

Stories of Home: The Northern Festival of Illustration

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Recommended Citation

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The Hartlepool Art Gallery may have just closed the curtains and dimmed the lights on this year's Northern Festival of Illustration, but its universal theme of "Stories of Home" leaves a lingering legacy. The biennial event, endorsed by the Association of Illustrators (AOI), now in its fourth season, invites illustrators and animators, both established and emerging, from around the world to enter this prestigious competition. The animation category was only introduced this year, sponsored by Oscar winning Aardman Studios!

Matt Burton, Festival Curator and Senior Lecturer in Illustration & Animation at The Northern School of Art explained, "The title "Stories of Home" emerged from the negative media coverage Hartlepool received following the riots of 2024. In a conscious effort to redirect the topic of national pride in a positive way, illustrators from around the world were encouraged to submit work that showed what home meant to them."

On entering the exhibition space, a former church, (blessed with an appetising Fair-Trade café) the clever curation of "Stories of Home" into subcategories becomes clear. Poignant themes of "What Makes a House a Home?" "Displacement and Alienation," "Motherhood" and "Childhood Fables" lead me, unsurprisingly, to "Family, Food and Culture." Was it the inviting, intense aroma of an Americano or the comforting crumble of buttery shortbread that steered my inevitable course?

Like an exciting assault on the senses, Fan Fan Hang's "Asian Food" leaps out at the viewer with its kaleidoscopic colours of culture in a vibrant, rhythmic composition. Moving from Asia to study illustration in London, the artist highly values food as a soothing remedy for homesickness, "Food became a way to connect, to build friendship and share warmth. "Asian Food" reflects this idea of food as a bridge between identity and shared joy." Resembling an entertaining child's floor mat map, the viewer is playfully guided from one gastronomic landmark to another, navigating a journey of mouth-watering food choices under the watchful eye of a dancing dragon!

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Fan Fan Hang's 'Asian Food' (photograph courtesy of Jenny Batchelor)

Attentive eyes gleam from another dining experience, this time in a joyful 3D representation of a mixed heritage banquet. TADO an established quirky cartoon inspired duo with a background in digital productions created "Sit Fan!", a homage to all their family members who spend hours lovingly preparing food for others to enjoy. This dynamic piece includes a generous table in abundance with pak choi, pineapple, pork pie, a tin of SPAM, a petrified prawn, a seductive duck sprawled on a bed of billowing lettuce leaves, not forgetting the splash and squirt of essential condiments, dark soy and tomato ketchup!

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TADO's 'Sit Fan!' (photograph courtesy of Jenny Batchelor)

The table covering, tiny reproductions of unpretentious tabloid newspapers and magazines allow for the magnificence of the feast to speak for itself. All the food items, with comedy googly eyes look like they are enjoying the festivity as much as the imminent party guests, (apart from the petrified prawn!) If only there was, “Any cheese, Gromit?” to accompany the crusty white loaf, two Aardman national treasures would not look out of place at this cracking spread!

Savouring the moment of the occasion summons images dusted with sugary scents of animal shaped birthday cakes; my Mam’s speciality “Harriet Hedgehog.” A decade before a certain controversial caterpillar was conceived, Harriet was a delicate dissection of spherical chocolate sponge adorned with chocolate buttons, hand cut in half, with precision, for spines. Often the celebration centre piece of our extensive, doily clad, 1970s sideboard accompanied by the Wellington fine bone China “Bluebell” tea service.

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A continuation of the titanic table theme is Ulrike Mieke's, delightful "Our Home, Our Kitchen, Our Table." Her fluid style depicts an extraordinarily long dining table, reminiscent of school dinner proportions, surrounded by family members interacting around a lively mealtime. Observing more closely, the artist is representing her family having many meals on different emotional occasions; some euphoric, others catastrophic but always calorific! Ulrike Mieke, an emerging freelance children's illustrator who has relocated to Brighton from her native South Africa explains, "Living far away from my family and my home is incredibly difficult, so being able to draw these special moments brings me a little closer to them."



Ulrike Mieke's 'Our Home, Our Kitchen, Our Table' (photograph courtesy of Jenny Batchelor)

Curiously, I am lured to a long display case containing six separate delicate drawings. "My Mum & Dementia" by Claudi Kessels beautifully illustrates the heartbreaking process of the gradual decline dementia inflicts on individuals, their families, and friends. The artist uses the familiar, comforting ritual of making a cup of tea to represent the reversal of roles from Mother, the care giver, to progressively becoming the cared for. Discreetly the colours diminish, as faculties faintly evaporate in kettleful clouds of steam.

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[Claudi Kessels 'My Mum & Dementia' \(photograph courtesy of Claudie Kessels' Instagram page\)](#)

“Stories of Home” can be accessed, navigated, and interpreted by the individual viewer on their terms. Displaying a spectrum of styles, using both experimental and traditional techniques this year’s exhibitors have interpreted the overarching theme in their unique manner whilst common anthropological threads weave through like a rich tapestry in a timeless translation.

The impact of The Northern Festival of Art has been a positive experience for both emerging and established artists whilst also gifting an optimistic view of the region. Promising new talent, Ulrike Mieke beams, “Having been selected is incredibly encouraging in what often feels like a very lonely and difficult industry to work in, it's a boost of confidence. I am hopeful that my involvement in this festival will hopefully open new doors for my work and future projects.”

Professional visual storyteller Fan Fan Hang enthuses, “Being part of The Northern Festival of Illustration was truly encouraging. It brought recognition to my work and, more importantly, allowed me to connect with many talented artists and creatives. Connections that continue to inspire my future projects.”

A testimony from Sheffield based commercial outfit TADO agrees, “It's been a lovely experience for us, and one that has allowed us to reconnect with people as well as encounter a lot of new people. It's really refreshing to have a festival of this quality and scale in this part of the world!”

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The eclectic array of entrants, their backgrounds, experiences, and lifestyles speak of the familiar we can empathise with and the remarkable we can learn from. Reflecting as the fading embers of the exhibition emit a final glow, I can only agree with the wise words of Faisal Hoque,

“Food is how we build connection, foster understanding, and create belonging. We don't need smarter kitchens. We need longer tables.”
(Psychology Today, May 2025.)

Waiting for the kettle to boil, I know in my heart Harriet will no longer be lovingly created by my Mam's now fragile fingers. I prepare her cup of tea; the best China cup and saucer now substituted for a spill proof plastic beaker. Wearing my cosiest pair of battered slippers, I click my heels together and softly reminisce,

“There's no taste like home, there's no taste like home, there's no taste like home!”

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