Victoria 00:02
Okay, today I'm talking to Grace and to Xach, who are BA Fine Art students. And I'm really interested to hear their ideas and their thoughts, and particularly the fact that you know each other so well, you met at UAL, and you've been together for... we haven't quite worked out... maybe a year, maybe less. But you know each other really well. And so, I'm really hoping that you can offer some ideas and comments that might be useful to people who are listening to you now. So, thank you, welcome. And perhaps just start by giving us a bit of a background of who you each are.

Grace 00:45
Um, yeah, I'm Grace. I studied Fine Art at Chelsea, and yeah, I'm from Essex, North Essex.

Victoria 00:52
So, how did you decide how did you get to come here? What was the journey that you took?

Grace 00:57
Um, well, when I was at college, I went to college in Cambridge, because I was predicted higher for my GCSEs than I actually got. And I ended up being the only student who did arts, film studies and music. Yeah, it was great. It really worked out well. And then yes, I applied to UAL, I didn't know much about art school. I googled "good art school", and UAL came up. And when I got the email asked me to come to an interview, I did panic, because I was like, I'm such an organised person. So, I was like, oh my god, like, what am I gonna do? And also, I feel like the way art is taught, you have to fit into a certain way to get the grades. My practices are very different, more scattered practice to how A Level worked. So, like, I was very nervous, because I was like, there's no way, like, and then when I came, UAL, was like, yeah. It was great. Yeah, so.

Xach 01:55
So, did you feel you fit in?

Grace 01:58
Oh, yeah, definitely. I mean, when we came, it was like, height of COVID. And it was on lockdown. So...

Xach 02:07
The big brother house

Grace 02:08
It was essentially the Big Brother house. You got to get to know each other, like everyone got to know each other, like, quite intensely, because all you knew what people in your halls. Eventually, it became
like a family away from home where everyone spent so much time together. So, I didn't actually meet that many people with my course for the first year. I'm still like, just meeting people now, like, almost at the end of the second year. And like just still making friends on my course, but I have a lot of friends at different colleges now, which is nice. And this means I get like a mix of like practices, creative practices around me, which is nice.

Xach 02:42
About about you Xach?

Xach 02:48
Hi, I'm Xach. I'm on BA Fine Art: Computational Art course. I've been at UAL for two years now even though I'm in my first year at Camberwell. I grew up in the Lake District and a really small remote area, studied art at Sixth Form. But originally, I was planning on studying Engineering and Computing. So, I was taking maths, physics, computing, and further math. But then after a while, it wasn't I wanted to do and my mental health was starting to take a toll because of it. So, I changed to photography and fine art for the second year of my sixth form. So that meant I had to do double the work in one year. But I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed the fine art mentality and, you know, to create all these amazing things. And I did quite well on my A levels in the end. So, then I went to a foundation college in Carlisle, which was really fun. It had so much freedom to to try different things and experiment. But then COVID started halfway through my year of my year at college, and so it got cut in half. And we didn't get to finish off our work and the course just ended halfway through.

[03:48]
So, it was a very, very, very turbulent, very turbulent, but it's very children, turbulent, turbulent, turbulent. If you can't tell I have dyslexia and it works for saying words as well as reading words, unfortunately. So, I do get confused quite a lot. Yeah, it was a very, it was quite a big upset. It meant that a lot of the work never got finished and it kind of put me in this weird limbo state. So, when I finally got, when I got accepted to CSM, I also applied for Camberwell, and Chelsea. But when I when I went to CSM, it was still locked down. So, we weren't really in our workshops and our studios never got to interact with other students very much. It was really hard to work really hard to motivate myself just being stuck in my room in student halls. You couldn't, we didn't have access to the studios.

Grace 04:38
Yeah, it was it was awful. It was like messy, like, your, yeah, art supplies everywhere but you were too depressed to clean it up. You were just like constantly surrounded by like, you should be doing work but you have zero inspiration because you're in lockdown and depressed.

Xach 04:52
Yeah, wake up and go to sleep surrounded by like all your paints and your tools and your and like all the stuff you're working on becomes cluttered with your mess. And so, you can't work until you tidy the room and you can't tidy your room until you've done your work, that's not important . You can get caught in this really like, obscure loop of just...

