



Claire A Baker introduces 'The Red Thread' exhibition at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA). Image credit: Craig McCann McMillan.

Sep 05, 2022 10:00 BST

Student research honouring Chernobyl self-settlers attracts award nomination

A talented PhD student whose research aims to understand and document the traditional skills and values of an aging community of people living in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, has been named as a finalist in the 2022 North East Culture Awards.

Claire A Baker's textile-based research at [Northumbria School of Design](#) has helped her secure a nomination as one of three finalists in the Visual Artist of

the Year category of the awards, which aim to celebrate and showcase the cultural infrastructure and diversity of the North East.

With an interest in memory, displacement and the lost, Claire first visited the abandoned city of Pripjat in Ukraine back in 2015 during a family holiday. She was instantly fascinated by the abandoned streets and buildings which were built to serve the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and then evacuated in 1986, one day after the nuclear disaster which put the city in the thick of a 30-kilometre exclusion zone for safety reasons.

Regular return visits supervised by an official tour guide have led to Claire getting to know many of the members of the small community of self-settlers, who have been able to return to live in the exclusion zone due to a legal loophole. Many of them are elderly women known as Babushkas.

Claire explained: “The more I got to know about them, the more I realised we have many shared interests, including in embroidery. All members of the community have those skills because their embroidery is linked to their religious life and has an emotional and spiritual connection. Embroidery is draped around their homes and they are really proud of the work they’ve done.”

Inspired by their values and way of life, Claire’s PhD at Northumbria School of Design, funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council studentship award, has been focused on documenting the rapidly diminishing community through research and her own textile creations which depict some of the characters she has come to know so well.

The research, *Connected through Embroidery: The Legacy of Stitch in the Everyday of a Dying Community*, also inspired an exhibition of Claire’s own artwork at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) called *The Red Thread*.

“Working inside the restricted zone of Chernobyl is a unique position and nowhere on the planet is comparable,” said Claire. “The ultimate aim is still to publish a digital archive of regional textiles from the Chernobyl exclusion zone and create a physical embroidery archive based in Ukraine. But things have been made more difficult over the last few years with pandemic restrictions and the current conflict in Ukraine. I’ve formed really close friendships with many members of the community and write to them

regularly.”

Claire A Baker's artwork showing the Babushka, Marusya, as an icon. Image credit: Craig McCann McMillan.

[Professor Jayne Wallace](#) from Northumbria School of Design, Claire's lead PhD supervisor, said: “It's absolutely fantastic news that Claire is in the running for the Visual Artist of the Year title at the North East Culture Awards. This recognition is so well deserved and demonstrates that the research Claire is doing has a huge perceived impact by people in cultural contexts in the UK. Aside from that, the relationship that Claire has formed with the community in Chernobyl, including the Babushkas, is extremely strong and through co-creative craft research and making together they are supporting her ambition to develop new textile objects that ensure their traditional skills are not forgotten.”

Now in their fifteenth year, [the Culture Awards](#) are open to anyone who has made an impact or a significant contribution to the North East cultural landscape during the last 12 months. Anyone can nominate an individual, organisation, event or exhibition for consideration. The winners of 11 categories will be announced at a special celebration evening on Thursday 8th September at Durham Cathedral.

Discover more about Claire's work online at www.claireabaker.co.uk or on Instagram @claire_a_baker

Visit northumbria.ac.uk/design to find out more about study options for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in disciplines including fashion design, industrial design and design innovation.

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk