RCAST_010_Kimberly_Burrows

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SPEAKERS

Kimberley Burrows, Benji Jeffrey

K **Kimberley Burrows** 00:00

What came to me coming to the RCA was I had the foundations for everything then. But it was ultimately caring for my mom, which showed me that life is very short. And anything can happen to you at any time and even my own circumstances you can lose your sight anytime you know none of us are infallible to anything happening to us. And it has to be now when it has to be today and I want to have a master's degree and and why not the RCA?

B **Benji Jeffrey** 00:34

Hello and welcome to this podcast from the Royal College of Art home to the next generation of creatives and the world's number one art and design university representing the largest concentration of postgraduate artists and designers on the planet. We'll be bringing you insight into the philosophy behind the programmes at the RCA by talking to staff, students and the wider RCA community about what we do here and how the work of architects, artists, communicators, designers and researchers affect the world at large. I'm Benji Jeffrey and today I'll be talking to Kimberley Burrows about accessible making and making accessible. Kimberley is an artist who explores blindness and grief through painting and poetry. Having graduated from her MA Painting this year. She is now the president of the Students' Union here at the RCA. Kimberley, thank you for joining us today.

K **Kimberley Burrows** 01:25

Thank you for having me.

B **Benji Jeffrey** 01:27

No worries, how are you doing?

K Kimberley Burrows 01:28

I'm really good. Thank you very much. How are you?

B Benji Jeffrey 01:31

I'm fantastic. Thank you. So let's start off with a big broad question. What does accessibility mean to you?

K Kimberley Burrows 01:38

That is a very big question. Accessibility to me is when everybody is included, it's when everybody has a seat at the table. And essentially, they have access to all of the information. So whether that is access to a space, even it doesn't have to be information, it's just access to a space. And that could be an art gallery or a museum, it could be a hospital, it could be your home that could be inaccessible for whatever reason. So accessibility at its core is access to a space and environment or information. And there is also accessibility in terms of the digital space. So access to information on the web, and accessibility in terms of web resources, and making sure that a website has accessibility tools for people with a range of disabilities, and ensuring that information on the screen is easily digestible. It's easily seen and read through the text size, the text colour, but it's also compatible with screen readers, for example.

B Benji Jeffrey 02:59

I think the idea of digestibility is really important as well, isn't it when it comes to these things? It's not just about these things being there. But it's about how people get there kind of paws on it as so to say.

K Kimberley Burrows 03:09

Yes, absolutely. Yeah, it's making sure that language is easy to consume, it's easy to read, it's easy to understand, it's not just using fancy words it's being aware of, of everybody, again, it's coming back to kind of a seat for everybody at the table and being inclusive to as many people as possible. And just having a language that ultimately everybody can understand and whether that is web language to but also our own English language that it just everybody can understand what you're saying.

B Benji Jeffrey 03:45

And to what extent was it kind of trial and error or education that led you to understanding how to do these things?

K Kimberley Burrows 03:51

Education in terms of school?

B Benji Jeffrey 03:54

Well not even just school. But well I guess I'm kind of thinking about gaining access as a comparison to a creative practice, right? With a creative practice, you're taught the right way to do things or how things should be done. And then there are certain ways that you just figure yourself out. And I'm just wondering whether there's a comparison between the way that you gain access?

K Kimberley Burrows 04:15

I think that's actually a very good question. So yeah, my creative practice and then accessibility, both are very experimental. It's just kind of being left to my own devices to figure things out. And being like, these are my tools. I don't actually know what I'm doing too much and I need to feel my way through it. And especially with having a visual impairment and then losing my sight. No one is really telling you how to use these tools, or how to use these materials in the way of painting, but I will make it make sense for myself.

B Benji Jeffrey 04:55

And to do as someone who was partially sighted and then lost your sight, how is your relationship to the way that you use these tools kind of pre and post those two things happening? Do you feel like you are still using those tools in the same way, or you have a different, significantly different relationship to them?

