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Art News

Gillian Wearing, *Real Birmingham Family*



Gillian Wearing Immortalises Real Birmingham Family In New Public Sculpture

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The Turner Prize winning artist Gillian Wearing has used a 'Real Birmingham Family' as the subject for a new public sculpture which was unveiled outside the city's main library today. The project co-ordinated by the Ikon Gallery was a four-year labour of love, a quest to find a 'real' Birmingham family and immortalise them in bronze.

The project draws attention to the unsung, raising questions about civic identity and what constitutes a family today. During 2011/12, residents were urged to nominate their families to be the face of Birmingham. Ikon toured to many different locations within the city and over 350 families responded. No limits were placed on how the twenty-first century family might define itself and nominations included groups of friends, extended families and people living alone.

IKON

In 2013 a diverse panel of community, cultural and religious figures chose a shortlist of four – the Clarke family, the Hancox/Treadwell family, the Hay/Wooldridge family and the Jones family – following discussions on what constitutes a Birmingham family: multiple generations, friendship and diversity as well as evidential links to the city. These families formed the core of an exhibition presented in the BBC Birmingham Public Space at The Mailbox in summer 2013.

Wearing works across a wide range of media including photography, video, performance and sculpture, often drawing on social, personal and political sources to create a visual language that shows the many sides of contemporary life. Her work is characterised by an engagement with the lives of others and her own family history.

The concept for A Real Birmingham Family developed from a past project Wearing undertook in Italy, A Typical Trentino Family (2008), where a local family was selected to be immortalised in a bronze sculpture. During the process the artist worked with statisticians who gave her the break down of what the typical family in Trento consisted of; their definitions of a family were surprisingly wide-ranging and included one person living alone. Wearing found this an inclusive way of regarding family and applied it to the search in Birmingham. Wearing explains:

I really liked how Roma and Emma Jones spoke of their closeness as sisters and how they supported each other, it seemed a very strong bond, one of friendship and family, and the sculpture puts across that connectedness between them. A nuclear family is one reality but it is one of many and this work celebrates the idea that what constitutes a family should not be fixed.

Stuart Tulloch, curator at Ikon, stated: The variety of nominations to A Real Birmingham Family has shown to us that whilst the traditional, nuclear family may no longer be the norm, the ties that bind us together are as strong as ever. The sculpture will draw attention to the everyday and the unsung; a lasting memorial to the people of Birmingham who are the life-blood of our city.

Councillor Ian Ward, deputy leader of Birmingham City Council, stated: The A Real Birmingham Family sculpture reflects the many ways in which people live their family lives in the city today. I hope it will provoke discussion and challenge preconceptions, which is such an important function of public art.