



It takes two: collaboration in the RA Schools

By Charlotte Jansen

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No artist is an island, as Charlotte Jansen found when she met students and their mentors at the RA's art school.

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Introduced by Curator and Head of the RA Schools Eliza Bonham-Carter

There are several reasons why artists apply to the [RA Schools](#). One important factor is the small number of students in each year-group, which allows a deep exchange of knowledge and a close-knit community in which to build critical and supportive relationships, both within the art school and across the RA. Another is the length of the programme which, at three years, is the longest postgraduate course of its kind in the U K.

With access to the sculpture, digital and print workshops and expertise across the RA Schools, some students' work changes form radically over the three years; in others, a quieter transformation will take place. But in either case, the work will evidence a condensing clarity of intention, formed in the fulcrum of this intense, intimate environment. The loss of this proximity and exchange necessitated by the RA's current closure is therefore felt particularly keenly by the student body.



In the case of the third-year students, some of whom you read about here, it affects their final show. It may be surprising to know that even before they apply candidates envisage their part in the RA Schools Show. Most will not be able to imagine how their work will manifest, but the idea of the show is strongly present. So it is with tears in my eyes that I read the interviews in this article, full of the community of the RA and redolent of the anticipation and raring-to-go for a final-year show so long in the making, yet no longer to take place in June as planned. What is sure, though, is that there will be an RA Schools Show 2020. The work of these students – [Clara](#), [Liv](#), [Olu](#) and [Tania](#) – will be exhibited. And the support of mentors like Leigh, Phil, Gonzalo, James and many others will prove all the more imperative.

Olu Ogunnaike and print tutor Leigh Clarke

"We've been to some dark places together and seen the light a few times," said Olu Ogunnaike, a student in his final year at the Royal Academy Schools. We were sitting in his studio at the RA alongside print tutor Leigh Clarke, surrounded by Ogunnaike's monumental print works of abstracted black-and-white images.

Ogunnaike had set out on the course three years ago as "a full-blown sculptor", in his words, but with the desire to find a way to use printmaking techniques in "a sculptural way". In Clarke he found a willing conspirator. The two have worked closely, developing a warm relationship that exists beyond the confines of long evenings and early mornings in the print workshop. The moments of darkness Ogunnaike refers to include a period in which Clarke helped him stage his second-year show only days after the student had come out of intensive care, after a period of bad health.

As the story suggests, art can be an emotional thing, especially for students such as Ogunnaike preparing for their final-year show at the RA. The exhibition is a culmination of three years of intensive practice, carried out under the weight of over 250 years of history and tradition. Vulnerability and failure are essential parts of the artistic process, but in a highly ambitious environment that relies on encouragement from the right people. Relationships like Ogunnaike and Clarke's become fundamental to the students' development, and thanks to the fact the school is at the heart of the Academy, with its many arteries, there are mentors on hand with numerous kinds of expertise.



Olu Ogunnaike (right) with print tutor Leigh Clarke in the RA Schools print studio

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My conversations with Ogunnaike and Clarke, and three other inspiring student-mentor pairs, took place in early March. As the portrait photographs in this article show, social distancing had yet to become the norm. The Royal Academy's buildings, including the Schools and its studios, had yet to be closed. The final-year show, of such importance to these artists, had yet to be postponed, its opening date unknown as we go to Press. But the bonds of each of the duos I met go beyond the institution's infrastructure, which is now in flux due to the coronavirus. Curiosity, flexibility and the ability to bounce back from failure underpin all their rapports – essential skills for any student of life as well as art. Key is the fact they are willing to approach each other with an open mind.

Ogunnaike and Clarke's friendship began with a technical challenge. Ogunnaike wanted to screenprint using charcoal and approached the tutor for help. "I told him it would be hard, as you can't get charcoal through the screenprinting mesh," remembered Clarke. "I told him there was another method we could look at." They screenprinted a photographic image with a translucent medium onto a sheet of paper, so that the image was almost invisible. "Then Olu picked up this bucket of charcoal and just threw it on top." The dark dust adhered to the wet printed image, allowing for excess charcoal to be blown or brushed away to reveal the image.

"It was like Olu's head blew off, like a volcano erupting," Clarke recalled of that 'Eureka' moment. "It was the most beautiful thing to watch, as something in his mind became apparent."

"One of the best things I've learnt from Leigh is "Let the art speak", Ogunnaike added. "I've let this technique take me on a journey, as Leigh often says." The method has become a core part of Ogunnaike's practice. "He has really expanded that technique above and beyond anything I would have imagined," Clarke explained. "It has brought a physicality to the work that you wouldn't get with conventional printmaking. That's the thing about originality. Just when you think everything's been dealt with, someone like Olu comes along with a madcap idea – and it's incredible to become part of that."