



**bOlder was a talent development programme for artists aged over 50 offering a programme of individual and collective development. Participants also had the opportunity to be part of an intergenerational project that culminated in the ‘Obstructions’ exhibition at Castlefield Gallery.**

‘Having spent many years putting family matters and other people first I feel more able now to put my career as an artist first... I feel a real connection with Castlefield Gallery and am so grateful that you’ve offered such an amazing opportunity to an old git like me!!’

**Artist participant**

## The challenge

**Castlefield Gallery undertook a needs analysis which included a review of current provision, consultation with others in the sector and research<sup>1</sup>. The analysis also took lessons learnt from arts commissioning programmes (2018-20) which focused on co-production with GM over-50s residents and professionally active artists. One such programme worked with Greater Manchester over 50’s residents who were looking to access professional opportunities, for example, ex-professional musicians from the 70’s and 80’s wanting to play in bands again.**

The process identified a lack of professional development opportunities for older artists and creatives nationally, and specifically in Greater Manchester. This is in contrast to the fact that many artists are over 50 and have often taken a career break due to caring or other responsibilities or have trained as artists later in life as mature students.

Much current local provision for older people within Greater Manchester, for example Manchester’s Age Friendly network, is focused upon audiences, volunteering and taking part in opportunities.

The Whitworth Art Gallery 2019/20 ‘Early Career Artist Commissioning Programme’ had focused on the production of new artwork by older artists in Manchester and in sharing this work with the public. However, there were no existing individual and personalised approaches to developing older artists’ knowledge, skills, experience, networks, careers and personal development without the pressures of final production and presentation outcomes.

‘Pre-bOlder most of my cultural participation was in London, but this year, through the programme, it has been strongly focused on Greater Manchester.’

**Artist participant**



This need for older artist talent development dovetailed with Castlefield Gallery’s objectives to broaden the age ranges of participants, most particularly those over 50.

Footnote<sup>1</sup>: de Mynn, R (2016) Artist Development at Castlefield Gallery: Policy Change through the Counterpublic? Manchester School of Art (MSoA) and Castlefield Gallery.

Slater, A. (2014) Artists in Greater Manchester. MIRIAD, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and Castlefield Gallery.

Other research and data published was also considered, for example from the Centre for Ageing Better, the Office for National Statistics and sector-specific studies by Arts Council England and research agency TBR.

## Our approach

**bOlder was the first scheme in the UK to specifically focus on providing visual arts and visual culture-related skills and career training for the over 50’s. The programme had four aims:**

1. Promote creativity in later life
2. Support vibrant and diverse cultural activity in Greater Manchester
3. Support the creation of high quality contemporary art in Greater Manchester
4. Foster greater cultural participation in Greater Manchester.

The project provided a short and intense course of professional development for artists aged over 50. There were opportunities for both individual and collective development. Participants benefitted from access to a bursary as well as:

- Seven one-to-one sessions with senior gallery staff including the Director and Curator
- Four coaching sessions from a specialist coach
- Five CPD workshops covering Peer Support, Situating Yourself in the Artworlds, Writing Statements and Applications, Instagram for Artists, Project Management
- Research trips to arts organisations in Liverpool and Birmingham (virtual visit).

To support artists during the Covid-19 pandemic, bOlder ran eight additional online check-in sessions.

Artists were also invited to take part in Castlefield Gallery’s Obstructions exhibition alongside artists from their graduate programmes. At a time when older people were being vilified for their vulnerability to Covid-19 and its impact on the young, this intergenerational project asked younger and older artists to work together.

Artists were asked to re-make an existing piece of artwork with one condition: they had to accept a bespoke ‘Obstruction’ given to them by another artist in the exhibition. The obstruction was presented in the form of a short instruction on how the piece should be produced, the media it should use, its meaning or its presentation. The concept was inspired by a long history of artists using self-imposed restrictions to aid creative or free thinking. In order for the artists to give meaningful and appropriate ‘obstructions’ to each other, they had to get to know each other and their respective work.

Prior to the main Obstructions exhibition, the bOlder artists self-organised an exhibition on Instagram called Ten Obstructions. This built their confidence, gelled them as a group, and built valuable skills and experience.

The online and physical exhibitions opened up a space for collaboration and reflection between artists from different generations as well as creating a strong network of older artists.

Alongside the professional development programme, Great Place GM worked with Castlefield Gallery to sponsor and promote a prize for older artists, as part of the Manchester Open 2020, hosted at arts centre, HOME. 70 artist submissions were received and shortlisted artworks were seen by over 33,000 people as part of the Open exhibition. The prize, a bespoke professional development programme, was awarded to Jai Chuhan, an expressionistic painter.

**66 artworks produced as part of bOlder**

**Over 13,000 gallery and online visitors to the Obstructions exhibition**

‘What a brilliant group to be a part of. Everyone pulls their weight in their own way, we are all really different from each other, [all] are really good artists, we have a laugh, we support each other, we share information, we appreciate each other’s work.’

**Artist participant**

## What we achieved

**The creation of high quality contemporary art, and vibrant and diverse cultural activity in Greater Manchester has been supported through the talent development sessions, artists' individual activity and the creation of online and physical exhibitions.**

Eight out of the ten artists said that the programme had exceeded their expectations and the quality of the programme was formally recognised when Sheffield University's Creative Lives awarded bOlder a kitemark for good practice.

bOlder has:

**Promoted creativity in later life** – The participating artists said that they felt renewed and invigorated at a time when Covid-19 was taking a heavy toll on them. Eight out of the ten said that participating in the programme had increased the amount of creative work that they produced and cited multiple benefits of participation, from increased confidence to the development of transferrable skills.

