

## Exhibition review

# 'When words are not enough': An exhibition by the Blue Mountains and Nepean Art Therapy Regional Group

## Abstract

A record of, and reflection on, the experience of putting on a public art exhibition by a group of art therapists from the Blue Mountains and Nepean Art Therapy Regional Group. It incorporates the groups' emerging themes, captured from the exhibition and subsequent reflections.

## Keywords

Regional group, art exhibition, art therapists, emerging themes, reflections

This paper was written to record and reflect on the experience of putting on a public art exhibition by a group of art therapists from the Blue Mountains and Nepean Art Therapy Regional Group. This group was formed towards the end of 2013, in order to provide a regional opportunity for practising art therapists to connect, share information and provide peer support for each other.

For the exhibition a working group of five people was formed from the Regional Group. This group started meeting around 14 months before the exhibition was held, initially monthly and then

moving to three-weekly, then weekly meetings as the exhibition drew closer. Sixteen members of the regional group chose to exhibit their work.

The exhibition was held at the Braemar Gallery in Springwood, New South Wales, in October 2018 and was deliberately timed to coincide with New South Wales Mental Health Week. It was formally opened on 13 October by Councillor Mark Greenhill, the Mayor of the Blue Mountains, who used part of his opening speech as an opportunity to share with the broader community some of his own experiences of living with a mental-health issue. The exhibition ran for three weeks. During



## WHEN WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Blue Mountains - Nepean Art Therapists

11 October - 4 November 2018

Braemar Gallery and the artists warmly invite you to the launch,  
to be opened by **Suzie van Opdorp**

**Saturday 13 October, 2 - 4pm**

**BRAEMAR  
HOUSE**



Braemar Gallery  
104 Macquarie Road, Springwood  
Thursday - Sunday 10am-4pm  
email: braemargallery@gmail.com

Tracy Allen  
Catherine Camden Pratt  
Annette Coulter  
Jo Davies  
Mandy Evans  
Louise Fox  
Toni Jessop  
Gina Harrowell  
Katrina Hawke  
Edwina Keene  
Amba Lewis-Rosman  
Nicole Luhrs  
Mishy Rowan  
Martin Roberts  
Liz Rummery  
Wendy Tsai  
Sue Wildman

Exhibition postcard.  
A combination of  
images by Gina  
Harrowell, Martin  
Roberts and Mandy  
Evans.

the opening hours of Thursday to Sunday, at least one of the exhibiting artists was obliged to be present in the space alongside a gallery volunteer, to answer any questions posed by visitors.

To gather the information for this paper, an open request was sent to the exhibitors asking them to reflect on and answer a series of questions about their experience of taking part in this public exhibition as an artist/arts therapist. Nine exhibitors (including the main author) decided to take the opportunity to assist with the creation of this paper. As the focus of the exhibition was on the visual arts, the paper concentrates on visual arts practice and art therapy, rather than the broader practice of arts therapies.

The questions asked of the artist participants were as follows:

- What most stands out for you in regard to your experience of participating in the exhibition?
- How do the artwork/s you created relate to your current artistic practice (if at all)?
- Did exhibiting enable you to create, develop or maintain your artistic practice?
- Did the opportunity to exhibit encourage you to do artworks that you might not have otherwise done?
- Were there any tensions showing up in regard to exhibiting the work you chose in the gallery environment?
- What, if any, feedback did you get about the exhibition, from the community?
- What were your impressions of Mayor Mark Greenhill's speech, and how helpful were his comments in regard to destigmatising mental-health issues?

The comments that were made in response to these questions were gathered together and grouped into emerging themes for this paper. A collective biography process was utilised as a mechanism for remembering the experience (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Themes arose directly or indirectly in response to the questions posed. The main ones that arose were:

- The profile of art therapy
- The development of artistic practice
- The development of artistic identity
- Artistic practice in relation to art therapy
- The tensions of exhibiting artwork in a public space
- General concerns raised from the community about mental health
- Mayor Mark Greenhill's speech

These themes are described in more detail below and are contextualised with some references to art therapy literature.

