British artist pays tribute to Edward Snowden

Robert Stevens
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Sarah Lynn Mayhew (aka SLM) is an artist who lives in Manchester, England. She has exhibited nationally over the last decade, with a particular interest in portraiture and interactive art.

Last month Mayhew painted a piece of street art on a disused substation wall in the Northern Quarter area of Manchester city centre. Entitled "Truth is Coming and Cannot be Stopped," it celebrates the US whistle-blower Edward Snowden.

Mayhew painted the piece for the Out House project, off Thomas St. Manchester. Her Facebook page explains, "Edward Snowden is the American whistle-blower who has leaked NSA (National Surveillance Agency) documents worldwide" exposing how the "US has conducted widespread and illegal surveillance of its citizens and other nations."

Mayhew concludes, "We are all in this together" as the "UK and USA government's hold hands…"

Sarah spoke to the WSWS about her art and the positive response that it has met from the public in Manchester and internationally.

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WSWS: Can you tell us something about your background as an artist?

SLM: I've always wanted to be an artist since I was little. Painting, drawing and creating things was all I wanted to do. At college I did a BTEC diploma specialising in Fine Art. I moved to Manchester in 1989 to do a BA in Educational Media Design. It covered illustration, graphics, photography, digital art, all with an educational stance and target audience in mind. I then went on to work within multimedia, animation and web design, setting up my own CD-rom design company called Mamadigit Design. I won a Royal Society of Arts award for multimedia (RSA). I later moved back down south to take a job as a scenic artist at the Colchester Mercury Theatre in Essex. I learnt the skills needed for painting large backdrops, producing 16m x 11m backdrops every three weeks. My love of paint was reborn.

WSWS: Which artists have influenced you?

SLM: When I was younger it was the old masters Rembrandt, Van Gogh, later Graham Sutherland, Modigliani. Huntervasser and Picasso have always been favourites. Today I am inspired by painters such as Guy Denning and Dale Grimshaw who are both traditional painters that have moved to painting Street Art. Both of their works have subtle political connotations.

WSWS: Have you exhibited work? Have you got a particular medium and what has been the response?

SLM: I started exhibiting in 2003. It was during this year that I devised the "Interchangeable Squares" series; creating large abstract interactive works which I still produce today. The idea evolved into creating "Mess with my Head" interactive portraits; the first of which was a controversial painting of Obama; called "Man or Beast". I love the fact that the viewer can determine the final outcome of a piece and that each work can have a million possibilities.

During 2006/08 I was exhibiting in seven different galleries over the country. The work was mostly contemporary abstract. It was good grounding, but I felt a need to change direction, wanting to produce work which had depth of meaning and effected emotion.

I work in many different mediums, from oils to acrylics, pencil, ink. I'm always interested in texture within my work and will use anything from builders materials to reclaimed objects glued on. My recent work is full mixed media—sometimes overlaying acrylic paint with oils and using collage. I enjoy experimentation and a certain amount of spontaneity.

People often get excited about my work—especially the interactive pieces! It's fascinating to watch someone else's imagination sparked through something I've created.

WSWS: I saw on your web site you do a lot of portrait work.

SLM: I love doing portrait work. People inspire me the most. There are many stories in just one facial expression. I was lucky as when I was 15, my parents paid for me to do a course with the royal portrait artist Richard Stone. Although only a two-week course, I think I learnt the most during this time and knew then that portraiture would be my vocation.

WSWS: How did the street art image of Edward Snowden come about?

SLM: The Out House Project was set up in Manchester in 2011 by Tasha Whittle and Lois Macdonald, later to be joined by Ben Harrison. It is sponsored by Fred Aldous, a local arts and craft shop. The old derelict toilet block in Stevenson Square in the Northern Quarter is now a legal paint spot for street artists with a three-month turn around. Artists from all over the North West paint there. I was invited to paint a couple of months ago, and painted "Wild woman Island". The substation—which is where Edward Snowden is, has just been made a part of the Out House project and I was able to book it in August this year.

I had been getting quite a lot of attention from artwork that I been doing relating to the TV programme "Breaking Bad". I'm not one for attention and it threw me a bit. I decided to use this attention to shine back at the people, hopeful of making a difference. I think that is what we are all here for; to make some kind of difference.

When the Edward Snowden video was released through the *Guardian* it moved me greatly. I read about him and thought this guy deserves celebrating. People need to be aware of this courageous guy. We need more people to stand up and speak the truth, to be brave enough to be conscientiously led for the greater good. I thought I want to do that. I've got some attention now from people so I'm going to say, "Hey look at this because this is something worth discussing, worth our support and awareness".

WSWS: How did your "Breaking Bad" work bring you to people's attention? Where was that work displayed?

SLM: I did some live painting at the Northern Quarter pop-up event for Shude Hill Studios. I painted one of the characters, Jesse Pinkman, on an old door. "Breaking Bad" is America's most popular TV series to date, with an immense following globally. Before that I did an interactive "Mess with My Head" portrait of Walter White and my notoriety and likes on Facebook went up. Although I've been painting for most of my life, I haven't been so good at promoting myself. It's got to be about the art, not about me.

WSWS: What has been the response to the Edward Snowden piece?

SLM: It's been there about three weeks to a month now and I'm hoping it will be there a bit longer. I've had a lot of really good feedback from it. I've had many messages from people saying thank you for painting it. Things like, "It meant that I could stand there and educate friends as to

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who he is and what he has done for us."