K Kimberley Burrows 05:13

I feel the relationship between my technology and the relationship between art materials is intensified. And it's a lot more intimate as well, because I'm relying on these things in a different way. It's not in a sighted way anymore. So before, for example, I was training to be an illustrator. And I was using a WACOM tablet, or a pencil and a sketch pad. And it was quite dependent on perfectionism, I had this idea of how I wanted things to be, and didn't always translate that way. And I would get very angry with myself. And it was lots of roughs, lots of thumbnails, lots of sketching, and trying to get something perfect, but also not quite in a perfect way. Because you don't want to be quite perfect as an illustrator, you want to have this really sort of whimsical, interesting style, we don't like to use that word style in illustration, but ultimately, you do have a style, which you are recognised for. However, since losing my sight, I feel very free of that. And turning to painting and, and painting in quite a tactile three dimensional way and building those textures and the the dimensions and the contours. It's very experimental, it's very loose, it's very free, is the polar opposite of what I was doing for. And that's, that's very much the same with my phone, my iPad, my Apple watch, I had to kind of relearn how to do things, I have the foundation of the skills with what I was doing with voice over. But now that I rely on it completely, I did have to teach myself like this is, this is how you

are going to interact with your Apple Watch or your phone. And it's yourself that's teaching yourself, there were a few tutorials around but, you know, ultimately you have to teach yourself.

B Benji Jeffrey 07:12

And what led you then as someone who was, would you describe it as partial sighted when, in the beginning of your life? As someone who's partial sighted, you've got to be pretty like you've gotta have a lot of bravado right to say, actually, I'm going to tackle something that is almost exclusively seen as a visual media. What made what what what about that medium, like turns you on so much?

K Kimberley Burrows 07:36

I think actually, I don't really think I had any bravado at all I think I was...

B Benji Jeffrey 07:41

Sorry, I'm assigning a cockiness to you that you don't have.

K Kimberley Burrows 07:44

Maybe I have some of that now, because I feel very empowered by my practice and by my life experiences. But when it first happened to me, I was completely the opposite of that. I was very timid. I was very frightened. But I turned to painting because my illustration degree was falling apart. It wasn't actually a choice, I don't thin. Maybe it was but it was also a means to saving my degree because I couldn't see to illustrate anymore. And I didn't really know what else to do. I couldn't use the WACOM tablet to use the word again, that is not accessible.

B Benji Jeffrey 08:23

Can you just explain what a WACOM tablet is?

K Kimberley Burrows 08:26

So a Wacom tablet is a piece of equipment. It's essentially a plastic board, which plugs into your computer screen with a USB cable, and it has a stylus pen, and you draw on to that tablet, and there's something within the nib of the pen that tracks what you're doing on the tablet, which will then track on to the software that you're using. So for me, that would be Photoshop, but there are other software programmes that you can use. And so for example, there are a Corel or other drawing programmes. But there is nothing in voiceover settings that would describe what you are drawing and translate that on to Photoshop or the drawing programmes. It just wasn't accessible. And the same with drawing with a pen or a pencil or, you know, any kind of marker. You have to have a spatial awareness, which I kind of do. But once you've lifted

the pen off of the page, it's quite a flat things that you've done, and then how do you find what you've done and where you've drawn? And that could be quite experimental, but that makes me uncomfortable coming back to the perfectionism again. Yeah, it just wasn't it doesn't fit into my practice and what I wanted to do with with my illustration, so I turned to cutting shapes and doing some collage, but I just felt very unhappy. That's not where I wanted my, my illustrations to go. I wanted to be a children's book illustrator and I had these ideas of being the next sort of Illustrator for Paddington Bear. Yeah, exactly. Yes. Yes. And that's just not, you know, because of, you know, quite a unpredicted and sad thing that happened with retinal detachments. You know, our dreams don't quite align with life. Yeah,

B Benji Jeffrey 10:30

But even before that, like thinking about going into illustration, as someone who's partially sighted, right, we all grew up in this world, right? Where we were taught to play to our strengths. So you have to have like, such a, like crazy passion and belief in yourself to go actually, no, you know what, this is something that I want to do, even though it's not technically seen as my strength.

