

The Art Works Gallery CIC

Director's Report 2024–25

Reporting Period: 1 October 2024– 30 September 2025

Report Created by Director Kayleigh Cruickshank



Our Purpose and Vision

The ArtWorksGallery CIC exists to create ambitious, professional platforms for artists with learning disabilities and/or who are autistic.

We believe disabled artists should be visible, valued and embedded within contemporary culture. Our role is to create the conditions for artists to develop creatively, professionally and publicly, whilst contributing meaningfully to the cultural life of our towns and cities. We work at the intersection of art, community and social change, ensuring these artists are not marginalised but celebrated as serious cultural contributors.

We are not defined by charity or social care work we exist to recognise disabled artists as essential voices within the cultural landscape. Our work challenges assumptions, shifts perceptions and creates space for talent to flourish without compromise.



A Year Defined by Creative Confidence



The 2024–2025 year marked one of the most confident and creatively ambitious periods in the organisation's history.



This report documents a year in which quality, visibility and creative confidence came together to create lasting impact.



This balance of ambition and consolidation enabled us to deliver work that was both artistically strong and publicly visible. Artists did not just participate, they were leading, making decisions and representing themselves as professional practitioners. This resulted in personal and professional growth for the artists. The work reached diverse audiences, occupied civic spaces and demonstrated that disability-led art belongs firmly within mainstream contemporary culture.



Rather than focusing solely on growth in volume, this year artistic quality, impact and sustainability were prioritised. Across exhibitions, installations, film, festivals and live events, our artists produced work that was bold, distinctive and emotionally resonant. At the same time, the organisation strengthened leadership, systems and staffing to ensure creativity could flourish within a stable, supportive structure.



Exhibitions and Installations: Art That Held Its Ground Beyond the Spectrum–Imperial,Rotherham

Beyond the Spectrum presented abstract and expressive works that challenged assumptions about art created by people who have a learning disability and/or who are autistic. Rather than explaining or framing the work through diagnosis or support needs, the exhibition positioned artists firmly as contemporary practitioners.

The exhibition was successful because it trusted the audience and the work. Visitors were invited to engage on aesthetic and emotional terms, allowing the artwork to speak for itself. This approach reinforced the message that disabled artists are contributors to contemporary visual culture, not a separate category within it.



The critical reception to the work was overwhelmingly positive. Audience dwell time was significant, as people stayed to view the work, and ask questions about technique, materials and artistic intention in the same way they would ask of any contemporary artist. Several pieces were acquired by collectors, further validating the work's place within the broader art market.



Cabinet of Curiosities - ArtBomb, Doncaster



Material Exploration

Artists worked with repurposed materials, including obsolete technology and everyday objects, creating intricate sculptural and collage-based works that transformed the mundane into the extraordinary.

Themes of Memory

The exhibition explored collection, repetition, personal symbolism and the ways in which we attach meaning to objects. Each work became a repository of individual narrative and emotional significance.

The success of this exhibition lay in its balance of playfulness and rigour. Strong curatorial framing encouraged audiences to slow down and look closely, resulting in deeper engagement. Rather than overwhelming viewers with volume, the exhibition created intimate moments of discovery.

Visitor feedback consistently highlighted the "unexpected sophistication" and "remarkable attention to detail" within the work. This recognition affirmed that when given proper platforms and professional presentation, disabled artists produce work that stands alongside any contemporary practice.

