

## Windows into Ourselves 4<sup>th</sup> July

ASN Workshop at the Courtauld Gallery led by Tomo Williams and John Harley:

### A personal response

This was a workshop to look at beautiful works of art which have the power to move people and for us to find an individual response, thus finding out more about our own inner space.

We started with a round of names and a spontaneous movement as a sort of signature to bring each of us into the circle. There were about 13 of us, and I think half the group were British and half Japanese; 3 men and 10 women. We were invited to share our hopes for the day with one word each, and to put something we wanted to let go of to be contained in a green and gold jester's bag until the end of the session (or longer!) We ate lunch together in the sunny courtyard and some of us played in the fountains alongside laughing children of all ages (including us)..

Then we went to the top gallery and gathered in front of a Kandinsky painting. We were asked to look at it in silence for a few minutes together and then to sit with eyes closed and to respond to the painting by holding and shaping a lump of dough about the size of an orange. This gave us the opportunity for a kinetic-sensate response rather than an art critic-intellectual one.

I was surprised to see how my shape looked when I opened my eyes – I knew how it felt in my hands but not how it looked. I was also interested to notice that I hadn't liked the painting when I first looked at it (I heard my judging mind say "I don't like Kandinsky") but at the end I was in a warmer kind of relationship to it, connecting rather than judging.

My issue I had put in the bag was time pressure, but as we were given only 45 minutes for the next activity, I felt like the time pressure had escaped from the bag and rejoined me! Performance anxiety? But then I decided that either a work of art would grab me as I hurried past it and then I would draw some fast response to it or else nothing would happen and I would just be disappointed, and that was the worst that was going to happen so I stopped worrying and started moving.

First a Cezanne caught my attention – beautiful diagonal shades of green in a wood. Then babies (Madonna and child figures). Melvyn and I have just become grandparents for the second time so babies were definitely my thing! I looked for a Mary and Jesus that didn't look wooden or po-faced or pious - as I think they so often do - and I found a little painting where the baby looked alive and beautiful and the mother held her with tenderness. But I felt drawn to do a whistle stop tour of the whole place – to give everything a chance to grab me. Downstairs in the final room I found this exquisite little diptych of the annunciation. It grabbed me and I felt something in my chest move – maybe my heart leaped. Interestingly, I then went upstairs to see what came as my response to the mother and child but found I was drawing not that, but a response to the annunciation.

Then it was time to go round sharing with our little groups (the whole group was split into 2 smaller groups for this purpose.) In my group each of us spoke about which paintings/sculptures had moved us and then we each chose to show our own drawn response. The rest of the group then also had the chance to join in. For me this activity felt very alive, and sometimes shaded into the mystical as well.

As my group moved down through the galleries to the last art work chosen, we were surprised to find the other group already standing in front of this picture. I marvelled at this, a lovely bit of synchronicity. A woman in the other group, not familiar with the Christian tradition, had chosen the same picture as me because of the feelings it

evoked in her. Both groups had also chosen a blue butterfly. Someone had chosen the ornate gratings which covered the ventilator openings. And I know I had nearly chosen the water in the fountains in the courtyard as it played and changed shape and caught the light.

Tomo and John facilitated our workshop with sensitivity and respect, so that trust quickly built up in the group. Altogether this was a lovely, playful and sometimes profound experience. Thank you.both for this treat.

Maggie Freake