

# THE CREATIVE SPACE

Art and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma,  
grief and loss

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Social Sciences and Psychology  
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### **Doctor of Philosophy Declaration**

I, Anne Riggs, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *The Creative Space. Art and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma, grief and loss*, is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the relationship between creative arts practice and trauma, loss and grief, including the shadowy world of sexual abuse. It is an examination of what art and the artist can contribute to wellbeing in the aftermath of such experiences through collaborative processes. It has involved creating art with a community of women who have inhabited spaces of trauma and loss and who carry the stigmata of these experiences. It examines what it means for artists to delve into the shadows of what hurts, disturbs and stultifies so as to offer something back that reveals, transforms and restores.

Participant and counsellor interviews, as well as the reflections of the artist as a participant/observer, are the main methods used to investigate the impact of creativity on wellbeing for women who have experienced trauma, grief and loss. Through a process of reflection and critical analysis, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how art-making and a relationship with art and artists can influence the wellbeing of those dealing with trauma, loss and grief.

The thesis also considers the creative spaces of artists: both the studio and the artist's internal world. Consequently, part of the research has involved the contemplation and exhibition of the artist's own reflective creative practice on trauma, loss and grieving, and the transformations and revelations that occur through the creative process.

Keywords: Art, trauma, grief, loss, sorrow, mosaic, ceramics, mourning, creativity

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## 2 INTRODUCTION

Artists delve into shadowy places. We inhabit spaces and are fascinated by what can be repulsive to others. Bones, death, corpses and other abject materials provide artists with endless opportunities for metaphor. We gaze, and in our natural introspection, we wonder.

This research is an immersion into one such place, of trauma, loss and grief and into the particularly shadowy world of sexual abuse, and asks: what can art contribute to wellbeing following this experience? It is an immersion into the creative spaces of artists who look at what hurts, disturbs and stultifies in order to offer what reveals, transforms and restores, and asks: what can artists contribute to wellbeing through their practice and how might this feed a community arts practice? It is an immersion into creating art with a group of women who inhabit this shadowy world of trauma and carry the stigmas of their experience and asks: how can being part of a shared creative practice contribute to these women's wellbeing?

This research and document is the work of an artist. It emerges from my creative space and practices and a desire to understand and articulate some of the complexity of what I do and what art does. It examines the nexus between my studio practice and engagement with the community. In Chapters 5 and 7 much of this examination occurs through a dialogue with participants, their artworks and creative practice, and in Chapter 6, as a reflexive dialogue with my own creative practice.

This thesis is an evolution in a long-term enquiry into grief and loss, explored through the prisms of the landscape, death and ritual, and a sustained and passionate interest in the First World War. My reflections about the First World War, which involved several excursions into the environs of the conflict and resulted in a Master of Fine Arts degree and touring exhibition, were a meditation on loss and the enduring pain and consequences of that cataclysmic event. While observing the dysfunction of present-day families and cultures as a result of this traumatic event, my focus opened out to include trauma in my contemplations of grief. It prompted this enquiry into whether a creative practice could tend the wounds of trauma and perhaps lessen the possibility

that future generations would be similarly burdened. This thesis, therefore, is a merging of the two parts of my professional practice as a studio and community artist.

The title of this thesis, *The Creative Space*, invites contemplation of where and how creativity occurs. It is an acknowledgement of physical creative spaces, such as the artist's studio, community venues, even the kitchen table, and it invites curiosity and conversations about how these spaces evoke and support creativity. The Creative Space is, however, more than an exploration of physical spaces; it is also a portrayal of the spaces of possibility: for life to be different and to see, feel and experience the world "through different eyes" as the victims of abuse often yearn to do. The Creative Space also describes the internal world of the maker as the place where feelings that have lain dormant for years are aroused and where revelations, shifts of perception and transformation are enabled by a creative practice. Those who go through the experience of trauma know that it is one of deadening and reduction, whereas creative spaces are alive and full of promise. Therefore, one way to enter the work is to consider art-making as "not representing a world, but creating one" (Witkin in Minge 270).

The shadow referred to in the title and throughout is a metaphor for the darkness of trauma and loss. It also suggests that which is not fixed or certain about the work or the terrain upon which the work is located; it is a metaphor to embrace the transitory, and the thoughts, recollections and feelings being suggested or hinted at but which are not yet definitive.

In the *Short History of the Shadow*, Victor Stoichita, referring to artist Leonardo Da Vinci, claims that in art, the shadow is of "supreme importance in perspective" because without it, opaque and solid bodies would be ill-defined (62).<sup>1</sup> Shadows represent a range of positive and negative human qualities and attributes, such as protectiveness (taking someone under your shadow) and mortality (in the lengthening shadow). Distorted and magnified shadows in art symbolise a person's negative side and are an

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<sup>1</sup> The MLA referencing style is used for the clarity it offers to the page. This style reduces the need for additional in-text referencing when an author or text is clearly already referenced in the body of the text. Other features of this style may be found in the 2009 MLA Style Guide.

expression of suspicion; the shadow articulates the imaginary enemy, evil and the externalisation of the inner self. I also muse over the shadow for its wide-ranging evocations that are neither wholly positive nor wholly negative, but rather a representation of both and the spaces in between, such as the representation of clarity and distortion, the present as well as the unseen and unknown, sanctuary as well as fear. In the shades between light and dark, shadows help express something by revealing its opposite.

Dark shadows make seeing difficult. In their isolation, and their acceptance of others' negative views of them, victims of trauma can block the light, unwittingly creating the dark shadows that impinge on their vision. They sit in their own shadow. Were the victim or the light source moved, the victim's perspective would also shift and, with that, what is unsure and unclear might become easier to see. I think of art-making as this movement.

The attributes of the shadow – sometimes transitory and indefinite, sometimes clear and defined, or dark and gloomy – can be applied to the understanding and expression of trauma, grief and art-making to help articulate what is difficult about writing and speaking about art, and living with and explaining trauma and grief. The wide-ranging connotations of the metaphor of the shadow help express my view that the creative practices and artworks described are a discussion rather than an argument; exploratory rather than definitive; about looking for possibilities, flexibility of thought and interpretations rather than maintaining a fixed viewpoint. It is a metaphor that describes the spaces between reality and abstraction, presence and absence and, potently, communicates about light and perspective.

Those who experience sexual abuse can feel like outsiders. An enduring sense of otherness, one legacy of their violation, is captured in the much-used phrase "me and the outside world" introduced to me by research participants. In its bluntness it holds the inheritance of abuse: victims' immense feelings of difference and alienation, their sense of aloneness and unworthiness, and the lack of care shown to them; the "destruction of the soul", as sexual abuse victim Carole Stingel describes it (Robinson).

In many respects, artists are also outsiders, although largely out of choice. We spend

enormous amounts of time pursuing our passions in creative solitude, leading different work lives from most others, and are guided by different motivations. The artist's practice may be viewed with bewilderment, but that may mean being closed to what an artist does. Artists are careful observers of people and things. We have a range of skills which, when applied to trauma, provide a unique and valuable contribution to wellbeing. Artists reveal constructive and healthy ways to express and communicate, especially those feelings that are hidden and silenced, ugly and abject. Artists demonstrate that an individual can claim, maintain and honour difference without removing her/himself from the community, shedding individuality or being trampled on by others. We can show participants how to be resourceful, lateral and imaginative in thinking and doing, and that these qualities are to be celebrated. Artists can encourage participants to see that determination and effort are important ingredients in creativity and to appreciate that passion, pleasure and beauty are worthy desires to pursue. Artists may be "defined in terms of openness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence, and intersubjective vulnerability", says Grant E Kester (81), and artists meet others with empathy. We habitually push boundaries. Our work practices allow us to transcend boundaries and, by so doing, we are well placed to help others transcend constrictive boundaries.

Artists are also insiders. We are invited into private spaces; we work in a range of places and alongside a variety of people that would be unusual in most other professions. We witness and immerse ourselves in humanity at its most celebratory, vulnerable, abject and ordinary. I have had the rich experiences of working creatively within prisons, schools, hospitals, community centres, tertiary institutions, orphanages; with people who have a disability, a mental illness, are deaf or who have been abused; indigenous Australians and those enjoying adult recreational and vocational classes or a children's holiday program; the well, the sick, the grieving and the dying. These human connections and experiences, the layers of "sedimentation and meditation", as Antony Gormley describes his arts practice (Arasse 179), nourish the artist and provide the foundations upon which to build the artist's studio and community practices.

As both therapists and victims attest below, the various modes of talking therapy that are the dominant treatments available to those who have suffered trauma can present impediments to recovery. Within the question "How can art contribute to wellbeing

following trauma?", I ask, if rape, or sexual abuse, is the destruction of the soul, can immersion in a creative space, working with an artist and being part of a community of practice, re/construct the soul. Without laying claim to a universal truth, my thesis, involving victims of sexual abuse, whose experience I discuss below, together with my own experience as an artist, suggests the answer is an emphatic "Yes".

For most participants who joined in the creative projects I discuss below, it was not a question of whether art might be useful so much as a belief that art *would* be useful to them. The impetus for joining the art group was the invitation to create and bring art into their lives; for many it was a summons to respond to a desperate need.

The claim art "is lifesaving" may sound outrageous. However, it is an assertion I have heard a number of times about creative participation. Indeed, participants said that the contribution to their wellbeing of being involved in making art was, "Well, I am still here". That is a big statement for survivors of sexual abuse to make, though it may sound overstated to the rest of us.

In grabbing hold of the opportunity and in taking a leap of faith, most discovered that "like a key turning", as many described it, art opened them to places previously closed and to possibilities seemingly unattainable and beyond dreaming. A creative practice by its very nature pushes against boundaries, barriers and preconceptions. As participants pushed, they discovered an opening into the "outside world" and, at the same time, into the internal world; this observation suggests one reason why art can be such an effective counterweight to trauma.

Beauty, love, care, community, the normal and normality, expression, sorrow and mourning are words with which this thesis is infused. These were words commonly used by the participants to state, indeed emphasise, the connections and communication between themselves and others, with their internal selves, and with the "outside world" made possible through this active engagement with art and artists. They provide context for understanding the meaning and consolation art provided to lives in which these feelings or experiences had either been absent or disabled. Many of these words have been and are the subject of intense discussion and debate within

the humanities, and undoubtedly one needs to tread carefully when using words such as beauty in any analytical or critical context. When Elaine Scarry says beauty has “been banished, driven underground in the humanities for the last two decades” (57) she is acknowledging the inherent problem of defining a concept, ‘beauty’, so open to interpretation. Jacques Ranciere, Nicolas Bourriaud and others have used the term “relational aesthetics” to help overcome the problem; Kester uses “dialogic aesthetics” to discuss aesthetics in the context of socially-driven artworks. Both terms describe an ongoing state of dialogue between the artwork, artist and audience and the potential for open-ended interpretation. In her essay as part of this debate, Claire Bishop uses the term “aesthetic resolution” to differentiate what is understood to be a completed artwork from “open-ended” artworks.

Used in the context of making art after sexual abuse, Bishop’s term may be useful for describing artworks and the processes of creating artworks that have an aesthetic appeal. However, I propose that it more accurately describes the resolution within and between trauma victims, and their place in the world discovered through an engagement with art.

Susan Johnson writes that artist Gerhard Richter believes beauty to be “that which is uninjured” (74). Rather than limiting the discussion about beauty to a debate about aesthetics, I use it as a concept to articulate how women, the injured, who once felt everything had been lost to trauma found redemption and restoration through art. Artist Agnes Martin believes beauty is an emotion that exists “in the mind”, and Olga M Viso, writing about Martin says “the same can be said of perfection and happiness”, also recurrent themes in this discussion. Martin argues that it is the human awareness of beauty that shifts because the distractions of daily life keep individuals from staying focused and connected with beauty. Art has a tremendous power to “reawaken the mind’s awareness of beauty, by providing memories and experiences in which to explore life’s mysteries”, says Viso (116). This theme of the relationship between beauty and memory is one Johnson contemplates as she connects beauty “to a moment of injury”. In pondering whether her long search for beauty is connected to witnessing the destruction of something beautiful, the “uninjured” as she calls it, she concludes that memory is a branch of beauty (76).

Scarry says that the beautiful thing is incomparable and seems to inspire a sense of newness/newborn-ness (23). When that beautiful thing is artwork created out of broken lives and damaged materials, such as broken bits of tiles and crockery as mosaics, or emerges from the earth as clay sculptures, the sense of newborn-ness is more than simply a metaphor. It is an expression of what creativity does: "You are in the presence of something life giving, lifesaving", as Scarry remarks (27). In delving into shadowy places in and through their art, victims in this study found that rather than stimulating more sorrow and negativity, things that had been lost, or thought lost, were found. Like the torch the artist Canova<sup>2</sup> places in the hand of the mourner to bring light into the devastating darkness of loss (see Chapter 8), the participants' own creativity brought light to the darkness, and opened the way to expression, consolation and restoration.

In the context of this work about trauma, the words listed above, which are quoted from participants' own statements, have particular potency and value. Sexual abuse had left each participant depleted and most feeling profoundly disconnected from themselves, others and the world. Some were unable to feel or see anything as being positive or as ever having the potential to be positive. Having "no inner beauty", being "bad all bad", unlovable, dirty, not human and unworthy are words and expressions I heard many times used to describe the internalisation of abuse. "We talk ourselves into existence", say Debbie Horsfall, Hilary Byrne-Armstrong and Rod Rothwell in arguing that the language of the discourse to which we belong shapes us: "we are not in charge of language; rather language and social practices are in charge of us" (in Higgs and Titchen 91). When women are part of the discourse of sexual abuse and victimhood, the statements from participants above are part of the existence into which they have "been talked"; when the women are part of a discourse of creativity and community, the existence into which they "are talked" includes the language with which I began this section.

Therese Schmid discusses creativity in relation to health through the practice of self-

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<sup>2</sup> Antonio Canova, artist of *Uxori optimae Albertus* (To The Perfect Wife of Albert) c1800. Tomb of the Archduchess Christina, daughter of Maria Theresa, in the Church of the Augustines. Vienna, Austria.

actualisation, referring to the humanist psychology theorists (Maslow 1962, 1971, 1987; Rogers 1970; Runco et al. 1991 and Sheldon 1995), who observe that “the creative person is one who is fulfilled, is self-actualised and is functioning freely and fully” (43). Taking this theory as a foundation, I argue that an individual may be a creative person for some time before they are fulfilled, self-actualised and functioning freely and fully. The thesis finds that it is through the practice of creativity that these things are attained and maintained. A creative practice was undertaken with the intention of restoring, or instilling, beauty and love into places that had been thoroughly distorted by ugliness and inhumanity – the aesthetic redemption Winter describes – with the intention of creating fulfilled and freely and fully functioning people, as the humanist theorists observe.

Community artists, project participants and those at its edges (such as administrators and councils) often have very different perceptions from those outside the domain, especially regarding the processes and value of creating art. While community art is not usually met with negativity it can be met with misunderstanding, cynicism and indifference, which I view as a refusal and disinclination to really look at art and creativity. In this shadow, the shifts, the transformations, the restoration, and the understanding of what art does and what the artist brings to community and individual wellbeing can remain out of focus.

There may be some alignment here with the refusal to look into the shadowy world of abuse, and the consequences of that rebuff for individuals. Looking opens the possibility of seeing, and in seeing, surely there is an obligation to act. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s work on testimony and witnessing indicates that the role of the attentive listener is crucial to a victim finding relief in giving a testimony rather than reliving the trauma; for those like Primo Levi, not being truly heard by the listener inflicts a terrible blow: “A desolating grief is now born in me. It is pain in its pure state ...”. Theirs is a story that cannot be witnessed (Felman and Laub 68). One area of enquiry in this thesis, therefore, is whether making and viewing artwork about trauma may be perceived as giving testimony and witness to the experience.

Art in the context of wellbeing is too often considered through the framework of other disciplines, such as psychology, and is frequently described as art therapy. This may

be because it can be difficult, using words, to articulate what is an essentially visceral response to art. It may also be because these other disciplines have developed language that now has widespread currency for discussing these human experiences, whereas the arts in this context is only just developing one. The purpose of this study is to examine creative practice as another option available to victims of trauma and not to compare art-making with therapy. I aim to contribute to the discussion a deeper understanding of the benefits of creative practice and to a language to help describe it.

The question posed by my thesis is thus not whether art-making contributes to wellbeing, but rather how, what and why, and critically, what roles do artists take in this. What is happening in the creative process and engagement that makes art so profound? What is the connection between the art project and the artist that enables momentous creative spaces to open and personal transformations to occur? The project participants' and my work presented and explored here are an examination and a dreaming. The thesis is a reflection upon what has been, as well as an ambition for what might be possible if art were to be more broadly offered in trauma and grief work. It is, as Freud has said, both love and work.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to Elms (90) and his interpretation of others' texts (Masson 1985) and Erikson (1963) for example, there is no account of this popular quote in any of Freud's writings. It is believed to have been Freud's verbal response to a question asked of him about what is necessary for a happy life.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is divided into three sections. The first, *Art and wellbeing*, locates the work in an arts practice. Drawing on a small but growing area of research emerging principally in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, I discuss arts practice in relation to health and wellbeing to distinguish that work from a therapy model.

The second section, *In the shadow of trauma, loss and grief*, describes the experience of trauma and loss and gives an overview of the terrain and then a particular examination of sexual trauma and its impacts. This section provides the context for the thesis. As I approach the thesis as a visual artist rather than as a therapist, I have not attempted to make a comprehensive evaluation of contemporary trauma and sexual abuse theory and practice. Instead I have drawn upon this literature to inform my practice as an artist and to identify gaps within the literature to support my hypothesis for the inclusion of an art practice as part of the journey towards wellbeing. In this section, I outline some of the effects of trauma, particularly sexual abuse, and describe how, as a consequence of trauma, many victims fail to fully participate in life. Here I discuss mourning, which I consider to be crucial to wellbeing in the context of trauma, as well as artworks and artists whose work contributes to the conversation.

The third section, *Art and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma, loss and grief*, draws the threads of art and trauma together in an examination of artists whose work inhabits the territory of trauma, loss and grief and some arts processes leading towards recovery and wellbeing. Here I discuss the language of artists and artworks, in particular how the elusive and difficult to express in verbal language can be accessed and expressed using visual language. This section is also a discussion of community arts practice and how participation can help reconnect some of the links broken through trauma.

## Art and wellbeing

The concept of "Art and Wellbeing" is too frequently viewed through the paradigm of art therapy, a field of work, as its title suggests, that has its foundation in a therapy practice. Art therapy, however, is not the only paradigm through which to examine the contribution towards wellbeing that arts practice and the artist can make; nor is it the one through which I examine and position this work or myself as a studio artist in this context. Instead, I place both within the model known broadly as "Arts and Health" This term suggests a relationship between the arts and a positive position of being healthy (as opposed to ill-health, being in therapy, being ill etc.). In its broadest sense, this field incorporates art in hospitals, artists working with communities for social inclusion and art projects conducted with vulnerable and disenfranchised communities and individuals; and includes all art-forms, that is, visual and performing arts, writing, circus and music.

Wellbeing is understood to incorporate more than a physical and mental sense of health. Michael Wilson, a pioneer of what came to be the New Public Health movement said: "It is difficult to know what we mean by wellbeing without first asking the question, what is health for?" In answering his own question, he notes "factors which make for health are concerned with a sense of personal and social identity, human worth, communication, participation in the making of political decisions, celebration and responsibility. The language of science alone is insufficient to describe health, the languages of story, myth and poetry also disclose its truth" (1975 qtd in Lewis and Doyle 100).

Mike White, Director of Arts in Health at the Centre of Arts and Humanities in Health and Medicine (CAHHM) at the University of Durham, England, citing Mulligan et al. (2006), nominates the social and communal contexts of our lives as constituents of wellbeing, saying it incorporates some intangible aspects of being human (in Lewis and Doyle 100). The English study *Invest to Save*, (qtd in Lewis and Doyle 100) asserts that wellbeing comprises two aspects: "hedonic wellbeing", describing feeling good, and "eudemonic wellbeing", describing feeling alive and well. Having feelings of self-worth, being valued, having close personal relationships and social networks are also among the attributes of wellbeing (in Lewis and Doyle 142). In other words, the

concept of wellbeing recognises that humans need more than medical care to enjoy good health.

The Arts and Health movement “has been, until recently, a small, local and poorly resourced movement fuelled by deeply committed artists, involved health care professionals and participants” (Macnaughton, White and Stacy 337). However, it is an expanding, sometimes disappointing, but increasingly dynamic area of research and interest. In part, this interest and research emerges from the health sciences and governments who seek to understand the effectiveness of art in its relationship to health, and who recognise that knowledge can directly impact health policy and health costs. Another significant thrust to the research comes from arts organisations wishing to validate, and ameliorate, the frustrations many of those who work in the sector feel at the widespread refusal to acknowledge the large and growing body of anecdotal evidence pointing to the significant impact of arts participation on health and wellbeing.

Among the early literature examining the connection between art and wellbeing are studies (Matarasso; Williams; Cooley) and books (Marsden and Thiele; Mills and Brown) that still have some currency and are useful in providing scoping information a foundation for considering this field. Some of the significant effects of participating in arts projects outlined in these documents are: art builds self-esteem, develops social cohesion and better relationships with friends and family, and develops skills in being open to change and new ideas (Jermyn; Williams; Matarasso). Among the limitations of these earlier studies and publications is the deficiency of a convincing discussion about how or what the arts specifically offer to wellbeing or health; few effectively discuss the processes and value of creativity, art-making, the place or the voice of the artist or participants in these projects. These deficiencies perhaps reflect the beginnings of a process and the challenges of describing creative rather than scientific or more easily measurable processes.

Another cause for dismay is that it is social researchers, academics and policy makers, rather than those involved in arts practice, who typically undertake the research and whose voices are most often heard. While this is useful in some aspects of interpretation, many authors are removed from the processes of making and do not

conscientiously engage with the art, artists or participants. Consequently, some authors demonstrate a narrow understanding and interpretation of the work and all that surrounds it. One example is the Australia Council for the Arts publication *Art and Wellbeing*. In the description of how case-studies are used to explore four themes, the words artist, art, creativity, making, participant (or similar) and wellbeing are all absent, while the bureaucratic language of strategies, policies, action and social capital, and expressions such as “cross-sectoral, whole of government approaches” are all too present (Mills and Brown 5). This document, typical of similar publications, is devoid of any meaningful engagement with the art practice, participants or artists, whose voices are rarely heard. When they are included they are usually insubstantial and unenlightening about art or wellbeing. This is a missed opportunity to address the inherent themes of art and wellbeing, or offer insights into the creative processes, relationships between artist, participant, art-making and artwork or the transformations that occur through a creative engagement. As this is the only document to date published by the Australia Council for the Arts on the subject of art and wellbeing, it is especially disheartening.

This concern is shared by Macnaughton, White and Stacy, who draw attention to the infrequency of participant and artist voices in the literature. They state: “Inherent to the success of any art and health project is an acknowledging that they are very much a product of their specific community and the individuals within it” (338); to grasp the impact of these projects, the voices of those involved should be heard in all their complexity. As testimony, participants’ voices can present some problems as there are those who believe it can “be readily dismissed as *soft*” (Macnaughton, White and Stacy 336). In noting that is not the art project alone that provides health gain, these authors recognise that its delivery is also important; they claim that project partners need to see “that artists may have a greater understanding of the potential benefits of their work and appreciation of the context in which it might be effective” (336).

Little research appears to be undertaken by community arts practitioners, and even less by practitioners who, in addition to facilitating community art projects, have a studio practice; nor is there significant research undertaken by others into the artist’s practice as it relates to art and health and/or wellbeing. This suggests there are gaps in understanding what the practice and thinking of the artist is and how it relates to an

Arts in Health practice: how do art projects unfold in response to engagement with a group; what specific art skills does the artist bring; and what are some of the non-art skills, such as communication, empathy, group facilitation, coordination and motivation also brought to the work that are crucial to a successful arts intervention? Goldbard and Adams recognise these as “stock in trade” skills the artist brings to the work: “The most skilled practitioners rely on qualities of sensitivity and intuition that cannot be quantified or standardised”; indeed those who rely on “models”, “replicability” and “best practice” tend to produce dull work, lacking depth and heart (38); “without them [artists] projects cannot rise beyond the level of well-intended social therapy or agitprop” (64).

William Cleveland, director of the Center for the Study of Art and Community in the United States, asserts that the two most critical contributors to the success of community arts-based programs are “a clear artistic focus and the high quality of the artists involved” (10). Cleveland’s observation that “the most successful programs have been developed by artists making art, not artists doing something else” (10), acknowledges the artist’s practice is crucial to a successful project. Cleveland notes the “therapeutic or remedial” benefits are the “unavoidable consequences of making art” and that artists are most useful in “concentrating on the empowering qualities of the creative processes” and not focusing on what is “wrong”, or on “treatment” (10).