K Kimberley Burrows 10:52

Yes and I did love drawing. And that was my strength. And that was my escapism, and it was Paddington Bear's author. I was his pen pal for many years. He did give me advice to follow my dreams. And I did. So I went to college into university, and I shared my illustrations of Paddington Bear with him. And I'm still friends with his daughter today. Yes, yeah, but some like I said, my, my retinas detached, and that just kind of that didn't work out for me. So, yes, in my darkest moments, after that, the healing of my emergency surgeries, the question is, what next? You know, do I go home from from where I am now, which for me was Leeds? Do I go back home to Manchester and just say this is done? And I'm not someone to give up. You know, I did work very hard to get where I was. And I didn't want to let my degree, fall down the drain. And you know, what, what is accessible to bring it back. What was accessible for me, what works for me. And what came to be was that I enjoyed then painting. So first, with watercolour paints, it was quite messy, it was very loose, but it helps me to tap into something inside to translate those feelings, you know, which were very muddy, they were very loose, they were very abstract. I didn't know how I felt, I was very confused. But I could get that down onto the, onto the tooth and the grain of the paper. And I could say, you know, this is me, and this is my story, I'm feeling really sad. And I'm feeling really confused. And I could translate that then with oil pastels, and again, to us like a more grainy tooth of a paper, and then moving on to canvas, and acrylic and putting mediums into the acrylic, and to them build that into a more three dimensional sense, with contours and nuances. And that was fun. And that for the first time I felt something in two years after going through so many painful surgeries, I could start to tell the story of what it was like to lose my sight to try and regain some empowerment and some clarity in some very difficult times. And with those early paintings, too, it was in the pandemic. So even in a wider sense, everybody was confused, everybody was feeling very isolated. So that was quite intensified. So I was able to reclaim my degree, I was able to graduate and create a really strong body of work and a strong portfolio and a really strong dissertation too. And in that dissertation, I talked about art therapy, but art as therapy, and how, when you go

through traumatic situations, art and materials can help you to reduce the stress levels and and how your nervous system has responded and how your brain has has closed off and is trying to protect you and you can tap back into your nervous system and release the serotonin.

B Benji Jeffrey 14:17

What made you want to come to the RCA and then how did you develop your practice through being here?

K Kimberley Burrows 14:22

So to go back to the dissertation, and those early paintings in the pandemic. So that formed the the final year of my university and I was very proud of that portfolio. But that portfolio, I then took forward to be my application for the RCA and what the circumstances which made me consider the RCA â€“ there's a few things actually so first one once I graduated from university, what was waiting for me was being a carer for my mom, which was another very difficult thing. So the year that I lost my sight, I also witnessed my mum have a stroke, so I could still see. So when I graduated, I was my mom's carer for the second time. And it was very, very difficult. I am naturally a very caring person, I have a lot to give to people. That's why I'm the President here, I care about the students and I want to make their experience as positive as it can be through events. And, you know, if they come to me with any issues, I want to problem solve and work with the students. And the same with my mom, you know, every day working with her to make her comfortable, I just have a very big heart, I feel that I am very generous. And within that is a very big empathy. Because of what I've been through, I don't mind caring. I love my mom. And if anyone comes to me with anything, I just want to help. But it was burning me out. And I knew that I, I have a dream, which is to be creative, and it was being stifled at home. Like I felt very stagnant, and that I wasn't really moving forward. And a friend of mine mentioned the RCA. I just thought to myself, oh, my goodness, don't be silly, I can't go, I can't go to London, I'm from the north, I can't afford that you know.

B Benji Jeffrey 16:20

But also the North will never take you back if you go down to London.