A number of participants found that this exhibition was a useful tool to gauge community interest in and awareness of art therapy in general, as well as provide an opportunity to educate the public and local services about it. The exhibition provided a mechanism to explain what art therapy is, how it can be utilised (with different client populations as well as in practice) and to answer any other questions raised. It also proved to be an exercise in group (or team) building, as the different agenda – the development of an exhibition – enabled this established group to come together in a unique way.

Ongoing artistic practice was also a significant theme, which arose for different reasons among these participants. Some artists talked about this as an opportunity to develop and extend their art practice and to explore new media and themes, as well as focus on current thoughts and feelings of the self, the environment or general art/therapy practice. The decision to try new media was seen in particular as a resonating metaphor for exploration and growth. Others described the exhibition as giving them a push to develop artworks that they had been holding on to for some time, or an opportunity to “just make art”. In addition it provided a “different kind” of creative experience, taking into consideration the expectations and requirements of the gallery committee and the public. The date and time deadline that was provided was a motivating factor for a couple of the group members who expressed finding it difficult to make time to be creative, due to the competing requirements of other parts of life, such as work and family commitments.

HMoon (2002) describes the importance of ongoing practice and of the immersion of being engaged in our own artmaking. Not only are our acts of making important for our own sense of artistic “knowing” and “sensitivity”, but it is this familiarity with materials that makes it possible to share with our clients how to “communicate through the language of artistic expression” (p.54).

Identity as an artist was viewed as critically important to most of the participants. For some it was deemed as ‘deeply felt’ and ‘central’ to how lives were currently being lived, as well as drawing on ‘deep reserves’ of memory and the acknowledgement of the presence of the

creative spirit. There were also reflections on the importance of bearing witness to the audience responses to the exhibition, which were largely positive and included participants hearing the words 'powerful' and 'emotive' due to the depth and spirit of the work on offer. The exhibition also gave exhibitors an opportunity to 'engage and dialogue' with other peers, private clients and new acquaintances. This opportunity to exhibit has inspired at least one member to work toward a future solo exhibition.

Moon (2002) describes how an art-based model of art therapy places a high value on the artist identity (p.162). Working from a position of authenticity and truthfulness can be enabled by the art therapist's commitment to a meaningful and developed art-making practice (p.163).

The question of the relationship between art practice and art therapy practice provoked a range of responses. There was a reflection and acknowledgment of the pain of self and others. A degree of solidarity with marginalised communities and clients was also expressed. Other artists described how important it was to have both the therapeutic experience of self-care and the opportunity to impart to others the therapeutic benefits of engaging with art materials. The exhibition was described as being a mechanism to express personal thoughts and feelings about art therapy practice, as well as an opportunity to consider how artists' own art practices informed their therapeutic work.

Moon (2002) describes four reasons why making art is so crucial for art therapists: It provides an ongoing method of self-education; if we expect our clients to make art, we should be willing to do it as well; active artistic engagement provides a healthy challenge for us to maintain our authentic artistic selves; and, finally, our collective identity as art therapists is tied in with a commitment to engaging in the art-making process (pp.55-56).

A number of tensions were described as part of the exhibiting process; some were derived from the actual practicalities of preparing work and/or the curation of the exhibition, and others from a more existential experience of self-doubt and exposure caused by sharing personal artworks.

On a practical level, one of the artists noted that the numbers for her artworks had been put on incorrectly, which, after the initial frustration,

provided her with an alternate view of her artworks. Another noted being confronted by a number of practical issues, such as how to reveal the 'process' of her artwork without spending a lot of money on framing (in this gallery space, work was not allowed to be pinned to the walls).

More common was the theme of a sense of being exposed through exhibiting personal artwork. This included feelings of self-doubt, self-criticism and fear over whether work would be seen as 'good enough', the trepidation of revealing a 'strong image', as well as the complexity of finding oneself revealing a dual identity of both artist and art therapist in a small community. However, the vulnerability and potential of self-exposure from showing artwork in a public space can be used to deepen our empathy for our clients with their own acts of vulnerability and self-exposure within the therapeutic space (Moon, 2002, p.56). Indeed, the ongoing arts practice for art therapists can be seen to be an essential part of professional development and for the "broader engagement and dissemination of art therapy 'in the community' through participation in exhibitions and community projects" (Paton et al., 2018, p.106).

