

**JASON
WILSHER-MILLS**

**Looking Back,
Looking Forward**

**7 DEC
2024 TO
23 MAR
2025**

hub



B. 1969

Jason Wilsher-Mills

jwmartist.co.uk

They stand together on the riverside, proudly displaying their own unique disabilities and wearing callipers and neck braces, which are brightly decorated and highly visible. They look on at the wildlife as it passes, and alongside the usual birds you would expect to see, there is a turkey, because, well, this exhibition takes place at Christmas, and you could not have a festive celebration without the traditional turkey.

There are fantastical elements in the banner, which demonstrate my thought processes and how ideas can exist alongside such activities as walking down the riverside in Sleaford.

There is a road sign, which shows the distance between Sleaford and my hometown of Wakefield in West Yorkshire. And there is a clue to my county of birth, with the Yorkshire white rose melting into the winter sun. In the sky there is a woman riding on a shark, which has stumbled in from another one of my artworks, along with the shark boy, who swims towards the shark.

There are other clues to the themes and meaning of my work, hidden in plain sight, but they have been included without explanation so that the viewer can enjoy being an art detective through trying to work out what these clues relate to. Some things are better when they are not explained. Everything featured in the banner is there for a reason, whether it is to add to the narrative or to be purely decorative. It is for the viewer to decide.

But in essence, this work is about the simple things in life, such as walking along the riverside, with your family, enjoying nature, and thinking. It is a piece that celebrates my northern working-class heritage, with its bright seaside colours, which evoke memories of holidays in Withernsea and Bridlington in the 1970s. It is also about who I am now, but resonates with past, present, and future whilst relating to my life now as a disabled person.

Meet Jason Wilsher-Mills and explore his journey as a successful digital artist with a vivid imagination and a real joy for connecting with people. Jason creates playful, brightly coloured art that explores his background and upbringing and what it is to live with disabilities. He uses text and patterns exuberantly to decorate the subjects in his paintings and sculptures, figures that are often based on himself or the people he meets and befriends. His designs, influenced by his 1970s childhood, cartoons, and fairgrounds, are often humorous.

As his art career has developed, Jason has learnt new skills and ways of telling his story and has taken opportunities to meet others who live with disabilities. The workshops he runs across the UK and internationally give him many ideas and images that find their way into his artworks.

Jason has strong self-belief and belief in others too, and so he celebrates the many heroes he meets through the titles he chooses for his artworks. In the gallery you'll meet *East Hull Elvis*, *Corby Rocker*, *Hull Powerhouse*, and *Japanese Argonaut*.

Jason and the Argonauts is an ancient Greek myth about the demi-god Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, a prestigious prize. Jason sails on his ship, the Argo, joined by heroic friends. Together, they face challenges that test their strength, ingenuity, and teamwork, making this a fitting parallel for Jason's own personal journey. He believes he may have been named for the 1960s film about the Greek hero (although there was also a popular 60s TV detective called Jason).

The exhibition title reflects this retrospective of Jason's career while acknowledging his ongoing quest to celebrate disability art and those who overcome challenges. The artist has continuing issues with his own health but never loses his enthusiasm for making new art and sharing his stimulating work and story.

Feel the joy in this vibrant exhibition and celebrate the inspiring stories of everyday people overcoming challenges, especially Jason himself.

Jason Wilsher-Mills tells us about this beautiful new commission:

I was thinking about all the things I have enjoyed most about living in Sleaford since I moved from Wakefield in 2004, and the thought occurred to me that the thing I enjoyed most about the town was walking along the riverside, which stretches from Cogglesford Mill all the way down to the Hub.

It is this walk that features in some of my most treasured memories, from taking my children to school at William Alvey to going out for my first walk outside at the height of Covid-19 in 2020. Being able to visit the river in those days was so special.

The river and that walk have always been such a magical place, as it is so full of verdant greens and wildlife. One of the very first things I noticed when I first came to live in Sleaford was that the river was abundant with life. I remember playing 'Spot the Fish' with my children from one of the many bridges. It was not a difficult game, as they could be seen just under the surface. It felt magical, being so close to wildlife. It still does, particularly when you can see the swans protecting their young and gliding gracefully down the river. They seem so out of place, those beautiful and graceful birds, as it's almost like they belong in myth and fantastic tales, but yet here they are in Sleaford, along with the ducks, who are characters in their own right. The ducks squabble and fight as new families take their walk down that riverside path and do that time-honoured tradition of feeding them.

