—and they want your work, too
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It may be the butt of many off-colour jokes but my much-maligned home county of Essex has proved to be a crucible for creativity during this pandemic. Last summer, the local hero and alternative Essex Girl Grayson Perry got the homebound nation finding its artistic mojo with his hugely successful Channel 4 television series Grayson's Art Club, which has a second series airing next month.

Then, just days into the first lockdown, Colchester's Firstsite arts centre also blazed the home-art trail in getting more than 40 top artists—including Antony Gormley, Hurvin Anderson, Cornelia Parker, Sarah Lucas, Mark Wallinger, Eddie Peake, Harold Offeh—to contribute to its free home activity packs, which have had more than 50,000 downloads from across the world. The end result will be a “magical patchwork of national creativity”, organisers say.

Now, nearly a month into national lockdown no. 2, Firstsite is celebrating its 10th anniversary with The Great Big Art Exhibition, another ambitious scheme to get us all making more art behind closed doors. Last lockdown it was rainbows, now the plan is for everyone across the UK to put variously themed works of art up in their front windows to create “the nation's largest exhibition”. This outpouring of artistic endeavour launches on 28 January and runs through until the end of April, culminating with what the organisers describe as a “magical patchwork of national creativity” that will be revealed in the summer.

People are encouraged to paint, sculpt, build or create any form of work for public display on balconies, front doors, window sills, or wherever it can be seen. Works can be made individually or by groups or communities—streets, churches, football teams, shopping centres – and every two weeks a leading artist will select a different theme for the UK's home bound artists to explore.



The Great Big Art Exhibition kicks off with Antony Gormley's choice of Animals with Sonia Boyce selecting the theme of Portraits for a fortnight later. Other artists supporting the project include Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, Anish Kapoor, Tai Shani, Jeremy Deller, David Shrigley and Ai Weiwei. Also supporting is Plus Tate, which includes a network of museums and galleries across the UK and to further assist the creative flow, Firstsite will be making key works from British collections available for download so the public can use them as a template, for colouring in or just as inspiration.

Image: David Shrigley has contributed to the project's activity packs © David Shrigley

The directors of the National Gallery, Tate, British Museum, National Portrait Gallery, V&A, National Museums Liverpool, Royal Academy of Arts, the Ashmolean, The Courtauld and other museums and galleries have also pitched in by selecting works which they think will be inspiring. The National Gallery director Gabriele Finaldi has chosen Claude Monet's The Water Lily Pond and the British Museum director Hartwig Fischer's selection is A Look at the Bright Side (1970), a vivid layered abstract by the veteran Turkish artist Burhan Doğançay.

All in all, a more positive start to what has hitherto been an utterly grim new year. “The doors to our collections and galleries might be shut, but art and expression will be unleashed as never before across the UK” declares the Firstsite director Sally Shaw. “Our national flair will not be suppressed.” The Only Way is Essex, indeed.