Floating Giants – The Deep, Hull

Exhibiting at The Deep represented a significant milestone

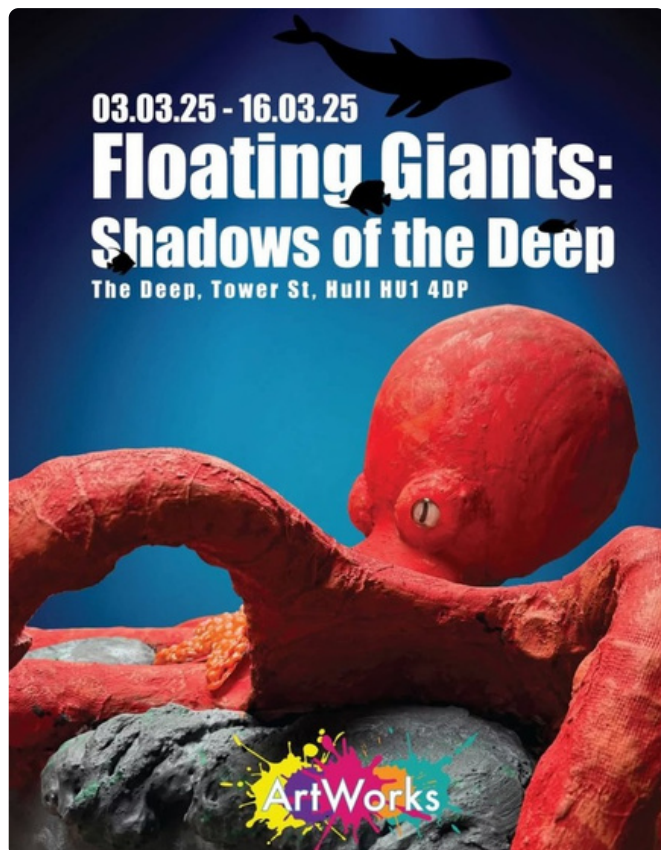
for the organisation. Presenting work within a major public attraction placed our artists in front of a broad, non-specialist audience numbering in the thousands.

The exhibition succeeded because of its visual confidence. The work held its own within a historic venue due to the scale, colour and form, where visitors might usually only spend moments with each piece. Artists rose to this challenge, creating works that commanded attention and rewarded both quick glances and sustained viewing.

This placement demonstrated that disability-led art can succeed in mainstream cultural venues without special framing or educational justification. The work simply belonged there.



- ❑ **Visitor Impact:** The exhibition reached over 15,000 visitors during its run, many of whom had never previously encountered disability-led contemporary art in a mainstream cultural setting.



Collaboration and Exchange:

BRILLIANT PEOPLE LIKE US! with Get Crafty

This year marked a significant collaborative milestone with Get Crafty, a dynamic disabled-led arts organisation based at the historic 20-21 Visual Arts Centre in Scunthorpe, North Lincolnshire. Get Crafty is a weekly art meet-up for adults with a disability. Their mission, much like ours, centres on empowering disabled artists to explore, create, and exhibit their work, fostering a vibrant and inclusive artistic community. This partnership was a natural alignment of shared values, aiming to amplify the voices of disabled artists across the region.

The collaboration began as an art exchange project, where the groups acted like "pen pals," communicating primarily through art rather than words. Six artists from Art Works South Yorkshire visited Get Crafty to initiate the partnership. Over the coming months, both groups collaborated intensively to produce artworks for each other, culminating in the joint exhibition titled "BRILLIANT PEOPLE LIKE US!" The exhibition featured a diverse collection of films, sculptures, and other artwork, exploring themes of identity, memory, and perception. The curatorial approach highlighted the unique perspectives and innovative techniques employed by artists from both organisations, fostering a powerful dialogue between their respective practices.



"BRILLIANT PEOPLE LIKE US!" proved to be a resounding success, drawing a substantial audience that included local art enthusiasts, community leaders, and critics. Visitors praised the exhibition for its thought-provoking content and the high calibre of the artwork.

This collaboration not only expanded the reach of both organisations but also demonstrated the profound impact that joint initiatives can have on promoting diversity and inclusion within the arts sector, setting a precedent for future partnerships.

Artist Development: Residency at Yorkshire Art Space

This year, we significantly deepened our commitment to artist development through an impactful residency programme at Yorkshire Art Space. This initiative provided a crucial platform for our artists to immerse themselves in a dedicated creative environment, fostering significant growth in their practice and professional confidence.

The residency at Yorkshire Art Space was a strategic move to further develop and strengthen our partnership with other established creative arts organisations. This collaboration facilitated invaluable peer-to-peer learning, mentoring opportunities, and access to state-of-the-art facilities, which are essential for disabled artists to thrive and gain recognition within the wider arts community.



Enhanced Creative Skills

Artists explored new mediums, techniques, and theoretical approaches, pushing the boundaries of their artistic expression. The dedicated studio time allowed for focused experimentation and the creation of ambitious new works.



