PRESS RELEASE

FIRSTSITE IS WINNER OF £100,000 ART FUND MUSEUM OF THE YEAR 2021

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Firstsite in Colchester, Essex, is announced as Art Fund Museum of the Year 2021 this evening (21 September 2021). Sally Shaw, Director of Firstsite, was presented with the £100,000 prize - the largest museum prize in the world - by broadcaster Edith Bowman at a ceremony in the spectacular setting of the Science Museum, London.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary, Firstsite is a contemporary arts organisation showing a diverse mix of historic, modern and contemporary art from around the world in an inclusive environment. It has built a strong, critical reputation nurturing long and deep relationships with artists and the local community. During the pandemic it mobilised at speed to support local people, lending its building to neighbouring charity, Community 360 to run a food bank. Within days of lockdown, Firstsite created activity packs which went on to feature over fifty artists and were downloaded by over 92,000 households. The organisation led on The Great Big Art Exhibition which encouraged people to display their own art in their windows during lockdown to create a nationwide gallery, and Michael Landy’s Welcome to Essex exhibition was enjoyed by thousands of visitors over the summer.
In response to Black Lives Matter, Firstsite commissioned Elsa James to make a downloadable work in solidarity and continued the Super Black festival celebrating black culture in Essex. Other significant initiatives have included My name is not Refugee, an Arts Council Collection exhibition curated by clients of Refugee Action Colchester, and Art For Life, an exhibition commissioned by the NHS with key workers to aid understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on mental health.

Jenny Waldman, Art Fund director and chair of the judges for Art Fund Museum of the Year, said, ‘We’re proud to announce Firstsite in Colchester as Art Fund Museum of the Year 2021. From inspiring everyone to turn their windows into a nationwide gallery during lockdown to feeding local kids in the school holidays, they are an outstanding example of innovation and integrity. At their core is powerful, engaged contemporary art, housed in a gallery that gives space for everyone, from artists to NHS staff to local families and refugee groups. They exceeded all our expectations. Here is a small organisation thinking big and caring for their local community. Here is excellence in Essex.’

Fellow judge, Edith Bowman said, ‘Museums and galleries are a portal to infinite creative avenues. I’ve had the real pleasure of visiting each one of the five finalists. Words fail me at what they’ve done with tiny teams and budgets. What Firstsite has achieved is mind-blowing.’

The winner was one of five finalists. The other shortlisted museums were: Centre for Contemporary Art Derry–Londonderry (Derry–Londonderry, Northern Ireland), Experience Barnsley (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, England), Thackray Museum of Medicine (Leeds, West Yorkshire, England) and Timespan (Helmsdale, Sutherland, Scotland).

Each of the other finalist museums receives a £15,000 prize in recognition of their achievements.

The members of this year’s judging panel are: Maria Balshaw, director of Tate and chair of the National Museum Directors’ Council; Edith Bowman, broadcaster; Katrina Brown, director of The Common Guild; Art Fund trustee; Suhair Khan, strategic projects lead at Google, artist Thomas J Price and Jenny Waldman, director of Art Fund.

The news was announced in a live broadcast on BBC Radio 4’s Front Row, BBC News Channel and BBC iPlayer, presented by John Wilson.

Among the 250 guests at the event hosted by Jenny Waldman were the following artists: Jeremy Deller, Ryan Gander, Chila Kumari Singh Burman, Hew Locke, Cornelia Parker, Grayson Perry Yinka Shonibare, Clare Twomey and Jonathan Yeo. Guests also included leading figures from the world of arts and culture such as: Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Nadine Dorries; Director of the Science Museum Group, Ian Blatchford; Director of Tate, Maria Balshaw; Director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer; Director of Wellcome Collection, Melanie Keen; Director of the Design Museum, Tim Marlow; Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Arts, Axel Rüger; Chair of Arts Council England, Nicholas Serota; and London’s Deputy Mayor for Culture, Justine Simons. Many other high-profile figures also attended such as: journalist and author, Yomi Adegoke; actor, comedian and TV presenter, Mathew Horne; poet and broadcaster Ian McMillan; and Museum and Heritage Consultant, Sandra Shakespeare.

Art Fund, the UK’s national charity for art, awards Art Fund Museum of the Year annually to one outstanding museum. The 2021 edition reflects the resilience and imagination of museums throughout the pandemic. At this moment of museums re-opening and starting their recovery, the 2021 prize highlights and rewards the extraordinary and innovative ways in which museums have, over the past year, served and connected with their communities against all the odds, even
when some have had to close their physical spaces for the greater part of the year. Art Fund Museum of the Year is the largest museum prize in the world.

