

By using recycled and previously used materials in the construction of their artworks, students at Heath Park School have demonstrated the importance of conservation, whilst highlighting the impact of single-use plastic on the environment. Caroline Wheelan, senior leader, explains

Bang! And the pigeon lay dead, neck broken outside my classroom window. What followed was a photo opportunity and a conversation about how beautiful birds were, even dead ones, with a group of fifteen year olds.

"Really want to 'do' birds! Here we go again. I still have to direct students away from this 'doing' word – 'what are we 'doing' today?' No, what are we learning today?"

I always find the beginning of a project is the most challenging. It's very slow going, lots of images collected, artists' work found, until the students discover the 'hook'. What that pigeon didn't realise – and never will – is that it became that hook. The slight obsession a couple of students did have was with dead birds. They found some beautiful images and some traumatic images (some difficult to look at) that prompted discussion about pollution, what our legacy will be, and hierarchy – why human beings believe they have ownership of the planet when the 'animals were here first'. Greta Thunberg would be proud!

Heath Park is recognised as one of the most successful secondary schools in the country,

an inner city school in Wolverhampton and an ethnically diverse success story. This has not been achieved by being complacent. I have worked at the school for twenty years, firstly as an NQT, teacher of art, head of the art and design department, faculty leader, and now as a member of the senior leadership team. Throughout my time in all of these roles I have always emphasised the importance of being resourceful, resilient and able to identify opportunities for creative thinking and action. This has had a positive impact upon outcomes, reflected in an art and design department which has continued to grow, evolve and has delivered successful exam results year on year.

During planning for projects, my starting point is always about what students need to learn and how each individual student will achieve this. From the outset it was clear the end results would be three-dimensional, but this was also GCSE textiles so the innovative use of materials and techniques was fundamental. Experimentation with media, materials and methods is important to the whole making process, and this really is where our students thrive.

In order to create something that looked like an oil-soaked bird, we had to use what looked like a lot of 'mess'; fabric doused in latex, powdered dyes, ink and glue. Dyed liquids were dripped onto plastic, dried and distressed with an iron, fabric was torn, burnt and shredded until the desired outcome was achieved. A coffin was created, very aptly from plastic, and quotes from David Attenborough were added to give the project a contemporary context and sentiment.

Resourcing textiles is always expensive so being resourceful is vital. Over time I have managed to acquire a range of fabric sample



Art is rubbish



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books, mostly from interior design companies who no longer have use for them. Regular Internet 'trawls' for free resources have resulted in many a trip around Birmingham – my partner and I have spent many weekends driving around collecting and filling the boot up with things which otherwise would have been destined for the skip. For this bird, an old oilcan and a container from the shed helped to make the perfect perch.

For the project, each student focused on the implementation and application of previously learnt skills and processes – such as constructing through textiles, manipulating materials, using materials resourcefully and creatively, and exploiting the use of textile materials to push boundaries. Through the use of recycled and previously used materials, their artworks demonstrated the importance of preserving and conserving, reinforcing the need to use materials more sustainably and the impact of single-use plastic on the environment and wildlife.

This project was not simply about producing 'beautiful' responses. It was about engaging and helping students to see beyond the classroom, making connections and responding in powerful ways. Like our planet and all its inhabitants, art is worth rescuing. Identifying the links to the 'real world' enables us to underpin its importance and communicate the message to all that have the privilege to study and deliver it. Art is salvageable and sustainable with commitment, support and vision from all who have a stake in it. ■

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