Professional Networking

Participants engaged with a diverse community of artists, curators, and arts professionals, forging connections that are opening doors to future exhibitions, commissions, and collaborations within the sector - including ArtWorks Together International Festival.



The success of this residency underscores our belief that providing dedicated time, space, and resources, coupled with strong organisational partnerships, is fundamental to nurturing disabled artists and ensuring their impactful contribution to contemporary culture.

Public Art and Civic Visibility

Learning Disability Week: Sheffield and Barnsley



Large-Scale Sunflower Installation

For Learning Disability Week, artists created a large-scale sunflower installation at Barnsley Civic, complemented by an art trail across Kelham Island in Sheffield. These public and celebratory works occupied public spaces, moving beyond confinement to specialist settings.



Strategic Public Presence

The decision to work in the Civic, outside Sheffield Town Hall, at festivals, and by running free workshops while inviting other groups to do workshops was strategic. Instead of requiring people to seek out the work, we brought it directly into everyday environments where communities gather, work, and pass through. This visibility is crucial; it normalises the presence of disabled artists within public life and challenges the assumption that learning disability art only belongs in care settings or specialist venues.



Significant Public Engagement

ArtWorks also opened

Learning Disability Week at the Town Hall in Sheffield, alongside council leader Tom Hunt and social services. All installations and events generated significant public engagement and social media reach, with thousands encountering the work organically as part of their daily routines. This kind of integration where art becomes part of the fabric of life is precisely the shift we intend to create. We lead for others to follow.



Bright Nights and Live Programming

Bright Nights Barnsley was a major public realm event that enabled the artists to experiment, present work publicly and engage new audiences. The Bright Nights model facilitated creative risk-taking and live interaction, allowing artists to test ideas and develop their practice through public engagement.

Live Art Jams

Artists created work in real time whilst audiences watched, asked questions and participated in creative activities alongside them.

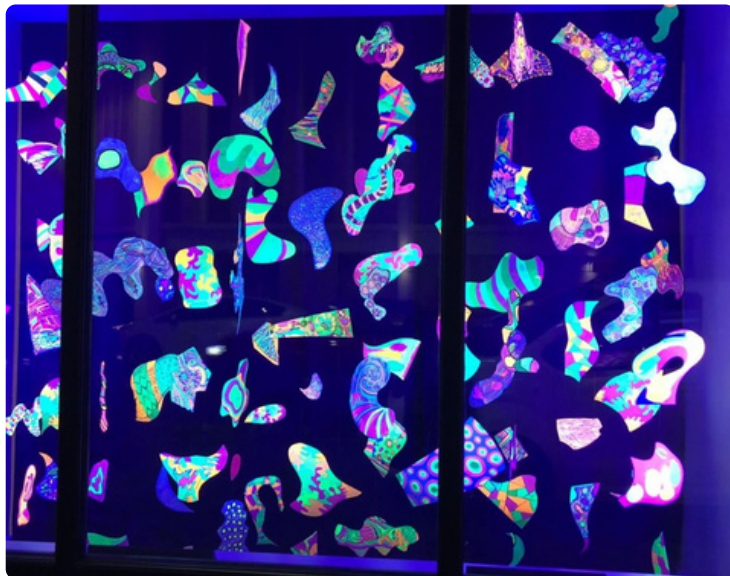
Performance Nights

Evenings combining visual art, music, spoken word and movement, showcasing the breadth of creative talent within the artist community.

Experimental Work

A supportive environment for trying new techniques, materials and collaborative approaches without the pressure of formal exhibition contexts.

These events served multiple purposes. For artists, they provided low-stakes opportunities to develop confidence in public presentation and direct audience interaction. For audiences, they offered insights into creative processes and the chance to engage with artists as individuals rather than through curated exhibition labels. For the organisation, they built community, generated energy and kept programming dynamic and responsive.





Murals and Community Commissions

Murals were delivered at DenbyGrangeColliers Club, A Lick ofPaint Festival, and including the unveiling of the Chapeltown Mural at the train station, enabling artists to work at scale within shared public environments. These commissions required collaboration, planning and technical skill—all valuable professional experiences that expanded artists' capabilities and confidence.

Importantly, these were not "community art projects" in the traditional sense. They were paid commissions delivered by professional artists who happened to be disabled. This distinction matters enormously in how the work is perceived and valued.

Denby Grange Colliers Club

A vibrant mural commission that transformed a community space whilst celebrating local heritage and the creative contributions of disabled artists to neighbourhood identity.

A Lick of Paint Festival

Artists worked at scale within shared public environments, gaining experience in large-format techniques and collaborative street art processes alongside established muralists.

Kelham Island Deli

A collaborative mural project at the vibrant Kelham Island Deli, reflecting the area's industrial heritage and creative community spirit. This commission highlighted the artists' ability to integrate their vision into commercial spaces.

AS Music School, Sheffield

A new commission bringing artistic flair to the AS Music School in Sheffield, enhancing its environment and visibility within the local community.

Thorpe Hesley School - Storybook Chair

Work on the Storybook Chair commission for Thorpe Hesley School, a unique project designed to inspire creativity and reading, with its unveiling planned for next year.



Film and Moving Image: Artists as Storytellers

A Tale of Swords and Smoke

This ambitious film project culminated in public screenings and wider release following its festival circuit. The film demonstrated artists' abilities to work within structured narrative forms whilst maintaining creative control over storytelling.

The production process itself was as valuable as the finished work. Artists participated in scripting, performance, direction and post-production feedback, gaining insight into professional filmmaking processes. Several artists spoke publicly about their work at screenings, articulating their creative intentions with clarity and confidence.

The film's success on the festival circuit validated the quality of the work and opened doors for future moving image commissions. Having the chance to take some of the cast and crew to Oskara Bright Film Festival to accept an award and then feature in numerous local news channels was a great achievement for our artists that we intend to replicate in the future.



A Dream Come True – Christmas Film

Development Phase

Artists contributed ideas, developed characters and shaped the narrative structure through collaborative workshops and creative sessions.

Public Screening

The finished film premiered to a packed audience, with artists present to discuss their work and creative process with viewers.

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Production

Working within a professional production framework, artists gained experience in planning, rehearsal, technical direction and on-set protocols.

A Dream Come True offered artists the opportunity to work on a festive-themed project that balanced creative ambition with accessible storytelling. The production demonstrated that disabled artists can deliver work across genres and formats, from experimental art film to narrative entertainment.

The Christmas theme also allowed the work to reach family audiences, many of whom had limited prior exposure to creative work developed by learning disabled and / or autistic artists. Feedback indicated that parents and children alike were moved by the film's warmth, humour and emotional responses, grounded in the quality of the storytelling.



Festivals, Events and Live Creative Work: Thorpe Hesley Gala

The first Thorpe Hesley Gala welcomed over 500 visitors and marked a significant cultural moment for the community. The event combined exhibitions, live art, performances and family activities, creating a festival atmosphere that celebrated creativity whilst strengthening community connections.

Community Reach

- Over 500 attendees
- Multi-generational audience
- First-time visitors to learning disabled and/or autistic art
- Strong local media coverage

Artist Participation

- Live demonstrations
- Public speaking opportunities
- Direct sales and commissions
- Peer networking and collaboration

Cultural Impact

- Established annual tradition
- Strengthened local partnerships
- Increased organisational visibility
- Platform for future programming

The Gala succeeded because it refused to compromise on quality whilst remaining genuinely welcoming and accessible. This balance is difficult to achieve but essential. The Thorpe Hesley Gala achieved the right balance of celebratory, professional and community-focused all at once, with the substance to demonstrate the artists' capabilities and the lightness to engage audiences of all ages. It also demonstrated the value ArtWorks can bring to project partners like Rotherham Children's Capital of Culture, who took part in this inclusive family event, and funded a young photographer from ArtWorks to capture the day.



Nourishing Communities: Blend at the Food Hall and S6 Foodbank

This year, we extended our commitment to community engagement and artist development through two impactful food-related initiatives: a partnership at Blend at Cambridge Street Collective and a vital collaboration with S6 Foodbank. These projects provided our artists with unique opportunities to develop culinary and social enterprise skills while contributing directly to local community welfare.



