

A PAINT BRUSH WITH THE LAW

ALL OF HUMAN LIFE IS PRESENT IN OUR COURTS. WHY NOT HUMANISE THEM FOR THE PUBLIC?

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Alice Kettle's textile hangings at the Scottish High Court depict daily court life. Photo: JOE LOW

Next week the Rolls Building on Fetter Lane in London will start preparing the ground for an installation by the artist Sophie Arkette. The sculpture, the first of its kind in the home of the Chancery Division, the Admiralty and Commercial Court and the Technology and Construction Court, will be unveiled in the autumn and the Rolls Building Art & Education Trust (RBAET) is staying tight-lipped about the subject matter of its commission. By all accounts it will be controversial.

That, perhaps, is how it should be. Courts are the public cockpit for human drama – often tragic, sometimes comic. And in the highest courts the biggest issues are tested by some of our most disciplined creative thinkers. So, it is

right that there is a growing interest in putting art into these great tribunals of people. “We are in the vanguard of those public buildings displaying art for the benefit of the visiting public,” says Geoffrey Bond, the chairman of the RBAET.

Arkette has the track record of producing powerful art within a legal context, notably in the form of glass sculptures that carry etched and sandblasted text. She has spoken at a conference in Oxford about human enhancement and the law and has written about intellectual property law for the Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities. More recently she was artist in residence at Cambridge University’s Centre of Intellectual property and Information Law and has an established reputation as a maker and thinker about law.

However, art in the courts can also be about simple human experience of being part of the justice system. The artist Alice Kettle was commissioned to produce a series of large-scale textiles hangings for the atrium when the Scottish High Court in Lawnmarket, Edinburgh, was refurbished. What she developed was site-specific and responded to a detailed briefing from the court managers of what they wanted. “That was an important starting point in shaping how I responded to the space,” she says. “I saw it as a meeting place with people coming in from outside who were new to the court, especially jurors and the members of the public involved in a case.”

“it might be the only time in their lives that they would come into the court, and yet it was going to be enormously significant for them. And then there were those who were using it daily, including the lawyers and the court staff. I was very aware of the theatricality of life being played out in this building.”

The resulting textiles showed jurors banked up as if they were sitting in the various levels of the theatre, a judge sitting on high, and then other images including life outside the court on a rainy Edinburgh day. The pieces were bold, brightly coloured. And slightly cartoonish so as not to be noticed at a distance, while rendering more detail as the viewer draws near. “the piece had to be non-threatening, as a way of mediating the space, given that many people going thought he atrium would be in a highly charged condition,” Kettle says, “we were trying to humanise the space.”

Kettle also draws attention to the importance of having a maintenance plan when commissioning art. “You should not just put it on the wall and forget about it,” she says. Of course, not all the art in the courts has been commissioned for purpose. The RBAET has work from a number of sources, including the collection of legal prints of Nicholas Chambers, QC, and the Scrutton memorabilia, from the family of Thomas Edward Scrutton, who helped develop the Commercial Court jurisdiction. What is incredibly popular is for courts to play host to temporary exhibitions. The Supreme Court Arts Trust (SCAT) hosted Where Modern Justice Lives in 2016, featuring architectural photographs of the contemporary courtrooms from countries as varied as

South Africa, Singapore, the Netherlands and Albania. The same year the Koestler Trust curated the Paperwork exhibition at the court in conjunction with the charity Victim Support. “It is our intention to continue such activities in the future, in pursuit of better understanding of the work of the court and the rule of law in general,” says Mark Ormerod, the chief executive of the supreme Court.

Meanwhile, beyond London, the Plymouth Combined Courts recently put on the justice project in which HHJ Paul Darlow and HHJ Miranda Robertshaw worked closely with staff and students at the Plymouth College of Art to create a body of justice-related work that was then exhibited in waiting rooms in the court building. “The Justice Project has been a unique opportunity for students to experience at first-hand how artwork can impact on vulnerable witnesses, families and the public,” says Dr Stephen Felmingham, principal lecturer and programme leader.

Art will not soften any blows of the justice system, but it might make it more emotionally accessible.

Alice Kettle’s tips for commissioning

- Who is your audience?
- What do you want to say?
- How will you select your artist?
- In which space will it be placed?
- Have you the right scale of proportions for the space?
- What are the sightlines?
- Are the temperature and lighting suitable for the work?
- How accessible/vulnerable will it be in terms of height?
- What is your long-term care and maintenance plan?
- Do you have adequate sustainable budget?