The riverside walk has always been a joyful thing, and I love how it changes throughout the year. As I travel down the river, it has given me time to think over things and contemplate new work. I have tried to put this sense of old and new work coming together, mixed up with my own biography and interests, along with the things that I consider to be important, so I have included characters from previous work who stand together in some kind of humorous 'rogues gallery'.



What you see on the Riverbank

DIGITAL PRINT ON
KNITTED POLYESTER,
EYELETS
2024

Brave Boy Billy

DIGITAL PAINTING, LIGHTBOX
2016-17



Brave Boy Billy is shown sitting on a space hopper. The space hopper was a popular rubber toy in the 1970s when Jason was a child—you could sit on it, grab the orange ears, and move around by bouncing. Slightly ridiculous but a lot of fun. This is Jason’s playful but also serious comment on the shortage of wheelchairs worldwide—there is only one wheelchair for every four people who need to use them. So, what other bizarre forms of transport could be used?

Billy wears Jason’s trademark Y-front underpants with a patterned shirt and tie, which is somewhat absurd. He has traffic cone shaped ear protectors and metal callipers on his legs—these now outdated leg supports for the disabled are described by Jason as ‘instruments of torture’ and were very uncomfortable to wear.

Corby Rocker

FIBREGLASS, WOOD
2018

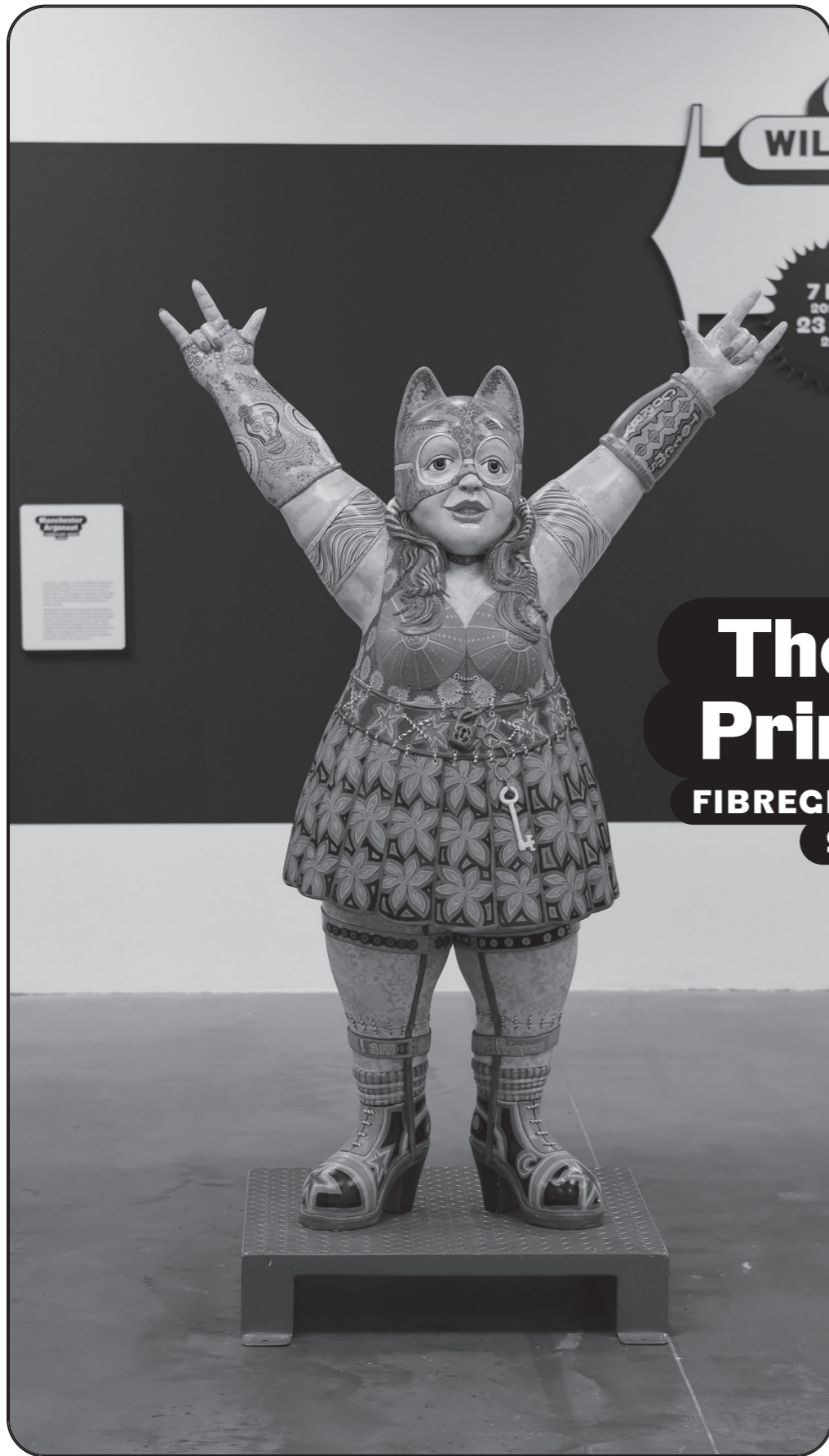


In 2018, Jason worked on *Corby Totems*, a year-long project as an artist in residence alongside learning-disabled communities, delivering workshops across Northamptonshire.