Blend at Cambridge Street Collective (Skills Development)

Through a unique partnership with Blend at Cambridge Street Collective, Europe's largest food hall, our artists engaged in a comprehensive skills development programme. Working alongside Blend's culinary experts, artists learned food preparation, hygiene, customer service, and an introduction to financial management. This immersive experience was designed to offer new vocational skills, presenting a practical pathway for artists to develop capabilities beyond traditional art forms within a professional culinary environment.



S6 Foodbank Partnership

Building on the culinary skills honed at Blend, our artists partnered with S6 Foodbank to prepare and distribute nutritious, ready-to-eat meals for vulnerable individuals and families. This initiative provided a tangible way for artists to give back, transforming their creative talents into direct social impact. The experience instilled a strong sense of purpose and collective responsibility, demonstrating how artistic practice can intertwine with vital community support.



Both projects underscored the versatility of our artists and the transformative power of art and community collaboration. They not only developed new professional skills but also built stronger connections within the local community, breaking down barriers and establishing a greater understanding of disability-led contributions.

National Recognition: House of Commons Visit

Art WorksGalleryCICwas profoundlyhonoured to receive nationalacclaim, culminating in an invitation to theHouse of Commons. This followed on from winning the National Xero Award for our dedicated and impactful community work. The award underscored our commitment to fostering inclusive artistic practice and highlighted the far-reaching positive effects of our projects across the UK.

National Acclaim

The National Xero Award provided significant validation for our community-focused initiatives, elevating our profile on a national stage.

Policy Advocacy

Direct engagement with MPs at the House of Commons allowed us to champion the cause of disabled artists and influence future cultural policy discussions.

Strategic Connections

The visit facilitated crucial networking opportunities, forging relationships with influential individuals and potential partners eager to support our vision.

During our visit to the House of Commons, we had the invaluable opportunity to engage directly with Members of Parliament. This platform allowed us to eloquently articulate our mission, showcase the transformative power of disability-led art, and advocate for greater support and recognition for disabled artists. The reception was overwhelmingly positive, validating our approach and fostering connections with influential figures who expressed genuine interest in our work and its potential for wider policy influence.

Speaking at this event was more than just an acknowledgement of past achievements; it was a powerful catalyst for future growth, reinforcing our position as a leading voice for disabled artists and cementing our role in shaping a more inclusive arts landscape.



Artists at the Centre

Throughout the year, artists consistently demonstrated growing independence, professionalism and creative ambition. This shift was visible across multiple dimensions of practice.

Artists sold work directly to collectors and members of the public, negotiating prices and discussing their practice with confidence. Several artists developed ongoing relationships with buyers, leading to commissioned pieces and repeat sales. This economic validation and the willingness of people to pay for the work represents a crucial form of recognition.

Artists also spoke publicly about their practice at exhibition openings, panel discussions and community events. These opportunities to articulate creative intentions, discuss influences and describe working methods positioned artists as serious practitioners engaged in critical dialogue about their work.



110+

Artists Supported

Individual artists actively engaged in programming throughout the year

165+

**Professional
Artworks Created**

Original pieces produced across exhibitions, installations and commissions

35

Pieces acquired by collectors, validating artists' professional standing

**25+^{Public}
Presentations**

Opportunities for artists to speak about their work to diverse audiences

Perhaps most significantly, artists developed greater agency within the organisation itself. They contributed to programming decisions, curatorial discussions and strategic planning. This involvement ensures the organisation remains genuinely artist-led rather than simply artist-focused, a distinction that fundamentally shapes our culture, priorities and impact.

Staffing, Leadership and Creative Capacity

During the reporting period, the organisation made substantial investments in staffing and capacity, recognising that ambitious creative programming requires robust infrastructure and skilled support.

11

New Staff Members

Recruited across artistic, administrative and support functions

5

New Freelancers

Engaged for specialist skills in curation, film production and technical delivery

7

New Roles Created

Expanding capacity in areas including public engagement, digital communications and artistic development

This investment directly underpinned the success of the creative programme. Without sufficient staffing, artistic ambition becomes unsustainable. Projects collapse under administrative burden, quality suffers and opportunities are missed.

