



Interview with Efterpi Soropos: Creating a sensory space for babies

Your New Ideas Lab project *Oompah!* grew out of your work making ‘human rooms’. Can you explain what human rooms are?

Human rooms is a concept developed from the experience of extreme grief, watching my mother dying in a hospital many years ago. I was propelled to create an interventionist process through art and design that would help alleviate the psychological suffering of people at end of life and that of their family, carers and staff. Through this work/investigation/artspace I discovered a balance of elements that immersed and appealed to the senses, to induce self-connection and engagement in such a way that people would experience something releasing and would have their minds eased of their current distress.

What inspired you to adapt this work for babies and families?

I began at some point to find that others wanted to use this process/technique i.e. people with dementia, people living with disability and mental illness. This is very serious stuff. The project began to expand into new audiences/participants and then one day it occurred to me that babies, who have not yet developed this state of consciousness (but who obviously pick up much from their parents) might enjoy these techniques from a purely joyful perspective. I have been inspired (for the whole of his life!) by my son who has grown up with my human rooms practice. When he was in pre-school he would play in my experiments and projects with such joy and I guess that always stayed in the back of my mind for the future.

What elements of this work did you bring to your engagement with babies?

From the human rooms, I brought the elements of gentle animations, simple concepts in video, bold colour light sequences and engaging sound techniques designed to pick up the babies' attention and alertness. There were also some pleasurable discoveries along the way through workshopping the interactive texture and tactile elements infused with light and sound.

How did the human room elements change when working with babies and families?

They changed by way of becoming more tactile and physically interactive than they were in previous works which are more immaterial. The workshops also became more performative, with live sound and light engagements. The toys themselves were not representational and we had a great time making the objects appealing to the baby perspective.

What did you learn about working with babies from making *Oompah!* and has the experience informed your overall practice in any way?

I was so pleased with how calm and relaxed the babies and parents were at the end. Many of them did not want to leave the space! The engagements with the babies were varied according to their levels of development—we had many little tiny ones who generally were calm and quiet and who became sleepy or watched the many vague movements of other babies, light, sound and video. The older babies who were

sitting up and crawling engaged with most of the elements. Those elements that were not as popular were probably too complicated.

From working with babies I personally have learnt to explore what is joyful and fun. As you can imagine, the work of human rooms, although rewarding in so many ways, has been very intense after over 10 years. I have also learnt, though, that there are some elements that have no limits and cross all barriers and age groups. This is really good to see and understand as a practitioner.

I want to also acknowledge that even though I led the workshops/installation, the work was very much influenced by Carmen, Tom, Liam and Jennifer, and, of course, the babies and parents. Their interactions and responses are an important part of the work. They complete it.

The environment at Artplay for artist's working is amazing and the staff were generous and supportive.