**Supported vibrant and diverse cultural activity in Greater Manchester** – The bOlder programme increased the focus on older artists as practitioners, focused Castlefield Gallery's thinking on how best to serve older people, and highlighted how much cultural organisations have to offer to older artists. bOlder has helped build an understanding of the common barriers that both young and older people face in their artistic endeavour: whether creative practitioners are 21 and leaving university or 70 and starting a new area of practice. From writing applications to finding funding or identifying opportunities, many barriers are similar.

**Supported the creation of high quality contemporary art in Greater Manchester** – bOlder supported artists to create new artworks. The talent development programme has hugely increased artists' confidence and this, coupled with the new knowledge they are armed with, access to a peer support group and the success they have already achieved, will help to fuel their creative practice into the future.

**Fostered greater cultural participation in Greater Manchester** – bOlder brought high quality artworks to a wide range of participants from across Greater Manchester and beyond. All participating artists said that bOlder had increased their cultural participation within Greater Manchester and that the skills they gained on the programme would support a career in the cultural sector.

Castlefield Gallery has married its learning from bOlder with experiences of Together We Move<sup>1</sup>, and learning from collaboration on Sheffield University's Creative Lives programme. This has informed the development of two strong offers for older people:

1. A professional development offer for older creative practitioners
2. More effective engagement with older participants and audiences.

bOlder has bought profile to the gallery's work with older people and this has resulted in the organisation being asked to produce case studies and engage in research into the lives of older creatives. These new opportunities are as a result of a recognition of the distinctiveness and innovative nature of Castlefield Gallery's approach.

Footnote 1: See [www.castlefieldgallery.co.uk/news/eihiy-twrm/](http://www.castlefieldgallery.co.uk/news/eihiy-twrm/) for further details



### 10 older artists benefitted from talent development

'I no longer feel I have to make apologies for taking a break in my practice...It was good to meet others who had come through other routes or similar, there was no one way.'

**Artist participant**

'Being challenged in this way and rising to the challenge has moved my practice to another level.'

**Artist participant**

## What we learned

**bOlder was a ground-breaking project and was a learning journey for all involved. Learning points included:**

**Kick-starting peer support** – One of the most rewarding aspects has been the level of exchange and support between the individuals involved. Future programmes should build in more time and resources to engender exchange of this kind. Running the programme reinforced the notion that peer support is incredibly important for creative practitioners, and kickstarting the peer support group was one of the most successful aspects of the programme. The field trip to Liverpool was very important in helping the group bond, and for future projects such opportunities should be offered as early as possible in the programme.

**The value of access to professionals** – One-to-one sessions with the gallery curator and artist coach were also found to be exceptionally useful. Working with a gallery and the opportunity to exhibit work was highly valued by participating artists.

**Developing new capabilities** – Castlefield Gallery created an Obstructions mini-website using 360 VR capture for the exhibition, so that people could visit even during lockdown. This was a useful experience for Castlefield. It enabled new and existing audiences to access the gallery's offer, when they otherwise would not have been able to do so. This included international audiences. Castlefield Gallery plans to build on this experience. The mini-site and VR tour were also useful tools for supporting engagement by art students, older audiences and disabled audiences, including the visually impaired.

One artist commented that the virtual exhibition meant she could show her work to international contacts in a way that she wasn't normally able to do.

**Identity** – This is a very sensitive area in which to operate. Older people do not want to be identified first and foremost as older people. We all have multiple and intersecting identities, and it is important to avoid reinforcing stereotypes, for example, by using poorly selected music to accompany visuals. Key to our approach was understanding participants as creative practitioners first and foremost, rather than as "older people" who happened to be artists.

Castlefield Gallery plan to test this learning further in their future programming and will build in more opportunities for inter and multigenerational connection, including through their work with graduate programmes at MMU and the University of Salford.

'I can't thank the Castlefield team enough for selecting me to be part of this programme and all the support they've given me. Also GMCA for supporting this life-changing initiative.'

**Artist participant**



'Working with the bOlder artists has been an absolute joy. They are a fantastic group and committed fully to the programme, to their work and to each other.'

**Project Co-ordinator**

'...this project balanced putting people at the centre of the activity without instrumentalising art. Be brave and trust people.'

**Gallery Curator**



## Great Place GM

Great Place GM was a 3 year action research programme led by Greater Manchester Combined Authority and part of the national Great Place scheme funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England.

Its aim was to demonstrate the powerful role of culture and its contribution to place-based issues. This was achieved through the development of imaginative partnerships and innovative ways of working across geographical and thematic boundaries including health and wellbeing, ageing well, place shaping and diversity and inclusion.

**Image credits:**

Cover photo – ‘...a global seam of plastic...’ (2020) by Jane Fairhurst; photo by Jules Lister

Page 2: Jai Chuhan Manchester Open winner 2020 receiving her prize

Page 4 Manchester Open Awards ceremony 2020

Page 5 – Paddy O'Donnell installing work at Castlefield Gallery New Art Spaces Wigan for the exhibition From the Ground Up; photo by Sabrina Fuller

Back cover: Sarah Feinmann and Christopher Rainham visiting Obstructions at Castlefield Gallery; photo by Sabrina Fuller

## GM Culture: Bringing life to GM and GM to life