It's gone worldwide too. It's got over 4,500 likes on two other Facebook pages. One is the Edward Snowden support page. There is also the Street Art Utopia page, which is the biggest street art page on Facebook and has a million followers. I haven't had any negative feedback whatsoever.

WSWS: The name of the piece is "Truth is coming and cannot be stopped", a statement from Edward Snowden. Can you expand on the idea behind that and why you chose those words?

SLM: I wanted to take a quote from him, something uplifting and moving which says it like it is. I wanted something simple to speak to as many people as possible and that stood out, something to move and motivate people. I wanted the whole thing to be beautiful because I think he is beautiful for being so brave and courageous. He's a hero.

That statement encapsulates what he has done. He has told the truth and it's for everyone else to follow in his footsteps by standing up and speaking out; whether it's for something small or large. It would be a better world if people were conscientiously led. Edward Snowden deserves our support.

I'm getting the feeling that this is starting to happen more. People are waking up and becoming more aware. I wanted the whole piece to speak to people and to give them hope as well. I didn't want it to be morbid.

WSWS: What do you think are the main things that Snowden has brought to light?

I think people already knew we were being spied on with previous whistle-blowers; he has reinforced that information and made a larger population aware. It's not just that we're being spied on but how that information is being used that is more worrying. Innocent people are being criminalised. Who are the criminals at the end of the day? He has shone a huge light on that question!

The governments should be fearful of the people and it's the other way round. We are living in an extremely oppressive world at the moment and we've got to turn things around. The people are not being listened to. We are the majority and our human rights and liberty are being taken from us. Soon we will have no human rights at all. If the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill goes through, we will be living in a police state. We will be unable to protest or campaign if the Transparency of Lobbying Bill, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration bill passes.

WSWS: I think it's important that what Snowden has exposed follows on from what WikiLeaks and Bradley Manning have also revealed.

SLM: Absolutely, and I think they are complete heroes as well. Snowden is showing who the real traitors are. It's the American government and the British government who are in cahoots with them. It's not just the Americans.

Some people have come up and said, "Oh it's that American guy". I've said. "Yes but what about Britain's GCHQ and their involvement". I mean there are rubbish bins in London that read people's smart phones as they walk past, apparently just for advertising purposes—but what other information are they taking from people? GCHQ have stated that their secret operation codenamed Tempora, involving mass interception of cable traffic, is designed to "master the Internet".

We're moving closer and closer to a police state and unless people wake up and start protesting more it will get worse. I'm concerned about the amount of apathy. If we all get together and use our talents to do something we can all make a change. What I'm doing is painting to make people aware, to discuss these things and open people's minds.

WSWS: What did you want to achieve visually with the piece?

SLM: It's been a real learning curve painting publicly. I was quite nervous but I'm getting used to it now. It took about three days to do. Unfortunately there is only really one photo of Edward Snowden which is a still from the *Guardian* video. I didn't have a lot to work with and neither did I want to make it too complicated, so I just used open envelopes to show emails being read. We are used to the envelope symbol for our emails and there is also the idea of surveillance screens in there, you know those rooms where they have all the TVs for watching everyone. One of the interesting things—and I don't know if many have noticed—is that in the left hand side of his glasses you can actually see the back of his head. It seems as if there may have been a mirror behind him reflecting the back of his head into his glasses. It gives the added dimension and idea that even the back of his head was under surveillance as he was interviewed!

I also invited a guy called D7606, who is a paste-up artist, to collaborate. He did the telephone boxes in the work. He pastes up different characters like Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn in telephone boxes all over the country. His work is cheeky, popular, and thought provoking. I suggested it would be a good idea to have Edward standing in a telephone box and outside of the box. His work contrasts nicely with mine, again adding a different dimension for discussion. Ed is shown in one of those orange prison suits inside a telephone box and then he standing outside the second telephone box in his normal clothes. So it's saying, how do you want to see him, locked away in prison or free?

I painted Edward Snowden's face completely freehand. Painting on brick is hard as it's difficult to do straight lines, unless you use cans that is!

WSWS: It must be difficult working from a small photo and translating that onto a large wall?

SM: I'm practised at it now. You have to have the space to keep standing right back from the work to see what you're doing. When I worked at the theatre I used to have to do things that would look good on stage right from the back of the auditorium and would spend quite a bit of time running back and forth to make the whole set "work". Things like making a tea stain dark enough so that it could be seen by the back row!

WSWS: Are you working on any projects at the moment?

SLM: Yes, I'm making plans for my next street art piece, which will be happening in Sunderland for the UpNorthFest. I'm excited about this—expect something political!

I'm also planning a launch night for my "Breaking Bad" interactive paintings, which will be a lot of fun. I'm also working on two portrait commissions. Plus I'm working towards an exhibition for the spring next year. A series of portraits called "Modern Day Outlaws"—loosely based on the first ever mug shots produced by the Pinkerton detective agency in America. In fact, I need three of me at the moment!

Sarah's web site page can be viewed here: http://www.artistmanchester.co.uk/

Her Facebook page is here: https://www.facebook.com/pages/SLM-art/368406486577292?fref=ts

The Facebook page of the "Truth is Coming and Cannot be Stopped" is here:

https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.520023674748905.1073741833.368406486577292&type=1

You can follow her on Instagram: Soly66

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