Among the common themes running through much of the Art and Health literature is a broad view of art “as an expression of human experience, of how the world is perceived, questioned, understood, valued or celebrated” (CANSAs 2005 qtd in Putland 1) and “its ability to develop and appreciate what is special about human beings” (in Lewis and Doyle 111). Therefore, in a discussion about art, specifically visual art and wellbeing, the processes of creativity and making are central. According to Therese Schmid, creativity is an innate human activity. “A theory about creativity is a theory about a part of human nature” she says, pointing to research that explicates creativity in the practice of self-actualisation, through openness to experience, having an internal locus of evaluation and the ability to play with elements and concepts (43). Theories of occupation (Brieness 1995 and Wilcock 1998 in Schmid 43) demonstrating a three-way link between survival, health and occupation are brought by Schmid to her

argument that creativity, in the human capacity to imagine, is essential to the survival of the species.

Dr Hans Prinzhorn, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychiatrist and art historian, accumulated a vast collection of artworks made by patients in mental institutions but generally not made as part of treatment, to explore the creative drive. He identifies a number of specific urges that drive creativity, naming them as “expressive, playful/active, decorative or ornamental, ordering, copying and the need for symbols” and concludes, as Schmid does, that creativity is an essential human trait “found not only in the realm of the cultured or educated, but ... present within each of us from childhood” (Maizels 15).

According to Danita Walsh (in Lewis and Doyle 78), “creativity underpins our health and wellbeing” as an enabling process that helps us “learn about, relate to and evolve with life” and is therefore an essential component in keeping us connected to the self and to others (78). For others, including project participants, creativity is a means of emancipation, as skillfully executed works speak to the social situation of the makers (Goldbard 21). In her essay on factors that encourage or inhibit creativity, Frances Reynolds describes creativity in terms of individual traits, some of which are originality, openness to experience, abstraction, resistance to premature closure and a tolerance of ambiguity (in Schmid 91). She uses the term “intrinsic motivation”, that is, being interested, enjoying and satisfied by the process for its own sake, as a key to understanding the creative drive (in Schmid 93). In discussing the effectiveness of a creative practice upon those with a chronic illness or disability, Reynolds acknowledges it acts as an effective “antidote” to many of the difficulties surrounding an individual’s condition, noting participants feel a renewed sense of agency and control in their lives and that it allowed the setting of meaningful goals (105).

Much within the Art and Health research relates to mental health and therefore has relevance to and informs this study because of the many crossovers that exist between the experience of trauma and the grief and loss resulting from it and mental ill health. Some research addresses art interventions with traumatised people and communities, such as Lindy Joubert’s writing about children traumatised through war, famine,

terrorism and natural disaster (in Lewis and Doyle). There is little research that specifically addresses sexual abuse.

Joubert describes the art programs run in displaced persons camps and through partnerships between non-government organisations (NGOs) and schools as providing transformative experiences which have halted the “downward cycle of depression that goes with being permanently in a state of flux and fear” in children who have been traumatised (in Lewis and Doyle 111). Extensive research, such as that undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research in the United Kingdom, has identified art programs in schools and non-formal settings as having helped reach children at risk, and as particularly useful in developing interpersonal skills (in Lewis and Doyle 116). Arts interventions can “find success where all else fails, through a unique capacity to stimulate the imagination and rekindle hope”, says Joubert, and they are especially useful in addressing disaffection following trauma (111). Key to this is the “growth of the individual and their reconnection with society”, achieved through the acquisition of knowledge and skills that effect changes in self-esteem and personal and social development (114). Joubert’s work with traumatised children has led her to conclude that well-planned and designed art programs “provide meaningful and effective ways to awaken cultural values [and] heighten a sense of being and place”; they can break a sense of isolation and provide “a social service that opens doors to the disadvantaged in most effective ways” (118).

The space in which creativity takes place can help victims reconnect links disconnected through trauma such as finding a sense of meaning, identity and place. John Angus describes the creative space, where energy, laughter, purposeful activity, the beginnings of trust, creditability and confidence prevail as “a privileged ground between a community’s potential for action and change and its alienated and deprived members” (qtd in Lewis and Doyle 100, Angus).

Another consistent theme throughout the literature concerns problems of evaluating the effectiveness of the arts for wellbeing, a point reflected in a question posed on the *fuel4arts* web discussion: “how do you start to measure pride, sense of identity, joy, spiritual fulfilment, outrage, enlightenment, vision, insight?” (qtd in Putland 272). One problem McCarthy et al. see, is a reliance on the social sciences model (37), which is

has too large a focus on measurable outcomes. White argues for the evaluation of arts in health as a process of discovery rather than one of proof, that their success is “predicated on [the] quality of the relationships built up between all involved in the project” (White 2005). He argues that the artist, agency partners and participants’ voices together can best measure its outcome. Putland argues that some problems of evaluation lie in the lack of a common language between the various sectors involved, and that a shared language needs to evolve to reflect the inherent interests and values of both the art and health sectors (267). Research and frameworks to better evaluate art and wellbeing and arts and health are nonetheless being developed. In Australia a number of agencies, including Arts Access Australia – particularly the Western Australian branch *DADAA* (Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts Australia) – and VicHealth and the Cultural Development Network Melbourne have made, and are making, significant contributions to the frequently cited problem of finding appropriate models of evaluation to quantify the critical role the arts play beyond the role of the cultural product.

### **In the shadow of trauma, loss and grief**

*There is a threshold of density of experience; when passed, that  
experience is widely referred to as a trauma or traumatic.*

Jay Winter <sup>4</sup>

The words “trauma” and “traumatic” are widely used and understood to describe stressful or confronting experiences and feelings such as fear, shock, loss and grief associated with these experiences. Accidents, medical emergencies and natural disasters can all be considered traumatic events. However, in this thesis I focus on psychological trauma, described by Judith Lewis Herman as “an affliction of the powerless. A person ... rendered helpless by overwhelming force which cannot be overcome, no matter what action the victim might take”, placing particular attention on the traumatic experience of sexual assault/abuse (33).

Trauma leaves distinct imprints on survivors, differentiating it from other challenging or

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<sup>4</sup> *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (15).

momentous experiences. Those who are exposed to events that threaten their own or others' life or physical integrity are likely to be affected by the experience and will show signs of distress and disturbance. The common responses to trauma of sleeplessness, fearfulness and flashbacks are indicators that the experience of the trauma has not been relegated to the past (Gold; Herman; van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth).

In examining common experiences of trauma, it can be seen that many people have the capacity to rebuild their lives afterwards; for such victims, feelings of distress are eventually accommodated, becoming a memory that has been processed and stored like memories of other momentous events (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth; Rothschild). For some, however, accommodation of a trauma event and its aftermath does not occur and the experience continues to have an extreme impact on the victim's life. Traumatic memories are known to remain intact and be experienced with the same intensity as when the event occurred. The imposition of traumatic memories upon a victim is immense; they can be triggered by external stimuli and recur without warning, regardless of an individual's will to remember or forget (van der Kolk; Winter and Sivan). A traumatic event might also be remembered implicitly, as a felt memory, without a victim remembering the cause, detail or narrative of it and without a verbal language to articulate it. However, it continues to have currency and impact upon the victim's present life (Felman and Laub 69), or as Danial Kogan, a child survivor of trauma laments: "I don't have the memories, I have the scars" (qtd in Valent 239). Traumatic memory prevents the event from ever being over.

Severe and extreme trauma responses are known, as post-traumatic stress (PTS) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although both are widely used terms, they identify specific responses to trauma. For example, PTSD comprises a number of disturbances, lasting longer than a month, and includes re-experiencing the event through flashbacks and/or disturbing dreams, avoidance of "stimuli associated with the trauma", a lack of response in general, and increased arousal. The disturbances cause "clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupation or other important areas of functioning". and are distinguished from the more general symptoms of distress and anxiety. Children's responses to trauma are sometimes expressed

differently from those of adults; children's play, in particular, can express what they don't understand to be flashbacks (DSM IV Text Revision).

Behaviours commonly found in trauma victims include the avoidance of activities and thoughts associated with the trauma, avoidance of social activities, inability to have loving feelings, feelings of detachment from others, a diminished interest in significant activities, and a sense of a foreshortened future expressed as a lack of expectation of a long life, intimate relationships, children or career (DSM IV Text Revision). Many of these traits were observed in the trauma victims who participated in this research.

A trauma victim's increased arousal responses inhibit the ability to relax and feel comfortable in their surrounds and with other people. The lived experience of these disturbances, which include difficulty in sleeping, irritability and anger, difficulty in concentration, hyper-vigilance and an exaggerated startle response, imposes a high toll on victims' health, their ability to participate in work and leisure, and their relationships. Extreme trauma responses affect all aspects of the survivor's being; they prevent full participation in relationships with individuals, family and the broader community, as well as compromising their sense of meaning. Many people who have experienced trauma have suicidal thoughts as they struggle to find purpose in continued existence. The ability to self-protect is often severely compromised and potentially leads to further victimisation (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth; Baker).

Trauma is known to spread outwards into the family and community and inwards from the broader society to the family or individual. Supporting this view is the considerable research done with second and third generation Holocaust survivors that reveals that subsequent generations of trauma victims also bear the scars of that trauma. Jay Winter, Jill Bennett (*Empathic Vision*), Paul Valent, George Halasz and Ruth Kluger, some of whom are child survivors of the Holocaust, describe the effects of trauma, such as poor relationship skills and depression, being passed from one generation to the next. The knowledge that the trauma has the potential to be ongoing unless addressed provides additional motivation to equip survivors with the tools to construct a meaningful life post-trauma.

Above are some of the common responses and experiences victims have to trauma. However, specific experiences of trauma often result in particular responses from victims and require interventions that attend to their unique qualities. Trauma emerging from war is one such specific field and largely the focus of Dr Richard Mollica and the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma Studies, of which he is the director. Mollica has written extensively about war trauma, particularly the effects of war in Cambodia and the inherent capacities of human beings to heal. Judy Atkinson discusses the compound and intergenerational effects of trauma in indigenous Australian people in *Trauma Trails*. Her work with traumatised indigenous Australian individuals and communities involves processes of identifying and naming the multi-layered experiences of loss, abuse, violence and grief, and the effort to find methods and places for healing. Atkinson's own experiences and reflections as a woman who claims an indigenous Australian, as well as European heritage, are also examined and shared in this text.

Sexual abuse is another form of trauma with a unique set of qualities, and it is here that the attention of this research lies. "Sexual assault" and "sexual abuse" are mostly interchangeable terms, although some professionals draw distinctions between them. For the purpose of this work I do not, referring rather to the experience as either "sexual assault", "sexual abuse" or "sexual trauma", and I follow the definition given by The Victorian Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA), which describes sexual assault:

*As any behaviour of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened. It is sexual behaviour that someone has not agreed to, where another person uses physical or emotional force against them. It can include anything from sexual harassment through to life threatening rape. Some of these acts are serious indictable crimes. Sexual assault is an abuse of power. Sexual assault is never the fault or responsibility of the victim/survivor.*

Support organisations may refer to those who have experienced sexual assault as "survivors" or "victims"; the terminology usually reflects the context and relationship between the organisation and the person who has experienced the assault. Some organisations, such as CASA, prefer the term "survivor" in recognition of the strengths

within those who have had this experience rather than focusing on the weaknesses implied by the term "victim". Surviving is in itself reassuring, observes Colin Murray Parkes, as victims can discover inner strengths they had not expected to find (*Love and Loss* 147). Others combine the terms as "survivor/victim". I follow the convention of using the terms "survivor" and "victim", depending on the context, during the first part of the thesis; throughout the sections discussing the arts practice, I use either "women" or "participants", which better describes their status in that context.

Statistics compiled in May 2008 by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA),<sup>5</sup> with whom I undertook this thesis, indicate that after the age of fifteen, one in five women and one in twenty men become victims of sexual assault; one in three women and one in six men are abused before the age of eighteen. Because of the secretive nature of sexual abuse and the high incidence of non-reporting, it is difficult to know the actual frequency of these crimes; it is however, known that while statistics point to a large number of people affected by sexual assault, they cannot begin to reflect its impact. Sexual abuse includes rape, incest and encounters involving much, or no physical violence. Random sexual assaults are probably the most feared and receive greatest attention, but it is the sexual abuse that is endured over years in families and communities that is overwhelmingly more prevalent, less acknowledged, and deeply damaging. Most sexual abusers are male, most are related or known to the survivor, and many are trusted members of a family or community. Consistent with the statistics available from SECASA and in the literature, most victims of sexual trauma who participated in this study were abused as children (Baker; Gold; Bifulco and Moran; Briere). Therefore, the long-term and sometimes lifelong impacts

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<sup>5</sup> South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA). *Sexual Assault Statistics*. Available at [www.secasa.com.au/infosheet/Statistics.pdf](http://www.secasa.com.au/infosheet/Statistics.pdf), 2008

SECASA is one of Victoria's fifteen Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA); CASAs "work to ensure that women, children and men who are victim/survivors of sexual assault have access to comprehensive and timely support and intervention to address their needs". CASA "also work towards the elimination of sexual violence through community and professional education, informing government policy, advocating for law reform and facilitating research to increase community understanding of the nature and incidence of sexual assault" ([www.casa.org.au](http://www.casa.org.au), 20 January 2009). SECASA provides a crisis service at Monash Medical Centre, Clayton, and follow-up counselling and other services throughout the south-eastern region of Melbourne.

of childhood sexual assault (CSA) and how this might be ameliorated through a creative practice are of particular interest to this thesis.

The lived experience and memories of CSA are complex. The incident/s may have been violent, abhorrent or unwelcome, or alternatively, experienced and viewed as loving, enjoyable and welcome. Some victims are bewildered by it, while some are known to find it useful. Regardless of the experience at the time, many adults who were victims of CSA carry misplaced guilt and self-blame about their part in their own victimisation and are burdened by the belief that had they behaved or looked different the assault and its consequences would not have occurred. Many feel responsible that their life has not unfolded more productively and satisfactorily (Briere; Parkes).

Much childhood sexual abuse occurs within families or within communities and by people known to the victim. The betrayal of trust by the abuser, therefore, is profoundly felt. Especially distressing for children is the additional betrayal that accompanies the awareness that family or community members were in a position to intervene and help but chose otherwise. Betrayal affects the child's perception of him/herself as being valued and loved while distorting her/his emotional and cognitive participation in the world (Ricker; Herman; Briere; Walker).

Women, especially mothers, are not infrequently complicit in the abuse. Audrey Ricker debunks "at least four schools of therapy" which excuse mothers for being ignorant or incapable of stopping the abuse. She argues that a mother's behaviour and attitudes can leave the child vulnerable to predation or continued abuse and cites among the reasons why mothers fail to respond appropriately: refusal to acknowledge the dangers presented by a known male (e.g. father, boyfriend), giving precedence to the relationship with an abusing partner over the existing relationship with the child, and refusal to acknowledge or act upon evidence of abuse (physical, emotional or verbal) being presented by the child. Christine D Baker states that victims of childhood sexual abuse claim their "non-supportive and unprotected family environment", which includes the lack of parental validation of abuse, underpins much of their current distress (57). Kathleen A Kendall-Tackett, Linda Meyer Williams and David Finkelhor's research supports this view, stating that a mother who is non-supportive towards a child disclosing abuse contributes to that child's "negative outlook and coping style"

and increased negative symptoms (171).

Brid Featherstone's essay on women's involvement in childhood sexual abuse from the positions of mother and social worker points to fantasies of an essential harmony existing between mother and child which, when disrupted, can be restored. In the discussion, she addresses a number of reasons why mothers feel ambivalent about the needs of their children and draws heavily on feminist literature to describe how power imbalances between the sexes can inform this behaviour and lead women to abandon their responsibilities by failing to protect. She cites reasons such as the mother also being a victim of abuse and viewing one task of the mother as being to induct her daughter into meeting the needs of others (179). Both Featherstone and Michael Karson are reluctant to "mother blame" as both see this as being essentially unhelpful and recognise that the dynamics of the family are usually more complex than is often claimed. Blaming can lead to the family closing ranks, thereby preventing help and change (Karson 144). Featherstone also draws attention to the understandable anxiety of feminists that avoiding "motherblaming" may lead to a tendency to assume the mother carries no responsibility at all (Featherstone 173).

David Finkelhor and Angela Browne devised a model suggesting that CSA affects children through four main mechanisms: traumatic sexualisation, betrayal, stigmatisation and powerlessness. Gold, following Finkelhor, argues that CSA transcends PTSD with victims showing a range of symptoms of extensive "cognitive distortions" (13). In the index of distortions, and witnessed in the research participants, Gold includes: damaged self-perception leading to feelings of being different from others; alterations to consciousness known as dissociation, where victims disconnect body, mind and feeling; affect and impulse regulation; the loss of systems of meaning; and disrupted interpersonal relationships. Very low self-esteem reflected in the incapacity to feel legitimate entitlement or to self-assert is a burden victims commonly carry. Briere's interpretation of the effects of abuse includes a chronic perception of danger, preoccupation with control, dissociative behaviours and negative self-evaluation.

Victims of childhood sexual assault are traumatised during fundamental and important periods of their development, when assumptions of the self, others and the world

around are being formed and when they should, ideally, be learning social, educational, physical and cognitive skills. Sexual assault leads to the interruption and potential stunting of normal human development, the impact of which is often felt for years (Briere).

I briefly draw attention to Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby and built upon by others, including Colin Parkes. Attachment Theory describes how the nature and quality of the attachments made between a child and parent/carer influence the child's capacity to live, cope and engage with others and the world around them throughout childhood and into adult life. It is based on a concept of proximity, suggesting an assurance of safety when the youngster stays close to the mother. Attachment not only contributes to a child's physical protection, it also contributes to good mental health. Jon Allen, following Fonagy, asserts that a secure attachment "not only facilitates exploration of the outer world but also promotes exploration of the inner world, the world of the mind; that is, one's own mind and the mind of others" (30). The development of secure attachments between children and adults are essential if a sound platform upon which future and positive relationships is to be built (Bowlby, Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde and Marris, Walker).

Insecure attachments can lead to, or help predict, responses that may inform future relationships and life challenges. Some indicators of this are whether emotions can be revealed; whether individuals can trust others to recognise and respond to their feelings and needs; and whether individuals are capable of self-soothing and self-reliance and have expectations to receive help, support and care from others. The failure to form sound attachments, or the violation of existing attachments, can lead to long-term and devastating consequences, which are acknowledged and described in the literature (Bowlby, Parkes, Walker) and by the participants in this research. These consequences include social isolation because of unwillingness or inability to forge relationships; inconsistent behaviours that are difficult for others to engage with or predict; underlying feelings of low self-worth, self-belief and self-awareness, which show a limited understanding of how other people are likely to respond; wariness of trusting others; and depression (Kendall-Tackett, Meyer Williams, Finkelhor; Parkes). When the essence of attachment theory is considered alongside the experience of childhood sexual abuse, a clear picture emerges of its profoundly damaging and

isolating effects.

Feelings of powerlessness, learned helplessness, impaired self-efficacy, a learned inability to cope and passivity are among the consequences of being overpowered by others during childhood; alternatively, victims may demonstrate an overeagerness to please (Briere, Walker 14). John Briere notes that this early negative experience, especially because it predominantly occurs within the bounds of a close relationship, leads to the avoidance of challenging tasks, ambivalence, fear and vulnerability, procrastination and underachievement in both social and work life (24-26), traits that were evident in project participants. Gold describes how victims who are led to believe they are responsible for their abuse due to a character flaw continue to bear the scars for years (49). They are known to accept their character as others have defined it, and are unable to shake off this negative mantle even in the face of evidence to the contrary. This was evidenced by participants' frequent self-references to being faceless, ugly or stupid.

Victims and psychologists working in the fields of trauma and sexual abuse attest to the difficulties of verbalising the experience of trauma, commonly referring to trauma as being "unspeakable", a term that is both a reality and a metaphor for the experience. The traumatic experience is, according to Belau, tied to a system of representation; to language. This is partly due to the nature of how and where in the brain the trauma memory is laid down. Bessel A van der Kolk (1994, 1996) and Babette Rothschild describe traumatic memories being stored differently from other experiences regardless of how momentous those other experiences might be, and this helps explain why accessing the traumatic memory verbally can be extremely difficult.

In addition to the issues surrounding the creation and storing of trauma memories, psychiatrist and Holocaust child survivor Paul Valent reveals another impediment to memory: when trauma occurs in children before they are capable of speech, there is no verbal language available to express it. The absence of verbal language extends to include others, such as older children, who may lack an appropriate vocabulary to express the complexities of the experience. Roberta Culbertson writes of her memory of childhood sexual abuse as being both a "known and felt truth" but fragmented and illogical, and that as such the memory and complete truth seem "unreachable" (170).

The “sense” or “felt” memory of trauma – held in a different part of the brain but recognised in the body – is another way the trauma remains silent from the victim. It may be that a survivor simply does not want to talk about it.

The unspeakable nature of trauma is not to be confused with the silence that surrounds it. Silence is more about avoidance, secrecy and the refusal to accept the truth than it is about victims’ difficulties in expressing it. The reasons for silence are often complex and involve all layers of society. According to Herman, Freud in *The Aetiology of Hysteria* presented the startling hypothesis that sexual assault was endemic: “It still rivals contemporary clinical descriptions of the affects of childhood sexual abuse,” she writes (13-14). Freud’s work reveals the impact of sexual assault upon women and their diminished capacity for a satisfying life following the assault. Yet when his conclusions were questioned, he faltered, thus catapulting the misery and damage of sexual trauma into silence for nearly a century. The famous case study of his patient Dora was the catalyst for an ongoing debate about abuse and here its relevance is as a symbol of society’s reluctance to bear witness to the incidence of sexual assault.

Silence may be maintained through the complicity of coercive agreements between the abuser and abused: “This is our little secret” or “If you dare tell anyone ...”, which may leave survivors feeling responsible for their abuse or believing there will be negative consequences should they disclose it. Where the potential exists for the victim to be blamed or punished, or their disclosure to negatively affect others, silence and secrecy are reinforced (Baker, Herman, van der Kolk 1996). Herman, Baker, van der Kolk (1996), Walker and the report published in 2009 by the Irish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, all conclude that surrounded by silence and secrecy, victims are reluctant to report their abuse and most who have been abused as children do not disclose it until they are adults, if at all. Unfortunately, those who do disclose are not always believed or are reprimanded for their disclosure (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth 260, Walker 189).

Another layer of silence sits with the abusers. With the exception of Amy Berg’s film *Deliver Us from Evil*, an account of one priest’s adult life of sexually abusing children, it

is rare to hear or read any commentary from the point of view of the perpetrator that advances a sincere understanding of the behaviour.

Silence is further maintained through the complicity of those who choose to avert their eyes from what is a difficult and potentially embarrassing societal problem. If the trauma is incest, or other childhood sexual abuse, it confronts one of society's last taboos. Van der Kolk argues "society's reactions [to trauma] seem to be primarily conservative impulses in the service of maintaining the belief that the world is fundamentally just, people are in charge of their lives and bad things only happen to people who deserve them" (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth 35). This attitude allows society to believe there is an underlying justification for abuse, thus avoiding an examination of what is truly at stake should the status quo not be maintained. If this were examined, the community would be forced to confront the reality of how widespread sexual abuse is and who perpetrates it. Therefore, it can be observed that silence is maintained by a number of people: the perpetrator, the victim, the collaborators and the community.

One consequence of talking about trauma "without being truly heard, or truly listened to" is, according to Laub, "that the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma" (Felman and Laub 67). This is known as re-traumatisation. Laub relates how Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi's experience of not being heard triggered "a desolating grief ... pain in its pure state ..." (67-8).

Questions as to whether an event is factual or fictional, accurate or exaggerated are commonly raised in response to trauma and are ever present to those who have been sexually abused. Victims are often questioned in order to provide appropriate help, as part of an investigation, for example, and sometimes such questions are raised to undermine a victim, protect a perpetrator or guard the community from facing the reality of its occurrence. In a legal or therapeutic context, the question of being believed and having evidence to support a claim of sexual assault or its impact are different from the context in which I, as an artist, work with the women. I chose as my guide a story related by Dr Dori Laub of a Holocaust survivor who gave testimony of her experience at Auschwitz. The survivor told Laub, a psychoanalyst, and a panel of historians her account of witnessing the destruction of four crematoria chimneys at

Auschwitz. The historians, aware that only one chimney was blown up, dismissed the survivor as an unreliable witness. Laub, however, understands the testimony differently. He notes that the destruction of one chimney was so extraordinary and its impact so great on those who witnessed it that its enormity must have seemed to have involved all four chimneys. He understands that her story, rather than being a lie, is one interpretation of the truth (59-64).

Richard Rozenkwajg says of his childhood experience of trauma, "If you feel, you die" (in Valent 271). Many who have experienced trauma can relate to this maxim. Victims are known to dissociate from the trauma by going into a trance or seeming to witness the trauma from outside the body (Herman). One witness at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission described how she survived being raped by taking her soul and spirit out of her body and putting it in a corner of the cell, adding that she had "not yet gone back to that room to fetch her soul and that it was still sitting in the corner where she had left it" (Tutu 107). After the trauma, what happens to the person used to living by the mantra: "If you feel, you die"? Will that person ever again be able to feel?

Trauma specialists are emphatic that people must heal if they are to get on with their lives. Treatment aims to help survivors re/claim a fulfilling and meaningful life, lived and enjoyed in the present with a view to the future (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth; Pearlman and Staub; Mollica, Chhim and Mitchell). Among the principles in treatment Herman describes, quoting Martin Symonds (1992 134), are empowerment, increasing the victim's choices and countering the dynamics of dominance. She suggests three tasks are necessary for healing to occur. The first is achieving a sense of safety; the second is acknowledgement, remembrance and mourning; the third is reconnection with ordinary life (155). According to Rothschild, healing requires "a linking of all aspects of a traumatic event" and being able to "think and feel concurrently" (161).

