

Susan Merrick

TESTIMONIALS (from Statements in Semaphore 2017)

Feedback from Artists

'Being part of the Statements in Semaphore project was a great honour and definitely most pivotal for the development of my own practice. Running the workshops with Susan allowed me to explore the production of various aspects of my art practice/methods whilst providing a supportive environment in which to facilitate these. Being involved in the project helped me to identify important references that are relevant to my practice and research, namely Women's rights and the nature of the domestic space.' **Amy Dignam, Workshop Artist**

'I was one of the artists lucky enough to be working with Susan on her Statements in Semaphore project. I am a spoken word poet and a long-time women's liberation activist. I've been committed to working with women in prison for the past eight years and although I always work with a feminist consciousness, I have never before been encouraged to work so openly with a feminist agenda. What's also new for me is the artistic collaboration with a woman visual artist I admire. It's wonderful to have someone to be excited with, to be moved with, to strategise with. As a freelancer, and because of the need for complete confidentiality, my prison work is often a well-kept secret, shared only between me and the women who come to my workshops. I appreciate the fact that women in HMP xxxxxxxx can go public with their words and images and have them placed at the centre of the FiLiA conference.' **Leah Thorn, Workshop Artist**

'My arts practice is predominantly textile based and I see it as a comforting, accessible and familiar medium to broach and open up subjects to an audience. There is a cultural, physical and visceral dialogue with the viewer and my themes of the human body are often concerned with feminist views of how women are treated and seen within the world. I believe this is where both myself and Susan became excited about working together.

The participants communicated often how they need more art in prison and I was really touched with the feedback given, one in particular stating she almost forgot she was in prison. Let's not forget that these aren't hardened criminals, they are just everyday women.

I am due to complete my final workshop next week and although I won't miss that commute, I shall certainly miss the experience of meeting such lovely women with fascinating stories they share through the art that helps them do this.' **Rebecca Harris, Workshop Artist**

" Earlier this year I worked with a small group of women and their children who had been subjected to domestic violence so extreme that they were living together in a secret refuge. The workshop was part of a series organised by Susan Merrick, the artist in residence for FiLiA, and we were exploring creativity through playing with materials – paint, ink, tissue paper and glue. Susan's interest is in the conversations that come forth in these gentle, arty sessions, and I am interested in how creativity finds its way out in the darkest of times.

Each session built on the trust gained from the previous one, and the women were encouraged to simply play. A loose structure enabled us to make up our own rules and see where the journey took us. In a surprisingly short space of time, the pieces created by these amazing women was exciting, experimental and sometimes profound. They surprised themselves over and over again. Admiring each other's work and taking compliments with grace. Creative energies that had become dormant were beginning to come back to life again.

Susan's energy, spirit and boundless love prevailed throughout all of the sessions, enabling the participants to feel part of something real and exciting. I was honoured to be part of the program and took away much more than I gave.' **Cate Field, Workshop Artist**

Feedback from Organisations

'We were delighted with the series of workshops organised and facilitated by Susan in HMP xxxxxx. Women in prison are highly vulnerable with complex needs, past history of trauma, mental ill health and high levels of self harm. I felt all the artists were mindful of this and created a safe, welcoming, calming and therapeutic-type environment for each session. The programme for each session was excellent a perfect mix of discussion, fast paced creative exercises, being inspired by the artists' professional work and developing each participants' own skills and work. Rebecca, Leah and Susan were all able to bring creativity out of everyone and created an environment for a prolific amount of poetry and art to be produced. They were also very well liked by the participants and quickly built up trust, which is not easy for the women we support. All the artists adapted well to the particular regimes and rules of the prison which always add layers of complexity to any activity. Both the art and poetry sessions had an emphasis on collaborative working, creating pieces as a group, not being precious or territorial over your work and learning the art of letting go. I thought this aspect was excellent and the women attending the group responded really well and it created a great and positive energy. We were delighted with the creative output from the groups which really showcased the talent and creativity of the women we at WIP support. Women in prison and several women attending these workshops have rock bottom self esteem, confidence and self belief so it was so great to see this grow throughout the sessions and by being able to professionally exhibit and publish pieces from the project. There were also several creative warm up exercises which set up each session with the right tone which I am now using in my group work at WIP which is improving these sessions. In the prison system and in particular HMP xxxxxxxx there are very limited opportunities for creative expression, art and learning from professional artists so we are very grateful to Susan for enabling us to offer this project which we know has had a positive impact on the women attending, participants seemed to learn new skills (as did !!) and most importantly had some fun, taking them away from prison life for a few hours.'

Claire Cain
Policy & Campaigns Manager
Women in Prison

'Susan is magical. She makes magic happen.

Susan came to us and suggested being our artist in residence. It was an honour to be asked and we said yes immediately, and based upon the success of her work it is something we would love to do again.

Susan created a project that engaged women who have had many difficult experiences of life within patriarchy. She brought in other artists and together they held workshops which literally transformed women's lives. Her work, when displayed at the FiLiA conference generated vast amounts of interest.

Susan is someone who makes things happen. As well as being a great artist, she cares. Her work makes us think ... what more could we be doing? How can we do better?

Susan is an artist that makes a difference.

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Lisa-Marie Taylor,
Chair, FiLiA
www.filia.org.uk

‘Thank you so much for doing the art workshops with our service users they all found it to be fun and interesting, this then allowed them to forget for a little while the troubles or stresses that they have, I know they looked forward to your workshops and have been really proud of the art work they created as some of it is hanging on the walls here at refuge, they are embarking on their own art canvas for the lounge as you have inspired them to continue to be creative, myself and my colleagues have also noticed how much it lifted the service users spirits with this to look forward to, I would really love for you to do some more art workshops with our services users, Thank you once again for all your hard work and Good Luck in the future. ‘

FM

Domestic Violence and Abuse Worker

DV Hampshire

The YOU Trust