

Strange Times: Pandemic Art Exhibition at Summerhall

A key aspect of art is the creative articulation of deep seated fears and trauma.

The lockdowns prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic were a period of national trauma. A 'pop-up' exhibition, [Strange Times](#), at Summerhall focuses on how 17 different artists responded to the various discombobulating aspects of lockdown. The event coincides with the fifth anniversary of the first Covid lockdown, which began on 23 March 2020. Is it *really* 5 years?!



Artistic responses

The exhibition features evocative photographs, landscape paintings, videos, and collages all trying to express their feelings during and after the pandemic. Also, exploring how it impacted mental health and society today; the ongoing effects. The exhibition is well set out, making great use of the space and the natural light streaming in from the Meadows. The darker spaces remind us of being trapped indoors during pandemic, cabin fever taking hold.

What comes across strongly is the very different experiences people had, depending on where they were and what they were doing at the time. Those are the front line, such as those working for the NHS, how to far more intense experience than others. For many, the experience was intensely isolating and

this feature prominently in the art. Those who lived alone often had a tough time.

Some of the photographs focus on the emptiness of places that would usually be full of life and activity. This aspect is well captured in [Neil Johnson's 'Sub\[Urban\]'](#) shots. That was all stripped away during the lockdowns, especially during the most severe periods, when leaving the house was limited to as little as an hour a day. During that time, familiar places took on a strange feel. The photos pick up on this post-apocalyptic aspect, capturing spaces emptied of life. At the same time, the real value of parks and other green spaces became evident. Going out for a local walk took on immense significance. Beautiful outdoor places feature prominently in the work exhibited. Their importance underlined during those strange times.

Disruptions

Cairistiona Fletcher, a fashion graduate and one of the organisers of the exhibition, spent much of her lockdown on her native Islay. This was, she admitted, an ideal place to spend such a period, especially as she was back staying with her family. However the pandemic arrived just in the middle of her studies at Edinburgh College of Art, causing her course to be pushed online. Thus depriving her of the crucial creative interactions that artists need to stimulate good work. Many students across the UK experienced a similar disruption to their studies, not getting the full college or university experience.



While the exhibition will do, as it did in my case, is dredge up memories of that very strange period. Fletcher was keen to discuss these experiences with each person who visited the exhibition, keen to see what it triggered. A photograph of the Royal Mile brought back memories of wandering through the Old Town one morning during lockdown.

On such a sunny morning, the place usually would be thronged with tourists. In contrast, it was deserted, not a soul to be seen or heard. In similar fashion, it was very strange to walk through the Cowgate in August 2020, in an area that usually would be packed with Fringe-goers and flyerers. The idea that something as huge as scale as the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe could be completely cancelled would have been hard to imagine in 2019. Summerhall was one of those usually packed places, thrust into silence.

Lets face what we went through

Cairistiona Fletcher felt that the 5th anniversary of the

lockdowns was something that we ought to mark. She remarked that this extreme experience is very rarely talked about; it's almost as if it's been deleted from our public conversation. As the exhibition poster puts it, "lets face what we went through". Yet, many lives asked are still marked by the event. Many had their lives turned upside down and not just those directly affected by the virus. It's a pity perhaps that the exhibition only lasts for a couple of days. Perhaps it will be repeated at a later date. Hopefully, the lockdowns won't!

Strange Times

Summerhall

Open 10am-6pm on Sunday 23 March only.