Grace 05:08
Xach 05:09
Yeah, a limbo. But yeah, I really wasn't enjoying being at Central Saint Martin's for this time. But luckily, I applied for a computational art course at the same time, which couldn't run that year kind of COVID. But it was running for the first time this year. And so, this competition art course was a mix of all the things I was interested in sixth form, before I switched to fine art, and put it all together in a fine art umbrella, which was a really exciting course for me. And so, I've switched that course now. So, I'm back at my first year at Camberwell. It's been really exciting being on a first-year course, let's get started, there's so much room to decide what the course is about as well as so much freedom in what you do. And basically, just do all the engineering and computing that I was always interested in, but for a Fine Art purpose, which has been really exciting.

Victoria 05:58
So, both of you have mentioned having mental health issues and having learning disabilities. So, perhaps we'll talk a bit about that, what sort of support you've got from each other, your friends and universities are just really whatever you feel is important to share.

Grace 06:12
I feel like mental health is definitely a journey like that you have to like, it's definitely journey. It's definitely a journey you have to go on.

Xach 06:21
Don't patronise your own mental health.

Grace 06:25
Yeah. So like, I feel like when you start exhibiting signs of mental illness, or when you first like the symptoms is that like, it's a completely like wild ride. Like, you don't know what it is like, it's hard to speak about because you're not that aware, at a young age, like, I definitely was exhibiting signs of like, depression and anxiety from a young age. And it just like gradually got picked up on and my learning disability was the most recent one to get picked up on. I have ADHD, and dyspraxia and yeah, so like, like clinically clumsy. Never been good at sports.

[07:04]
Once you're diagnosed, then you've got to, like start learning to get help. And I had to learn to speak to people. And once that happened, it became a lot easier I learned towards the end of Sixth Form to talk to people and like learn to open up and be very honest about it because I found that was the most like, healing thing to do. Like, if some people are a bit weird about it, okay, I won't speak to you about it, like. But then COVID and so I'd finally learnt to speak to people and it's like, you can't speak to anyone because you got to stay inside. And the ADHD definitely, like looking back on my education, it makes so much sense. Like I was called the space cadet my entire life, and it turns out I had ADHD and I couldn't pay attention. But at UAL it's, it's good because I can reach out to get help. And like in other scenarios, like in the last year where like I've been struggling. Like there's definitely places to go with it, like you can definitely speak to people and so yeah, it's nice like I'm someone who like will be very open
and honest about it and like so it's quite nice meeting other people. And it does inform my practice like it used to like damage my practice but now it informs it.

**Xach 08:16**
Yeah, um it's definitely quite interesting going from such like a small town like there's very few people who had similar, who were struggling with similar things to me and could relate or empathise with my learning disabilities or my mental health but coming to art school it's definitely a lot more prevalent, there's a lot of people who have had similar paths to me which have brought us there, like you, and so there's lots of things which we can talk about and really support each other with and help each other. And we can always understand when one of us is like having a rough time we can understand why, we understand the context and you don't feel judged like you would elsewhere. You don't feel like ashamed of it as much, it's more just, okay like this happening like that's fine, we can deal with it because we like we know we know what people need and what and what we might not need and that's a really been really good.

**Grace 09:14**
Yeah, I feel like everyone's very understanding like at UAL, there's definitely like sense of empathy though. Yeah, I mean, in my experience, like our friends. It's definitely, even if I don't have the same struggles as them and they don't have the same struggles as me it's very much like very understanding place and everyone I've met has been very understanding to

**Xach 09:34**
Yeah, like you can speak, well, I've got additional, oh what's it called, like they did like extra extenuating circumstance, no it's the other one, it's not that one.

**Grace 09:49**
I think I have them to.

**Xach 09:53**
It's that thing that we both have. What it means is that it allows me to have extra time on my deadlines. I've got a deadline tomorrow, which, so luckily, I have this extra time for my deadline because I have not haven't, I've been procrastinating doing the doing the work for it. I want to go and tidy my room instead of doing the work instead of finishing off this paper that I need I need handling tomorrow.

**Grace 10:19**
You got an EC?

**Xach 10:20**
I got an EC.

**Grace 10:22**
Oh, that is Extenuating Circumstances

**Xach 10:24**
It's a different one. Not study skills, there's a lot of acronyms which, which aren't great for me.

**Victoria 10:30**
But it shows that there is an understanding, and it's a system based on understanding. If you need support.

**Xach 10:37**
There definitely is yeah, there's a great system. They've helped me with quite a few things. I had pastoral care, I guess it's called, extra time, as well as, for my dyslexia, I got a laptop with like, with Grammer.ly premium on it, which is like a really good spell checking thing, a bunch of voice dictation software, which I could use to get my ideas down really fast and a microphone with that, and a printer so that I can then print these out and hand them in physically like basically compete sought out by the university through nice knowing this stuff like that out there and available for us. And like all the tutors you speak to are so understanding when it comes to like mental health or learning disabilities. And I assume tutors will bend over backwards just to like, make sure that even if you've missed a deadline, you can still they'll sort you out and you can still you still hand it in. But that's really nice to see.