When visiting the exhibition, many community members brought up their concerns about the profile of mental health and mental illness in our society, and associated issues such as the poor understanding of its impacts and stigma. There appeared to be strong resonance with and recognition of the use of the arts in relation to health, as well as a keen interest in learning more about how creativity can be used for self-expression, communication and self-care. This exhibition seemed to provide a safe and open space in which conversations and stories about the many aspects of mental health were possibly easier to have than in some alternative community spaces.

Moon (2002) suggests that we need to maintain authenticity in our work as art therapists, and that fits "into an alternate view of the visual arts that is more communally based and more socially responsible" (p.57). This also aligns us with the philosophy informing arts therapy education at Western Sydney University (where many of this group trained), which perceives the arts therapies as a practice of social justice that directly dialogues with social and cultural issues (Paton et al., 2018, p.101).

Councilor Mark Greenhill is the current Mayor of the Blue Mountains. He opened the exhibition for the group and used it as a platform to share his own experience of living with bipolar 1 disorder. This was described by one participant as a “relevant, heartfelt and powerful speech by a very high-standing member of the Blue Mountains community.” It was described by another participant as the highlight of the whole experience, as it was “moving, thought provoking and challenging.” It demonstrated how the “power of people coming together to create and exhibit art can break down barriers and promote a dialogue that is so important and necessary in order to destigmatise mental-health issues.” This kind of dialogue can also help to normalise what it is to seek help and treatment from mental-health practitioners, such as art therapists, and affirm that this is a positive and helpful thing to do. Another participant said that they felt “proud of the Mayor”, empowered to talk so honestly, and also proud of the fact that we, as a group, facilitated this opportunity that enabled him to do so. It also provided a headline in the local paper, which meant that we ended up having the exhibition reported twice in local media (*Blue Mountains Gazette*, 8 October 2018; *Blue Mountains Gazette*, 15 October 2018). As this event occurred during New South Wales Mental Health week, it was a particularly important and pertinent speech.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents expressed their delight in the success of the exhibition; an evaluation that was gauged from the number of attendees at the opening event, the number of people who came through the door during its three-week run, and from the feedback that was obtained from visitors to the gallery as well as the participating artists.

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The Blue Mountains Regional ANZACATA group, Braemar Gallery, Springwood, New South Wales, 2018. (Photograph: Peter Hackney, group photograph, *Blue Mountains Gazette*, 15 October 2018)

## Images and artists' supporting statements:

Sue Wildman

My works are about the process of art therapy.

I wrote this poem to illustrate the meaning of my works:

### Mirrors of the mind

*The image mirrors back what lies beneath the surface  
of the mind's terrain, muddied waters of a reef  
Something hidden but lurking underneath  
The image mirrors back what lies beneath the surface  
Nearing the estuary, waters mix and flow  
Merging together above an undertow  
The image mirrors back what lies beneath the surface  
glinting insights slowly emerge and rise  
Reflections gradually crystallise  
The image mirrors back what lies beneath the surface  
And through the mists and icy chillness  
calmness settles in the mind's new stillness.*



Sue Wildman, *Mirrors of the mind (bringing subconscious to light)*, 2017, pen and ink on paper, 203 × 254mm.

Tracy Allen

I spontaneously created three artworks (one shown). They were created very quickly, scratching into the paper with a pair of scissors, to rid myself of tension and frustration. After that release, I then laid the gentle wash over the scratches to self-soothe. It was appealing in its brevity and both its emotional and physical release. As an art therapist, I am particularly interested in the physical nature of creating art for release, with that activity embodied by art media for reflection. When words are not enough, an art therapist can provide a safe space for the client to actively feel and see the mystery and complications they are attempting to unravel and identify.



