

LIFE IN OUR HANDS

A joint work between Shanthamani M & the people of the Yorkshire Dales

The Joinery, Dawsons Court, Settle

23 Sept 2019 - 28 Feb 2020

"We are not just recording the people's history; we take the impression and the gestures of the hands of those who have worked many years shaping the land and its history."

About This Resource

This resource is for teachers and facilitators visiting the **Life In Our Hands** exhibition with their students. It provides a context for the exhibition, suggests topics for discussion and offers ideas for creative activities. All resources can be downloaded from the Settle Stories website at www.settlestories.org.uk



About The Artist

Shanthamani Muddaiah is a visual artist who uses ephemeral, natural materials such as paper and charcoal in her work to create, install and display exhibits exploring complex ideas about the self, society and sustainability. *'Today's art is not about upholding human achievements, it's about time we look at lives around us in totality and sort out all the waste we have produced'* (Carbon Myths)

Originally from Mysore in India, Shanthamani uses art to connect to the world. She has exhibited countless group and solo pieces internationally and won numerous awards. Her most recent solo piece **Neither Tree nor Ashes** is on display in the Suzanne Tarasieve Gallery, Paris and her 2014 award-winning sculpture, *'Backbone'* is on display in Aspinwall House, Fort Kochi, India.

Find out more

www.shanthamani.com/frozen_phoenix

www.shanthamani.com/reflections

About The Exhibition



Life In Our Hands is a multimedia exhibition that focuses on the people living in and around Settle and the stories they have to tell. In the process of creating this exhibition, internationally renowned artist, Shanthamani Muddaiah, sat with, chatted to and held the hands of a number of Settle's inhabitants; and whilst they talked she cast their hands. *'I have been privileged to have a space to listen to people's stories right in their homes. To me, it [also] served as a celebration of commonality as well as differences between our cultures.'*

Shanthamani developed this way of working with sculpture and story during the creation of **Reflections**, her 2012 multimedia exhibition: *'During my Journey on Ganga river, I figured out a way of making people sit down to talk and have a true exchange. The camera has the power to dominate and make people more conscious. Sitting down to cast their hand was a great opportunity to create an intimate space where they can talk and the camera became a third entity to witness this interaction.'*



By sculpting the hands of individuals who have helped shape the Dales' landscapes and communities, this project captures and celebrates the history and culture of the Yorkshire Dales whilst the contemporary nature of the installation helps bring those stories to life for younger generations.

Artist statement for Life In Our Hands

'I believe, every individual's imagination and innovations locate themselves in the community/society. Looking back to my own experiences, I could find when one looks deep into one's own aspirations and concerns, one sees the reflections of the structure and nature of a society. This art project; Life In Our Hands, is my effort to map the history and culture of Settle and its surroundings through personal stories of the people (accompanied by the process of making casts of their hands). It is a journey to understand the factors that have moulded its cultural landscape and integrated into the values and the social lives of the community.'

About Settle Stories - the home of adventurous storytelling.

We collaborate with communities and artists to create transformative experiences that ignite curiosity and reimagine storytelling. Our flagship festival, year round events and learning programme, welcome everyone to our idyllic home in the Yorkshire Dales. In our venue, The Joinery, we bring the world to Settle and show Settle to the world through our live and digital programme.

The Creative Process

The Hands

Shanthamani used plaster bandage, plaster of paris and handmade paper (she received a Charles Wallace scholarship in 2004 to study paper-making in Scotland, and a National Junior Fellowship in 2006-08 to work with paper sculpting.) to create the hand casts.



The Stories

Documenting what life was like in rural communities, the exhibition records dialects that are being lost and experiences that are uncommon in today's society. **Life in Our Hands** has captured the individual experiences that map the history of the Yorkshire Dales and its community.

Photographs by Tony Crossland

Sita Brand, Artistic Director & CEO at Settle Stories, accompanied Shanthamani on all her interviews, she commented; *"It has been an extraordinary experience for me. It has allowed me to hear stories from many unrecognised people in our community. Stories we don't often celebrate. The most moving part is how much everyone loves the area so much, and how committed everyone is to the community - that is a very beautiful, moving thing."*

Themes to explore

India is a country with many cultures, religions, belief systems and ways of life existing in different pockets of the same fabric. One can experience the most postmodern way of living to the tribal ways of living within a few kilometers. Growing up in the midst of this is learning to navigate the plurality and yet find the self that encompasses the larger cultural ethos. In a way, my practice or my growth is by putting myself in such locations to break my own limitations. 'This kind of community project [Life In Our Hands] is a way of moving from the singular self to identifying the self in plurality. This is a way I have worked through my career as an artist.'

- **Commonality and difference**
 - Compare **Life In Our Hands** (Settle) with **Reflections: Hand Cast** (peoples' voices from the banks of Ganga) www.shanthamani.com/reflections/hand_cast.html What are the similarities and differences? What does this say about the two cultures?
- **The environment and the complex nature of our relationship with the material world**
 - In her work, **Carbon Myths**, Shanthamani uses wood charcoal, an in-between material '...neither tree nor ashes...' The material mirrors the contradictory, in-between nature of humanity's relationship with the environment as both protector and destroyer. Discuss how the material used to create an artwork can be as important as the work itself.
- **The symbolism of hands in art**
 - Hands speak. From the everyday use of gestures in conversation to the symbolic use of hands in art: open, clasped, raised or clenched. Consider the symbolism of various hand poses, what they mean and how you might use them in your own art.
artsandculture.google.com/theme/ggLujk207qHGLw
- **Art and story**
 - The **Life In Our Hands** contributors were filmed whilst Shanthamani cast their hands and their stories are exhibited alongside their hand casts. Consider how the juxtaposition of video and hand cast frames the stories. Would the stories read differently if the video was absent or was replaced with text and why?

Other Artists

Tim Booth: A Show of Hands

Photographer Tim Booth believes hands can reveal much more about a person than you might think. The photographs in his book, *A Show of Hands*, 'focus on people whose hands are a key part of what they do - not just a cerebral connection, but a physical one too.'

www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34452745

Htein Lin: A Show of Hands

This 2013 multimedia installation included hundreds of plaster sculptures cast from the hands of former political prisoners from Myanmar, each accompanied by a card bearing information about the circumstances of the individual's imprisonment.

www.albrightknox.org/art/exhibitions/htein-lin-show-hands

Omar Reda: Hands: The Story of Life

Lebanese photographer Omar Reda focuses just on the hands of his subjects, rather than their portraits and asks us to reflect on what hands reveal about each person.

mymodernmet.com/omar-reda-photos-hands/

Raymond Watson: The Hands of History

After the Good Friday Agreement 1998 Watson created an exhibition to explore the Agreement and its context. The Hands of History exhibition opened in 2002 in Belfast. The central installation piece was the bronze hand casts of those political leaders who negotiated the Agreement.

thehandsofhistory.com/wp/the-hands/