**Victoria 11:26**
What would you say to students who haven't got disabilities in the way that you have about how to be supportive and empathetic to you?

**Grace 11:37**
Oh, that's an interesting question. Um, that's a really interesting question.

**Xach 11:43**
I guess, I guess for students who don't have students who don't have learning disabilities or mental health, and they interacting with students who do? Well, it's just empathy.

**Grace 11:54**
Yeah. it is just empathy.

**Xach 11:55**
It's understanding when people are struggling, and yeah, just being empathetic.

**Grace 12:00**
I guess, like also like, I mean, this goes for everyone. But like, especially like, don't get offended if someone has to put a boundary in place. Because it's definitely like, there is an element where you do have to have some self-preservation, like, you don't leave your room and or you don't see a friend for a while. Like, some people get very upset, and then there's a guilt, like, then, I feel really guilty sometimes I don't have the capacity to see all these people at once, like, I struggled, like group work sometimes, because I just don't have the mental capacity that day, or I struggled to sit in a lecture. Maybe, I'm always someone just like think about all reasons why someone might be acting the way they are. As long as they're not like hurting someone else, like actively have malicious content, I feel like there’s definitely ways [illegible] empathy can have with someone.
Victoria 12:59
It's really interesting, because one of the very important parts of learning here is collaboration. And if people have different learning styles and different learning levels, and empathy does become a really big thing, because you have to learn how to get the best out of your colleagues, because that's gonna help the project and all of you. And so understanding people's boundaries and understanding their limitations can really help that.

Grace 13:29
I recently did like a quite intense collaborative product where we had to do an off-site exhibition for my course. And they basically like, you have to learn how to set up an exhibition. So, like, find a group, find a space, like basically organise everything yourself and they'll give you advice on that, but they're not gonna do it for you. That was a really interesting one. Because like, organising like a group of seven artists is quite hard. They're not organised by nature. I'm not over. Like, some days, they wouldn't show up unannounced and we'd organised to show up. Like, I wouldn't show up one day, and it's just like, okay, like, it was just like sharing the workload. And constantly, like almost playing Hot Potato of the workload, I found work the best. So, like, you don't have one sector, like everyone takes on what they can at the moment. And if someone has a greater capacity than another one, they'll take on more. And then if they need more time, then someone else will take, like, make easier for them. So yeah, I think that was quite like interesting about collaboration, because I've actually never done a collaborative project before that. And it worked out really well that the exhibition went absolutely fine. Like, so yeah, it was really interesting because you don't often collaborate as artists all the time. Well, I hadn't because of COVID.

[14:48]
Yeah, I feel like the best collaborative projects are like, when you go in knowing it's a collaborative project, if you have someone going in like I'm gonna do this, then it's not gonna work, but then you just tell them. Like I'm someone who'll be honest, like, like, I'll be honest, in that scenario, I'm very, like avoiding kind of conflict kind of person. But like that, like it's just like, you know, you just have to be otherwise it won't work out. You just get annoyed at them in silence.

Victoria 15:16
What would you say to someone who's thinking of coming who perhaps have their own challenges?

Xach 15:23
Yeah, I think people who are coming here who suffer from mental health or have any other issues know that there's, there's so many systems in place and so many other students who have come come to UAL with mental health issues and have found different workflows and different ways to ways to motivate themselves and to get their work done. And even speaking to some of the older students has been really insightful, they've taught me different techniques they've used, just to try to almost like trick themselves into doing work. And, yeah, it's just a really great atmosphere for that kind of thing, where, if you're in the studio, I often talk with people, other people my course. And they'll talk about what they struggled with. So when I found that part of the course really easy, like that bit really easy, but I struggle that bit and seeing that everyone has their own thing that they're dealing with.
And so, it's really really easy to get inspired by these people because you know that they've got so many things going on, they're still managing to do this really awe-inspiring stuff. Yeah, it just kind of like fills you with, like spending time with people chatting with them, because they're some of the most amazing people UAL and just been able to talk to them and see what they're doing. And like, it fills you with excitement about your own work sometimes and realising that you can push yourself to do these things you can get over some the issue that you're having and really make the most of it which has been quite good.