This work is one of two sculptures he designed at the end of the residency that tell the hidden stories of those communities. The Rocker incorporates many of Jason's favourite symbols and themes: brightly striped clothes, a very flamboyant quiff of hair, 70s-style boots with massive stacked platforms, and huge friendly eyes.

The Princess was an outcome of Jason's *Corby Totems* project in 2018. As Jason worked with learning-disabled people across Northamptonshire throughout this year-long project, he asked them how they wanted to be represented in his art. Everyone was keen on having positive and uplifting images of disability, and so the Princess came about—dancing, posing, full of joy and movement.

Her name refers to the UK government's contentious Personal Independence Payment, launched in 2012, which had issues that delayed national roll-out and has been heavily criticised for the administrative and stressful burden it puts on claimants.

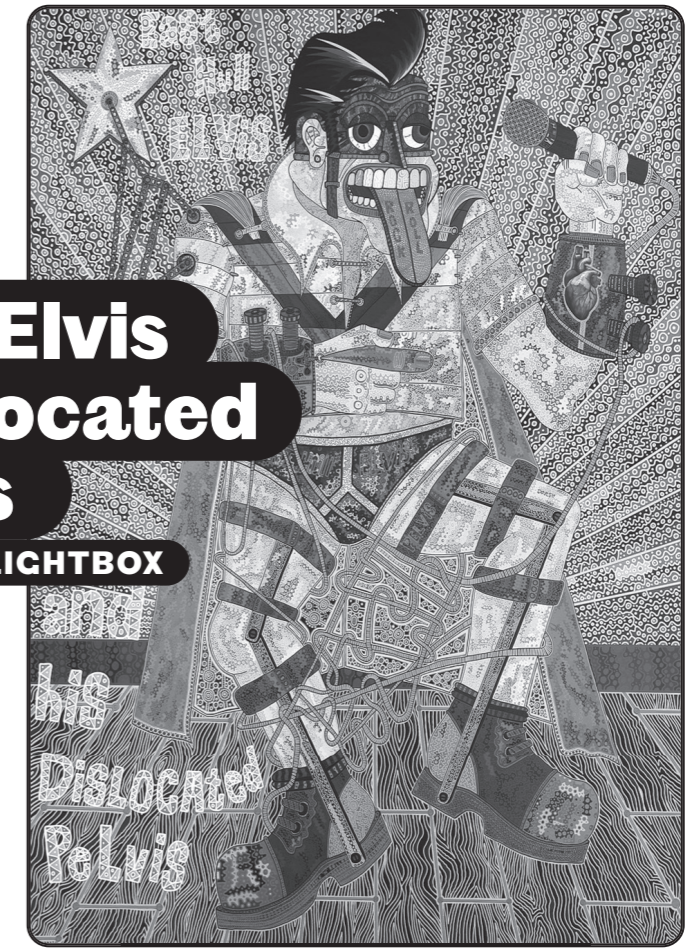


The PiP Princess

FIBREGLASS, WOOD
2019

East Hull Elvis and His Dislocated Pelvis

DIGITAL PAINTING, LIGHTBOX
2019



East Hull Elvis is a composite character that Jason dreamt up based on people he worked with in Hull on community projects from 2017 onwards (including his 2019 project, *A Totem for Hull*). Jason wants to have their voices and passions heard, something that can be especially challenging for the learning-disabled. He says, 'These are my mates.'

Elvis is partially based on a Hull local called John, an Elvis impersonator. The artwork shows a celebratory figure with a strong 1970s aesthetic and bright colours shining out from the central subject. His garments are like *Jason as Argonaut* (the big central inflatable on a sheep), but he also bears a resemblance to the *Corby Rocker*— Jason loves a big quiff of hair.

Golden Wakefield Argonaut

INFLATABLE, LED LIGHTS
2023



Jason was born in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, and in 2023, the city commissioned him to create a bronze statue for the city centre art trail.