In Herman's approach to recovery, the victim tackles acknowledgement, remembrance and mourning by telling her/his narrative of the trauma in as much detail as possible. Telling the narrative, undertaken with varying emphases, is currently the dominant paradigm in trauma recovery work. Many reasons are given by clinicians to support

the view that giving a testimony is crucial. According to Rothschild, part of the reason is to move the memory from that part of brain in which the trauma memory is stored so it may be integrated and processed in the same manner as other significant memories, rendering it non-pathological. Felman asserts that because trauma memory is not processed properly, real knowledge of the event cannot be located until the story is told and the telling witnessed.

As Herman, Rothschild, Briere and Laub (in Felman and Laub) attest, this exchange between the victim and the witness is not simply one of giving and receiving information but an important engagement in listening and witnessing, as well as speaking. They claim that it is in being heard, sometimes for the first time, that trauma can be acknowledged and healing can begin. Herman's assertion that truth-telling has the restorative power of diminishing the gripping quality of trauma story is a viewpoint reflected in Laub's argument for the benefits of testimony and witness in which he contends that no peace can be found in silence (Felman and Laub 79).

Most recognise that the telling process can be enormously challenging for the victim, not only because of problems in verbalising the experience but because, in the full acknowledgement of the trauma, a survivor is recognising that life can never be the same again. Among the difficulties victims of childhood sexual abuse face in giving testimony, particularly in adulthood, is as I described earlier, the absence of an appropriate language in which to communicate. This can mean the victim is silenced from her/himself. Culbertson refers to these memories as "fragmented" (178) and "obey[ing] the logic of dreams" (170). For these victims, the act of telling the trauma story is also about being their own witness. When it is not possible for the facts to be fully exposed, what is important in a testimonial, then, is the attainment of understanding, rather than the attainment of knowledge.

There are some, however, who believe healing from trauma is impossible. The writer Primo Levi, himself a survivor of trauma, points to the impossibility of healing: "Once again it must be observed, mournfully, that injury cannot be healed – it extends through time" (12). He refers to philosopher Jean Amery who was tortured by the Gestapo and said: "Anyone who has suffered torture will never be able to be at ease in the world, the abomination of the annihilation is never extinguished. Faith in humanity

... is never acquired again" (12). The desolation reflected in these thoughts is heartbreaking. Although both Levi and Amery worked diligently to seek and locate understanding and consolation following their experiences, both remained conflicted by the experience throughout their lives. That some victims will not be healed from their trauma is one outcome, I believe, that must be accepted.

Perhaps the language that surrounds trauma may inadvertently contribute to its irresolution. I ask the question: if words such as transformation, restoration, recovery and wellbeing were used rather than healing, which implies a cure, could victims and those who work with trauma strive towards more accurate and achievable aspirations for life post trauma?

In Richard Mollica's terms, recovery happens firstly through "social recovery", that is, by functioning well in various social or life roles, such as mother, husband or worker. Secondly, Mollica argues, recovery happens through re-establishing a sense of meaning in the world, a goal which proved unattainable for both Levi and Amery; and finally by being an "autonomous, functioning, generative person". Mollica argues that most people want to contribute to their family and community; in his terms, a person who contributes is recovered (Mollica, Chhim and Mitchell).

As the effects of the trauma and grief are likely to resurface from time to time in response to new stages of life, awareness, or experiences, a trauma survivor may experience strong responses and need to undertake part of this work again. Therefore, recovery is more likely to be a journey than a destination.

The experience of sexual abuse leaves much to be angry about, yet the emotion involved is afforded little attention by many who work and publish in the fields of trauma and grief. Anger may be viewed as a negative and unhelpful emotion, and its expression not encouraged. Although it is acknowledged as being part of trauma and grief experiences, anger receives little attention compared to the voracity and legitimacy of the emotion. Anger is not indexed in *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman) or *Healing Invisible Wounds* (Mollica) and Rothschild's comments on it are limited. She refers to anger as an emotion of "self-protection", a common response when "being threatened, hurt or scared". She asserts that problems can arise post-trauma when

anger becomes chronic and “inappropriate or misdirected anger can interfere with interpersonal relationships and job stability” (61). Left unsaid is what is *appropriate* or *directed* anger following trauma. Pat B Allen, in *Art is a Way Knowing*, suggests art is a way of knowing about many things, including fear, life and grief, yet in omitting to include anger in her ruminations she neglects to contemplate the contribution art makes to understanding and expressing this very human and legitimate emotion. Allen’s omission is not unique; there appears to be considerable reluctance to engage in a conversation about anger and little guidance as to how this emotion might be confronted and expressed, or how consolation from it might be found.

These challenging emotions are an unavoidable burden for victims. They stick in the throat; they cannot be spat out or swallowed, then passed through the system to be expelled as waste. For others they are undesirable and confronting; many wish the victim would “just get over it” quietly and without sully the communal space. Judy Atkinson is one who, in *Trauma Trails*, tackles this thorny subject. In her work with indigenous Australian communities, a space was provided for individuals to express the full extent of their anger, some of which is included in the book. Atkinson points to its insidiousness and destructiveness, describing how the impacts of childhood harm such as being fearful, insecure and alone had led to adult feelings of anger, hurt and shame (150); and it was the expression of anger that unmasked feelings of fear, grief, sorrow, anguish or sadness. According to Atkinson the feelings and stories of loss would emerge from narratives about anger, and it was with this complete range of feelings that work towards healing was undertaken. This work helped victims understand the legitimacy of their anger and also the illegitimacy of expressing it through violence (247-8).

In trauma and grief work, avoiding an engagement with difficult emotions, particularly anger, may be due to a number of factors, one of which is the potential for the expression of anger to cause harm to the self or others. Another is that some methods used or suggested for the expression of anger, such as punching a cushion, scribbling, shouting, or even talking, may provide short-term release but be less useful in achieving real resolution. Further, an expression of anger may be ineffectual when directed towards somebody other than the person responsible for it, which may leave victims with a continuing unresolved sense of the emotion. These problems with

expression relate to the victims. Briere, however, suggests that another reason for avoiding the expression of anger is that "some clinicians may find the goal of facilitating emotional release somewhat alien, especially if their approach to treatment is usually more cognitive". He states this "work is nevertheless necessary, since many abuse survivors have difficulty with the experience and expression of painful affect" (137).

Alongside anger, vengeance is also a largely avoided subject in trauma literature, although it can be a significant emotion or desire within victims. As well as concerns that vengeful thoughts if put into action can cause harm, Herman asserts that they are unhelpful because of the impossibility of "getting even" with a perpetrator. Spending time and emotional energy ruminating over what is essentially unhelpful and unattainable potentially hinders a victim's ability to properly acknowledge and accommodate the consequences of abuse (190).

There are some, however, who are sympathetic to the expression of negative feelings. One is philosopher Jeffrie G Murphy, who claims that people deserve, indeed have a right to express their legitimate emotional responses, and that these expressions ought to be validated (19). Victims may find value in the expression of negative emotions through reclaiming self-respect and protection. In voicing their emotions they proclaim that they are no longer prepared to accept poor treatment from others. If genuine and pressing emotional responses are not appropriately acknowledged and confronted, the potential for rumination remains and damage still occurs, albeit differently from that discussed in the literature. As Atkinson demonstrates and project participants attest, when full exploration and expression is denied or repressed, emotions have nowhere to go except deeper, or in endless unresolvable circles.

Losses are the inevitable consequence of trauma. They are myriad, profound and long lasting; they seep into a victim's health and wellbeing and into relationships with the self and others. Losses that are a consequence of trauma may be tangible or intangible, physical or emotional, and may include the loss of an expected future, loss of control over one's thoughts, sense of meaning and purpose, and feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy (McNab 108). The loss of childhood, education and friendships are cited as being among the losses born of childhood sexual abuse. Some losses may

almost feel indiscernible and unnameable. Others such as experiences, situations or feelings that have never existed such as feeling trust, wellbeing or a sense of safety, may yet to be understood as losses. Some losses may be understood as a breach of the victim's "assumptive world", a term used to describe how relationships, interactions with and the experiences of others, as well as an individual's lived experiences, inform and impact upon daily and life decisions (Janoff-Bulman, Parkes). When the assumptive world is formed or transformed by trauma, confidence to negotiate the world is severely comprised, affecting survivors' day-to-day activities and how their lives will unfold and be experienced (Parkes).

The violation of the body through sexual abuse brings particular feelings of loss, affecting not only the victim but also her/his existing and future relationships. The losses of a positive relationship with one's own body and mutual intimate pleasure are two manifestations of this; for many, the elusiveness of a happy and healthy intimate relationship that includes children is a profound loss. For others, relationships beyond the intimate are also severely compromised or lost altogether. For example, in cultures where sexual abuse is part of systemic and sanctioned political decisions, losses for women can be severe and include the loss of life, family and self-respect or standing within a community (Meintjes and Goldblatt; Gobodo-Madikizela, Ross and Mills; Tutu).

Although it is clear that victims suffer many losses as a result of sexual abuse, Laub points out that the event has happened and nothing "can undo the horror" (Felman and Laub 91). If there is to be a contented future, attention must be given to the processes of facing the loss, and reuniting the world that has been destroyed with the world that remains. Felman and Laub place testimony and witness at the centre of facing the loss; Atkinson places the We Al-li<sup>6</sup> program based on the integrity of indigenous culture and practice (94-145) at the centre of confronting community and individual loss; I place acknowledgment and mourning.

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<sup>6</sup> We Al-li is the name given to a program that evolved from the participatory action focus of Atkinson's research and was informed by the work of Alice Miller (1983). The work of the program was based on indigenous cultural and spiritual practices and was the process of recreating ceremonies of healing in a contemporary situation (93-93 and 216).

Mourning is a dreaded task for survivors, says Herman, as the acknowledgement of loss and trauma inevitably plunges victims into profound grief (188). This, together with the fear that were they to start crying they would never stop, leads victims to resist mourning, and is a common cause of stagnation in recovery. It is, however, important for victims to "reclaim the ability to show the full range of emotions, including grief" in order to recover from the trauma (188). Others rail against mourning, believing that through the process of mourning feelings of anger are given over to feelings of loss and grief. Walter Benjamin confronted his personal experiences of the atrocities of war and inhumanity not by seeking solace through mourning, but by maintaining his rage, and believing others ought to confront reality rather than be numbed by accepting false closures (Martin 229-230). Antonius Robben describes a similar attitude found in the Madres, the mothers of the murdered in Argentina's "dirty war", who resisted national mourning in order to obstruct national forgetting and absolution of the perpetrators.

In recognising the difficulties of confronting, holding and mourning suffering, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, nonetheless says that naming, observing and honouring pain is essential to the healing process: "Our suffering is us", he reflects, "we need to treat it with kindness and non-violence, to recognise, acknowledge and identify it" (29). These are difficult tasks. However, if victims of trauma are to find sanctuary from the overwhelming feelings of their experience, then acknowledging loss and grieving must be part of their recovery process. Otherwise, victims may live with the attendant consequences of avoidance or in a perpetual state of dread that they will eventually have to face these difficult emotions.

Bennett argues that "grief must be thought of in terms of an unfolding into the world that must be remade in the aftermath of tragedy" (*Empathic Vision* 68). The process of mourning is a transition between the old and the new, or as Grainger expresses it, between death and rebirth: it is a resurrection, a bringing back into life. Life after death for grieving father William Verity<sup>7</sup> does not mean a spiritual afterlife but how a

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<sup>7</sup> William Verity's three-year-old daughter was killed in a freak accident. He described the loss and family experience of grief and mourning at the Annual Grief Lecture, Monash Medical Centre, November 2007 attended by the author.

life can be rejoined after a fracturing through loss. This concept offers hope that meaning can be rediscovered after the loss of a loved one and through a period of mourning. Like death, trauma reshapes one's worldview; in the context of sexual trauma, I suggest a grieving process reshapes a victim's internal world to enable an unfolding into a mainstream world.

Some mourning requires guidance, but unfortunately little specific guidance appears available in grief or trauma texts to assist victims of sexual abuse through this period. However, through sharing their visual language, artists are well placed to provide some of the guidance needed to confront and express loss, and to then experience a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Doris Brett's commentary that "the poem's mission is to go to the heart of grief, and to return with something even greater than grief", although not referring specifically to visual art-making, suggests the service art can provide to mourning.

### ***Community Acknowledgement of Trauma***

Community acts of remembrance, such as war memorials and ceremonies that grow out of tragedies such as the Port Arthur shootings and the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, serve many purposes. They create a space for public acknowledgement, for receiving affirmation that the pain and sorrow felt is an authentic and legitimate response. They also offer an opportunity to receive public support and to give those not directly involved the opportunity to share with the affected community. Many community acts of remembrance are the result of small groups working passionately, but unofficially, together to put form to experiences of trauma (Winter and Sivan). As Bennett (2005) argues, this sort of response is an attempt to find a language that represents the process of moving from individual suffering, the realm of traumatic memory, into a place of social interaction (31).

Community acts of support and remembrance offer processes for meaning-making, assist victims cope and find benefit in their circumstances and, in the longer term, can act as a means of restructuring a view of life. They can assist victims and those affected by trauma to understand that few situations are completely negative. James

Gillies and Robert A Neimeyer identify community participation as contributing to post-traumatic growth, and assert that by developing human connection, and offering meaning and hope, something new and useful may be constructed out of trauma (Gillies and Neimeyer).

How and where might those victims who suffer as a result of trauma that has been concealed from their community express their sorrow and mourn? How do those already disenfranchised share and mourn traumatic loss? There is nowhere for victims of sexual assault to gather to publicly mourn their losses, nor is there the sense that sexual abuse is a shared community tragedy. Isolated in their trauma, these victims may be further disenfranchised (Herman).

One disenfranchised group creatively responded to trauma through the creation and public display of the AIDs quilts,<sup>8</sup> acknowledging the devastation wreaked by the AIDS virus that at the time was primarily affecting the gay community. This particular community's creative refusal to silently accept a pervasive view that the deaths were in some way acceptable because of the gay lifestyle was a defiant rejection of a societal belief that, as van der Kolk observes, "bad things happen to bad people" (van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth 35).

Most people who have experienced trauma will eventually seek resolution. Some refer to that as "healing". Given the reflections of people like Primo Levi, however, I consider a more useful ambition may be to find a sense of wellbeing. Many victims of trauma will achieve this sense of wellbeing through their own resilience, family and friends' support and through finding a way to journey through this experience. While some people never need to seek help from professionals, many do. It should be noted that many victims of sexual abuse, particularly childhood sexual abuse, do not seek help immediately and some may not do so for years or decades after the event (Gold, Herman, Briere, Finkelhor, van der Kolk).

Trauma therapy has a number of purposes. Among these are the integration of

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<sup>8</sup> Thousands of hand-made panels, each naming a specific person who died of the virus, were made and added to the quilts which, when displayed, occupied vast areas of space. [www.aidsquilt.org](http://www.aidsquilt.org).

implicit and explicit memories into a comprehensive narrative of trauma and its aftermath (Rothschild 150) and the reconfiguration of a victim's belief that all close relationships are dangerous, thus enabling more satisfactory connections with others. This is a form of "social recovery", as trauma psychiatrist Richard Mollica puts it. Once a victim reaches the understanding and experiences the trauma as a past experience, and functions well in social, work and family situations the goals of therapy have been met, says Mollica (Mollica; Mollica, Chhim and Mitchell).

While the efficacy of trauma therapy for many victims is accepted, substantial impediments to achieving these goals are also well documented. In addition to the difficulties of fully capturing the trauma in thought, memory and speech there is the struggle to encompass the full range of human responses to it, particularly the challenging emotions. Avoidance and distractions are other problems. These can impede a victim from reaching a comprehensive acknowledgement of and resolution to the trauma.

Many external factors also contribute to wellbeing following trauma, loss and grief. Rothschild suggests trauma therapists take an inventory of a client's resources when taking the trauma history. In an inventory of resources, which she notes are acquired before and after the trauma, Rothschild names functional, physical, interpersonal, psychological and spiritual resources, and includes creativity as a psychological resource. The inventory can raise survivors' awareness of the resources they have already used in overcoming the trauma and its aftermath and draws attention to the significant part survivors played in their own survival. A survivor with a range and number of resources has a better prognosis for recovery (Rothschild 188). One question being asked in this thesis is what contribution to a trauma survivor's resources can be offered by art, the artist and art-making.

How creative community participation can help victims reach a sense of wellbeing is one consideration in this thesis. There is much to be gained by reconnecting those isolated by trauma with the world around and finding a community of people with whom there is a shared experience (Laub, Herman). Winter uses the term "fictive kin" to describe a group created through a shared experience coming together for a specific purpose. In embracing the idea of a chosen family, the term denies the paradox of

choosing to belong to a family one would never want to have to join (Winter and Sivan 40). Herman believes belonging to a group provides the opportunity to extend outwards towards others, to make and develop relationships and to give and receive support and love. Community participation in arts interventions that address mental health “go[es] to the heart of the social exclusion problem” and are now at the forefront of practice, says White (in Lewis and Doyle 97). The experience of art-making is enhanced by social interaction; conversations and relationships provide protection from anonymity while self-love and love of others builds self-worth. Further, the space itself becomes privileged ground between action and change: “an embryonic focus for wellbeing” and a “place of temporary celebration” (100). Connectivity is especially relevant in the sexual abuse context, argue Herman and Atkinson, as many connections to family, friends and others have either been severed or distorted by the sexual abuse experience.

In addition to the earlier review of Arts and Health literature, it is useful to briefly consider art therapy here as it is also receiving recognition and acceptance for its contribution to wellbeing. With therapy rather than art as its foundation, art therapy does, however, have different objectives from an arts practice and therefore has little relationship to this work. As these terms and practices are regularly used interchangeably in the public realm and in discourse, some explanation may offer clarity. Edwards cites the British Association of Art Therapists to describe their practice: “The art therapist is not primarily concerned with making an aesthetic or diagnostic assessment of the client’s image”. Instead, the art therapist’s concerns are facilitating “change and growth on a personal level using self-expression and reflection, as well as strengthening [the] client’s ability to cope with symptoms and stress” (2). In a post-trauma context, some objectives of art therapy are, according to Wertheim-cahen, to “activate feelings ... rebuild trust and lessen a sense of isolation”. Additionally, art therapy helps victims avoid being overwhelmed by emotions and memories related to trauma (Wertheim-cahen, Van Dijk and Drozdek 421).

Art therapy is generally understood to have two streams, neither of which has the purpose of developing the skills of art-making or the thinking of an arts-practitioner. In the first, an “art-in-therapy” model, the art is subservient to the medico/psychology structure. In this model art therapists generally work as part of a therapeutic team.

The second stream, the “art-as-therapy” model, has the purpose of expressing meaning, to relax and console, as well as to let off steam. In this model, the client can alternate between recreation and confrontation. For a traumatised patient, this means the possibility to “draw away from traumatic memories, as well as address them” (Wertheim-cahen, Van Dijk and Drozdek 439). From the outside this may seem to reflect this thesis. However, that “art therapy occurs in the presence of the trained therapist” (Edwards 2) points to a significant departure between art practice and art therapy. Another is Wertheim-cahen’s observation that art may provide a temporary distraction (247, 421, 429, 553), with the possible inference that art has no intrinsic value in art therapy other than to serve a therapeutic objective, whereas those engaged in a serious arts practice view the process of art-making as one of inherent value. Because the processes and purposes of art therapy and arts practice are fundamentally different from each other, so too are their effects and affects.

Art therapy has, for some, become shorthand for the arts in the context of wellbeing, reflecting Frank Furedi’s claim that the “therapeutic culture” has become inculcated into the vernacular, as well as the lived experience, of the developed world. Furedi argues that therapeutic culture has allowed a distinctly passive response to prosper, leaving people feeling they have little control over their lives (128). His claim that the “decline of agency” risks limiting human potential has some correlation with my own observations of some participants who, after years of participating in therapy-based treatments, were yet to achieve some of its rudimentary aspirations (130). This observation raises questions regarding the impediments to reaching a place of wellbeing and, important to this thesis, how and what art and the artist can contribute to overcoming those impediments.

### **Art and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma, loss and grief**

Researchers Arthur P Bochner and Carolyn Ellis ask: What is awakened or evoked by an engagement with art? How is it used to create meaning and, importantly, to what uses might art be put? What new conversations could be opened up and what hidden

possibilities revealed? (507). When considered as part of a conversation about sexual abuse and art these questions offer a way into contemplating the usefulness of art.

Artists have always been driven to create work in response to trauma and seek meaning, bear witness, shock and commemorate in their art. The work of the artist is to say things about an internal and an external life that "must be said", claims Grainger and it does so "gently" and "with dignity" (134 43). Art suggests, rather than imposes: "it beckons, but does not, cannot compel" (134). Kathe Kollwitz's, Otto Dix's and Joseph Beuys's explorations of the First and Second World Wars, contemporary artist Doris Salcedo, whose work *Unland: Audible in the Mouth* contemplates the civil war in Colombia, and Louise Bourgeois, whose work explores her experience of early childhood trauma, are examples of artists creating in order to understand, interpret, explain and comment upon trauma and its effects on individuals and communities.

Artists whose concerns lie with human connection and disconnection move towards, rather than turn away from, the complexities of humanity; they grapple with and attempt to express the layers of human nature and behaviour. Through contemplation and imagination the artist reveals what cannot always or easily be said. As an enabler, the artist transforms an idea, feeling or the internal world by giving form to, revealing and offering a physical object that can be touched, as well as seen and felt. Grainger writes: "It is the only way of saying things about life that must be said. Unless some things are said, and said often they will be denied or ignored and the experience of mankind will be impaired" (43). He recognises that the complexities, and difficult and unpalatable aspects of human experience and feeling may be examined through art and then offered back to the viewer in a form that transcends other forms of communication.

Salcedo is interested in the concept of the "artist as thinker", one who is attuned to society and creates art "irreducible to psychological or sociological explanations" (Princenthal and Carlos 24). Her works, particularly those responding to the atrocities, disappearances and murders in Colombia during the civil war, do not reveal a narrative and are, she writes, "about" nothing(24). The absences, the traces left behind after people vanished, hint at past lives and states of being. Salcedo picks up threads from survivors' testimonies and draws them into the present, enables their sometimes

uncertain and unformed thoughts and feelings, and gives them form. In saying “nothing”, as she states, Salcedo is revealing.

Artists and artworks involving an examination of trauma and the expression of loss and sorrow, which also reflect the concerns and experiences of project participants, are therefore crucial to this thesis. Kathe Kollwitz’s body of work responds to suffering, particularly of working class women. In observing and bringing attention to the experience of poverty, death and social injustice, she responds to the effects of trauma on the vulnerable and innocent. Her deep engagement with her subject is demonstrated in her lifelong and diligent commitment to it, as well as by the immense struggles she confronted and overcame to coherently and accurately express herself. The recurrent use of her own image puts her in continuous dialogue with the subject, the work and the audience (Kearns). One example of her work, the two statues *Grieving Parents*,<sup>9</sup> which are modelled on the artist and her husband in grief at the death of their son, are a “profound statement of individual grief for a collective catastrophe”, writes historian Jay Winter (Winter and Sivan 58). With the complex emotions distilled into these works expressing her own devastating loss, Kollwitz communicates the pain and isolation of mourning, its debilitating effects and seeming endlessness.

In the work *To the Perfect Wife of Albert*,<sup>10</sup> sculptor Antonio Canova interprets and articulates the devastation, horror and despair of another who is confronting life in the face of immense loss. In the honouring of the dead the artist honours the living by acknowledging their pain and offering them the means to lighten their darkness.

Otto Dix’s art reflects his lived experience as an active participant in the First World War. Here he brings into the public realm his feeling “that one side of reality [that] hadn’t been portrayed, ugliness” (Karcher 46). The suite of prints, *Der Krieg*, graphically depicts his reality of the Western Front, while other works are an examination of sadistic sex and prostitution, as well as maimed and disfigured returned

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<sup>9</sup> *Grieving Parents* in Vladslo German Military Cemetery, near Ypres Belgium, viewed 2002 and 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Vienna. Uxori optima Albertus (To the Perfect Wife of Albert) Tomb of the Archduchess Christina, daughter of Maria Theresa, in the Church of the Augustines. Created by Canova, viewed 2008.

soldiers. The emotional burden of the war on Dix was enormous; in recognising that he could never be rid of its impact, art-making became the means by which he could "hold the war at bay" and stop it overwhelming him (46). While many viewers find Dix's work confronting and unappealing, his desire and courage to create it nonetheless offers others, including participants in this project, encouragement and scope to confront their most challenging emotions and experiences.

If slightly altered from "I write for myself and strangers" (289) to "I create for myself and strangers", Gertrude Stein's well-known statement would comprehensively reflect how creative practice is about communication and made for an audience, however small that audience may be. As art is firstly a communication with the self, it must first be enriching here before it can usefully extend outwards to enrich others. Roger Grainger argues that art communicates without compulsion. As art suggests rather than imposes, it is "the symbol of loving interaction" (134); it invites the viewer to become engaged in a dialogue with the work.

