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IT'S OUR ART SCHOOL!

A look at the youth-led Despacito

A GAMBLE THAT PAID OFF

Haeckels' HQ in a converted casino



▲ © Matthew Murphy

Writer
Twinkle Troughton

As the roots of an art school formed unconventionally in Cliftonville grow stronger, the future looks set to flourish thanks to the nurturing and dedication of those behind it, and of the students who attend

'IT'S OUR ART SCHOOL!'



▲ Colourful PPE, Doorstep Despacito 2020

In 2017 art school Open School East (OSE) moved into the ground floor of Resort Studios on Athelstan Road, a street rich in cultural diversity but also one of the UK's most deprived neighbourhoods. Within a matter of days local children were knocking curiously on the window. It's unlikely they foresaw what would follow: the formation of a free art school all of their very own.

It was OSE employee Ayaan Bulale who invited their intrigued neighbours inside for a tour, wanting to ensure the school was welcoming to local residents. Ayaan, who was the school's events manager, recalls how during that initial tour the children declared, "We love art. We want lessons." And so, rather unconventionally, Despacito Art School was established because the children demanded it.

Starting out as a six-week programme, Despacito now runs

throughout the year, providing opportunities for five to 12-year-olds to learn new skills and develop creatively. To date, the impressive range of projects have included creating a soundscape with electronic musician Sarasara for Margate Carnival, making a zombie film with artist Heather Tait, and making a series of short-stop motion films with performance company 1927. OSE alumni have also overseen projects, introducing techniques such as cyanotype, block-printing and instrument-making.

Alongside this clear focus on creative learning, there is also a code of excellence for the children to follow; kindness and helpfulness are emphasised, while violence and prejudice are condemned, bringing the children together as one team. At the start of each lesson, the children must also declare, "I will be the best artist I can be." Ayaan explains: "This last rule

is one the kids have to shout at the top of their lungs. I want them to feel it in their bodies, I want the vibration of the shouting to inspire ownership of their artwork. I want them to feel it in their soul."

This notion of the children's ownership is key to how the school runs. When asked about the name Despacito, Ayaan, who is continually eager to point out this is the kids' school, says, "When the school was set up, the song 'Despacito' by Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee was all over the airwaves. The children loved it and decided to call their programme Despacito, which means slowly. It felt like it was meant to be."

Ayaan has recently announced she will be standing down from her role at Despacito, as she will be relocating to Sweden for the foreseeable future. However Ayaan's unwavering energy for the project has helped ►



▲ Despacito making clay pots with Coral Brookes, © Louis Palfrey 2019

“I learned not to be shy any more. I learned not to be shy outside. Actually, I am now really confident to do things”

Bruno, aged 11

“It’s our art school”

Maria, aged 11

Despacito become a firm part of the OSE agenda. Polly Brannan, OSE’s newly appointed director, has been devising a progressive vision for the whole of OSE, a vision she very much sees Despacito being integral to. Polly says, “We strongly believe that every child has the right to access free art, education and cultural experiences. Art must be part of everyday life and

accessible to all, and children need outlets for creativity to carve out a future for themselves.”

Polly has plans to bring nature to the forefront of Despacito, seeing it as an essential tool for healing following lockdown. Their current programme Garden Art at Garden Gate, inspired by forest school methodologies, will see the children partaking in practical and



▲ Courtesy of Despacito

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collaborative workshops at the Garden Gate, led by multi-disciplinary artist Jason Evans.

Polly also sees it as a priority for the school to involve the families of the children they are working with. She explains: “The Despacito artists speak eight or nine different languages among themselves. Many of the families are dual heritage, such as Afro-Caribbean and English, Zimbabwean, Roma Slovak, Roma Czech and Bulgarian. It’s vital they have a voice here in Margate. By working with these children and their families, we hope to support them in ensuring further integration into the local community. As the arts ecology grows here in Margate, we must ensure that our young people and children do not get left behind.”

And their intentions to continue expanding Despacito’s outreach don’t stop there, with ambitions to include wider communities and people from even more different backgrounds, all the while creating connections, building confidence and putting the children and their families at the heart of Despacito.

You can support Despacito Art School’s ongoing work by donating to the Despacito Art School Fund via openschooleast.org/support



▲ Despacito camera-less photography and light sensitive emulsion making with Jason Evans at the Garden Gate Project, © Louis Palfrey 2021

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