The expansion also enabled greater specialisation. Rather than asking small teams to cover impossibly broad remits, the organisation could deploy focused expertise where needed—curatorial knowledge for exhibitions, technical skills for film production, community engagement capacity for public events.

Importantly, staffing growth included disabled and neurodivergent staff members and people with lived experience of learning disability and autism. This representation ensures the organisation's culture, decision-making and values remain grounded in authentic understanding rather than external assumptions about what disabled artists need or want.

Investing in people is investing in quality. The creative achievements documented in this report were only possible because skilled, committed staff created the conditions for artists to thrive.



Building Sustainable Capacity



Commitment to Quality

Investing in people is investing in quality. The creative achievements documented in this report were only possible because skilled, committed staff created the conditions for artists to thrive, fostering an environment where innovation and accessibility could flourish hand-in-hand.

Enhanced Project Delivery

This strategic approach to capacity building had a profound impact on project delivery. With dedicated specialists and sufficient hands-on support, artists were able to execute their visions with greater precision and professionalism. Projects that previously might have been too complex or resource-intensive became feasible, leading to more ambitious and impactful outcomes across all programming areas.



Operational Excellence

The new roles enhanced overall organisational effectiveness by streamlining workflows, improving communication between departments, and ensuring that every aspect of the creative process from concept to public presentation was supported by expert knowledge. This created a more robust and resilient infrastructure, capable of supporting a higher volume and complexity of artistic projects.

Place-Based Growth and Reputation

Barnsley, Sheffield and Rotherham all strengthened their roles as creative and community hubs, each developing distinct identities whilst contributing to a coherent regional presence.



Rother ham

Consolidated as the organisation's flagship site, hosting major exhibitions, the annual Gala and acting as the central hub for artistic development and professional programming.



Sheffield

Expanded community engagement and public visibility through the Kelham Island art trail and partnerships with established cultural venues, hosting Beyond the Spectrum.



Barnsley

Developed as an experimental and community-focused space, working in partnership with a range of local groups and organisations. Neon Garden strengthened civic relationships.



Place-Based Growth

This place-based approach matters enormously. Rather than concentrating resources in a single location, the organisation's distributed model ensures artists and communities across the region can access high quality programming. It also builds reputation and resilience; multiple sites mean multiple partnerships and audiences, reducing dependency on a single location or set of relationships.

Raised Reputation

Seen as a serious creative force

Cultural Invitations

Invited to exhibitions and collaborations



Local Authority Recognition

Stronger relationships with councils

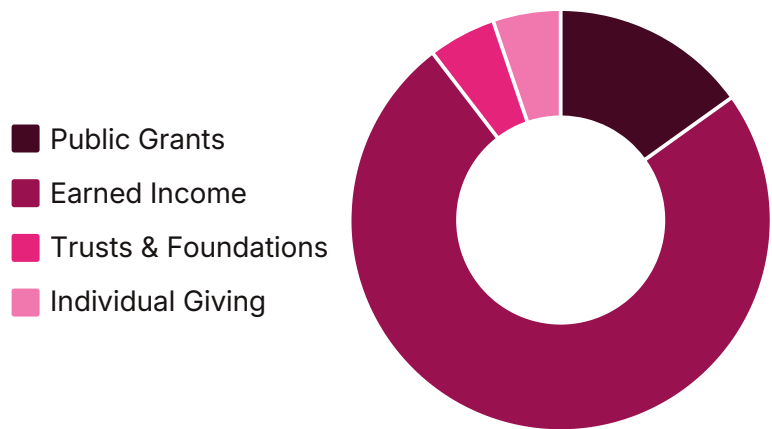
New Opportunities

Access to projects and funding streams

Financial Sustainability and Strategic Partnerships

The organisation's financial position remained stable throughout the reporting period, supported by diverse income streams including Arts Council England funding, local authority grants, earned income from sales and commissions, and philanthropic support.

Diversification of income is critical for sustainability. Over-reliance on any single funder or revenue stream creates vulnerability. The organisation deliberately pursues multiple funding sources, ensuring that creative programming can continue even if individual funding relationships change.



Strategic Partnerships

Arts Council England

Working towards National Portfolio Organisation status provides core funding and strategic support, enabling long-term planning and artistic ambition.