Grainger's point reflects the concept, devised by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, of dialogical exchange through art. Bakhtin argues that art can be viewed "as a kind of conversation, a locus of differing meaning, interpretations and points of view" (Bakhtin qtd in Kester 79), a concept that provides the foundation for Grant E Kester's examination and discussion of how artists, artworks and audiences interact. Kester names this communicative engagement "dialogical aesthetics" (76-88). The concept responds to a discourse surrounding contemporary art-making and a growing desire and practice to engage the artist, artwork and viewers in open-ended conversations. Its overarching premise regarding the multi-stream communication between artist, artwork and audience nonetheless has relevance to any discussion about art. The relationship of the concept of dialogical exchange to this work may be found in Kester's suggestion that art is specifically about experience, aspiration and a probing of the sensibilities of otherness (79). These reach out towards that which is not itself, proposing for those affected by trauma that art may offer a language to express the past as well as the future, and to do so as part of a dialogue.

Kollwitz captures and depicts moments of tension and tragedy using the traditional art materials of the sculptor, print-maker and drawer to portray her raw and heart-rending

images of strong, silent and grieving women. However beautiful and accessible this mode of work is, many artists now find Kollwitz's figurative and maternal style incompatible with contemporary expression. The industrialised suffering of the twentieth century demanded new ideas, new materials, and new approaches towards art production as the artistic depictions and practices of the past were no longer useful metaphors. Therefore, most of the artists discussed in this thesis not only created works of art responsive to trauma, but also a new language in which to express that trauma. Finding the art conventions of their time unsuitable to meet their needs, some chose to abandon the narrative form or the conventions of composition and use of materials to express trauma, and instead embedded their intent into a different form of art-making.

Visual languages, or visual dialects as I think of some, were created to speak to the uniqueness of individual experience and to move outwards from the artist to communicate with and touch wider audiences. Many of these artists' languages or dialects eventually became absorbed into mainstream visual language and are now widely used. For example, in *Der Krieg*<sup>11</sup> – a suite of prints portraying aspects of the First World War – Dix purposefully abuses the etching technique to "portray the successive stages in which individuality was suspended or brutally destroyed" (Karcher 49).

Joseph Beuys,<sup>12</sup> in his post-Second World War work, determined that a new visual language was required to articulate and communicate his vision of the war and its violations. Working to make sense of this seemingly senseless period of German history, he evokes trauma through an eclectic range of materials and objects that he reshapes into assemblages, places alongside other objects or configures into something new. In responding to the changing world, he "took up and perhaps transformed the stance of artists to suit the wiser and sadder age" (Joachimides, Norman and Wieland 18). His radical departure from the use of traditional art materials and methods established a new means of expression that not only served his creativity but also became extremely influential with other artists, including me.

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<sup>11</sup> Viewed at the Historial Museum, Peronne France 2002 and The National Gallery of Victoria, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Viewed at the Schloss Moyland, Germany, March 2008.

Materials and their transformation is the language of artists. "Sculpture is its materiality" says Salcedo of the power specific materials have to evoke (Princenthal and Carlos 21). Salcedo's use of everyday materials, such as furniture, clothing, concrete and hair, speaks of the presence and absence of human beings. The connection between the object and the humanity of the viewer, says Salcedo, makes metaphor unnecessary (Princenthal and Carlos 21). Louise Bourgeois says assemblage, putting materials and objects together, is "a process of recuperation and restoration, a means of re-establishing order amongst exiled things that have lost their normal function" (Storr 30). Like Beuys and Salcedo, Bourgeois ascribes new meaning to objects through her transformative process of making.

For Bennett, the journey the artist takes the viewer on is more important than the destination. To identify an artwork as "being about trauma", Bennett argues, reduces it to a singular defining subject matter that is often anathema to artists (3). It is in questions such as "how does it work and how is 'seeing feeling' being achieved?" where most of art's revelations lie; "art cannot simply give us answers" (41). Bennett and Salcedo both argue that it is not the purpose of an artwork to give answers as "this would, of course, merely short-circuit critical thought", says Bennett (90), and would be an "imposition on the viewer", says Salcedo (Princenthal and Carlos 25).

Art, like trauma, transcends boundaries of language, sex, education, culture, abilities, family and age. All people need to articulate their emotions, says Penny Eames (Director of Arts Access Aotearoa in Lewis and Doyle 89): "individuals who cannot communicate retain their anger, feel lost and become isolated, which leads to depression and mood disorder".

When in contact with art, some people can see and feel more clearly than they can verbalise. Nonetheless, the language of art used to express meaning and feelings is not universally transparent, but rather "deficient and exuberant", says Bochner and Ellis (507). Art as a language can be reflexive, inviting us to ask: "What do I see? What can I know?" In so doing art becomes a form of enquiry. According to Bochner and Ellis art may be an object, a product and also an idea, a process, a way of knowing, a manner of speaking or an encounter with others. It has the capacity for sensuality and emotionality, and to represent, evoke and embody as it reveals an

artist's perception and feelings (508). "Art can be used to examine ourselves, investigate and express the worlds of others, transgress stifling conventions and boundaries, resist oppressions, grieve and heal, produce intersubjective knowledge ... and come to terms with multiple and contradictory identities" (510). Artist Antony Gormley considers the process of art-making a journey of discovery and recovery, "an instrument for thinking, or perhaps (since thinking cannot be divorced from being) a catalyst for new states of being", and an artwork may initiate transformations in both maker and viewer (qtd in Nesbitt 13). McCarthy et al. argue that the language of art fills the gaps left by communication based on the natural science model of knowledge that dominates our culture" (43).

The language of the artist is visual, dreamlike, unconscious, as well as thoughtful and aware; we look, explore, explain and understand through metaphor and symbols, which according to Frances Downing "help us to order the unknown in reference to the known, the part in reference to the whole" (83).

In addition to using well-understood symbols, reclaiming or reinventing past knowledge and traditions by reinstating ancient symbols, now without widespread currency, can bring new meaning and vitality into contemporary art. Diane Wolfthal's study *Ancient Images of Rape* provides a range of visual dialects for the expression of sexual domination, while early religious iconography, especially European *ex-votos*, offers a language through which healing might be contemplated and expressed.

Each creative discipline has particular attributes useful for wellbeing. Visual art-making, even when undertaken as a group, tends to require of the maker periods of quiet and contemplation. It also involves the maker in an activity that is simultaneously meditative and active, cognitive and intuitive. Rothschild observes that trauma clients "benefit from engaging in activities which demand concentration and attention" and cites creative, practical and cognitive activities as examples. She suggests that active focus and thought helps reduce hyper-arousal and allows the victim to find "relief and rest from the trauma through quieting the internal dialogue" (92). Within this oasis, as Rothschild calls it (92), a way opens for new ways of thinking to emerge. The process of making art may be one such oasis; within the time spent in engagement with art-making and in the quieting of the mind, the maker can

find a contemplative space in which perceptions can be reviewed and shifted, and different ways of thinking and living suggested. The act of creation and, particular to the visual arts, the existence of the artwork that remains after the creative process, are two significant contributions to wellbeing.

In the physicality of an art object a victim may recognise that the trauma is in the past, which, as already described, is a goal of trauma healing. Putting the “inside and outside into contact with each other” is how Bennett, following Deleuze, expresses the connection with the seemingly disconnected aspects of a trauma victim’s life. The “inside” is described as the past /present and the psychology while the “outside world” is expressed as the future and evolution; together they create an integrated whole (*Empathic Vision* 44). Wilhelm S Wurzer writes that “inevitably, visibility reveals the invisible, the unseen whole” (vii).

In her essay and discussion about occupational genesis, that is, the capacity to problem solve and evolve through making and doing, Estelle B Brienes draws a parallel with Schmid and Ann Wilcock (qtd in Schmid 8) in noting the uniquely human capacity for creativity (in Schmid 54-74). She claims humans have an innate biological drive to be engaged in purposeful human activity. Together these propositions suggest that a creative and purposeful response to working through a trauma has some grounding in an innate need to respond by doing. When this is considered alongside Mollica’s and Herman’s claims of an innate need for human connection it suggests why a creative practice achieved through mindful engagement, an authentic connection between the art, the maker with him/herself, and viewers is a useful response to trauma and loss. Or put simply, these processes reflect the components for a happy life, which are as Freud might say, “work and love” (Elms).<sup>13</sup>

There are many ways a community can engage meaningfully with art. One is through viewing, another through participation. Antony Gormley’s extraordinary community

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<sup>13</sup> According to Elms (90) and his interpretation of others’ texts (Masson 1985) and Erikson (1963) for example, there is no account of this popular quote in any of Freud’s writings. It is believed to have been Freud’s verbal response to a question asked of him.

work *Field for the British Isles*<sup>14</sup> is an example of a disparate community working together, with inspiration and guidance from the artist, to bring forth work that would have been impossible for any individual to create alone. Gormley explains that when people work together they “begin to sense themselves as a collective body, even when previously unknown to each other, and at the same time create an image of that collective body” (qtd in Nesbitt 32).

According to Claire Bishop, the success of community arts projects is recognised through the process of making and community strengthening. Creative participation rehumanises, she says, but this alone cannot legitimise the work as artwork (Bishop; Roche). Unlike Kester, who she argues legitimises work that succeeds in being socially engaged but founders on the level of art, Bishop believes it is important to consider artwork in art terms and not solely on whether it meets the criterion of a successful community event. Community projects can be dull and formulaic when an artist attempts to be democratic and declines to impose a vision or skill on participants (Roche). Bishop’s outlook is refreshing to me who has observed that when skill development and critique are not provided as part of community art projects, artists run the risk of being patronising and limiting towards participants.

Bishop, referring to Lacan, emphasises: “The best socially collaborative art does not derive from a superegoic injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’, but from the position ‘do not give up on your desire’” (Roche 4). Bishop believes this stance is about taking responsibility for one’s own desire, rather than responding to the perceived desires of others. A response of desire from a trauma victim represents a connection with the self and acknowledgement that her/his desires have value. It suggests a refusal to be totally crushed by the experience of trauma, indicating an ambition to acknowledge the full spectrum of trauma, loss and grief, and to communicate something of it. In acting upon desire, the participant reveals a willingness to be active, not simply a passive victim of trauma or recipient of treatment. How can survivors make the harmful work for them? In taking the work out of the private realms of the makers and placing it in a public space, the silence is broken. It is a declaration of the trauma and the many facets of its existence. Edwards notes the difficulties and risks involved: “abandoning

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<sup>14</sup> Hayward Gallery, London, viewed 1996.

the familiar and courting the unknown” by giving form to a feeling, by producing “an image that is in some way meaningful and personally significant can feel messy and chaotic” (50). Nonetheless, when the pain is visible, the witnessing and acknowledgement of it by the self and others can become an important part of healing (Pearlman and Staub; Winter and Sivan).

In this chapter, I have outlined the terrain upon which this work is located. In declaring that art, creative participation and artists can contribute to wellbeing, and setting this alongside the devastating effects of trauma, particularly sexual abuse, I have laid the foundations for my enquiry. I have identified some of the difficulties inherent to trauma therapy that may find a counterweight in an engagement with a creative practice, artists and art work. In the following chapters, I demonstrate through creative practice how, in the case of sexual abuse victims, art and artists can transform lives affected by trauma.

## 4 METHOD

This thesis examines modes of arts practice and makes visible the formative and transformative processes of creating visual art. One mode being examined is creative practice as part of a community; another is how materials influence a creative process; a third is the creative practice of a studio artist. The thesis is an examination of how and what these practices contribute to wellbeing following trauma, grief and loss, specifically sexual abuse; it is an examination of processes, and of where artists fit into these processes, considering the multiple roles of creator, facilitator and resource for creative thinking and practice. In addition to the artist's work I brought to the conversation, I identify myself principally as an artist because my arts practice is of primary interest to the question asked by this thesis – what does an artist contribute to wellbeing after trauma? In order to be authentic to this investigation I maintained a studio practice throughout and used this as a mode of enquiry, expression and reflexivity.

In their work with the University of Helsinki, Arthur P Bochner and Carolyn Ellis reflected upon “the burden of demonstrating the legitimacy of art as a basis for inquiry”. The University of Helsinki had observed that the qualities of art in “producing knowledge and contributing to human understanding” did not fit with traditional standards of inquiry (506). For the University and Bochner and Ellis “imagination was as important as rigor, meanings as important as facts, and the heart as important as the mind” (506). Bochner, Ellis and the University asked questions similar to those that guide this thesis: “As a mode of inquiry, what was important about art? ... how could it heal, teach, incite, inspire or provoke?” (507). They concluded that art as research was “not a conclusion but part of a conversation, not a closed statement but an open question; not a question of this is how it is”, but a means of inviting others to consider what it (or they) would become (507).

I faced similar challenges in this multidisciplinary thesis where creative processes and practices sit alongside trauma, grief and loss at its centre. How to reveal the awakening of dormant desires, skills and relationships? How to describe the transformation of materials, leading to transformations of attitudes, ideas and lives? In

addition, how might words be used to describe the artistic investigation of thoughts and memories, or the struggle to grasp the impact of trauma?

The thesis comprises three separate but interconnected streams: a community art stream, pre- and post-community art group interviews, and my studio practice.

## **Community art**

The community art groups were an exploration of, firstly, how and what learning art-making skills and engaging in the creative process contribute to the wellbeing of victims following trauma, and secondly, how and what creatively acknowledging and expressing loss and grief following trauma contributes to victims' wellbeing. Also of importance to this thesis is how and what being part of a community of arts practice with others who have a shared experience of trauma contributes to wellbeing. I also examine and reflect upon my roles and contribution as artist and as facilitator. These two roles are interlinked and integral to understanding how and what the arts and the artist contribute to wellbeing. In addition to examining my place in the work, I also consider the contribution of other artists' work to help deepen the understanding of trauma, grief and loss, and how these might be effectively expressed. Their artworks and art practice helped victims develop the visual language to competently express the depth and breadth of their complex responses to their experiences.

The community art stream<sup>15</sup> consisted of two arts projects I set up and conducted with women who had experienced sexual abuse and the loss and grief that accompanies that experience. The first was a creative arts project with no intention of specifically expressing trauma and was conducted using the medium of mosaics. I refer to this project throughout the thesis as "the mosaic project". The second project focused specifically on the expression of grief and loss using the mediums of plaster and clay. I refer to this project throughout as "the loss and grief project". Also included in the discussion of this work are three exhibitions of participants' artworks and two colour

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<sup>15</sup> Community art as I refer to it throughout this thesis is the practice, and/or the artwork that emerges out of an artist working with a community. The artwork is made predominantly by community members under the guidance of the artist (Cleveland).

calendars showcasing participants' work produced by The South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and co-designed by me (see Appendices).

The community art aspect of the thesis was undertaken with the support of the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Abuse, (SECASA), an organisation based in Melbourne, Australia and part of Southern Health, the largest public health provider in Victoria.<sup>16</sup> I had worked with SECASA as an artist/facilitator two years earlier. SECASA was the primary source of recruitment of the participants. It also provided the accommodation for the art projects and a counsellor who attended each session as a participant/counsellor. My existing relationship with SECASA, and the trust that had been established between us, led some potential participants to feel reassured that the group would be a safe one to join.

In agreeing to support the thesis SECASA was thoroughly engaged in considering and planning around the ethical issues surrounding the community projects, such as confidentiality and the potential for causing harm. Ethical issues were discussed with participants before and during the project. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and unrelated to the services they received from SECASA and that they could withdraw at any time without prejudice. I applied for and received ethics approval from the Victoria University Ethics Committee in 2007 (see Appendix). Under this approval I was not permitted to ask personal or probing questions about the participants or their trauma, although many disclosed some of this information.

Participants in these groups were women aged between eighteen and sixty-three years, most of whom attended SECASA for counselling. There was broad diversity within their sexual abuse experiences: a significant number were abused over long periods as very young and young children, some by a number of people; a significant number were abused in adolescence; there were experiences of one-off and gang rapes; abuse through working in the sex industry; rape by a church representative; and rape/abuse by fathers, husbands, brothers, neighbours, friends of the family and work colleagues. As some women did not reveal their experience, this is an

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<sup>16</sup> [www.southernhealth.org](http://www.southernhealth.org)

incomplete catalogue of sexual abuse experiences within the group. Others reported experiences of domestic and random violence.

Biographical details were not formally collected. They did, for some women, emerge during the project, but any information I could provide would only be a simplistic overview of the complexities and richness of the individuals involved. Further, any interpretation I might make of their lives would necessarily be selective and could lead readers to make inaccurate or misguided assumptions about them. In considering this position I pondered my own curiosity about the participants' lives and the possible desire of a reader for a biographical profile. What personal information is necessary to advance the discussion about art and wellbeing? And what is simply feeding a form of voyeurism? What would be gained by disclosing a person's history as a sex worker or a single mother, her age, or her cultural background, for example? I concluded this information would not make a useful contribution to the thesis if using it denied the complexity of the women's lives, which here is discussed through the prism of their creative engagement. I considered any such disclosure would be disrespectful to these women and inconsistent with and in breach of their much stated desire not to be judged. This position is consistent with the approach of Gemma Stacey and Theodore Stickley who did not request biographical or medical details of participants in an arts-based project because, as researchers, they did not want to be intrusive or lead to a perception that the art project was a form of medical intervention. It is also a theme Lockie McDonald (in Lewis and Doyle) raises in his essay about Freight, a gallery that exhibits work made by adults who have a mental illness. He notes that participants would "rather not be pigeon-holed or labelled" as labels and assumptions imposed upon them had been burdensome and limiting (40). By reading about the effects of sexual abuse in participants' own words, I trust readers will understand that all the women involved in this study have suffered greatly because of the violations they have experienced, and that the most important focus here is their interactions with and through art.

None of the participants had existing skills in mosaic-making or plaster-casting, while few had skills beyond primary school experience with clay. Participants were taught skills experientially through working on a range of projects using a number of different art-making techniques. They were also taught how materials might be used to expand

their self-expression, and offered insights into how artworks and artists inspire creativity. These projects are described in detail in Chapters 5 and 7.

Pseudonyms have been used in the text of this thesis to protect the women's privacy, particularly as they revealed personal experiences of their abuse and lives. While agreeing to and understanding the reasons for anonymity in the text, not all of the women wanted to remain silent or anonymous in relation to other aspects of their creative engagement. Many actively chose to use their full name in publications and exhibitions as an acknowledgment of their sexual abuse and all nominated how they wanted their participation to be acknowledged in this thesis. For many, being named in these documents acted as proof of their abuse. The decision to publicly claim their abuse was not lightly made. Many discussions, over a period of weeks, were held with participants regarding the potential for harm these documents had once they entered the public realm. Participants were encouraged to discuss the possible implications of disclosure outside the group, particularly with counsellors and family. All participants gave written confirmation of how they wished to be acknowledged for each interaction with the public realm.

Recruitment to the projects occurred largely through counsellors who informed women they considered might be interested or who might be expected to benefit from participation. Information about the art projects was also widely available as flyers and on noticeboards in each of SECASA's locations. As the interest in participation in the mosaic groups was slow at first, further recruitment was achieved through sending information to other organisations that support women who have been sexually abused (such as the St Kilda Crisis Centre), and through a series of articles in local papers, which attracted women who were not linked to support services following their abuse.

As participation in this project was through self-selection, a natural bias towards art and creativity being of benefit to those who have been traumatised is reflected in my findings. While many women found the creative processes, participating in the group and confronting their trauma at times very challenging, all the women said that the projects had been of benefit or of significant benefit to them.

All groups reached capacity and some were over-subscribed. Most women who began each project also completed it, and of those few who left, most did so early, citing reasons of work commitments and loss of interest in mosaics. The loss and grief groups were comprised principally of women who had attended the mosaic groups; however, as some were unable to join this second project, mainly due to work and study obligations, six new participants were recruited through SECASA. The new recruits expressed a passion for art and had some existing experience of art-making.

The format of the groups drew on my previous experience of managing and facilitating community art projects. I also took into consideration what would be a reasonable commitment to ask of participants and what would be necessary to reach the goals of the thesis. The three-hour sessions allowed for participants to settle in and be productive as well as have time for short breaks. It also made provision for those who, for all the reasons that brought them to the group in the first place, were unable to either be on time or who had lapses of productivity during the sessions; it enabled time for participants to achieve something constructive in spite of these constraints. The mosaic projects were held weekly for fifteen weeks and the grief and loss projects were held weekly for twelve weeks.

Each community art project had specific aims. Although it might seem that those who have experienced trauma would find it useful to express their loss and grief before embarking on a general art project, I felt it important to first establish a creative practice. This would allow participants to learn skills in creative thinking and making before attempting to creatively express their most profound feelings. Additionally, given most participants' isolation and lack of social engagement, it was also important to establish a sense of group and trust before the more complex work began.

The principal aims of the mosaic project were to examine what and how being creative, working creatively as part of a group and working with an artist might contribute to participants' wellbeing. The primary aim of the grief and loss project, in addition to the aims of the mosaic group, was to examine how and what the expression of loss and grief born of trauma could contribute to participants' wellbeing.

In order to have a meaningful sample size for research purposes, I conducted two mosaic groups and two loss and grief groups. In total, twenty-five women were involved.

The mosaic groups were located in Frankston (eight participants) and St Kilda (twelve participants), and conducted between August and November 2007. The loss and grief groups were located in Frankston (eight participants) and Moorabbin (thirteen participants), and conducted between June and October 2008. The St Kilda mosaic group and Moorabbin grief and loss groups were essentially the same; the location was changed because the St Kilda room became unavailable. This group transferred to a space in the Monash Medical Centre, Moorabbin. The different group sizes reflect the accommodation available.

A counsellor was provided by SECASA to support each community art group. Counsellors supported the project as participants/counsellors and most undertook the role on alternate weeks. They participated creatively, principally because, as observed from experience, it is unhelpful and distracting if counsellors are present but not also creatively involved. Some participants also mirrored this view, indicating they had felt uncomfortable in other groups where they were observed by counsellors/psychologists who were not also participants. The counsellor's role was to provide support for the women should they wish to talk about their trauma or other issues. When women required assistance from the counsellor, the usual practice was for both to leave the room for a short while to address the participant's needs. Conversations between the counsellor and participant remained private unless the participant asked for information to be given to me.

Counsellors also contributed to conversations, provided encouragement to participants, worked with individuals on small group projects, and at times sat next to a person who was in distress and helped keep that person calm and focused. They provided me with support in understanding some of the behaviours and emotions of participants, and helped devise strategies to make one group, which had a very broad range of personalities in it, work smoothly and effectively for all participants. Counsellors revealed that they worked with clients outside the creative space to help them process the art work, the group's interactions and client's interactions with me. The

counsellors' presence within the creative space may not always have appeared active. However, most were aware of when their services were required and responded accordingly. At the start, most participants indicated they did not expect to use the counsellors' services but nonetheless felt comforted in the knowledge they were present. Although only some participants used the counsellors' services, privately most did engage with the counsellors, in an informal way.

The personalities of the Frankston as compared to the St Kilda/Moorabbin groups were surprisingly different, although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly why this was so. Frankston is an outer Melbourne suburb approximately 40 km from the city centre. It has a large low-income population as well as a strikingly contrasting affluent one. Some of the participants in these groups live in Frankston, but most travelled there from other outer-suburbs and from as far away as Dromana on the Mornington Peninsula. The women in these groups tended to be quiet; few revealed details of their abuse and none displayed extreme emotional behaviour. The group was held in a building accommodating police and medical services involved in family and sexual violence in what is a pilot model of practice.

St Kilda is an inner-city suburb at the northern end of the region serviced by SECASA and is an area known for its diversity, sex industry, and transient low-income through to affluent population. The group was held in a building accommodating several other service providers, notably the Salvation Army, which works with the many disenfranchised and vulnerable people in the area. Whereas some participants in these groups lived in St Kilda, most came from a range of surrounding suburbs, including Moorabbin, to where the group eventually transferred, which is a middle suburb approximately 15 km from the city centre. The range of women's residential locations provides little insight into the reasons for the more boisterous and overt personality of this group of people.

The St Kilda/Moorabbin groups were larger than the Frankston groups as there was more space available in these locations, and no doubt this contributed to them being noisy and lively. There were more non-parents in the St Kilda/Moorabbin groups, but factors such as education and employment status, age and the stage of life when the

abuse occurred were similar for participants in both locations. They too do not readily suggest reasons for these differences between groups.

Each participant in the Frankston mosaic group had a quiet demeanour, whereas in the St Kilda mosaic group there were some lively and vocal women who initiated a more dynamic environment and some who readily expressed negative emotions about their abuse. In St Kilda women sat around a number of large tables whereas in Frankston everyone sat together around one single table. However, these observations do not apply to the loss and grief groups; here both groups had a balance of quiet and lively participants and both groups worked around a single large table.

### ***Data collection and analysis of the community art groups***

According to Stacey and Stickler, research into the arts needs to “honour the demand for clarity, order, form, meaning and logic, but it must also embody the passionate, expressive, vital basis of the arts” (71). The data for the community art aspect of the thesis was collected in a number of ways. The principal means were pre- and post-interviews conducted with each participant in both community art groups. For expediency, I will refer to these as “entry” and “exit” interviews throughout the thesis.

I met with each woman who expressed interest in participating for approximately one hour prior to the commencement of each project. This was mainly to undertake the entry interview and sign the consent forms. However, the meeting was also useful in allaying potential participants’ anxieties about the project and gave them an opportunity to meet and begin a relationship with me before the commencement of the group.