#museumoftheyear

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Notes to Editors:

The Art Fund Museum of the Year 2021 finalists were:

Centre for Contemporary Art Derry–Londonderry
The Centre for Contemporary Art has been exhibiting emerging artists from Northern Ireland alongside international peers since 1992. Today CCA creates opportunities for audiences to experience ambitious, experimental and engaging contemporary art and supports the development of artists through commissions, solo and group exhibitions, public programmes, artist residencies, alongside its own publishing programme. In the past year, it has supported 65 artists with paid for opportunities including social media takeovers, as well as developing its CCA Supports programme. This includes an online platform providing artists with information on emergency support through Government schemes and initiatives, crit groups and surgeries along with a series of Roundtable podcasts. Moreover, CCA has continued to engage with the community by displaying artwork in its windows. It presented the biennial exhibition URGENCIES 2021 in spaces across the city such as in shop windows, theatres and a shopping centre, and delivered activity packs to hundreds of schoolchildren, essential in an area of social deprivation.

Experience Barnsley
Since opening in 2013, the collection at Experience Barnsley traces the known history of the borough from pre-historic times to the 21st century. Located in the iconic Town Hall and one of five Barnsley Museums sites, it is supported by thousands of local people who have shared their precious memories and objects, making up the displays in the Barnsley Story Gallery. As well as this there are spaces dedicated to changing, community created (temporary) exhibitions, such as the recent story of the Barnsley Canister Company as well as learning spaces and an archives centre. Experience Barnsley’s recent digital activities, such as an online festival of archaeology, the daily digital jigsaw, and working with Ian McMillan, their Poet in Lockdown, has inspired local audiences to write poems, submit sketches and get creative, demonstrating how culture can make a difference to the local community with an increased digital reach to 17 million and an engagement of 942,000 across social media. In addition, thousands of care packages were sent to schools, care homes and local families through their partnerships, virtual trips to the pub kept communities connected and IT provision was catered for vulnerable groups.

Thackray Museum of Medicine
The Thackray Museum of Medicine is the UK’s leading independent medical museum located between Europe’s largest teaching hospital and some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in West Yorkshire.
The museum building first opened in 1861 as the purpose-built Leeds Union Workhouse. New buildings were gradually added to the workhouse complex including a separate infirmary, later to be renamed St James's Hospital. By the 1990s, the old Leeds Union Workhouse building was considered unfit for modern medicine and Parliament gave permission for it to house the museum. It now has a reimagined immersive visitor experience and, through a redisplay of the collections, eleven new galleries showing how people have triumphed over disease. It became the first museum in the pandemic to host a vaccination centre delivering 50,000 Pfizer vaccines. Tackling a range of medical subjects and enterprising outreach projects, the Thackray Museum has worked with schools to generate content to reinforce the science behind handwashing, created the online exhibition Mothers in Lockdown, and it became a locus for food distribution and converted an ambulance to carry out outreach projects around the city.

Timespan
Located in the Scottish Highlands, Timespan comprises a local history museum, contemporary art programme, geology and herb gardens, shop, bakery and café. Timespan responds to urgent contemporary issues that are rooted in the local context of remote, rural Scotland, with a global and multi-disciplinary perspective to produce four projects a year, each aligned with broader social movements, alongside a programme of artist residencies. Timespan has operated as a social hub for the community during the pandemic and demonstrated a clear ambition for art and heritage. In the past year, the exhibition Real Rights reframed local history within the intersection of climate change and colonialism. YASS (Youth Actions Social Squad) activity packs were sent to homes of local village children and tackled themes of social justice in creative ways, a consequence of which was the formation of a young gardeners’ association. Their online cooking show, Recipes for a Disaster, proved popular and featured local produce and producers.

Art Fund Museum of the Year
Art Fund has supported Museum of the Year since 2008. Its forerunner was the Prize for Museums and Galleries, administered by the Museum Prize Trust and sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation from 2003-2007. The prize champions what museums do, encourages more people to visit and gets to the heart of what makes a truly outstanding museum. The judges present the prize to the museum or gallery that has shown how their achievements of the preceding year stand out, demonstrated what makes their work innovative, and the impact it has had on audiences.

Winners 2008 – 2020:

2008 - The Lightbox, Woking
2009 - Wedgwood Museum, Stoke-on-Trent
2010 - Ulster Museum, Belfast
2011 - British Museum
2012 - Royal Albert Memorial Museum
2014 - Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield
2015 - Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
2016 - Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London
2017 - The Hepworth, Wakefield
2018 - Tate St Ives
2019 - St Fagans National Museum of History, Cardiff

In a unique edition of the prize in 2020, Art Fund responded to the unprecedented challenges that all museums faced by sharing the prize money equally between five winners: Aberdeen Art Gallery; Gairloch Museum; Science Museum; South London Gallery; and Towner Eastbourne.

About Art Fund
Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. It provides millions of pounds every year to help museums to acquire and share works of art across the UK, further the professional development of their curators, and inspire more people to visit and enjoy their public programmes. In response to Covid-19 Art Fund has made £3.6 million in urgent funding available to support museums through reopening and beyond, including Respond and Reimagine grants to help meet immediate need and reimagine future ways of working. Art Fund is independently funded, supported by the 131,000 members who buy the National
Art Pass, who enjoy free entry to over 240 museums, galleries and historic places, 50% off major exhibitions, and receive Art Quarterly magazine. Art Fund also supports museums through its annual prize, Art Fund Museum of the Year. www.artfund.org