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U.K. Election Artist Nicky Hirst Reflects on 'Fractured and Febrile' Campaign

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Boris Johnson's Conservative Party won an overwhelming majority in yesterday's U.K. General Election despite the efforts of artists such as Anish Kapoor and Antony Gormley, who came out publicly in support of Labour.



Nicky Hirst. Courtesy the artist. Photo: intherightlight photography.

Official U.K. General Election Artist Nicky Hirst couldn't comment on the result—the role requires her to remain neutral and politically balanced—but after attending manifesto launches, political debates, hustings events, and canvassing by all the participating parties, she had a strong sense of how the electorate was feeling in the lead up to the election.

'The words I kept hearing were fractured and febrile,' she said.

The London-based multimedia artist, who is represented by Domo Baal gallery, said experiencing the election campaign as an artist had both pluses and minuses.

'As an "outsider" being surrounded by people who are unanimously in agreement is an extraordinary and sometimes uncomfortable feeling,' she said.

'Happily, I have always subscribed to the Groucho Marx quote, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member", so I found having to remain neutral in these situations interesting, liberating, and useful.'

Her outsider status as an artist was especially valuable because the electorate was so polarised.

'As an artist, I could be objective and listen without having to think about my personal response or how to react,' she said. 'I think just hearing and trying not to judge helps hone one's own feelings of empathy. I loved it.'

Hirst was appointed official General Election Artist by the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art. She is the sixth artist to hold the title, following in the footsteps of Jonathan Yeo (2001), David Godbold (2005), Simon Roberts (2010), Adam Dant (2015), and Cornelia Parker (2017).



Images from the electionartist2019 Instagram feed. Courtesy Nicky Hirst.

As part of her role, Hirst has been posting regularly to the electionartist2019 Instagram account in recent weeks. An 'X' motif, found in brickwork, wrought iron, door frames, and elsewhere, appears again and again.

'For me the ubiquitous "X" is many things—a literal symbol for voting and making your mark, a symbol that alerts you to something that needs fixing, like a broken paving stone or window, [and] a shape that provides strength to a structure,' she said.

The discovery of these visual puns is a major thread in the artist's work. *Elemental 147* (2014), for instance, rhymes Jane Goodall's bent leg in a photograph and the closed jaws of a dolphin, while a set of photographs in her 2019 series 'Always One Team'—capturing daily life at Great Ormond Street Hospital—juxtaposes a child's drawing of an elephant with a bannister mount that resembles the animal.



Nicky Hirst, *Elemental 147* (2014), paired pages. Courtesy the artist.

While the election is over, Hirst's job as official U.K. General Election Artist is not yet done. She will create a work responding to the election that will be acquired by the Parliamentary Art Collection that will go on public display in Westminster Hall in 2020.

'For this commission, my opinion about the result really doesn't matter, as the work will be about the process. I see my role as responding to the feeling, temperature, tenor, and tone of the electorate—though it will be interesting to see if my personal opinion becomes apparent in the final piece,' she said. 'As yet, I really have no idea what I will create.'

Having experienced the election up close, Hirst has no desire to enter politics herself.

'Seeing the democratic electoral process in action has made me thankful for our system but even more thankful that I am an artist and not a politician. There appears to be very little room for ambiguity, serendipity, mistakes, playfulness, and poetry in politics.'