The entry and exit interviews were semi-structured. In both sets of interviews each participant was asked to respond to a set of questions relating to their participation in the arts project, rather than relating to their abuse (see Appendices for interview questions). Entry questions covered participants’ motivation and expectations for participation and their expectations experience of working with an artist; exit questions covered their observations of and responses to having participated.

In addition to these questions, I asked others arising from the conversation, usually relating to participants' interest in and previous experiences of art. Participants received a notebook and were asked to keep a journal throughout the project and record their reflections and responses to art-making and participation in the group. Although journals were intended to be private and kept as an aide-memoire for the exit interviews, many women chose to read me excerpts from them in the exit interviews.

In the exit interviews, the questions reflected the responses the participants had given in the entry interviews, their commentary during the groups and my own observations of their participation. Other questions related to creating and contemplating specific artworks and where the women saw links or differences in their creative work and the work undertaken with counsellors. These interviews were between one and two hours in duration.

This method of data collection, which uses open-ended questions and encourages a conversation, draws on the work of Norman K Denzin and Yvonne S Lincoln, Christopher J Pole, Arthur P Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, Shelly Schalter and others. It provided space for participants' voices to be heard, and created the conditions for as rich a response to their participation as each wanted to share. The inclusion of the participants' voices to describe their creative participation and the meaning they ascribed to it is an important component of the thesis. This method responds to my overall disappointment in the Arts and Health literature regarding a deficit of participants' voices in research, as discussed in the Literature Review, and similar concerns raised by Doyle and Lewis.

A conversational-style interview had advantages over a survey, for example, which could not yield enough insightful or rich qualitative data, while drawing solely on my own observations could only be reductive and limit the scope of knowledge available to the thesis. It enabled participants to make contributions beyond the scope of my questions. Many chose to reveal information about their abuse while others chose to keep that information private. Most made revelations about their education, family and partnerships, as well as interests and experiences in other creative pursuits and travel. This additional conversation contributed useful data for me to consider and

included, among other things, such issues as silence, privacy, anxiety and fears, how women viewed their abuse, and how each wanted to be represented.

Interviews took place within one to three weeks of the commencement and conclusion of each art project, giving participants time to reflect on their participation while still retaining the freshness of their experience. Some further reflections offered by participants in the months and years following are also included. Although it was not the intention of the thesis to include a longitudinal study of the effects of the women's participation, these reflections contribute useful insights into on-going impacts of the projects. All the interviews were conducted at SECASA and were recorded onto audio cassette, and most were also recorded onto video.

The video record is important because, as I expected, *how* things were said, rather than just *what* was said, provided additional data. The video record usefully captured a broader range of responses than was possible using voice recording only. In addition to recording the participants' verbal commentary, video captured a considerable amount of additional information, such as incidental gestures, the gaze and pauses. Although the collection of data in the form of video and photographs was not widely addressed in the texts I consulted on research collection and analysis, authors such as Denzin and Parker commonly counsel researchers to collect their data in ways that can be examined from a number of points of view and potentially offer valuable information that may not immediately be visible or considered. I considered the video to be a useful tool for my purposes. For example, the participants' growing confidence could be seen in the way they sat and moved during the interviews, and how they related to their work could be seen in facial expressions as participants looked at and spoke of specific and often precious works of art. Most participants readily agreed to the request to record the interviews, but some declined the video-recording and one refused permission to record either on audio cassette or video.

An exit interview was also conducted with the SECASA counsellors who supported the groups. They were asked to respond to their observations of the project and participants' responses to it. Their responses and observations provide another viewpoint, thus triangulating the data. The interview and discussions with the counsellors helped locate aspects of the work and my own observations within the

theories that ground how counsellors work with their clients, giving additional resonance to the work. The exchange was insightful for us all and deepened our understanding of the work. Counsellors also contributed to my understanding and wellbeing during the course of the arts projects by providing insight and the opportunity to discuss some aspects of the project, particularly participants' responses and behaviours. Approximately eighty-five participant and counsellor interviews are drawn upon in this thesis.

In my role as a participant observer I kept a diary. Entries were written after each session. I recorded my observations of the art groups and individuals' responses to artistic processes, to each other and to me, comments and reactions to the work, any participant distress, counsellors' comments and engagement, and artistic ideas to pursue. The diary is a record of the journey: how comments and reflections unfolded into the creative planning, the relationship between ideas and the resolution of issues, as well as incidental information and things that did not feed directly into the thesis but were useful in deepening the understanding of its processes and effects. The diary was not, however, the means of recording my reflexive thinking; the difficult tasks of grasping, then processing themes, ideas, responses, events and experiences was done mostly through my work. The discussion in Chapter 6 reflects some of this.

The weekly processes of the community art projects and the completed works were documented in still photographs. I viewed images often during the project and used them in my reflections and analysis of the work. Some images support the text of the thesis, some were published in the SECASA calendars and annual reports, used at conferences, are included on my website ([www.anneriggs.com](http://www.anneriggs.com)), and are in articles such as *Southern Health News* and in a forthcoming brochure being published by Victoria Police about family violence. I also made a video documentation of the mosaic projects, but not the grief and loss project, as the video-recording felt intrusive in that setting.

Showcase exhibitions of the mosaic work were held at the Monash Medical Centre Clayton and St Kilda SECASA in November 2007 and were also documented. An exhibition of the loss and grief work was held at the Monash Medical Centre Moorabbin during November and December 2008 and was documented in still photographs.

Speeches given by participants, counsellors and me at these events were recorded on video and in still photography. The video of the speeches provides further data to consider, particularly when compared with the entry and exit interviews. The women's growing confidence and capacity to express their opinion in public is evident. The documentation of the projects in photography was essential for our work to be understood for its visual qualities.

This was largely action-based research. Apart from the first two mosaic sessions and the first grief and loss session where introductory skills were taught, all the art sessions were devised in response to themes, comments and desires as expressed by participants. The sessions and thesis therefore unfolded thematically and sequentially. This structure was a useful tool to interrogate and understand how the growing competency in visual language fed into participants' scope and capacity to self-express then attain feelings of wellbeing. Researchers who are not artists or directly involved in an arts practice but whose concerns lie with the efficacy of art for health, or in processes of evaluation, have collated their data into themes, such as extrinsic influences and intrinsic influences upon creative expression; the therapeutic value of creative expression; the affective response to participating in artistic activity; and conflicts within the creative process (Stacey and Stickler 72). However, as my purpose was not to answer the question "Is art useful to wellbeing?", but rather to ask how and what the women's participation contributed to their wellbeing, themes of process in relation to time were also important thematic considerations.

As this is a qualitative and not quantitative thesis, I have not analysed the participants' responses statistically. There were a number of trends common to the participants' experiences of trauma and its aftermath, many of which also mirror trends identified in the literature. Similarly, trends appeared through the women's creative practice. When I refer to "the women", "they" or "participants" I am referring to a trend I have observed in the majority of participants. When I refer to "some women" or "some participants" it suggests a trend but not necessarily one that is widespread. When an observation refers to a single participant, I use the term "one participant" or similar.

## Studio practice

An investigation into my studio arts practice and the creation of artwork contemplative of trauma, loss and grief, including an exhibition of that work, forms the third strand of this thesis.

Bochner and Ellis point to the gaps between what can be shown, seen or felt through an arts practice and what can be said. As a form of language, they argue, art can be reflexive and invite questions: "How do I see? What can I know? How do I know what I know?" (508). As an artist, art-making was a form of processing and questioning about trauma, articulating feelings and responses about sexual trauma in particular, and issues of grief and loss. It was a mode of calming myself and was a means to take this discussion into the wider world. Bochner and Ellis consider art as the means to "examine oneself, investigate the worlds of others, transgress stifling convention", and as a mode of inquiry, as well as one of representation (510).

Placing my creative practice within, indeed at the centre of the thesis, is to acknowledge and examine the artist's practice and thinking as an integral constituent of the work with the community and to this discussion about trauma, grief and loss. The artist's practice is, as Cleveland said, one of the most significant contributors to a successful community arts project. Creating art throughout and as part of the thesis maintained the connection between the arts practice, the artist as facilitator and the researcher.

My studio practice explores and expands upon a deep and sustained interest in the expression of loss and grief, and to that I added an exploration of trauma as an extension of this interest. I made artwork throughout the entire period of the PhD, beginning before I met the participants with explorations around themes of revenge and forgiveness and continuing until the installation of the exhibition *Art in the Shadows: Trauma Loss Grief* at the Monash Medical Centre, Clayton in November 2009. Approximately 25 per cent of the time spent on the thesis was devoted to creating art.

Themes of trauma, loss and grief were creatively explored through a wide range of materials, including ceramics and painting, materials that form the basis of my arts practice. Found objects, such as bone, rusted wire, dolls and shoes were also used, along with such materials as wax, glass, wire, nails, plaster and hooks and domestic materials such as needles, thread and scissors. Scissors were used to consider themes of loss, abuse, violation, the elusiveness of revenge, forgiveness, pain and the absence of a stable and nurturing home. They were also used in the consideration of transformation. Many artworks, although not all, focused on sexual trauma and childhood sexual abuse in particular, and a substantial number include children's clothing to consider the impact the abuse of children has on its victims. Other works are contemplative of sorrow and loss and draw on religious iconography and practices, such as relics and the use of the colour purple, as symbols of mourning. Many emerged from ruminating upon things the women revealed, and the personal struggles I felt working in this field. My creative practice, discussed in Chapter 6, is where I locate much of my reflexive thinking. I returned to themes many times, and worked with ideas through a range of materials and methods, reflecting on my position, my distress, my anger and my confusion. My work, which amounted to many hundreds of objects and paintings, is my reflexive process.

The shadow plays an important role in viewing and considering this body of work. Shadows are purposefully created and brought to the work as a metaphor for the distortions that accompany trauma and grief; they are a means to express the elusiveness of a full range of emotions and sound human connection and responses. Shadows convey the lack of clarity about the trauma, which is a familiar experience of those who have experienced it; they also convey the movement implicit in the journey towards wellbeing.

Many of the works include a transformative process. In putting incompatible materials together, such as glass and ceramic, wire and clay, or bone and clay, and exposing them to the extreme environment of the kiln, the capacity of the artwork to express trauma is expanded beyond the possibilities of an image alone. The materiality and its response to the tension becomes integral to the expression of how humans may respond and react to the extreme experience of trauma, and the pain of loss and grief that accompanies it.

Many of the works are small, sometimes tiny, and much of their resonance is found in their materiality and how they relate to the artworks surrounding them. Rather than gaining meaning and understanding solely from individual items, the viewer is asked to consider them as a body of work. Through this method of making and presenting I convey the fragmentation, distortions and inability to find clarity or any easy answers after trauma.

My studio practice underpins my work as a researcher and community artist. Although some artworks draw on my exchanges with participants and are reflections of their experiences, the work does not illustrate or use personal stories or events. Rather, artworks are an inquiry into the conditions of trauma, grief and loss. This practice is discussed fully in Chapter 6, where it was positioned between the two community art projects. It, particularly, laid the foundation for the work I undertook with the participants in the grief and loss group.

The method I chose for making and exhibiting this artwork draws on my years of arts practice and also responds to the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys and Doris Salcedo, both of whom have made considerable bodies of work contemplating trauma and loss. Beuys's work particularly underpinned my decision to make and show fragmented works that were resolved very differently from my usual arts practices. Part of the research for both my studio practice and my work with the grief and loss groups was conducted in northern Europe in 2008, where I made a practical and visual investigative journey into mourning, remembrance and memorialisation, much of which concerned the First and Second World Wars.

The studio work culminated in an exhibition, *Art in the Shadows: Trauma Loss Grief*, presented from 25 November 2009 to 29 January 2010 at the Monash Medical Centre, a large teaching hospital in suburban Melbourne. The location of the exhibition in this busy public space ensured the work was seen by hundreds of people daily, most of whom – whether staff or visitors – have an existing awareness of human vulnerability. Having many times before situated my exhibitions in public spaces, I carefully consider the potential effects of the art upon intentional and chance viewers. Siting the work in a public hospital had two purposes: one, bringing consciousness to art as a means to

wellbeing; the other, fracturing the silence and opening a conversation around sexual trauma.

### ***Data Collection and analysis of studio practice***

I use thematic analysis as the major approach to considering my studio practice (Aronson). The work and processes of making it are examined from a range of perspectives and themes, including the materiality described above; the vulnerability of the child and the incapacity of some homes and parents to provide a safe and nurturing environment; the devastating and long-term impacts of trauma; and how trauma and grief may be accommodated. How art-making provides consolation and rest for the artist working with people who have been traumatised, and how the practice of the artist feeds the community arts practice, were also considerations.

I documented the work in still photography and video and occasionally kept a written diary; however, the artwork itself is the record of the unfolding body of knowledge and is embodied with feelings, responses and intention. This is best held within the work itself, and in the language in which it was made.

### ***Supporting visual material***

Images supporting the written text are located at the end of the particular chapter in which they are discussed. The selection of images in the thesis, however, cannot reflect the amount or range of the work that emerged from each of the community art projects or my studio. A DVD containing a more substantial range of images of the work, including installation shots of the exhibition, is therefore provided in the Appendices.

## 5 ART IN THE SHADOW OF TRAUMA

*So that for me to be able to create a piece of art and to have somebody who was actually supportive during that creativity, that was very healing – it was healing a part of me that was damaged for a very long time. Rosie<sup>17</sup>*

Richard Rozencwajg says of his childhood trauma experiences of the Holocaust: “If you feel, you die” (in Valent 271). In this chapter I discuss how victims of sexual trauma discover the opposite: “If you feel, you live”.

The relationship between art and thinking, working and feeling is a good place from which to consider the mosaic project, the first of the two community art projects. Here I explore the contribution of creativity to wellbeing through this strength-based arts project, and consider how and what working with an artist, and being part of a group with others with a shared experience of trauma, can also contribute to wellbeing.

Creative participation enabled each woman to feel and think differently about herself. Art-making, as this chapter describes, transformed each victim of trauma from thinking of herself as the other – separate from the world, unworthy and inhuman – and instead nurtured the tiny seed that enabled her to first believe, then witness, herself to be otherwise.

If creativity is understood as a fundamental human characteristic, as Schmid, Eakin and I consider it to be, then to ask what creativity (in this case mosaic-making) contributes to wellbeing may also be to wonder at what is lost or distorted when creativity is absent from a person’s life or when a child is deprived of the opportunity to explore and hone creative skills and thinking. These questions are explored through the journey of making and through the created art objects and the revelations they evoke.

According to Herman, the first principle of recovery is “the empowerment of the survivor” (133): reducing isolation, diminishing helplessness, increasing a range of

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<sup>17</sup> Project participant. All participants who are quoted throughout the thesis have been given a pseudonym.

choices and countering the dynamics of dominance are some of the goals of empowerment. Whereas many may look towards therapy as a means to achieve these goals, others such as White, Eakin, Atkinson and I have observed that creativity and art-making also achieve these goals and guide victims towards recovery. For recovery to occur, first there must be an imagining that recovery is possible. The mosaic project was first a step into the imagination. With the project came the offer to nurture the possibility that lay beneath the morass of past experiences, humiliations and negativity: that a victim *might* be creative and “might even be an artist”, as one participant shyly admitted. This project enabled the participants to imagine who they might be and of what they might be capable. With the mosaic project came the artist and the organisation, people to whom those different dreams could be voiced and who would very likely honour such dreams.

As each woman placed herself in front of boxes full of tiles in a room with similarly hurt women, without knowing what could be created there, her imagination was opening to possibilities for transformation. The imagination opened each to the possibility of “seeing things with different eyes”, to looking inwards to seeing herself differently and outwards to seeing the world differently. The imagination provides a bridge, a reconnection between “me and the outside world”. The imagination accepted the offer to come on a creative journey, even when the destination seemed impossibly far.

Kester describes the dialogic practice of art-making as being “potentially emancipatory” (78), and it is with this concept in mind that I discuss in this chapter the journey of the project, the art made and work undertaken as processes of aesthetic resolution.

In Kester’s terms, empathetic insight is a necessary component in a dialogical practice (83); in this creative context, empathetic insight was an essential ingredient. Kester points out a number of axes along which empathetic insight occurs – one was through the relationships between the participants who already shared some form of commonality, another was in the exchanges between the participants and viewers, and a third was in the rapport between the artist and the participants. I would add empathetic insight exists in the possibility for the non-verbal to be acknowledged rather than exiled, occurring in the exchanges between the participant and her internal self, and between the artist and her internal self. Kester points out that meaning is

ascribed to the various human exchanges that occur through some forms of art-making. As others such as Neimeyer attests, finding meaning is one way to heal after trauma and this suggests why a number of participants (some of whom had almost reached the point of believing their lives were non-viable), said that the project had been "life saving".

The presence of the artist is both implicit and explicit in this discussion. The artist primarily developed and expanded the visual language, which empowered each woman to creatively express and understand herself, to imagine herself as creative, a part of a community, valuable and valued. The artist implemented a place of care, as well as a creative space in which growth could occur, honouring Primo Levi's view that "in order to live, an identity, that is, dignity is necessary" (103). In addition to the technical and creative skills brought into the creative space, the artist is also a unique personality and range of experiences, which obviously influence the shape of a creative project.

The mosaic project was initially viewed with uncertainty and excitement: "What have I let myself in for?!" one woman asked. Everyone was nervous, some extremely so. Adults are commonly anxious on the first day of any art project but here these feelings were accentuated as many of these women were stepping out from extremely isolated existences to take part. To limit participants' feelings of anxiety, my introductory talk was kept to a minimum at the first session. Participants were welcomed and introduced to the project, the counsellor and the facilities before each participant was asked to briefly introduce herself.

*The first day you asked us to go around the class and just introduce yourself, I don't know about anyone else, but inside myself I had a little bit of "Ohhh what are we supposed to say?", and then I was thinking, "I hope Anne doesn't point to me". It was that initial thing, "How much do I say to these people?" and I just said "Hello, my name is Amelia", but my head was saying to me "Oh you know, I was ... I have three children ... I am a single mother ... I was a child abused ...!!" I had that kind of thing happening, which was you know, fairly unnecessary. I looked around and I felt, maybe there were a few others sitting there thinking the same thing. So it was good whoever started, just said "Hello". Amelia*

In the first two projects a small paver and a mirror (Figures 1, 2 and 3 at end of this chapter) were chosen to introduce participants to several mosaic-making techniques, such as design, colour, making mosaics for interior and exterior surfaces, breaking and shaping tiles and using the various cutting tools. Participants were encouraged to choose their tiles and colours with awareness, rather than simply using what was readily to hand; this act of choosing began a conscious engagement with art. These simple, small-scale projects are not overwhelming for new participants and are usually completed in one or two sessions per project. In their simplicity and completion, they give participants the opportunity to practice and build confidence with the mosaic medium. In the paver, the start of their journey is literally and figuratively set in concrete.

As participants struggled to manipulate tools and grasp the particular concepts of each project, most had no idea that in just a few short weeks most would be totally at ease with the materials and tools, and would be producing work unimaginable to them at this point.

In submitting to a lack of knowledge, some participants immersed themselves in the work, open and undaunted by the prospect of not getting things “right” the first time. However, a significant number of participants felt intimidated. They were frightened of the other women, of making a mistake, of being ridiculed then isolated from the group. Nothing I said fully penetrated those early fears and it was only after an extended period of time spent being creative and being part of the group that some aspects of these fears eventually subsided.

I became familiar with participants’ attachments to their desires for “perfection” and “not to make a mistake”. In recreational adult art classes it is common for students to claim to be “a perfectionist”; this is usually part of the process of learning skills and enjoying the struggle, then success, of achieving realistic representations in their artwork. Here I sensed something else. The desire for perfection was born of a different imperative. Rather than being indicative of artistic progress, it stultified women’s growth and had the potential to continue doing so. Some other women however, enjoyed the making while being ignorant of their potential “mistakes”. It

gave them freedom to experiment. Mosaic-making has its frustrations, but most recognised these as being part of a creative and healing process:

*I found it really liberating and frustrating, because I loved the freedom of not knowing the mistakes I was and wasn't making to begin with. It was time consuming and sometimes I had to walk away from it – even if it was for a couple of minutes just to get away from all those jig-sawy bits and trying to get them all to fit, that was a bit frustrating – but that was ok. It wasn't frustrating to the point that you couldn't get over it. Indi*

Many participants were unable to recognise the space between the desire to do and mastery, that creative space in which one learns, experiments, sometimes falters, tries again and improves. These participants were burdened by a looming sense of danger. In her entry interview, Barb told me how afraid she was of so many aspects of joining the group and how she hoped her participation might relieve her of some of her daily fears and anxieties. The following, a part of that conversation, describes her aspirations:

*To watch you doing it and learn that it is ok if I make a mistake, because if I see you making a mistake, or I see you throwing something to the side and saying "I don't like this I am starting again", that will be so comforting.*

*So comforting that you are allowed to make a mistake or when you are doing something, it is ok not to be perfect, that will be a really big help to me, that someone normal, that normal people make mistakes, normal people aren't perfect, they change their minds and don't fret over it necessarily. And if they do, they recover, and that's why I am interested to see how you work and see if you show any emotion when you are working. Barb*

At the time, I was intrigued by this thinking. More than this woman's beginners' nerves were being exposed; her deep emotional vulnerability and fear of being ostracised seemed an extraordinarily impassioned response to something that appeared unworthy of such an emotional investment. This conversation heralded further conversations that would emerge in this and the loss and grief projects. It

indicated some of the profound effects abuse had had and continued to have on participation in life and in this art project. One participant spoke of how her yearning to understand her responsibility in the abuse, and her need for a sense of safety underpinned her desire for perfection:

*I need to sort through how much of what I did or didn't do got me in this situation – how much was it the other person – the other people? What did I do to contribute to this? What did I wear, what did I say, or not say in that situation? A lot of analysing goes on, trying to make sense of what happened, because I need to help myself feel safe in the world now and know what I need to put into place so that I can continue to function. Meg*

The blame she placed on herself was unfounded in fact, and based instead on her belief that she, as the abused person, was the only “constant” in her life and therefore at least partially responsible for her abuse. She said her desire for perfection:

*carries through to every area of my life because I wasn't perfect and look what happened to me, look how I was punished. So if I am perfect, if I don't do anything wrong, no one can pick on me, no one can blame me, nothing will be my fault because it won't have gone wrong because of me. Meg*

The aspiration to perfection becomes habitual for some victims of abuse, while for others it is a way of maintaining some semblance of control in their lives. At times, the persistent references to “perfection” and “mistakes” seemed overstated or unchecked. While obviously the desire for perfection profoundly affected some participants, it was not always clear to me how deeply felt this stated desire was or whether these words had become shorthand to express adult anxieties. Whatever their origins, these feelings existed. However, I was interested neither in perpetuating nor indulging them as the constraints they imposed were anathema to creativity. An un-moderated desire for perfection is not useful to art-making, and it was clear from the discussion that it had not been useful to participants in other areas of their lives.

In their desire for perfection and to please, participants expected proscriptive instructions from me, asking “What does Anne want?” before understanding that my

desires were irrelevant to their artwork. Rather than provide written notes, a fifteen-week advance program and whiteboard instructions, as some would have liked, I worked more to the adage "If you give a man a fish, he eats for a day and if you teach him to fish, he eats for life". As an artist and facilitator I teach participants how to look, experiment, trust their eyes and make artistic judgements. In other words, I teach participants to learn skills to be independent creators and adults.

*A few times when people were reluctant to start their work, to grout, or put certain colours together, you were able to reassure them or suggest things that made it easier to get started. Because you have an art background, it was easier to take. Dora*

No one enjoyed their attachment to perfection. Participants admitted that for all their justifications and efforts, it had failed to guarantee their feelings of safety or comfort. Those who most craved it had only further distorted their already distorted lives. Participants joined the class because they wanted their boundaries challenged.

In the entry interviews women commonly enthused about the prospect of working with an artist, believing artists "saw things differently" and lived life according to their passions.

*Artists are more connected to what the soul needs or to do what is true to them. It would be nice to see someone doing that. It encourages me to want to do what is right for me. Indi*

These participants wanted to experience the kind of life they believed artists led. They yearned to feed their desires for rebelliousness, play, expressiveness and pleasure; to feel less limited by fear, inertia and their obligations to meet the expectations that others had of them. They ached to explore their possibilities and potential. Rather than viewing working with an artist as daunting or intimidating, as I expected, the excitement of working with a professional who could guide and expand their creativity and self-expression was considered "the fun part".

While Christina talks about having fun in the following excerpt, she is more importantly hinting at what defines each of us as being human and able to see the world expressively. Here she is referring to me, but later these observations were reflexive and may more accurately define her experience of mosaic-making, (*Putting Myself in the Picture* in this chapter):

*It might be quite fun because it's your life, you breathe that life, it is not just a little activity or hobby. It is associated with you as a person so it means that you are seeing it through different eyes. Which I think is fun, when you meet people who see the world a bit differently, expressively. Christina*

Every participant's life has been distorted by the will of others. Expressions like "allowed" and "not allowed" and "can I?" were pervasive, indicating a form of emotional retardation that frequently shadows sexual abuse. I feel the indignity of mature women asking my permission for things the rest of us simply and rightfully take. Intellectually I understand what I see and hear about abuse and its affects. However, my heart grapples with its insidiousness. There are some very difficult concepts to grasp: "I didn't know who I was, I didn't know this was my leg" is one. What could it possibly mean to not know who you are or that this is your leg? These and similar comments posed many troubling questions for me: were they literal or metaphorical? This chasm in understanding oneself as an intact, validated and valued human being underpinned my observations that part of the participant's "true" self had been stolen, or at least severely compromised by the contemptuous behaviour of others. Intuitive feelings about art's capacity to heal, or contribute to wellbeing, were beginning to find form in these revelations.