Grace 16:47
It's, I can speak on behalf about my course, I can't speak on behalf of every course but like for me, I definitely have a freedom within my course where I can allow myself to like take a minute, breathe and like do what I have to do before I can carry on. Yeah, so it's definitely I feel like UAL does allow you to do that.

Xach 17:05
I think it's I think it's quite hard for any like learning disabilities, mental health not to affect you in practice, because it's something that you're dealing with so constantly every day you think about it so much and yeah, it's definitely something which kind of hinders but also very much in like inspires and it's something you want to make art about. Especially because so many people can relate really deeply to these, these topics. It's been it's been really interesting. And quite a few my projects recently have been focusing on the kind of like depression of that happened locked down this kind of isolating, crushing loneliness that would happen. You kind of been stuck in, in this like this one room for hours at a time, which is like the inherent opposite of, like, I've been a social creature, just been stuck in these tiny spaces, which is something which lots of people can resonate with, which has been... But then of course, while I'm making it, I am then suffering from the bouts of depression, and then procrastinating the whole thing. And if you're lucky enough to see lots of other people make out about all sorts of personal issues.

Grace 18:06
I mean, I definitely informs my practice. And, like, there are definitely practices that don't, not everyone uses it to inform. But again, I find that you do suffer with it every day. So, and it's a very intense all-consuming thing sometimes. So, it's like natural to want to make art about it. Especially, I'm someone who finds it hard to sometimes like articulate things verbally, I find it hard to put the words together to emulate exactly what I'm feeling. And so like, definitely, art is an outlook to that. Yeah, it's it definitely informs my practice and yours. 100%

Xach 18:40
Yeah, sometimes it's a really, it's quite a therapeutic way to like rationalise what you're thinking,

Grace 18:44
yeah,
Xach  18:45
By having all these like swirling thoughts, emotions, and because they're all in your head, you're not quite sure really what like what to do with them. So when you make something about them, there's like a physical object and you put all this time and you're thinking about it the whole time while you're making it and then putting it towards making an object or a piece or some work. Yeah, can be really therapeutic can be quite rewarding to then be able to really like contextualise these really crazy thoughts you've had to then be able to view them and realise what they are and what they meant to you. Like you say you can like separate them, you can notice them and realise that they are part of this thing that you've...

Grace  19:19
It's definitely like... because like I mean mental illness is like definitely a part of who I am now. Like, this isn't like my personality. This is something I suffer with chronically. Yeah, and it just detangles it because like, like your thoughts are so abstract and you just speak how you like think it'd be so discombobulated in nature. It's like detangling headphone wise almost. And like just like making everything a bit more quiet and nice. Yeah, it's a physical embodiment. It becomes a separate thing rather than like something that's taking up like your brain capacity. That's why like... it's nice.

Victoria  19:57
We could talk for hours on this, but I think one other things I've come away with is the acceptance that you have. It is who you are. And also, the support you have for each other, I think,

Grace  20:08
Oh, yeah, no, definitely. I feel like we have very similar experiences, and like, similar creative ways of doing things.

Xach  20:16
Definitely. We're really good knowing, yeah, when one of us is struggling and yeah, when it comes to art to like prompting each other, or like brainstorming reach of it. Really well.

Grace  20:26
Yeah, we always very fun.

Xach  20:30
Yeah, like, speaking of being like, collaborative. Like, I feel like, our work is just closer and closer together.

Grace  20:36
Yeah definately.

Xach  20:37
Which was being quite nice. I mean, you obviously you, you really inspire me in the work you do. And so it's really fun, like bouncing on idea of each other.
Grace 20:44
Yeah, yeah. We definitely collaborate a lot like definitely like Xach's artwork informs my process to where I get and I feel like it works both ways. Yeah, definitely. It's great.

Victoria 20:55
Seems from your experience, that you have got a lot of support and understanding here and I find that really encouraging.

Grace 21:02
Yeah, definitely, even if like not all, because obviously these resources are limited. Like sometimes like there is a waiting list for counselling, as there often is everywhere, but like, like you have people around you who are gonna share very similar, you're most definitely you're gonna meet someone else who shares a very similar experience to you. Like, it's just being honest about it, I guess, and you will find people around if you... people will support you, even if it's not necessarily from the uni. I mean there great too, I've had that support from them. But like, it's the whole environment really.

Xach 21:32
Well, thank you very much indeed. It's been real a pleasure and very informative, and very uplifting actually. Thank you. And I wish you both every success.

Grace 21:46
Thank you so much.