

Art auction for Grenfell fire survivors raises £2 million

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30 October 2017

An October 16 auction of works donated by 31 artists raised nearly £2 million [US\$2.6 million] for survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire. All works donated to Sotheby's Art for Grenfell auction sold, in the process almost doubling the organisers' predicted total.

This response of artists who donated works should not be underestimated and contrasts starkly with the government's criminal negligence.

Art consultant Katie Heller and film producer and art collector Hamish McAlpine began contacting artists shortly after the disaster. They had no difficulty in persuading artists to donate works to raise money for survivors.

Most of the works came from artists themselves, including many leading figures of the contemporary British art scene, such as Wolfgang Tillmans, Tracey Emin, Rachel Whiteread and Antony Gormley. The gallerist Sadie Coles donated a painting by Neo Rauch from her own collection. Jeremy Deller produced a limited edition print, *South Londoners*, proceeds of which will go towards the auction's takings.

Patrick Hughes donated *Escape* (2015), one of the stronger pieces artistically, and connected his work with the reasons for the event in a descriptive comment for the catalogue: "A rainbow, imprisoned in a cell so that it loses its vibrant colour, escapes through the bars and rejoins the sky. I hope that the Grenfell Tower escapees can find hope in their new lives."

Tacita Dean and Idris Khan both produced works specifically for the event. Dean's *Lay the Dust with Tears* and Khan's *I Remember* are both sombre pieces. Others produced works either directly referring to the fire, like Anish Kapoor's *Red Lens for Grenfell*, or titled to connect with the auction, like Sarah Lucas's *Sarah Lucas, Eating a Banana (for Grenfell)*.

All of the works can be seen at the Sotheby's

website.

If one piece sums up their motivations, it is Harland Miller's silkscreen *Who Cares Wins*. The auction was a generous response to appalling tragedy. Heller told *Vogue* that she and McAlpine "were both incensed by what had happened. We wanted to do something." Central to their response was getting money directly to the affected families, most of whom have still not been rehoused. More than four months after the fire hundreds are still living in temporary accommodation, with entire families living in hotel rooms.

Heller, in her capacity as an art advisor, worked for four years setting up an art programme for a homeless charity with House of St Barnabas. The Grenfell families were invited to view the art ahead of the auction, and Heller sees Art for Grenfell as a longer-term project, "an initiative that seeks to use art to help support the families." There are plans for art therapy, workshops, and creative partnerships with local schools through classes and projects.

The sense of horror and outrage felt by all those who saw what happened was shared by artists. Heller said that very few artists had turned down her request for works, as "Most artists felt very saddened by what had happened." McAlpine explained that "Grenfell touched their souls. It's a very emotive subject for people in London." The donation of art follows the heartfelt, and generally angered, response from musicians to Grenfell who produced a number of songs reviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

There was certainly a feeling here that artists do not stand apart from the social impact of the tragedy. One of the fire's known victims was the photographer Khadija Saye, whose work is included in the current Venice Biennale Diaspora Pavilion and has now been shown at Tate Britain. Phyllida Barlow, Britain's

representative at the Biennale, is another contributor, as is Àngela de la Cruz, who works in a studio adjacent to the tower block. Sotheby's staff visiting the company's warehouse must pass the tower.

There were criticisms of the decision to raise money for the families by an auction in one of the most affluent parts of London. But the ability of the bidders to be generous further underscores the inequalities that led to the social crime of the fire in the first place. This was a gesture by people who could afford it, with the auction house waiving "most of" its fees and buyers' premiums for the event. There are, too, legitimate questions to ask about the commodification of art and the art market.

Heller said they were "very conscious of this," but that "those who have, need to give to those who don't have." Noting that "The art market deals in billions of pounds worth of art," she said she thought the auction was a way "we can access that for those who need it most." The response of the artists should be taken seriously, too, as an indicator of some awareness of social life.

Heller is conscious of the realities for the survivors. "Most of the families are still living in hotel rooms," she told the *Metro*. Heller and McAlpine consulted closely with the families and the charities working with them while preparing for the auction.

The auction met up with the feeling of solidarity that many people have with those devastated by the fire, under conditions where the Conservative government and local Kensington and Chelsea council have done next to nothing to assist survivors. According to research carried out by Reuters, total compensation payments may be as little as £4 million. The news agency wrote that this was based on "the compensation amounts stipulated in the Fatal Accidents Act of 1976, precedents set in previous cases and the individual circumstances of the 70 victims identified so far."

It added, "If the courts find someone was wrongfully killed, the claim categories are a flat £12,980 pounds per victim for bereavement, costs such as funeral bills, dependency damages where minors or dependent spouses are left behind, and property damage—all to be paid by the party found responsible.

"Under the 1976 law, only family members who were supported by those who died can claim dependency damages. Reuters has identified only five people who

died leaving dependents who could definitely claim damages—on the basis they were financially dependent on the deceased."

The process of distributing the money from the auction to survivors exposed the inadequacy of charity as a solution.

Heller and McAlpine have talked about their search for a charity that would ensure all of the money went to the families. Some of the charities they approached said they would take up to a quarter of the money raised in administrative fees. Finally they found the Rugby Portobello Trust, who were already working with survivors and their families, and who will ensure all the money will be divided among the families by mid-December.



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