The arts are often described as being useful for building self-esteem (Lewis and Doyle, Matarasso); however, this can be an overused and under-explored declaration in many situations which, rather than enlighten an audience about creative practice, shines a very pale light onto the wonder and unique qualities of art-making. As the mosaic, and later the loss and grief projects unfolded, it became obvious that creativity was instrumental in participants confronting, rebuilding and claiming a sense of self and eventually celebrating their talents and individuality.

A significant shift in individual women's circumstances, or perception, had opened a fissure to let in just enough light to see the possibility, indeed the necessity, of leading a different life. Leaving a marriage or being left, recognising they had lived too many years in isolation, and tiring of unworkable family relationships were all reasons cited by participants as catalysts for change. It is no wonder that some described the invitation to participate in the art group as "miraculous", "the answer to my prayers", "turning up at the right time" and "just when I needed it".

People usually attend community art groups for creativity, inspiration, relaxation and socialisation; for these participants, art meant freedom. The mosaic group offered a legitimate forum in which participants could expand beyond the confines of present unacceptable circumstances to fully inhabit who they were and who they could be. Each participant had already formed the opinion that art, and working with an artist, would be nurturing and expansive, believing that art offered "the one place you can do what you like and it can be right". Outside the arts, it is hard to imagine any milieu in which participants in these and similar circumstances could "express without boundaries" what they desired.

*I wanted to create something that was a symbol of my freedom. My freedom to be all of me and look after me and to do the things that I wasn't allowed to do, or I was told I couldn't do even though I had ability ... Rosie*

Freedom seems an unlikely aspiration for an arts project, yet the freedom to express, to be and to act as an individual is exactly what the mosaics created in these groups represent. The presence of an artist in the centre of the project suggested to participants that their aspirations would be respected and, in all probability, supported. That the women achieved the kind of emancipation Kester noted through participation in the mosaic project is likely to be one reason for the improvement of their wellbeing.

We began the mosaic mirror project in the second week. I expected mirrors to be set squarely onto the centre area of the board with a mosaic design framing it; instead mirrors were cut, smashed, put on an angle and integrated with the tiles across the entire surface; both extravagant colour schemes and gentle, feminine designs and tones emerged. Women revealed their personality and experiences through their

choices of tiles, cutting styles, designs and grout colour. One woman abstracted the essence of a beloved seascape into her design, others luxuriated in smashing mirrors into pieces that were representative of the fragmentation they felt as a result of the abuse, some chose to work with regularly cut tiles and others enjoyed working with the random shapes.

*It made you think outside the square more. I felt more confident to try different materials and play around. Without an artist I would have stuck to a square mirror and kept it more uniform. Dora*

Participants worked in metaphor and their choices were significant and important, often remaining splendid mysteries to me. It was not always necessary to know the detail of their stories or thinking to help women achieve their goals or for me to appreciate their work.

I was not the only person who inspired participants' creativity. As women became more assured, they brought and introduced into the space new ideas, materials and ways of working, taking the artworks and groups into truly new territory. My preference for neutral and dark-toned grout was turned upside down by one woman's desire for colour, and her influence spilled into both groups as a result. Similarly, the range of mosaic materials I typically use was expanded by women who brought in beads, jewellery, bottles and stones to add variety and visual vocabulary. For some, the ability to use "pretty much anything that would stick to the board" opened up possibilities for experimentation, chance and surprise. We all benefited from these exchanges.

For people used to their ideas and opinions being ignored or crushed, open communication and sharing of ideas and materials was welcomed as a rare and unexpected pleasure. The recognition and acceptance of individual contributions represented an important gift of validation and gave the women scope to show their creativity, skills and ability to inspire others.

*You fostered an environment where people felt safe to give their opinion and that is a growth step. Rosie*

Nonetheless, dark shadows occasionally still fell. No one who has experienced trauma moves towards wellbeing without also sometimes moving back into the darkness of self-loathing, fear and anxiety. It was not unusual for me to become aware of a participant becoming derailed by the small, or large, frustrations of mosaic-making. Normal mosaic issues, like colour combinations not quite working, or tiles being hard to cut, could bring participants to the brink of tears and whimpers of being “crap at everything”; but it is the memory of pain, rather than art-making frustrations, that informed their emotional retreat into silence and despair. It was heartbreaking to witness this depth of anguish being exposed over something so easily remedied.

By stepping in with specific suggestions to solve a creative problem, or working with a participant cutting up tiles, or mixing grout for them, I helped re-focus their attention. The women’s determination to create and make beautiful work was strong and therefore solid, practical assistance and words of reassurance could, with relative ease, help reconfigure their self-perception so that they could start working again. At other times, a tea break and short rest was enough to short-circuit the distress emerging out of the intensity of the artistic endeavour.

Some may call that “rescuing”. I prefer to think in terms of compassion and care, of heeding a summons to respond to the distress of another. Rather than involve myself in the detail of the underlying trauma causing the distress, I opted to arrest the fall. I view this as an enabling through care. Here in this creative space a move towards, rather than away from, participants in distress helped ground them in the here and now, providing a support structure, a root system, from which they could establish their balance and grow towards their potential. Rather than rescuing, by stepping towards, we are affirming the tenet that “here you do matter”.

Meg’s deliberations on perfection articulate the shifting boundaries that occur through an arts practice:

*The more we got to know each other and the wonderful sense of safety that we had in that room meant that in the end, we were able to joke about the amount of randomness. Or when someone tried a new technique or colour, we could see them moving out of themselves. Meg*

Meg describes how the opportunity to try out new things in the company of others was “a way of appreciating that people were pushing their boundaries”. She found it useful and meaningful to experiment within the creative space because she was provided with the structure and resources in which boundaries could safely be pushed:

*We have all found ourselves in unsafe situations. We would be pushing the boundaries with a piece of art and it would, in no way, make us unsafe. It wouldn't threaten our safety in any way. And yet, in those small steps is a big emotional shift, because if I can try to change things and there is no backlash, there is no negative result. I am not punished for doing something new, or doing something that is not Meg. That is a wonderful gift. It opens a crack in my mind that says that maybe I can do those things that I thought weren't me.*

Meg

A fruitful relationship between the artist and participant is anchored in honesty. Through the offering of ideas, new methods and materials, the artist encourages participants to stretch creatively. In urging each woman's active connection between herself and the artwork, I was genuinely and respectfully trying to assist each person achieve her desire to be a creative human being. Artistic challenges, encouragement and recognising individual shifts in skill and perception, provoke change, whereas the ubiquitous “that's great!”, a term I believe is overused in current education practices, reinforces the status quo and implies participants are incapable of being stretched artistically or are not smart enough to learn. Discussions about arts practice, ideas and aesthetics advanced participants' artwork and abilities by opening their minds to new ways of thinking about art.

Challenges are not always appreciated at first, as the exchange below indicates. Nevertheless, a capacity for change is necessary if participants truly want to explore their creative self, as this participant recognised when, upon reflection, she saw her interaction with me as having a “good influence” on her and providing a stimulus to re-evaluate the view she had of herself:

*Elizabeth: You were looking over my shoulder and I can't even remember what you said. (I think you said ...) "I think you can come up with something better*

*than that!" "Fine"!! I started it again. Fine! But it worked, because the design I got was ... I went "Oh! oh! Actually, I like that because it's different, ... even the kids love it.*

*Artist: So there is something in it for you to be pushed a little, to be pushed to the next step?*

*Elizabeth: Because through not having family structure, the only guidance in my life, in my existence, is my therapist, or what I can push myself to do. I have good influences come into my life and push a little bit and, I get my back up. Anger is the backbone of healing. Well, I got a little bit angry, but used it constructively, and I noticed with this, you can ... bash or cut them for days and that – it's working and the energy that has been stuck in there you can let go of.*

*Artist: I wonder if part of that is about being able to change things as well. If that little shove also gave you permission to ...*

*Elizabeth: Yes, because I fight change. Even though we change all the time, I still fight it. But it has shown me that it's ok – within myself not only the art – in life in general it's ok not to be normal because I usually shut up a lot. Now I think, it's me, if you don't like it – then go away!"*

At the centre of this creative space is the desire to make art, to locate the creative self. That desire is supported by care: care to provide the materials and the skills to enable creativity, care of each other and self, and care to create the best work possible. The artist is also in the centre of the creative space; someone who, by "seeing things differently", enables care and desire, as well as many of the shifts of perceptions necessary for creativity.

The paver and mosaic projects laid the foundations to honour the desire to create art. The projects that followed nurtured these delicate desires and habits, guiding participants towards stepping out of the shadows of abuse to experiencing a life sustained by a different set of values and objectives.

*It was a place to be someone, not your background. Even though I knew that these people were coming from hard backgrounds, that is not what we brought into the group ... Elizabeth*

## **Group projects**

*The notion of community is born when the individual opens him or herself to others.*

Doris Salcedo<sup>18</sup>

Both the Frankston and St Kilda group participants were offered the opportunity to create a group artwork. A communal art project can be an immensely enjoyable way to work alongside others, Sharing creativity, ideas and skills help develop human connections and deepen relationships with fellow participants. Each group's artworks were to remain with SECASA to enhance the environment and potentially offer hope and inspiration to others seeking help.

A group project might be uplifting and expressive, rather than one representative of trauma, I suggested to them. The theme for a group project would evolve from individuals' ideas and be shaped to create a work symbolic of the whole group. The Frankston group was nervously responsive to the idea, whereas the St Kilda group was humorously, but steadfastly, oppositional.

Although it was not an intention of the thesis to compare groups, the different approaches to the proposal, the reflections made by participants and my observations yielded up considerable interpretative capital. They led to insights into the women's concerns, skills and willingness to negotiate and compromise, and into issues of trust. It was also useful to witness my own position within this, noting the expectations some women had of me, and what I offered them. The varying attitudes to the projects identified the fragility of trust as it was being built, and reminded me that my reasonably carefree assumptions of trust towards others could not always be reciprocated among this population.

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<sup>18</sup> Princenthal, Basualdo and Huyssen (142).

In the first section below, I discuss the Frankston group project and the methods of working together as a unit to create a series of four artworks, *Elements*. In the second, I discuss the St Kilda group, which at first rejected the proposal, and then because of unforeseen circumstances, worked in small groups to create pavers. In so doing, many objections they had to group work fell away and they then created another group artwork, *Birds*.

## **Elements**

*I think everyone in the room was a little frightened by the group project.*

Amelia

Four panels represent the elements Earth, Air, Fire and Water (Figures 4-7). The elements are a metaphor for the women's past, present and future lives; a distillation of memories, ideas, pleasures and sorrows. Images, books and photos I brought to the group, and over which the women pored, reminisced and dreamed, inspired these artworks, which were also reflective of deep connections between nature and the women.

Images that touched the women in any way (such as through colour, texture, shape, or narrative or the memories they evoked) were gathered and shared in a group discussion. A hundred simple, un-precious sketches followed: small, fluid and un-detailed. These drawings developed themes, and combined and connected creative thoughts. Quick drawings are a useful way of gathering visual information and testing ideas that can then be moulded or discarded.

Drawing can be challenging. Participants were inexperienced, and most were frightened by it: "I can't draw freehand and was stressing about that". I demonstrated a simple drawing style, almost as basic as drawing stick figures, which is useful for its capacity to communicate intent, our starting point for the project. Participants could see that in its simplicity, this style of drawing nonetheless could achieve all that was required.

My expectation that participants could draw their sketches was well founded:

*... and you said, "you do the sketches", we all looked at each other and then we all did the sketches and we go "oh god, the process worked". Elizabeth*

Working within the parameters of a task is another step towards breaking down entrenched thinking about perfection. That these scratchy line drawings could be acceptable or useful seemed implausible, yet they satisfied all that we asked of them. The experience of this exercise transformed perceptions of what constitutes a drawing and how to tackle a complex creative task.

### ***A Voice in the Wind***

*A variety of patients cannot or will not speak, whether the cause is organic, as in aphasia, or psychological, as in elective mutism. Those who are painfully shy might be able to talk, but can be so frozen with inhibition that precious little can be accomplished in verbal therapy. For all such patients, adding art can open a vital avenue of communication.*

Judith Rubin (10)<sup>19</sup>

Fred Williams's paintings of the Pilbara (in north-west Australia) provoked one participant's memories of her early childhood spent watching immense trains transport iron ore across the red, vast and seemingly limitless landscape (McCaughey). She deeply loved the Pilbara, yet it was the place of her darkest experiences. Shaping this amassed collection of drawings, ideas, desires and fears into a coherent artwork was beyond some participants' then current artistic capacity; just introduced to creative process, they had no way into the task. As the artist, I had the pivotal role of helping carve out the visual coherence of the artwork. This was achieved by facilitating the development of the form and structure that would be carried into the four panels so that that they could be read and understood as a related series of artworks, created by a group of individuals working as a unit.

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Rubin is an arts therapist who has a background and degrees in art and arts education.

With hundreds of drawings spread around us we looked and listened, searching for the order within that would bring coherence to the panels. I suggested the drawings reflected connections with home and place, noting how participants expressed their profound love of place and the natural environment, yet acknowledging that their relationships with their childhood homes were frequently vexed. Most women had moved far from these places to distance themselves physically and emotionally from the abuse and their abuser/s. Memories of place were tainted with sadness, loss and any number of other emotions. Was it possible to bring forth the beauty of the environment without dragging the abuse along in its wake?

The very normal artistic process of deciding which images were to be retained and which were to be discarded emerged as a significantly difficult group process and extremely challenging for individuals. My thoughts about home and place were met with blank faces and averted eyes; clearly I was on the wrong track, yet no one spoke or directed the emphasis elsewhere. The process exposed deep chasms in individuals' confidence to voice an opinion. *"Because in grief and trauma, where we come from, our ... my words aren't valued, so why contribute them?"* It was incumbent upon me to interpret the silence.

Art is a way of exploring paradoxes. Creativity can provide the vehicle to move towards confronting difficult emotional themes, and it can also provide respite from them. Incorporating the emotional or painful might be a useful contribution to understanding, acknowledgement and healing; conversely, it may be unhelpful to include in a group project things that are too raw to touch or are best left in the shadows. Some images don't have enough substance to warrant a place in an artwork while others can spark responses that take work into a completely new or unwanted direction. These were some considerations put before the group. With so much visual material available it was unnecessary to include anything causing disquiet or distress. Although abuse was the obvious common thread connecting the women, other common themes, such as the beauty of nature, could also be given a place within the artwork. It was not necessary to focus on the abuse. In this project, the aim was to locate what felt possible and right before the artwork unfolded around it.

Creativity is a blend of intuition, skill and decision making. Although decisions are hardly of life and death importance, they can be significant to the integrity of the artwork and the wellbeing of participants. I, and others in the group, could not know what impact any particular image had on an individual unless we were told.

*I knew if the image of the snake remained, I would have to leave the group – and I didn't want to leave, so I said no. Christina*

When this participant later reflected on that comment, she said that speaking out was most unusual for her:

*I am usually a dormouse, but I did, I did say no! Christina*

This reflection draws attention towards the artist's obligation to open up a space for the voiceless, a space in which we are attuned to hearing the laden silences and the desire to not recognise the void, to close it over and "move on". The inhabitation of that space can be extremely challenging, as it may require the abused person to reconfigure their self-perception of being voiceless and silenced. Changes to perception do not remain in isolation; they provoke questions: if one perception can be transformed, what other perceptions of me and the world around me are similarly transformable? An invitation was indefatigably extended to participants to inhabit that silent space.

*I am used to having opinions but not always expressing them, and not always being safe in expressing them, but you created an environment where we were safe to express our opinions and that is a really big thing. You created that. You directly did that. Rosie*

The "back-story" was not required when deciding whether an image should be included or rejected. The participant for whom the image of the Pilbara had evoked so much hesitated as we decided whether to include or discard it. The intensity of her relationship with this place meant her opinion was vital. "In or out, Elizabeth? You *have* to say." "Out", she replied. It is, as one woman says, "immensely important to have a voice".

*I have always taken a back seat, I have never put too much in, I have always waited but no, you used everyone's opinion. You made sure everyone had a comment, a say about what was happening. And that's what drew us all together, because it made us, made me, feel valued, and I am pretty sure that's what ricocheted off all the other women – it was just like wow! Elizabeth*

Commenting about this process she later told me, *"I am still attached to the Pilbara, to the red earth, but not the incidents or the people. It's the land, the place. And I am realising that through art, I can get those colours ..."*. The importance of her comment resides in recognising that before the project she had all but severed connection with the Pilbara due to its overwhelming negative associations, but through art she had found a way to continue her relationship with it.

## ***Earth***

*Earth's* (Figure 4) six silhouetted trees provide its structure and rhythm. Originally, the trunks emerged out of root systems, a metaphor for hidden strengths; in the mosaic process, however, the roots became visually messy, and were removed. In our minds, though, we knew they existed; not unlike roots exist in life – present, but out of sight.

The trees' simple forms evoke reminiscences of wandering through a forest. Flowers dance across the surface, providing lightness and a contrapuntal rhythm to the trees. They were included for their beauty. Their pinkness was inspired by one participant's passion for that colour and the radiance she brought into the room with her limitless collection of pink-toned clothes. It is one of many ways in which individuals found their way into the work. Bright green created a restful background and the dark grout enhanced all the colours and added solidity to the trees.

Creating art refocuses the mind away from negativity. Others, although interestingly not the women, have described this as a "distraction", an inadequate portrayal of the mystery and wonder of creativity (Wertheim-cahen, Van Dijk and Drozdek). Throughout this thesis, I aim to demonstrate how creativity denies space for the corruptive inner voice while providing spaces in which the self, the voice and creativity

can be seen and heard. These benefits are separate from what is too often described as the “distraction” of art.

Participants frequently arrived at the art group in a state of “chaosis”. I devised this term to describe a particular set of chaotic, drama filled and reactive behaviours I regularly observed. It was not unusual for individuals to arrive late or in tears, in a state of high emotion because of poor interactions with children, friends and partners or, conversely, deeply depressed from loneliness. Nor was it unusual for a participant to arrive having spent the previous days in bed, in hospital or affected by drugs or alcohol. Three women had car crashes on the way to the art groups; two wrote off their cars before directing their almost uncontrollable anger towards the hapless person whose vehicle they had hit. A significant number were troubled by their incapacity to maintain a manageable level of order in their homes. The abuse and the losses accompanying it had, to some degree, disabled the learning of the life skills generally taken for granted by those “in the outside world”. As a consequence of these deficits, participants regularly struggled to construct and live a meaningful and competent life post trauma.

I saw the need to construct a word reflecting that this way of living was a condition of trauma, rather than an unwillingness to impose order or restraint on daily life. It is a construct of the word “chaos” and the suffix “osis”. One of the definitions given for chaos is well known: “utter confusion and disorder”. There is another, however, which has particular potency in this context: “a gaping void, yawning gulf, chasm”.<sup>20</sup> The suffix “osis” is used in medical terminology<sup>21</sup> to describe a process, condition or state, one that is usually abnormal; it also describes “a (specified) action, process or result”. Together, as “chaosis”, they offer meaning to, or at least a description of this seemingly chaotic way of living or responding to life, and recognise that the behaviours described as a condition are a result or means of processing trauma.

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<sup>20</sup> Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Fifth ed. 2002

<sup>21</sup> Described in [Webtools.delmarlearning.com/sample\\_chapters](http://Webtools.delmarlearning.com/sample_chapters). “Introduction to Medical Terminology”. [www.dmu.edu/medterms/basics/useful.cfm](http://www.dmu.edu/medterms/basics/useful.cfm); [www.medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/-osis](http://www.medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/-osis)

Schmidt offers insights into this behaviour in a discussion about homeostasis. Quoting Stedman's Concise Medical Dictionary (Dirsck 1997 in Schmidt), she writes that homeostasis is a "bodily state of equilibrium (balance between opposing pressures) in the body" and "the processes through which bodily equilibrium is maintained". This is widely understood as a fundamental, unconscious function of the body. An example is the maintenance of core body temperature. Schmidt (citing Wilcocks 1998, Blair and Hume 2002) extends this bodily need for balance to include mental processes. When this balance is disturbed, individuals tend to operate at a higher rate of energy and, as a consequence, block attention to any psychological or physiological stress. Schmidt suggests that if this balance is not redressed "individuals can be in danger of either physical or psychological ill health" (41). Further quoting Wilcock, Schmidt describes three human needs associated with homeostasis, especially in relation to human health and survival. First is the need to warn and protect; second is the need to prevent disorder and prompt the use of capacities; the final need is to reward the use of capacities. Those rewards have been described by Veenhover (1984 in Schmidt 41) as "meaning, pleasure, purpose and satisfaction".

In this discussion it becomes clearer that this imbalance, referred to by Schmidt as "an imbalance of the mental processes" and by me as chaosis, is redressed by the use of human capacities – in this case, creativity and art-making.

Chaoisis describes this state of helpless distress and the accompanying inability to effect meaningful change; it delineates a cycle of reaction. Distraction is the diversion of the mind, the drawing focus away from purpose towards something else, such as noise or an easier task. It is a drawing *away* from purpose. Art-making, by contrast, is a drawing *towards* purpose.

There is nothing about living in a state of chaosis that is useful. It is destructive, limiting and distressing, and this, rather than art-making, is a distraction from meaning. Yet the addictions, illnesses and emotional outbursts were, at times, the only means by which distress or inadequacies could be communicated. The traits I describe here as chaosis are symptomatic of abuse and frequently stand in the way of the very hard and heart-rending work of confronting feelings of pain, anger and unworthiness, and the abuse that has initiated them. I have learnt how women

distract counsellors with day-to-day issues rather than address the underlying awfulness and the sorrowful truth surrounding their abuse. Incredible effort is required to create, or recreate, a meaningful life out of the embers of abuse; to construct something of value out of the belief that "you don't matter". Mike White remarks that the "importance of a process of emotional transaction through creative participation ... makes for genuine empowerment" (102 in *Proving the Practice*), whereas distracting oneself from the realities of sexual abuse, although understandable, is nonetheless unhelpful in the long run.

In self-selecting to participate in the group, most women were fulfilling a yearning to feed their creative selves, to "create beauty" as one said, and to make friends; because not so deep down each felt creativity would help them heal. In choosing to attend the art session each week, especially in the face of all that distracted and thwarted them, each person was showing her commitment to that purpose.

In her beautifully crafted conference presentation, *Creative Uncertainties*,<sup>22</sup> Helen Garner, in describing ways around the stultifying immobilisation of writer's block, speaks of the wonder of being able to let go of "your urge to be in control", to be in the present, to simply sit with whatever you are doing; "just sitting and not demanding". Within that abandonment a place of serenity is found, she says, a relaxing of the urgency to do, to act and to respond. In her own experience of writing, once in that serene space "feelings of futility" are displaced and something "dark, hidden and barely conscious" emerges. Garner describes how she can then see a "starting point" and what follows is first "a word, then a sentence, then a paragraph".

Garner recalls a story told by psychoanalyst D W Winnicott of a patient who crawled for three hours "abject and sobbing" on the floor in his consulting room, while he, rather than taking the lead, sat present, allowing her to make her own interpretations of her state of distress. He describes how, at the end of the session, "She pulled herself up by various means characteristic of her, and knelt up" (Winnicott in Garner).

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<sup>22</sup> Available as audio download from [www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2514021.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2514021.htm)

Garner proposes we each need to find within ourself the “means characteristic” to find a way to “kneel up”. She describes the “collapse of purpose into potentially creative darkness and despair” as a process of abandonment into uncertainty and the need to work through this uncertainty before there is any possibility of redemption. It is through “this abandonment into uncertainty” that first we kneel, and then we stand.

In using the words “work”, “starting point”, “first kneel, then stand”, Garner leads me to again consider Freud’s assertion that work and love are the means to happiness (or wellbeing, in this context). Garner and Freud both allude to effort, work that is required if one is to go beyond the first euphoric discovery of “the word”, in Garner’s parlance, to advance an idea to its conclusion. As it applies here, the art-room, the mosaic projects and the people within it can provide a place of sanctuary from chaos, or “the collapse of purpose” Garner describes. However, simply coming into the space will not, in the long term, redeem that purpose. Work and creativity do that.

*Giving us that time and space I was able to stay on and really enjoy the rest of the day. I was trying to work on the pieces with the flowers and feeling that I had no beauty inside myself; how am I supposed to make something beautiful like a beautiful flower? On that particular day, I didn't feel that beauty so I was finding it hard to put beauty on the canvas. Fortunately, at the end of the day it came; you know I went to a good place, to the artwork, on that particular day. Amelia*

## **Air**

This panel was inspired by a drawing of a figure struggling to hold on to her hat and umbrella in a blustery wintry wind blowing her and a few remnant autumn leaves about in all directions. The drawing is enchanting in its simplicity and expressiveness; its underlying frustrations of being blown about and knocked off course were identified by participants as commonly felt experiences.