Tracy Allen, *Scratching 1*, 2018, paint on paper, 270 × 200mm.

Annette Coulter

The series of artworks refers to taking the risk and deciding to enter therapy versus what can happen if an issue or problem is not addressed. My work was inspired by the IDT, Interactive Drawing Therapy, therapeutic process. *With Therapy* (the blue images) includes the decision to embark on therapy; the feeling of elation after therapy has inspired change; then the consolidation of that work in the transformational stage until life is restored, and self-determination is achieved. *Without Therapy* (the red images) refers to a problem festering, unresolved, potentially damaging most aspects of one's life, which can then morph into disarray. The amusing part was that the series *Without Therapy* (red), appealed to viewers more than the series *With Therapy* (blue) and, interestingly, the works were initially put up the wrong way around during the curatorial process. The oval canvas represents life – roundness offers integration.



Annette Coulter, *With Therapy and Without Therapy*, 2018 mixed media on canvas, varied sizes.

## Mandy Evans

I work intuitively, gesturally, fluidly moving the paint around on the picture plane in fast actions, developing a physical and an emotional connection with the work. This urgency and energy are the welcoming of an uncertainty and this process helps express unconscious states of being in the painting. The paint becomes the conduit bridging the gap between the unconscious and conscious worlds, providing the unconscious with a means of expressing itself visually. Reflecting back on my own work and process helps me stay in touch with myself and the art therapy participants I am with.



Mandy Evans, *Gracious Leap*, 2017, acrylic on linen, 2190 × 1190mm.

## Mishy Rowan

The concept for *Forever changing me* spawned from my understanding of my own identity as an art therapist and is simultaneously a reflection on the changes that clients experience through the therapeutic process. The painting consists of layers of paint so thick that the previous image is intentionally indistinguishable – like masks worn by therapist and client alike which hide aspects of our identity, our experiences, our personality, our past, all of which are always with us, entangled in our present, forever changing.



Mishy Rowan, *Forever changing me*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 450 × 450mm.

## Martin Roberts

I think with my artwork and art practice in general these days, I find it's a way to process issues and concerns that are affecting me and it's empowering to be able to give an expression to that. My artwork for the exhibition looked at social media and the impact of it on the mental health of both my clients and myself as a therapist, and to focus a specific artwork on this was a way to reflect on this.



Martin Roberts, *Cruising troubled waters*, 2018, paper collage, fabric applique, ink, 840mm × 670mm.

## Liz Rummery

These assemblages were part of an open-ended art enquiry process into the nature of self and self-identities. Using handmade pinhole cameras, I thought of the process as 'drawing with light' and would work quickly, in an approximative way, to capture the essence of the small assemblages. I shot directly onto the photographic paper and had a preference for the negative images. When approached this way, the images consistently revealed an aspect of the sculptural pieces that I hadn't yet known; a way of knowing my subject that had previously been hidden from me. This made for an alive and rich inquiry process that has continued and guided me in my life and in my work as an artist and art therapist since.



Liz Rummery, Pinhole camera and small assemblages, 1996-1998/2018.

Katrina Hawke

*Wishbone*, for me, is about expressing a profoundly deep longing and being vulnerable in revealing a part of myself to others. Vulnerability is something that many art therapy clients experience, especially in the first few sessions. This work encourages me to provide a safe space where clients have the freedom to explore the deeper parts of themselves and feel comfortable in self-expression through the medium of art.



Katrina Hawke, *Wishbone*, 2018, chalk pastel on paper, 430 × 300mm.

Jo Davies

This is from a series of process-led artworks that reflect on the somatic expression of grief, communicated through 'embodied gestures'. Bringing to consciousness sensory stimulus as it occurs is our primary link to the here and now, and directly links to our emotions. These somatic and emotional responses can be made visible through the art-making process and are something I encourage clients to work with, in the therapeutic space.



Jo Davies, *Embodied gesture of grief*, part 1, image 5, 2018, ink, water and varnish on board, 280 × 355mm.

# anzjat

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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