Standing on Kirkgate near Wakefield Cathedral, the artwork is called *Amazonian Caiman God*. It represents love and hope and was inspired by a painting of Victorian conservationist Charles Waterton, who also came from Wakefield. Unfortunately, there has been some local resistance and even vandalism, but the city and the Dean of Wakefield have been very supportive.

This inflatable sculpture is the only work in our exhibition that is not multicoloured, as it is a copy of the Wakefield bronze. Look closely: the couple in the statue's right hand symbolises love.

The Hull Powerhouse

DIGITAL PAINTING, LIGHTBOX
2019



Jason's 2019 return to Hull was to create the 3D version of this as a commission for the University of Hull. *The Powerhouse* is a strong and beautifully decorated Humberside woman, an embodiment of many stories told to Jason about local groups.

One group, the Headscarf Revolutionaries, were women fighting for better rights and working conditions for their families, women whose husbands were out at sea for long periods in the demanding fishing and trawling industries. Jason also talked to local disability groups, asking people, 'What do you want to be?' and 'Where do you want to be?'

The fibreglass statue, like those in this exhibition, went through many processes before it was complete: first digital drawings, then a maquette or scale model, a polystyrene form, clay modelling, plaster moulding, the fibreglass moulding, and finally sanding and painting. This lightbox takes the process further by returning to Jason's original drawings and giving the figure an intricate and joyous background of patterned floor and wall.



Manchester Argonaut

FIBREGLASS, WOOD

2022

Jason has created a number of different Argonauts over the years. They are often portraits of people he has worked with, some of whom are sadly no longer with us. They may wear callipers on their legs and clothes that are brightly coloured and ready for action. They often have very quirky headwear or elaborate hair.

Manchester Argonaut was made for *Nothing About Us Without Us*, a project by People's History Museum that explored the history of disabled people's rights, activism, and the fight for inclusion. The project title embodies the campaign for inclusion. Jason created the intricate design from his wide research subjects, including iconic Mancunian musician Ian Curtis of Joy Division (who was also disabled) and parts of the city's coat of arms.



Green Man

INFLATABLE, LED LIGHTS

2022

This work is inspired by the Green Man, a symbol of spring and renewal that dates back over 900 years in England and has been traced to ancient Rome, often occurring as a face made of leaves and carved on buildings.

Created for a Nottinghamshire art project, Jason's *Green Man* is less leafy and more cartoon-like, with a strong feeling of the fairground characters he loves. The figure sports a quiff hairstyle, and the decoration is drawn from patterns seen in local churches. And, of course, he wears the hated callipers (see the light boxes on the opposite wall).



Heart

INFLATABLE, LED LIGHTS
2022

The only piece in the exhibition that is not a figure of a person, animal, or god, *Heart* was shown as part of Jason's involvement in the 2022 Commonwealth Games.

This giant human organ is decorated with the faces of some of Jason's favourite characters and is related to the artwork *I am Argonaut* (shown opposite).

Is this Jason's own heart? It is a symbol of love but importantly also of life, as the heart is the machine that keeps our blood surging through our veins.