*Air* (Figure 5) is a lyrical artwork. The blustering winter assault and the figure toiling to remain upright is gone; vanquished too, is the sentiment of being blown about, of being the victim. The pale blue and green hues, barely yellow background and vanilla

grout describe a gentle wind, an autumn or spring breeze perhaps. The occasional leaf is lightly picked up and moves with the rhythm of the breeze. In the transformation of the drawing into the mosaic, the participants similarly chose to transform the definition each had of herself into something other than being a victim.

Small and large barriers fell and trust developed as women got to know each other and meaningful exchanges occurred. The women opened up and revealed not only their suffering but also their humour, talents and interests. They offered guidance, received and gave encouragement, supported each other's creativity, and they shared. Being part of a creative group allowed a sense of normality to prevail.

Waltraud Ernst, in his reflections on the concepts of normal (and abnormal) describes how the concept is differently considered, interpreted and contested across a range of disciplines, such as science, philosophy and the social sciences. It has many connotations and can often be burdened with an implied moral overtone. Its meaning is constantly being reviewed and reinterpreted as society itself evolves. This can make its use problematic. It is, however, a word commonly used in everyday language and was frequently used by participants to describe how they felt, how they did not feel or how they wanted to feel. In the context of this work, the terms "wellbeing" or "mainstream" may be reasonable substitutes for "normal", but neither be used linguistically in the same way, nor do they accurately imply how one might feel, think or behave in relation to others.

The participants could see how their lives had been distorted by their abuse. Significantly, these distortions had frequently led them away from others into deep and unhappy isolation, and to holding unusual views of how others were likely to think and behave. In coming to the group, many women expressed a desire to "feel normal" and "be normal". Words, such as usual, typical, common, healthy or natural, – useful alternative words in some circumstances – here fail to convey the feelings the women were striving for – that is, to achieve a sense of connection and to disable the concept "me and the outside world". This may be what Mollica meant when he said that functioning well in social, work and family situations is considered "recovery" (Mollica, Chhim and Mitchell).

For some of these women, functioning well in social, work and family situations could well be considered a discovery. One participant, Christina, told me that her life, which she now understood as being extremely abnormal, had been “normal” to her for so long that she struggled to comprehend what a normal life might be. She described a life devoid of anything that could be understood by most people as normal, let alone pleasurable or fun. She described her pain as “*so great, that fun just didn’t have any meaning any more*”.

The art group, however, provided her with a sense of wellbeing:

*It made me feel a bit normal even – because I didn’t feel abnormal and I generally do. I feel really alienated from normal people and I didn’t feel that. You know I could almost be happy with the class.* Christina

McCarthy points to pleasure and joy as some of the “intrinsic values of the arts experience” (68), achieved both through the creative process and the aesthetics of the work. Participants shared this view and also found pleasure in having time for themselves:

*Apart from the creativity side, it’s about something that I am actually doing for me, because I really like it and it gives me that sense of pleasure, joy and happiness for myself, not for anybody else, and so it has helped through just little things. When sad moments come into my life or bad stuff comes into my life, just by cutting a tile, it has really helped.* Amelia

The creative acts of making art together, with all that happened around it, opened a space for normal, or healthy, human exchanges; a space for caring relationships to develop naturally; where quips and ideas could be thrown about and participants could get womanly advice from others; a space where odd behaviours could be expressed and scrutinised. The exposure to a larger slice of humanity opened participants to reconsider prejudices and engage differently with the world around them. The creative space might have been laden with the abuse, but it was alive with work and love.

*Being able to work side by side with the person who might have a different personality but you don't realise how much you actually have in common with that person. Amelia*

Nonetheless, much pain, both related and unrelated to their sexual abuse came with participants into the creative space. I was surprised and saddened to learn that many participants nursed seeping wounds that had been inflicted upon them by careless teaching, and reckless art teaching in particular. It is a point Rubin also observes: "By the time most people reach their teens, they have had more uncomfortable experiences than pleasant ones with art" (43).

*I had been so damaged at school by art teachers: primary and secondary and tertiary. I had destructive things said about my artwork and when I look back, they were quite creative pieces that I had done. Rosie*

I can only imagine why the women felt these wounds so deeply; whatever the reasons, the comments indicate how precious an individual's creativity is and how carefully it must be nurtured. Creativity is so closely aligned to one's sense of self that it is difficult to separate the two; when our creativity is crushed, so too is that sense of self.

*Once I was going to join a painting group and the woman on the phone said, "Well, can you draw?" and I said "No" and she said, "If you can't draw, you can't paint until you can draw, then you have to come for lessons and keep drawing a line". But you never gave me that shut down feeling. That was good. Christina*

One challenge that arose for the participants was in shedding the constrictions of the old teacher/student dialectic, of thinking of me as the "expert with all the answers" and themselves as the "blank page". Obviously I had expertise participants did not, but the prevailing belief that they had none, and nothing to offer, required revision. It was soon apparent that regardless of the deficits in education and upbringing, most women had acquired an impressive range of skills, tenacity and creative observations, but they were without the confidence to readily apply them. Participants did not stay locked in the student/teacher realm and instead chose to claim their human dignity and work in

a creative collaboration with me and with each other. Sometimes I taught, sometimes I guided and sometimes we all bounced off the ideas that were put into the centre of the creative space.

*I suppose part of me did realise that I could do it all right at the start, that what I produced was ok. Deep down I always felt I wasn't being who I was and when I actually produced something that was, you know, quite acceptable, it made me feel more reassurance in that belief that I had about myself that there was something there. Christina*

A creative collaboration enables rather than dictates. I guided participants, who were untrained in aesthetics, through our discussions about colour, form and composition, and encouraged their experimentation with the work and with materials. One of my teaching mantras, "trust your eyes", trained participants to dig deeply into their own resources and trust what they found. It trained them to observe and honestly acknowledge how a section or piece of work was looking and if they felt disquiet about any of it, to have the courage and confidence to change it. Participants were encouraged to trust in their creative instincts and learned skills, and to be determined to pursue the best possible result.

In a creative collaboration, offers such as an idea, suggestion or thought are made. My offers, although sometimes slightly beyond a participant's present capacity, were well within reach and made with the intention of developing creativity and skills in art-making, as well as deepening a participant's self-understanding and appreciation of her capabilities. An offer is an invitation, not a demand. Participants were encouraged and learnt to accept or decline them, as they desired, a process that can be especially challenging for those unused to asserting their own opinions, especially when declining the opinions of the teacher.

There were many times, however, when my artist's experience and skills were required to advance the work; for example, learning to cut tiles to form a curve or understanding colour relationships. The combination of teaching, guiding, challenging and encouraging self-reflection helped participants to continue to develop their creativity. If new ways to learn, ideas to consider, and practical skills are not put

before them, people's creative skills and their work will remain immature. Therefore, participants were encouraged to continuously broaden and deepen their creative sensitivities to enhance the work's aesthetics, as well as expression.

*I think having somebody there who is supportive, makes positive suggestions, isn't destructive. Those things can really ... it is like when there is a blockage there, you can work your way through it, which I do, or if you have a good teacher – you can just fly over it. So I feel like that. I have just flown over it and perhaps it was easy because I had done so much work on my blockages. It just became easy, and pleasure. Really very beneficial. Rosie*

While I continued to bring expertise to the work, the women also discovered their growing creative independence. As many had not been in a learning environment since their school days, this was the first time they had the opportunity to revisit, and repair, some of the wounds from their educational past. With the experience of a different learning practice, based on adults meeting each other as adults and each making a valuable contribution, the memory of past learning experiences and failures could be surrendered. The wintry blasts had made way for the spring breeze.

*To be able to create a piece of art and have somebody who was actually supportive during that creativity, that was very healing. It was healing a part of me that was damaged a very long time... Rosie*

## **Fire**

How appropriate that *Fire* (Figure 6) should have aroused the most emotion. After one participant independently drew up the *Fire* design and felt triumphant about her effort, the group set about trying to transform it into a mosaic. Triumphant in this context, it should be understood, had nothing to do with brash egotism; it was simply a great feeling of achievement and her gift to the work. We diligently tried to accommodate her design and style, but as a mosaic it didn't work.

The difficulties in negotiating how to change it were not unexpected. Feelings of trampling on another's work were provoked, as were the deeply felt emotions of

“always being compromised”. While everyone recognised that the design needed altering, there was nonetheless significant reluctance – born out of immense sensitivity towards each other – to remove tiles or implement change.

There are ways to enable change without inflicting pain. The use of neutral language and participation in what we referred to as our “board meetings” opened up possibilities to discuss the aesthetics of the work. Although the group was already practised in exchanging ideas about art and the panels, the *Fire* mosaic and discussion around it was more problematic than usual. It was my task to lead the group through this sensitive process of negotiation.

Firstly, it was necessary to re-establish the ground upon which the project was being built. Focus was brought back to the whole, to remembering that this was a group artwork, and to understanding that everybody had to feel able to jump in, contribute and alter areas if we were to create a harmonious series of works. The desire to be sensitive to each other was best met by being sensitive to the work and to the group as a whole.

Secondly, it was necessary to address the aesthetics. We identified how, although the design was strong, the mosaic was static and not the representation of fire we had imagined. In asking the question, “What makes it static?”, the ensuing discussion offered solutions: “The design is closed, the pieces are regularly shaped; there is too much red, and not enough black; fire doesn’t come to a regular point, the existing image is more like a drawing of a candle-flame”. We now had something tangible from which to launch the necessary changes.

The tendency to think in extremes is common among people who have been badly hurt. It’s either black or white, life or death. In my observations, the tendency leans more toward black than white; more death than life. Past and residual hurts were easily awoken, inducing participants to retreat into negativity, silence and feeling disheartened, to the point of despair. While understandable, in this and many other contexts, it was rarely helpful. This response is too extreme.

*That explains why this experience of art is a huge component of me getting well; because this is the area of my life where I can practise decisions without there being any major consequences. I am literally able to have that practice of making decisions, almost in a way that doesn't impact on anyone else. Meg*

Talking objectively about art has a number of benefits that extend beyond the quest to make good art. By naming the disquiet – the problem areas – participants could step back from the precipice of everything being “bad all bad” onto solid ground. This style of discussion functions in a similar way to the “anchors” Rothschild uses in her therapy to encourage responses to the “here and now”, rather than allowing things to become unhinged by overreaction. As I demonstrate in this discussion about *Fire*, a solution is often present in the objectivity of looking and naming.

Bringing full attention to a troublesome area also means it can be fixed rather than ignored, put up with or subjected to a complacent “that’ll do” before being dropped into the bottom of the wardrobe with the countless other half-finished and unsatisfying projects while the “I’m crap at everything” mantra remains fully present. Objectivity helps disable that undermining inner voice; it does not, however, always come easily. After a while, the women were able to find their own ways through frustration:

*Every time when I started that negative thing: "You can't do this", "Get out of there", I thought, "No, I will sit with it", "Look what the other ladies are doing", and I'd start again on whatever I was working on. Amelia*

By using the language of artistic engagement, a new way of speaking emerged – one that became assured and honest – and with that, a new way of listening was also found – hearing words for what was being said rather than distorting their intention. This process eventually led to participants developing a less severe expectation of harshness from others and to respecting their own opinions.

*Decisions were being made through me and around me. Elizabeth.*

It was a testimony to the nascent strength of the group and the goodwill of the individuals within it that significant changes were made to *Fire*, bringing forth its potential and beauty without forsaking others’ efforts and feelings in the process.

*I did the fire one, and it took a long while because initially I felt like I was trying to capture somebody else's image, how they see fire. That got me a bit frazzled at the beginning, trying to find someone else's creativity in it. Ultimately it has turned out great because of everyone's input, of the feeling of the fire. It's turned out beautifully, you know. Amelia*

*Seeing those group projects, in the process of being made, like that Fire! That was just ... pure agony at one stage and we worked through it, and it's a masterpiece! It's a masterpiece. Elizabeth*

## **Water**

The four panels vary in complexity. Where *Wind* was precisely built around regularly shaped pieces that fit closely together, *Water's* (Figure 7) structure is more relaxed, with large areas of chunky tiles playing off against small areas of detail.

The mosaic is predominantly blue – a calm sea on a bright day. In the foreground is a palm tree, evocative of the idyllic seaside environment. The strip of colours towards the top is inspired by the child's love of drawing rainbows and is suggestive of the sense of optimism participants were beginning to feel. The rendering of the colours does not follow the traditional representation of a rainbow; rather than being laid down as stripes, they are mingled to also be suggestive of a path. Two pelicans, one replete with a full bill, float in relaxed communication with each other and are the centre of focus.

*Water* evolved from thoughts of home, dreams of holidays and the simple pleasures of the nearby natural environment. We all became enchanted by the wonderful photos of one participant's garden, which tumbles into the Kananook Creek, and by the pelicans who are her neighbours. We loved those magnificent birds. Most participants enjoyed walking along the nearby stretches of beach, finding solace and tranquillity in the watery environment, and we wanted to include that restfulness in the mosaic. Finally, although few had experienced it, others dreamed of a tropical paradise; what they didn't yet have in life, we would make in mosaic!

These ideas were amalgamated into a version of paradise. The image and the design of *Water* provided a space for the women to relax.

Whereas some participants enjoyed conceptual thinking and advancing ideas using metaphor and symbols, others did not think in this way and found a literal interpretation more useful and expressive. Some participants were very interested in precision, such as cutting tiles to fit exactly into a vacant spot, and others who didn't think in terms of angles and geometry preferred breaking the tiles with the hammer and working on large, informal areas. All these individual needs and preferences could find a place across the four panels. With its large blocks of colour, *Water* best suited those who enjoyed a free-form and less precise approach to mosaic-making.

For those who arrived distressed, the free-form areas on all the panels provided a transitional space between chaos and creativity. In these spaces, focus was redirected towards creativity and composure. Very little was required of the participant as there were few creative decisions to be made and no demanding cutting required. Women regularly sat in these spaces momentarily before taking up more artistic challenges, or they returned to the free-form spaces for some creative rest from some of the more challenging aspects of mosaic-making.

*Elements* holds within the development of each participant's capacity to think and work creatively, to think and work as part of a group, and to think of herself as a creative human being, capable of making artwork that is worthy of praise.

*At the end, I was really surprised at the overall result. It really came alive and you could see and feel each panel work that was being produced and [it] was good that we all had a go on each bit of it. Amelia*

The project enabled the connections between the women to form and deepen through the natural processes of first sharing the common love of art and creativity, then building on that solid ground to locate further points of commonality. Sexual abuse, which brought everyone together, receded in importance as other experiences and aspects of participants' lives were given the space to exist.

The women's evolution, from the exposure of some of their saddest memories through to feelings of vulnerability and pain, to completing four panels of uplifting and optimistic artwork, indicates how the process of creativity and making could guide participants through their darkness into a lighter space where they can imagine and live a more satisfying life. The creative process did not encourage these women to turn their backs on the reality, pain and grief of their abused lives. Rather it opened their lives outwards, creating spaces for more of life's riches – beauty, achievements, friendships, fun, sharing – to co-exist with the pain.

Participants were introduced to music from around the world as we worked; in the lively, rhythmic, soothing or wistful sounds, spaces were opened for dreaming, stories and adventure; connections were deepened by locating more commonality with each other through the sharing of a widening range of experiences and loves. What followed were serenely beautiful moments, with everybody quietly singing along to Bob Marley, the clipping of tiles the only other sound in the room; each woman was fully absorbed in the mosaic, in harmony with the work, with each other, and for the time being at least, with her own self. This was not rare, and it was quite beautiful.

The self-discipline required to make and complete *Elements* pushed participants through what I think of as the pain barrier, beyond the challenges that seem too hard or too daunting. Overcoming feelings of despair or complacency in order to complete the four panels, engendered in many of the participants a sense of pride and achievement that had rarely, if ever, been experienced. As life can never again be the same post trauma, so life could not be quite the same after making these mosaics. So many old and negative messages were proven, without doubt, to be unfounded.

*A beautiful series of art pieces were created that you would look up and think: yes, an adult has created that sequence there, that piece of art. You would not think "damaged people" did that. Rosie*

I didn't think my contribution would be worthy. I can't believe I've had my hand in every one of the panels. Elizabeth

## **A different earth and air**

### ***Pavers***

My invitation to create a group work for the St Kilda premises initially received a lukewarm response. Although some participants expressed a sincere interest in the idea, most did not and were at times jokingly, vehemently against it. Initially I encouraged their participation but when their preference to continue with the individual mosaic projects was strongly made a number of times, I accepted the choice and didn't pursue the idea.

Most later revealed that their decision not to participate in the large group project was made in order "to avoid conflict", believing that conflict and harsh words are inevitably part of a group experience. One woman expected she might feel "rejected" by the experience. Another reason involved conflicting internal responses and turmoil around compromise. Although each woman was beginning to assemble confidence enough to assert her needs, many did not yet feel strong enough to negotiate well with others. The prospect of a group project aroused fearfulness that this burgeoning ability to express desire would be obscured by the needs of others. Their responses were not born of arrogance, but out of fear of the return of their submissive self. I suspected that part of their disinclination to participate was a way of nurturing the relationships they were enjoying and treasuring. They revealed both at the beginning and end of the project that spending time with other women who had experienced similar trauma was of paramount importance to their enjoyment of the art project. I suspected these relationships were too embryonic to threaten at this early stage.

Saying "no" was empowering these women to express their blossoming desires.

A group project did evolve serendipitously, however, when one day the key to the storage cupboard, where the materials and the participants' work were stored, was lost and we had to make do with the very limited materials I had in my car. There were a few mosaic resource books, enough materials to make some large pavers, and the tools. The participants who were present were asked to work in pairs. As others arrived they were randomly put into pairs, with the suggestion being made that each

pair of participants make a large paver. Each pair designed and made the mosaic in one session.

The randomness of the pairing, together with the randomness of the materials available, inspired works that took full advantage of the lack of resources and expectations. In yielding to their partner and the circumstances, each participant abandoned her resistance to a group project and also relinquished any desire for perfection. In taking the view that much in this project was beyond an individual's control, most felt no burden to perform and instead took the contrary view that it didn't really matter at all how the pavers turned out.

I was intrigued to learn afterwards that some suspected I had orchestrated the locked door to coerce them into doing a group project and, while there was an element of humour in their disclosure, it also revealed, in the lack of trust, evidence of lives disfigured by trauma. The teacher/student or adult/child imbalance I discussed earlier was present in the underlying expectation that I would ultimately impose upon them my (perceived) desire for a group project rather than accept their expressed preference to do their own work. In the face of considerable evidence to the contrary, their instincts were nonetheless guided by their traumatic past, although strangely, those who made the suggestions also acknowledged a deeper insight into the integrity of the project:

*It is really important the way that you chose to work with the participants, the fact that you don't have a pre-determined idea or predetermined path, that you are not rigid in that idea or goal. For a lot of us, this is our first experience as adults or post trauma of working, collaborating with another adult in a positive experience, because we don't collaborate. We are isolates. Meg*

I noticed participants using the word "force" in their reflections and how "being forced into it" was useful for them. One participant indicated that she responded well when the decision to work together had been taken from her: "Everything else was locked away but that was good in a way because it forced us". Thoughts and responses were often conflicted, as was evident in their expressed desire for me to direct, which was in opposition to their desire to choose. When Barb said "With a little, a minor amount of

pushing” from me to get the group projects up “we would have done it. Just a small amount, it would have happened”, an internal struggle is revealed - between confidently making choices and being reticent or incapable of taking full responsibility for them. Part of this struggle, she noted, arises from the deficits born of childhood abuse, when her desires were put to the side in acquiescence to the needs of others.

The women enjoyed working together even though it had taken an odd situation to provoke it. This discovery, together with witnessing the achievements of the Frankston group, caused many to examine their views about adult interaction, and prompted some to consider how these potentially confronting interactions could have been guided by me so a rich creative experience might have occurred:

*When I saw the work the other group had done, I was really disappointed that we hadn't done something joint. And I was really disappointed that I hadn't trusted you enough to know how to deal with those situations; that I had already decided that all these rejections, conflicts, disagreements were things that could not be handled by a person who was leading the group. I was really disappointed that I didn't have the foresight to think that you could handle a group situation.*

*It was me, it was "I won't be able to handle it", I didn't give any consideration that you would know how to handle it. Barb*

This serendipitous project provided one of the many significant intangible benefits of the mosaic groups as participants identified and confronted their anxieties about relating to others; where they witnessed their inner conflicts and the cost of their misplaced mistrust. By contrasting their approach and how they chose to manage their vulnerabilities with those taken by the Frankston group, useful insights were yielded to the Moorabbin women. In their exposure to a breadth of opinions, interests, behaviours and responses, the osmotic learning that occurs in community art projects became one of its very great strengths. It would be hard to imagine these lessons being learned in a one-on-one therapy situation or achieved while living an isolated life, as in neither of these situations was there the opportunity to witness different responses and results being applied to the same problem.

Notwithstanding their doubts, the participants thoroughly enjoyed making the pavers with their partner and many described it as “one of the best days”. Rather than being met with conflict, most found that in sharing ideas through the design phase, coming to a mutual plan for and making the paver, the exchange was creatively and personally enriching and much was gained. The closeness of working together enabled a deepening of the friendly relationships that, although already present, were still developing. In the spontaneity of the occasion, a space opened up where individuals could submit to standing outside of their own realm and experience something different. Participants were elated about their experience: “It was really good, we bounced off each other,” said Indi.

#### Janet and Indi (Figure 8)

Janet was initially one of the most reluctant to participate in the group project:

*Well a lot of us just hated it, because we were getting absorbed in what we were doing and the thought of negotiating with other people, I thought, no it is going to be hard because I don't connect with their work or, how are we going to negotiate things, and I just couldn't be bothered. Janet*

However, both Janet and Indi thoroughly enjoyed the process of working together:

*Janet: Once I started working with Indi it was really easy. I think because it happened naturally that was good.*

*Indi: It was excellent and we loved it.*

The pair easily settled on a design: “There was no planning in it, we just scanned through the book and thought, oh that's pretty good”. Neither liked the colours of the original design “so we chose our own colours, and we were really happy with the end result”.

The design is of a large flower with a blue centre and red petals; tendrils spread from the centre of the flower and curl into the corners and across the centre of the paver; yellow dots punctuate the surface. The paver's strong design is accentuated by

carefully cut tiles, geometric shapes and a combination of complementary and clashing colours.

The journey from “hating” the concept of working with another person to “really enjoying it” and being proud of their joint work became possible for Janet because the project “happened naturally”, and she could respond to the circumstances. Her response throws light onto how individuals allow themselves to experience new things, suggesting artists have to be flexible in the ways projects are offered and how they respond to the rejection of offers.

One unexpected benefit of the project was the space it opened for individuals to recognise and praise their own work, as failing to acknowledge their work would be a slight upon the efforts of their partner. There was a playful and joyful acceptance of the beauty in the work: “Ours was the best! We’re good, we know!” Both participants set aside any qualms about being egotistical and took full pleasure in their work:

*Because Janet and I loved doing that piece together and when we poured the concrete, we put our handprints in the back of it. Indi*

#### Kate and Mary the counsellor (Figure 9)

In different ways, this small project addressed many of the same issues that confronted the Frankston Group project. In her account of working together with the counsellor, Kate said:

*[I] was taken aback because she [Mary] allowed me to choose the colours, I thought that was really, really, really nice of her.*

Her surprise and appreciation of this opportunity suggests she was unused to normal acts of adult interaction, of one person thoughtfully making way for another’s needs or for receiving random acts of kindness. In the retelling of this experience, with her emphasis on “really, really, really nice”, this simple gesture, no doubt ordinary behaviour for the counsellor, was utterly memorable:

*That really touched me. It was one of the highlights of the groups actually.*

In its ordinariness, it was also profound. That Mary opened up the space for Kate to express her views and make a significant contribution to the making of the paver not only touched Kate, it “*made me feel like I had a responsibility and that she had confidence in me to help make the paver*”. Rather than expecting incompetence, the counsellor showed a belief in Kate, who responded by making an effort to do well.

Two things are important here. The first is recognising the power of human connection – even our smallest acts of care and kindness are worthwhile. Unlike other participants, when talking about this project Kate barely mentioned either the design or the artwork, except to say she chose the colours and she felt proud that others would see the paver. It is the connectedness to another, particularly to Mary, that remains the most important aspect of the project.

The second is recognising the value of being seen as competent. It was immensely important that Mary, and the rest of us, saw Kate’s competence and that the faith placed in her had not been in vain. Participants who had lived their entire life believing they were “hopeless” or “crap at everything” were now being exposed to different expectations, to new messages, and they met these with responses of disbelief and profound gratitude.

Similar outpourings were heard throughout the mosaic project as participants realised that I believed in their ability to make beautiful mosaics long before they saw this possibility themselves. Just as Mary demonstrated to Kate, I had confidence that each woman would, with help, be able to meet the challenges of the creative tasks. The transition to accommodate the new and positive expectations being placed on them took participants some time and adjustment. Eventually, when participants had completed a number of satisfying projects, they began to believe, as one put it, that “I might be quite good at this”.

