

ECOSSE ALIVE

11.7



Young at art

Inspirational: pupils
Danielle Souness
and Jamie Kane
paint in Room 13 at
Caol Primary
School, Fort William

“I won two packets of Chewits,” Jodie Fraser skips into the school art room dressed as an old woman. “One for best costume and one for best dancer.” It has been a good year for Jodie, a pupil at Caol Primary School in Fort William. Not only is she the queen of the fancy-dress disco but she has also been shortlisted for the Barbie Prize, a £20,000 national award for child artists sponsored by Mattel.

Her work, 9/11 — an enormous abstract canvas scattered with burnt and partially burnt matches, each one intended to commemorate a person dead or injured in the World Trade Center attack — is alarmingly mature.

In the centre of this crumbling state school, with a housing scheme on one side and snow-capped mountains on the other, is Room 13, the creative hub of Caol Primary. It is a baffling mix of Andy Warhol's Factory and St Trinians. References to Van Gogh and Dali trip off the children's tongues as easily as the names of the contestants on Fame Academy.

Jodie and her friends Danielle, Lindsay and Frances — who are in here most days — are a riot of pink hair wraps and giggling that contrasts strikingly with the art they have produced. “I thought that the building falling looked like matchsticks,” says Jodie, showing some 9/11 photo-montages she did on the computer. In one of her collages, New York is engulfed by clouds of smoke, the sky tinted a bright pink. In faint text across it are the words “The Future Is Gone”.

Jodie is 11. Surely it is the product of an adult imagination. Did she get any help? “No. It was my idea,” she says with a steady blue-eyed gaze. What made her choose September 11 as a subject? “I like doing art about disasters,” she says, matter-of-factly. Danielle agrees: “I prefer to do art about sad things. When I try to paint happy things it doesn't really work.”

Jodie's is not the only disturbing piece. A joint effort by Danielle and Frances seems to be an unconscious response to the murders of the Soham schoolgirls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. “This is us,” explains Danielle, pointing at two stick figures in a cage. “And up here, is the man who they think kidnapped us.” She gestures towards a shady form behind bars, then to a figure in the right-hand corner. “But over here is the man who really did it. And on this side are the people who are worried about us calling 999.”

Wait a minute. This is Britart. Where are the Powerpuff Girls and wonky drawings of Gareth Gates? And this is Fort William, not Hoxton or New York's East Village. It is tempting to think someone else must be pulling these pupils' strings. But their teacher, Rob Fairley, the artist-in-residence at Caol Primary who set up Room 13 a decade ago, says he has little to do with what the children produce.

“I'm not their teacher,” he insists.

Children at a Fort William primary school are learning how to paint their feelings about terrorism and the Soham murders.

Lucy Sweet is amazed by the 11-year-olds who produce Britart

Fairley looks like the stereotype laid-back art teacher, bearded with sandals and a love of India. Throughout the school, the children's paintings are peppered with golden hippos and flying elephants, inspired by his interest in Hindu mythology. He brings out a sketch book and a white plinth

his input stop and the children's start? Fairley sighs. “We work as an open studio and interact with each other, making collaborative pieces. This sketch book is a collaboration between me and Danielle. She does one page and I do the other. She's also been collaborating with an artist called

equals. Apart from basic rules of good behaviour, in Room 13 there are no distinctions between children and adults. The users, who are mostly girls, are given free rein to develop their ideas in their own ways. Not to judge children using grown-up logic is a lesson Fairley learned early.

small, all that was in her eyeline was the sky, the window frame and the radiator. That taught me a lot — never assume that what you see is necessarily what they see.”

Another reason perhaps that these children are so comfortable with the stuff of their souls is that, at Caol Primary, children are taught philosophy from seven. There's also a debating society that takes place at lunchtimes. Claire Gibb, the classroom assistant who has traded in a place at art college for four years' teaching in Room 13, tells me that they all enjoy a good argument. “We give them a question, such as: ‘Do you think asylum seekers should be allowed into the country?’ Some weren't exactly sure what asylum seeker meant, but they adapted it and came to their own conclusions. It was fascinating,” she says. “It's often quite odd,” agrees Fairley. “I came in the other day to find a bunch of nine-year-olds discussing existence.”