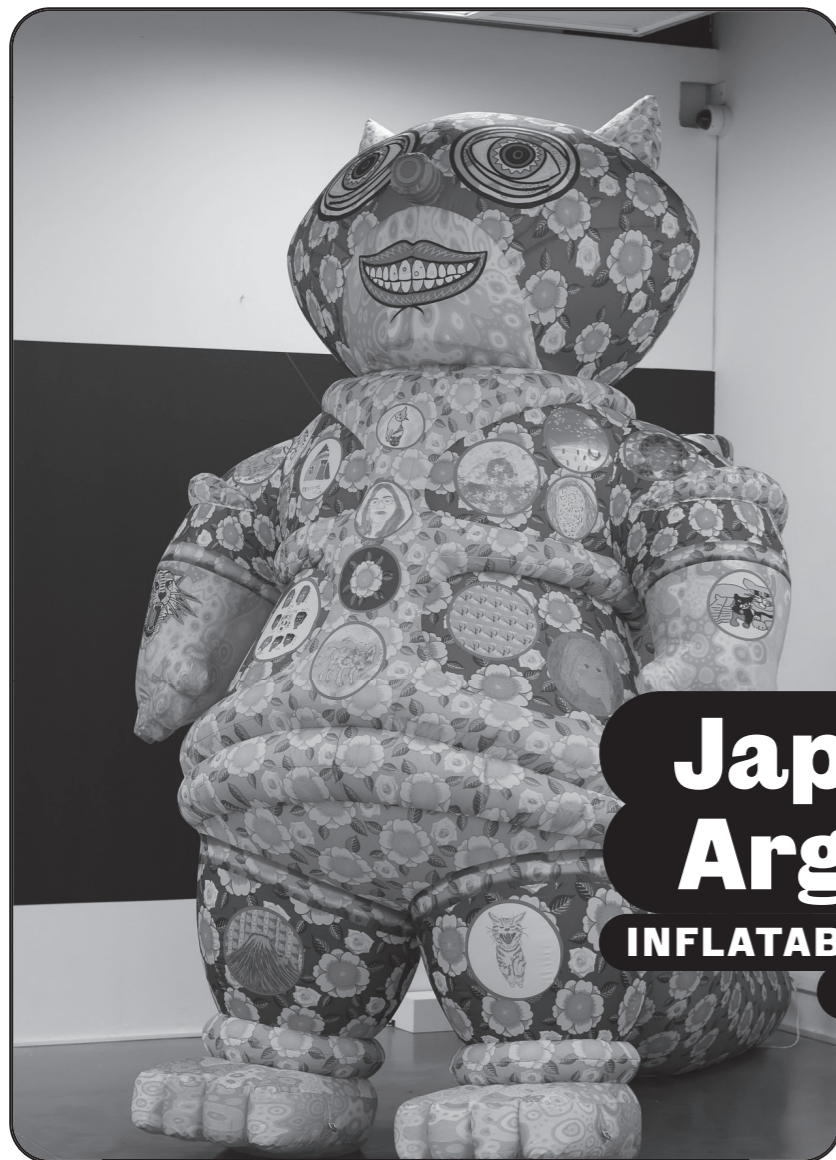
Jason and His Argonaut

INFLATABLE, LED LIGHTS
2020



Here is Jason the hero, letting the golden ram carry him on his adventures through the world. He wears chunky boots, a protective helmet, tattoos, and a stripey jumper like a cartoon character or a rugby player. It's inscribed on the chest with the names of friends, some of whom are no longer alive. Jason is huge, a big smiling hero, equipped to face the world.

This was one of Jason's first inflatable works, created in the first year of the Covid pandemic. Out of his frustration at having projects cancelled (including one with Tate Modern) and being unable to go out, he began staging work in his Sleaford backyard. With the help of his teenage children, he would regularly drag his inflatables outside as a display for the neighbours. Over time, Jason's garden project became well known, and he was even interviewed by a German media company, who were interrupted by local bin men shouting over the fence that they liked his inflatable dolls. No wonder he's smiling.



Japanese Argonaut

INFLATABLE, LED LIGHTS
2023

Jason travelled to Japan in the spring of 2023 for a collaborative residency project with Shape Arts and Keio Graduate School of Media Design. He ran workshops with local disabled people and spent time learning about Japanese culture.

This artwork celebrates that trip and includes images and patterns from his workshops, including cherry blossoms to represent Japan and white roses for Yorkshire. The form of the Argonaut is an exciting mash-up of prehistoric art Jason saw in a Tokyo museum and the tail of famed Japanese film monster and pop culture icon Godzilla.

I am a Beautiful Machinery of Joy

DIGITAL PAINTING, LIGHTBOX
2017



This is an excellent example of how skilfully Jason uses his chosen technology—the bright colours and cartoon-like drawings come to life when illuminated from behind.

This portrait is another reference to Jason's campaigning for disabled people to be seen as strong and engaging, as well as the continuing quest to improve facilities, access, and provision of equipment for disability support.

I am Argonaut

FIBREGLASS, WOOD
2022



Meet Jason Wilsher-Mills.

This sculpture, a self-exploration of his body, is based on medical teaching models that trainee doctors use, split down the middle to show what lies beneath the skin on the right side.

Jason presents himself as both a scientific subject for research and a real person with likes and passions. He has favourite tattoos of ships, mermaids, and stars, a helmet for being a hero, and hearts for love all over his big superhero pants. His year of birth is tattooed under his heart.

Other patterns on his skin include shapes based on Jason's own cells, which have nerve ends typical of people with auto-immune conditions. Jason compared these to 'beautiful explosions'.

Being auto-immune means you may catch more infections than others, but here, Jason celebrates the beauty of his medical condition.

The figure smiles, showing his joy in the world—and also at the artist's joke about its inspiration. This was made for the 2021 Folkestone Triennial and was placed opposite a statue of William Harvey, the local physician who, in 1628, discovered how the heart circulates blood around the body. *I Am Argonaut* points at a hole in its chest, where the heart should be; the statue of Harvey holds a disembodied heart.