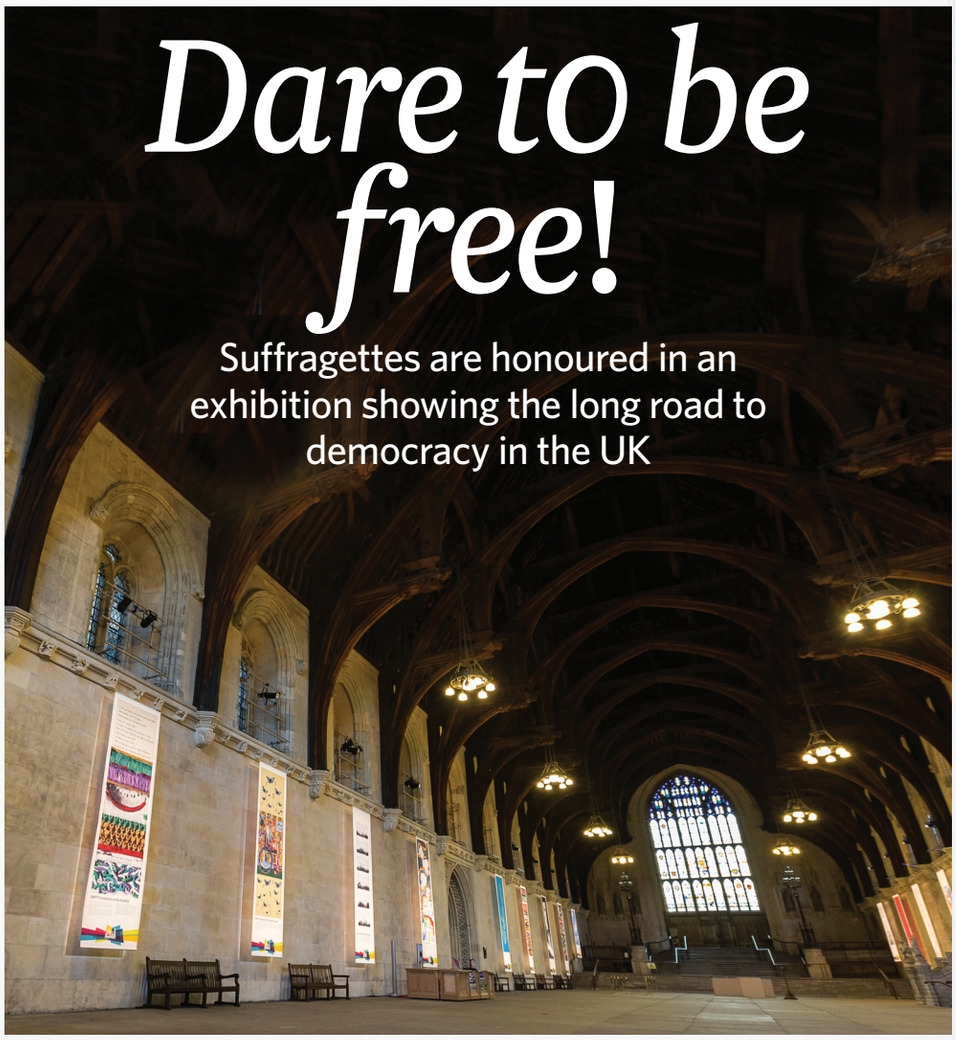
Voices

Alinah Azadeh works in installation, sculpture, performance and digital art, creating dialogue around the social, personal and political

Dare to be free!

Suffragettes are honoured in an exhibition showing the long road to democracy in the UK



Art exists to ask questions, inviting us to look at the world differently for a moment and reflect on where we are in relation to it. I felt hugely honoured and somewhat intimidated to be chosen as one of the artists to create works for an exhibition in Westminster Hall, as part of the programme marking the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta.

Working on the theme of women's suffrage, I wanted to create an 'unexpected ' piece. Apart from the well-known images of militancy, how could I celebrate these courageous activists and their intellectual and creative genius, particularly their powerful use of language in communicating their message, embodied in books, newspapers, plays, exhibitions, installations and performances?

I was blown away by the passionate creativity and razor sharp thinking present in so much of the archive material. I discovered such riches through the Women's Library, the Museum of London, Google news archive (for a digitised version of *The Common Cause* newspaper), the suffrage section at the Palace of Westminster archives and from impassioned suffrage drama specialist and actress Naomi Paxton, who introduced me to Cicely Hamilton's play, *A Pageant of Great Women*, a section of which features in my image.

I often work with textile as an art form; both in relationship to writing (weaving was a form of telling stories 2,500 years before the first texts) and to technology (look at the Jacquard looms alongside the Babbage Engine, the first computing machine, at the Science Museum). Key to this is the role of women in the use and development of both; the operating of looms, synonymous with computer code; the spinning of stories and the mathematical genius of Ada Lovelace, without whom Charles Babbage would not have realised his ambitions.

I create many sculptures using objects wrapped in cloth, a symbolic act of honouring and separating them from the past. Searching for an object to wrap in suffrage colours that would symbolise the struggle for self-representation in the time of suffrage, I found it in the typewriter. It was in so many photos I saw of women working for the cause in the last century.

Victoria Olwell's essay *Typewriters and the Vote* gave me insights into the importance of this machine as a channel for autonomy, independence and a reframing of women's role in the workplace; then as a crucial tool for those who became activists. They took their machines with them, to communicate, co-ordinate and disseminate their campaigns so widely. An ancestor of the laptop and forerunner of social media, the typewriter helped chart the journey 'from prison to citizenship'. Scanning over the post-war, typing pool phase, which relegated women back into more subservient roles in the workplace, technology in the last 20 years has once again given women a chance to self-represent in more immediate ways. Imagine following the Twitter feed of Millicent Fawcett or the Pankhursts!

I often take for granted my right to vote and yet it was won fairly recently. I am now more aware of my debt to those women who risked their own freedoms and sometimes lost their lives to pave the way for us. As someone of mixed origins – my mother was Iranian – I am aware that the right to be represented is still not a given in many countries.

I wonder why women are still under-represented in so many areas of public life; in politics, the legal system, the arts, the economy? There are massive changes happening on all fronts, creating opportunities for positive social change and solidarity. It feels like there is a call to action once more. We all have the potential to be activists in our own spheres – how free do we dare to be?

See http://magnacarta800th.com/events/uk-parliament

For more about Alinah, visit www.alinahazadeh.com WI

ABOVE The banners hang in Westminster Hall, at the heart of the Houses of Parliament LEFT Alinah's work focuses on the typewriter, chosen for its key role spreading the word about the struggle for women's right to vote. Alinah has wrapped it in suffrage colours