K Kimberley Burrows 16:25

At first I thought, you know, I can't afford to live in London and I can't afford to go to the RCA like I don't know, you know, I just sort of smiled and was like, you know, being very, very polite, like, Okay, thank you for your suggestion. But I went onto the website and looked into it. And there was lots of scholarships, and particularly, there were scholarships for disabled students. And there was a particular one, which I was very interested in, which was the Tony Snowden scholarship. Right. And I was like, that's the one that I really, really want. So the the Tony Snowden scholarship that rewards disabled scholars in the UK, and the reward is very significant. So it would pay for the course fee, but then you would also have an additional sum of money. So for me, that would pay for my student accommodation as well. So everything would have been covered. But what I found with that scholarship, too, was the language that

was used. So sometimes in scholarship applications, you feel very drained at the end of it, because of the language and the questions and it makes you feel like you're asking for help. And you're like, you know, I'm in need and that I need this. And then, you know, I'm disabled, and I'm working class. And you know, and you're kind of asking, and you feel like there's a power imbalance and you're relying on other people. Whereas with the Tony Snowden scholarship, the language was, it's rewarding you because you are a scholar, and you are talented, and you are extraordinary. And you have something to give the world. What came to me coming to the RCA was I had the foundations for everything then. But it was ultimately caring for my mom, which showed me that life is very short. And anything can happen to you at any time. And even my own circumstances, you can lose your sight anytime, you know any none of us are infallible to anything happening. And it has to be now when it has to be today and I want to to have a master's degree and and why not the RCA? I had a lot of doubts at first when my friend mentioned it. I was like, why...I don't belong there. But then the question should actually be. I do belong there, actually, you know, I do. And so I put it in my application. And I was accepted. And now I'm here and I'm I am very lucky. And I'm very happy to be here.

B Benji Jeffrey 18:48

Yeah. Well, thank you, first of all for being so like generous with what you're sharing, you know, that can be quite difficult. But thank you so much. So you briefly mentioned before that obviously you're the co-president for the RCA at the moment. So can we think a bit about some of the advocacy things that you've done? But just quickly, congratulations, because I believe over the last few days you noted correct me if I'm wrong on this, you are noted as in the Disability Power 100 List as one of the big hitters in the world of art and design. Is that right?

K Kimberley Burrows 19:18

Yes, pretty much. Yeah, no, you're quite right. So it's with the Shaw Trust. I was recognised as one of the top 100 disabled people in the UK, but particularly the top 10 in visual arts, design and fashion.

B Benji Jeffrey 19:33

So could you tell, you touched on some of the work you're doing with the SU to kind of advocate for the disabled students, can you tell us about that? Or even just more broadly, the work that you're doing in the SU?

K Kimberley Burrows 19:42

Yeah, absolutely. So I can mention a few things. So one of the first things that I did was for the convocation ceremonies that we had, I set up the the convocation funds so if anyone needed help with the cost of tickets, thinking particularly for working class students or parents or caregivers, if you want your family with you, it would be at a cost. So hopefully that will continue each year. Yeah, that was one of the first things that I wanted to do. For disabled students, particularly, the shuttle buses that we have weren't accessible, particularly for students in wheelchairs and powerchairs. So now, in the fleet that we have, we have shuttle

buses where there is a motorised ramp at the back. And I'm also working, there is a Braille working group. So I'm hoping to have, I'm not sure if it will be implemented at the end of my time here. But hopefully in the next year, there will be Braille signage across the campuses, yes. But we'll start within the SU space first. So the the Braille working group that we have will identify where the Braille signs should be, what they should say, and we're just sort of having many discussions about that. But I'd like to bring on board the visually impaired and blind students because I'm just one perspective. And I very keenly realised that I'm just one perspective of blindness, one lived experience. And I think it's really valuable that we bring other students on board this project.

B Benji Jeffrey 21:17

And I believe you've got a whole list of recommendations there right? So I think alongside this podcast, we'll try and get out a little list of resources that you've got. And just to add that if anyone is interested in engaging with the Disabled Student's Network, who is outside of the RCA, you can follow them at at @rca_dsn. And what is your Instagram handle?

K Kimberley Burrows 21:39

So I am @kimberleyburrowsart, so that's kim@kimberleyburrowsart.

B Benji Jeffrey 21:50

Amazing, thank you so much for being here with us today Kimberley.

K Kimberley Burrows 21:53

Thank you for having me.

B Benji Jeffrey 21:54

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