But there is usually too much going on for idle introspection. Rather than the usual powder paints and PVA glue, children here are allowed to use oils, spray paint and any other art materials they can squeeze out of the budget. Attendance is voluntary. There is no specific course and children can come and go as they please, providing they finish their other schoolwork first.

The room is open from 8.30am and some stay as late 6pm, competing for a chance to get to paint on the big canvas that hangs on the wall at the end of the room. (“If Mr Fairley likes your idea, then you can paint on it, but it has to be good,” Danielle explains.)

There is also a system of government that gives the pupils an equal say in how the room functions. This year Lindsay is

chairwoman, in charge of organising meetings. Rosy-cheeked Eileen, who is going to the disco dressed as a tree, is treasurer. The children also read newspapers every day and play the fantasy stock market on the internet.

The more time you spend in Room 13, the more it becomes obvious that the children really do run the show, and they do it exceptionally well. The room is theirs and the work they produce is a tribute to their curiosity about the world. Their commitment is total. When Jodie talks about the Barbie Prize, there is no trace of self-congratulation. She just wants to win the money so that Room 13 can buy more materials.

Danielle and Lindsay show me around the “gallery”, a selection of paintings dotted about the school. Colourful, ambitious and pure of intent, they put many an art undergraduate to shame.

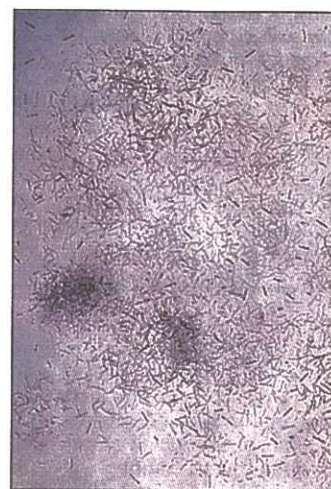
The Shark Is My Future, an ominous blue abstract seascape, is like something the abstract painter Howard Hodgkin might have come up with, if he had the ingenuity to incorporate rubber goldfish into his canvases. “This painting by Kirsten is based on the bull in Guernica by Picasso,” Danielle says. “Have you heard of Guernica?” Their knowledge is gleaned from the Room 13 library, a small cupboard in the corner which houses a few tatty art books and the odd Penguin classic. (Slightly worryingly, Danielle says her favourite novel is

Finnegans Wake by James Joyce. “I couldn't believe that either,” says Fairley.)

By the end of the tour, my scepticism has faded. The children's enthusiasm and instinct for art seems boundless. They treat it as a natural form of expression — social glue and an outlet for their fears and insecurities. Room 13's powerful effect extends way beyond art work. It is hard to understand why art is not taught like this in all schools.

There are problems of course — mostly financial, the sort that not even Eileen the treasurer can sort out. “The sad thing is that in Scotland we're stumped. Nobody wants to give us funding,” Fairley says. His stumbling block is that the activities of Room 13 do not fit into the terms of conventional education. It does not follow the standard rules set out in the curriculum. “I tried writing up the course so other schools could see what we do, but it was impossible.”

Not that this dampens anyone's ambitions. Danielle has an idea to expand Room 13 by creating an annexe in the nearby high school. At the moment money is tight. But perhaps the Barbie Prize will change all that. And even if Jodie does not win, Room 13 will continue to produce work that goes beyond the expectations of cynical adults. They have a maturity which coexists with glittery girliness. Gibb, used to their quirks, shrugs and says: “People forget that children are people.”



Mature: Jodie Fraser's 9/11, left, and The Lava Zebra and Moonlight Zebra by Nicky Donnelly, eight

decorated with inscriptions from the book of Genesis, which he is working on with Danielle. The only Genesis I knew about when I was 11 had something to do with Phil Collins.

I can't imagine I am the only one who might enter Room 13 with a degree of scepticism. Where does

Peter Haining who lives in Ireland, and the book gets passed between them. Often it's impossible to work out which pages are his and which are Danielle's.

After about an hour, you begin to realise that the unconventional nature of their work is a result of everybody treating each other as

“When Jodie was wee, she asked me what to paint, and I said just paint what you see out of the window. So she started painting these stripes — a blue one at the top, a white one in the middle and a green one at the bottom. I was thinking, what is this kid on? Then I realised that because she was

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