Local Authorities

Partnerships with Barnsley, Sheffield and Rotherham Local Authorities support place based programming and civic engagement initiatives.

Cultural Venues

Increased relationships with cultural venues have created exhibition opportunities and expanded audience reach beyond specialist networks.

Community Organisations

Grassroots partnerships ensure programming remains connected to local needs, priorities and voices, whilst building inclusive creative ecosystems.

These partnerships are built on mutual respect and shared values. The organisation is interested in partnerships that position learning disabled and/or artists with autism as contributors to culture rather than beneficiaries of charity. This principle occasionally means turning down funding or opportunities, but it protects the integrity of the work and the dignity of the artists we support.

Looking Ahead

TheArt WorksGallery CICmoves forward with confidence, creative momentum and ambition. The foundations built during 2024–25 position the organisation to expand impact, deepen artistic practice and continue to challenge perceptions about disability and creativity.

01

Expand National Reach

Develop partnerships and exhibition opportunities beyond Yorkshire, positioning our artists within national conversations about contemporary art and disability culture.

03

Strengthen Digital Presence

Invest in digital platforms, applications and virtual programming to reach audiences who cannot access physical venues whilst creating archival resources. Updating all of our websites.

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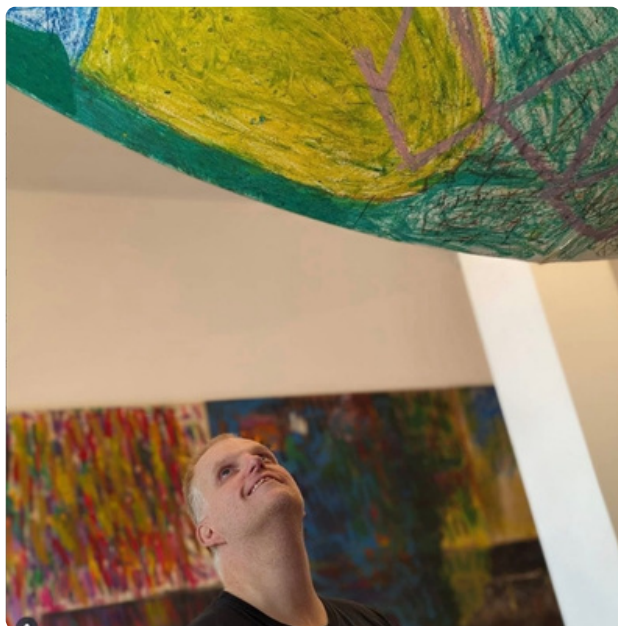
Deepen Artistic Development

Increase support for individual artists to develop specialised practices, pursue further training and access professional networks that accelerate creative growth.

04

Build Sector Leadership

Share learning, advocate for systemic change and mentor emerging disability-led arts organisations, contributing to wider cultural transformation.



The future is not without challenges. Funding environments remain uncertain, cost pressures continue and the cultural sector faces ongoing transformation. However, the organisation enters this period from a position of strength artistically confident, financially stable and widely respected.

Most importantly, artists themselves are leading the way forward. Their creative ambition, growing independence and commitment to excellence drive everything we do. As long as artists remain at the centre of decision-making, the organisation will continue creating work that matters—work that challenges, inspires and demonstrates the essential place of disabled artists within contemporary culture.

"Disabled artists are not a problem to be solved or a gap to be filled. They are essential voices within contemporary culture, and our role is simply to ensure those voices are heard."

— Kayleigh Cruickshank, Director

Director's Statement

This has been a year of remarkable creative achievement, organisational growth and deepening impact. I am profoundly proud of what our artists have accomplished and grateful to the staff, partners and supporters who made this work possible.

The Art Works Gallery CIC exists because learning disabled and/or autistic artists deserve the same opportunities, platforms and recognition as any other creative practitioners. This report demonstrates what becomes possible when we commit to that principle—not as rhetoric, but as practice embedded in every decision we make.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this year's success. Your belief in our artists and our mission creates the conditions for excellence to flourish.

Kayleigh Cruickshank

Director, The Art Works Gallery CIC

30 September 2025