The mosaic project enabled many opportunities for the giving and receiving of care. Such encounters should not be underestimated in their significance for wellbeing as, with this wounded group, they rarely go unnoticed or unappreciated. Each participant built on this reshaping of her understanding of herself, particularly in relation to others, and as a result, became more confident in tackling new things and enjoying the

processes and results. The women became incrementally more connected, or may be less disconnected to others as feelings of alienation receded.

#### Meg and Barb (Figure 10)

The experience was not transformative in the same way for all participants. Meg struggled to work with a partner for reasons that reflect where both women were in their journey towards wellbeing. Although the experience was not a great one for Meg, it did nonetheless give her the opportunity to further develop skills in negotiation.

Later, she explained her response by first discussing the paver itself, then her frustrations of working in partnership. Her frustrations evolved from her partner not communicating her desires clearly, and also in recognising that she too was unable to clearly articulate her needs. In this partnering, one participant deferred to the other, both stepped around each other but wanted their own way, with neither able to express her needs and ideas clearly to the other:

*It is not as appealing as the work other people did. I knew from the beginning when I worked with Barb, that I would continue to defer to her because when she gets an idea in her head she is not at the stage where she can say "I would really like to do this, let's do it this way", she would rather say "How about we do this, or this looks good, why don't we do this?" and my answer is "No".*

*It is very important for me to be heard, and a lot of other people find it very difficult to say "Oh I see, so what you want to do is this", it is a growth thing and women who have childhood issues and sex abuse issues to work out don't have a lot of experience in these areas, often it is new. Doing group work is a challenge.*

*... when it comes to my ideas and having my opinions and saying "No, I don't like that, and I don't want to do it", that was what I was not taught to do when I was a child and that's why I have some of the issues I have. Meg*

Meg's comments are useful in understanding the dynamics of the women's interactions with others. She addresses the desire to please and accommodate, and the opposing

desire to hold and nurture a developing sense of self. Common human negotiations are made so much more difficult by past experiences. However, this creative environment, in which a range of approaches to such challenges had already been established, was an ideal place to practise these skills. Participants expected and wanted to be challenged and they believed creativity enabled personal as well as creative development. The small difficulties that arose in the process should not be seen as negative or unhelpful but, rather, as they were by participants – as integral to human (re)connection and development.

Meg's comments are a salient reminder that the journey towards wellbeing through this art project could not have been uni-directional. The creative work itself, and particularly in combination with the past experiences of the women, was always going to present challenges to participants. Some of the benefits of this project resided in the discovery of participants' personal resources to meet and work through these challenges; in finding a voice, a solution; and in responding and interacting in normal ways.

Urging and encouraging participants to look for solutions and finish projects were ways of helping them meet these challenges. Working in pairs was not a preferred option for Meg. Nonetheless, she accepted the challenge and she produced a striking mosaic with Barb. It proved useful even in its difficulty, as both learned where boundaries needed to exist in order to interact well with others.

### ***Birds*** (Figure 11)

The paver project highlighted the women's pleasure in doing quick, light projects as a deviation from their more serious work of *Putting Myself in the Picture* (discussed below).

As the fifteen-week project drew to a conclusion, I suggested to those who had finished their individual projects that they might like to create artwork for a blank rendered brick wall facing the art room. I suggested making mosaic birds that looked like they were sitting among the trees, but were discreet and a surprise to passers-by. Unlike the four *Element* panels, where the Frankston group worked as a unit, or in the

*Pavers* project described above where participants worked in pairs, in this project the women worked individually to create a group artwork. This approach to group work provided a further opportunity for women to develop creative and group skills while at the same time respecting participants' desires not to work on a group project.

The *Birds* project provided an opportunity for participants to learn a specific mosaic technique for installing work onto exterior, vertical surfaces, thus adding to their skills repertoire and advancing their knowledge of the complexities of making and installing mosaics. The knowledge gained in the project broadened participants' imagination and the opportunity to apply their newly learnt art skills elsewhere, particularly to enhance their home environments.

This simple project had a profound effect on Maria, a participant for whom doing the birds was "an extremely pivotal moment". Before her rape in 2004, Maria enjoyed painting birds; now, however, birds represented "my past life, my normal life". My suggestion to make a bird unwittingly forced her to confront the likelihood that she might again "be normal", after having believed for three years that "I didn't think that I was normal any more or could ever be normal any more". Because she didn't feel she could be normal, internally she resisted. In her reflections, she noted that she actually hadn't wanted to be normal again and by doing the birds she had to confront the prospect of being normal. None of these ruminations were shared with me at the time of the project.

*I didn't want to make a happy bird because I didn't want to be in the happy zone, I wanted ... to stay ... in that zone, you know. Be miserable and be track-suity, and be depressed or whatever.*

She decided to accept the project as a "sign", one of her "god moments", and chose a parrot-like bird for her mosaic because "I hadn't done birds like that before in my past life". Viewing the work as something new and forward-looking was made possible by her choice of bird. When she completed her bird quickly, I suggested she make another. However, unwittingly that suggestion further compounded her difficulties in confronting the possibility of her "being normal". She nonetheless complied. Reversing the design of the first bird, she made a second, its pair. "It was done in a

flash, like a no-brainer!” She saw she had made two “happy birds”, not a sad or “damaged bird with a broken wing”, and in this moment of revelation, she realised that she could “be normal” again. She made a small, mirrored love heart to go between her birds.

Participants’ commentary often reflects the polarised, “black and white” thinking I discussed earlier. Participants had a capacity to hold two opposing views simultaneously, with little grasp of the space in between, the grey zone; or how to integrate or find a bridge between two extreme thoughts: “I am hopeless / I might be an artist”; “I want to have a voice / Tell me what to do”; “I don’t see you as an artist / I notice every artistic thing you do”; and “I am an isolate / I love being part of this group”. The grey zone is difficult to locate in day-to-day life when the tendency is to think in extremes. Art, however, opens up that space, as one participant observed:

*If I continue to do what I have always done, I will get the same results and I wasn’t getting any new results, so it’s about being willing to try something new, knowing that I could well be surprised by the result. Meg*

Some of the value in the bird project in particular was in how it challenged some of these polarised views. The “I used to be normal / I can never be normal again” position had to be expanded to incorporate a new thought: “I can be normal”. This particular participant was both scared and delighted by the realisation. The birds, their happiness and the prospect of love suggested to Maria “You can be that person” and it was a “very powerful” message because until that stage she “hadn’t gone there, not even with the counsellor” whom she had been seeing for three years. This is a striking revelation and one that I learned is not unusual. Herman argues that the sole purpose of therapy “is to promote the recovery of a patient” (134), yet after three years, the concept that “you can again be normal” in this case had either not been raised or not been grasped.

“That a person comes out of the blue and is so much more powerful than hours of counselling”, as Maria put it, raises questions about the limited range of recovery options currently and usually available to traumatised people. Rather than be taken as

a criticism of counselling, it is the recognition that art offers something that may not be achievable through verbal exchanges.

When she saw her birds installed on either side of one made by the counsellor, Maria felt "honoured" that her work had been deemed "normal" enough to be with the counsellor's. Her love heart was not installed because the concept behind the project was for the mosaic birds to at first appear like real birds sitting in the trees; nonetheless, this also provided another way to locate the positive. It was a way of "releasing" her from her "control freakishness" and helped her realise "I can't have everything my own way". It helped her be flexible and made her "normal on the day", as she put it.

The installation offered further benefits. I invited Barb to help me with this task. We spent a morning together working out the location of the birds, so that they appeared to be perched on the branches, then adhering them to the wall. Later, reflecting on a question from her psychiatrist about what she got out of the group, she said:

*[It is] my relationship with you [Anne] and I said I felt really pleased when you asked me to help you install those birds. And he said, "Well, obviously she thinks you are capable of doing that". And he mentioned the words; he said, "You are an artist". And I can't actually accept that. Oh, you know, this was just a mosaic class. He said, "But you are, can't you see that you ... Why can't you accept that word that you may be an artist?" And, I can't quite. But I am now thinking, well ... yeah. Barb*

The psychiatrist had seen her creativity in the calendar and her recovery through being part of the group; although she painfully told me she couldn't see herself "as an artist", in some ways she does, as revealed in the final sentence quoted above and in her description of us working together with the installation. As she saw her creativity unfold and witnessed it being appreciated by others, her insistence that she is "not an artist" wavered. With the support of her psychiatrist and the mosaic group, new possibilities opened before her, and her desire for rebelliousness was, at last, being realised.

Barb had not seen me make art and therefore saw me predominantly as a researcher: "I actually didn't see you as an artist, to be honest". This perception liberated her from anxiety as she worked with me on the installation: "If I had thought that Anne is an artist, what if I don't do it up to her standard...?" Instead, she enjoyed the experience: "When we were installing the birds, I was very relaxed. I wasn't seeing myself as an artist or you as an artist". In that encounter Barb began to view herself as an artist working alongside another artist. Although she said she didn't think of me as an artist, Barb was nonetheless conscious of all I brought to the project and what she learned from it. Her levels of anxiety were extraordinary at times and significantly constricted her participation in and enjoyment of life. However, in the class she learned, via osmosis, new ways of tackling tasks and, through observing how I worked, she also observed Winnicott's renowned concept of "good enough" in practice:

*Like when we were mixing up the grout in little butter containers, I thought "Oh! You don't need special pots. You don't have to have all this fancy equipment". And when we were installing the birds, you were just going "Yep! That'll be fine!" Seeing your relaxed attitude was beneficial for me, at those times, just "Put a little bit more water in", "Just try a bit of yellow", being nonchalant about it – that was comforting for me. Barb*

Although she noticed that my comments followed careful looking, she had yet to appreciate that my "good enough" was grounded in a small range of acceptability and experience, or mastery, which allowed me to know when we had reached the point of "Yep, that's fine!".

The experience opened Barb up to working in a relaxed and flexible way and helped disable her anxiety and belief that she was always about to make a mistake. It enabled her to view the creative experience as an adventurous and pleasurable one.

## Putting Myself in the Picture

*All my life I've asked myself one question:  
How can you hate all you have come from and not hate yourself?*

Anne Michaels (180)

Before the mosaic projects began, I expected most of the revelations would emerge in the various intersections between the artist, art and community, and in participants' developing the skills and confidence to create in the company of their "fictive kin", as Winter describes such relationships, and receiving pleasure in doing so. However, during an entry interview, one participant expressed a yearning to "put herself on the canvas". This inspired a project in which, unexpectedly, women first inhabited the private creative space, the home and spaces outside the art-room, and some discovered the internal creative space, a place of deep internal dialogue. In this project, a deeper understanding of art's profound contribution to wellbeing emerged.

In order to set the tone for considering *Putting Yourself in the Picture*, I begin by pointing out that although the inspiration for the project was found in Amelia's yearnings, it was the artist, who on hearing that comment, crafted the idea into the project from which could cascade the many beautifully creative interpretations and important work made by participants. It required the artist to pick up important threads and weave them into the possibilities for a meaningful arts project.

*Putting Myself in the Picture* hinges on the concept of the self-portrait but does not aim for life-likeness. Women designed their piece at home and sent the outline, along with little notes ("My first drawing!!!") in the post, for me to cut out in timber. It was the start of work being taken from community into private creative spaces. This habit of making art at home continues beyond the life of the project.

Making space for art at home, in the private creative space, is a very unusual development in a community art project, and is therefore of particular interest to those of us who seek to understand art's relationship to wellbeing. It begins to clarify the service art can make to post-trauma recovery and the unique benefits it can bring. It

suggests that art-making is not simply an external recreational activity, but one which may be incorporated into and valued as part of everyday life.

It is so valued, in fact, that significant changes were made to accommodate it. Mosaics was taking over women's lives: *"It was just live, eat and die mosaics. My kitchen, my lounge room, my bedroom..."* said one participant. In addition, behaviours and relationships with others were altered to accommodate the desire to create:

*I couldn't stop once I started and the table in the kitchen would be filled and my kids, my son wondering what the heck is going on! Yeah, well, we're not eating in here tonight! Amelia*

Women reported that their friends and family members were startled to hear their "voice" for the first time. In saying to others: "This means something to me" and "You have to respect it", they signalled new boundaries. It was an indication that these women, who had always made themselves available and eager to please, were becoming strong enough to identify and claim time and space for their own needs.

When participants worked at home they developed and practised skills, and made more complex work than was possible within the limited group time. This signified a creative maturation; from the deadening position of "not wanting to make a mistake" to opening themselves to creative exploration and putting in place all that was required to achieve the best artwork possible. Many purchased their own equipment. When trauma memories and life overtook them emotionally, solace was found in creativity:

*I did it when I couldn't sleep, when I was upset, down in the dumps, or when I was lonely. I was able to construct something of value, instead of internalising it and being destructive to myself. Elizabeth*

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "Calming allows us to rest, resting is a pre-condition for healing" (27). Some participants who worked at home said it helped them sleep. By this stage, each was reasonably competent with the tools and materials and many difficult design decisions had already been made; what remained

was the wonderful and meditative stage of the project. In this restful doing and mindfulness, victims' anxieties were reduced as attention was refocused towards creativity and directed away from what had been troubling and distressing.

The deepest beauty and significance of this project lies in the inhabitation of the internal creative space, a place I have rarely seen inhabited by participants in any of the many art projects with vulnerable people that I have facilitated. It is a place where art evokes feeling, contemplation and wonder, a place of revelation and transformation.

At its inception, I envisaged that *Putting Yourself in the Picture* would stimulate fun, imaginative and optimistic works by providing the opportunity for participants to step into a world not wholly dominated by their abuse. Many people with a history of abuse are vulnerable to allowing their realities to be defined by others, and this can foster a misperception that their abuse is the single most important factor about their identity (Gold).

Participants were encouraged to let light shine onto different aspects or characteristics of themselves, or to create work reflecting a dream or fantasy each had for her future. The portrait might be poetic, subtle, playful, bold or intuitive; it might carry private or oblique thoughts, or dreams the women had yet to share with others. The use of metaphor was discussed. However, rather than being light and fun, as I had expected, for many it was a quietly confronting project. Questions of identity were provoked: if "I am more than just my trauma", then the question must be asked, "Who am I?" and "Who or what I would like to be?"

The movement towards wholeness achieved from *Putting Myself in the Picture* was profound. The project's strength was heard in the voices of the women describing their work, which included the name each spontaneously gave to it. I include here many of their words verbatim in order to reflect this movement.

Christina: *Me* (Figure 12)

When talking about her mosaic, *Me*, Christina revealed that her abuse began "virtually from the womb". Her trauma has been so profound she described herself as being

"voiceless" as a result. This is both literal and metaphorical "because mine was very silencing, I actually stopped being able to speak", she said. However, her revelations were even more disturbing: "I didn't feel human". When I asked how then, did she view herself, she replied, "A blob".

How do you construct a self-portrait when you have no notion of who or what you are? When the Nazis described the Jews as *unttermenschen*, subhuman, it was to dehumanise human beings in order to kill them. "In other words", says Primo Levi, "before dying, the victim must be degraded so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt ... it is the sole usefulness of useless violence" (101). In order that abuse can occur, victims of sexual abuse, particularly those subjected to childhood sexual abuse and protracted periods of abuse, can similarly be dehumanised by their abuser.

At the time, I was unaware of all but a glimpse of Christina's trauma history. I strongly encouraged her to work on the project at home because I thought it might be a satisfying way to fill her long and lonely days. It nonetheless took weeks before she felt able to begin.

When you describe yourself as "a blob" how is it then possible to identify, and represent, yourself in an artwork? I later saw the impossibility of imagining who you *might* be, when you don't know who you *are*. Christina did not want her portrait expressed through fantasy or whimsy; nor did she look to metaphor and symbol to craft her identity. The artwork began with a simple plan, and through the process of making the mosaic, *Me* emerged.

She drew herself as a small child, of about five or six years old; she said this was her first drawing and she was very pleased with it; she was thrilled she had done it at all. The forward gaze and upturned arms gesture towards a simple childhood spiritedness; the simplicity of the design evokes feelings of the idyllic childhood, although I knew that this was not so. I also see now in the small staring mosaic eyes and upturned hands a suggestion of fear, submission and acquiescence.

As the making brought the memory of her childhood into focus, a realisation emerged from under the shadow of her trauma and isolation that there indeed existed a self:

*When I was a child, I was quite creative. In the effort to deal with everything, it got suppressed and that part of me got lost. It was like re-igniting something that had been part of me as a child. It was kind of an acknowledgement of me, really.*

Christina also observed beliefs, practices and behaviours that were self-sabotaging or unusually self-protective, which had never before been scrutinised:

*If I discover I am good at anything I immediately make myself crap at it and I was scared, thinking "Oh no! I am going to do that!" as a punishment.*

In the quietness of making, thoughts turned to childhood and school days, and something shifted, "like a key turning" or "a spirit coming in". The sexual abuse virtually reconstructed her as a "depressed, squashed, and traumatised" individual; the mosaic-making deconstructed the reconstruction, if you like, taking her back to a place where she had been successful, creative and social. She recalls:

*Suddenly realising, in the second year of primary school I actually won the art prize for a work of art [and] I had friends at primary school ... it made me remember that, my God, I did have friends.*

Another participant described this process:

*The thing about artwork is that it really takes you back to a very concrete place. People aren't trying to operate up here on an abstract level, they are able to come back and, creating a piece of art, they are operating at a concrete level.*

The creative process enables the integration of thoughts and experiences both into the work and internally, giving form to or "making concrete" what participants commonly express as "this jumble in my head". Rather than untangling that "jumble", creating artwork is more akin to pulling out a thread or two at a time, and weaving these into a fabric that is meant to be seen and experienced, thus leaving the confusion less intense.

The pain of the actual trauma was, in many ways, already known to Christina; the threads she pulled from the jumble were from her childhood and represented the manifold losses she experienced as a result of being abused. The work revealed herself – truths that were unknown, or may at some point have been known but had long since been forgotten:

*I did have something as a child, it was quite a central part of me and losing it was like, you know, when someone has taken something away from you.*

The process of creating the mosaic, creating herself, was at times torturous, and Christina frequently fell into despair. The technical processes of mosaic-making, no doubt, contributed to that despair, but mainly it arose out of what was stirred within her. After recognising the significant meaning she was placing on this artwork, I talked with her about the potential for and danger of over-investment in one piece of work.

When an artwork becomes so laden with meaning, a fear of ruining it can disable the urge to continue creating. Similarly, in striving for perfection or life-likeness, attention is drawn away from the essence of the work towards unnecessary detail that is almost impossible to achieve in mosaics. The desire for perfection usually leads to disappointment in the finished work. Recognising that perfection may never be achieved often arrests the creative process, as was happening with Christina. I cut out two more timber templates and suggested she worked across a number of pieces simultaneously to diffuse what she later described as “performance anxiety”.

Despair, like depression, has the capacity to draw towards it everything in its orbit. When there are problems with the technical side of making, sheer frustration can easily flip makers into feelings of negativity, and this is a typical aspect of making. However, with this population, the flip was backwards into thoughts of being “useless”, “stupid” and “crap at everything”, activating the endless and complex jumble of feelings attached to the trauma. Pulling awareness back to the technical problem, asking questions like “What’s not working?”, and providing practical support stopped the downward spiralling.

Persevering through a creative challenge can ultimately reconfigure despair into elation:

*I felt kind of annoyed with ... that old message that I was too stupid to do anything and in the end I thought, "Shove it!", I am just as capable as anyone else. I'm going to do this! And that is when I started to do it.*

*It made me feel that I am capable of doing something after feeling that I was virtually a failure, so it affected my self-image. It made me challenge who I think I am and I guess increased my self-esteem.*

Christina made this point a number of times:

*It made me realise, "Shit! I am not the person who I thought, not the person who I think I have been; I have been somebody else".*

*It made me realise who I have become and who I was now and who I might have been in a different situation.*

She said it with a different emphasis each time, but ultimately she recognised her qualities and potential, and the original purpose of the project: "You are more than just your trauma".

Apologetic for her lack of words for a coherent explanation, Christina said that somehow, through the making of this piece of work, she understood the child's pain within and her innocence. "It actually dislodged part of me that has been buried so deeply that I haven't been even able to look at it." In the internal creative space, that quiet contemplative creative place, a lifetime of misconception fell away when finally she knew she wasn't "all bad, totally bad".

*What it did to me, it moved me and I was in so much pain and I knew that it was affecting me. I knew that it was good.*

To feel *anything* is a step forward:

*So, it was doing something, but I don't know why. I had no idea why. All I could theorise is that it has been working on repressed parts of my brain that I haven't been able to access.*

Recovery, or finding comfort after trauma, is a long journey. The creation of this work was an important part of the journey. In the process, *Me* became a precious object, kept in a private space in her home, away from public areas into which her sister made unannounced and critical visits. The artwork was an embodiment of her; only now as the adult could she protect the child from being hurt by others.

Elizabeth and Rosie: *Milady* and *Mini Me* (Figures 13 and 14)

Prior to the project Elizabeth and Rosie, like Christina, each held a misshapen self-view: "Non-existent, my needs weren't important, it was everyone else ... and I didn't exist", said Elizabeth; and Rosie: "I had been called 'ugly' my whole life". While space was available in the artworks to hold these entrenched distortions, each woman's creative and reflective engagement enabled her to transform this self-view into a more representative portrait.

"Everything about this piece was totally out of the norm for me", said Elizabeth of *Milady*. Dressed in a full-length crimson gown with gold and red trim, *Milady* wears silver mirrored shoes and holds a sprig of flowers. She inhabits the femininity Elizabeth dreamt of but did not recognise as one of her own characteristics: "I don't think I am feminine enough". Half of *Milady's* face is in shadow and she is surrounded by butterflies. "She is perfection in herself, that's why she is special to me."

Rosie's figure, *Mini Me*, also dressed in a long gown, has one arm gently resting to the side and the other stretched upwards: "Like hanging on to those in the spirit world who have helped and supported me, I was hanging on and smiling". Although a viewer might describe *Mini Me* as an abstraction, according to Rosie it "accurately, realistically" represented her. "It was a very realistic thing I created."

The connectedness between the self and the created self is intriguing, especially in view of Rosie and others' interpretation that the mosaic "is realistic". It brings to mind

participants' yearnings to "see things through different eyes", which was occurring in unexpected ways.

It is clear from participants' reflections and descriptions that they not only changed their self-perception through the process of making their mosaic, they fully inhabited this changed view. Throughout, project participants came to realise that they were not "non-existent", "ugly" or a "blob". Instead, in recognising through the earlier work that "I might be good at this", some had already begun to mistrust their negative perceptions. The time spent making this portrait and considering who each was and wanted to become, then committing these thoughts and desires to their artwork, helped invalidate faulty perceptions. It is not surprising, therefore, that the portrait, this image of a new self, "accurately" and "perfectly" represented them.

It was fascinating too to witness participants' shifts in thinking about perfection and what is realistic. Nobody attempted to create an artwork to look the same as their former self. This could not have satisfied their purpose. The expression of their essence, rather than their likeness, relied on an artistic approach that described their inner true self, rather than the surface, misshapen or misunderstood self. The work signified each participant's emergent, confident and "perfect" self. *Milady* and *Mini Me* helped liberate Rosie and Elizabeth from their distorted self-beliefs. The work enabled them to represent themselves and, through that, for them and the world to witness them as "unique", and precious because of that uniqueness.

*This is saying I am aware I have perfection tendencies and I won't ever take on the criticisms that others have had of me – that is a part of me that I am very pleased with and I don't take it out of balance and that is how I feel about me.*

*Yes, I am different and I am different from anyone I have ever met, but I am really ok about that, and presenting something concrete that makes a statement about that, it is a very good thing to do. Rosie*

Rosie's work rested on accepting who she was, whereas Elizabeth's explored who she was becoming:

*I am becoming one fine damn woman! That's why I feel she is so beautiful.*

That Elizabeth could say such a thing would have been inconceivable at the start of the project. She chose to underscore this transition by metaphorically interpreting an area that was too dark and didn't quite work:

*I've still got my darkness, but becoming colour, whole, feminine, just beautiful.  
I still respect my darkness, it's still me, even though I have got so much light, I  
can feel it all around me.*

When Rosie's face, made out of tiny white beads, disappeared into the grout, she was devastated by what she saw as an awful reminder of her many wounds; of being considered ugly. All that had gone before in the group, including her relationship with me, had resulted in her being resilient enough to remake the face. In the process, she also dressed old wounds and literally remade herself:

*When what I had created didn't look the way I wanted it to, it wasn't that I am  
ugly, it was "Oh god! What I have created is ugly" and I am not going to have  
her presented that way. You made positive suggestions, and you encouraged  
me and I finished it. The thought and the risk I took in re-doing it, that was  
really challenging and it was a very good thing to present something that  
represented me, that wasn't ugly.*

*Milady* connects with the viewer through the familiar symbol of the butterfly. Like the butterfly, Elizabeth explained that she too could not be "put back into the cocoon". She revelled in the metaphor:

*Because I have become a butterfly, Madame Butterfly, the trauma has  
somehow lifted and I am able to live.*

Her other therapies have contributed to treating her post-traumatic stress syndrome, but it was the mosaics, and the quiet contemplation of the creative space, that moved from her exile "into the big wide world" in ways so diverse that they are irreducible to one simple interpretation of the value of this work:

*I have noticed I am making eye contact with bank-tellers. Walking down the street, I smile at someone whereas before I thought, I suppose I thought I was unworthy.*

She begins to realise how warped her thinking was:

*Instead of thinking, "Oh my god that poor woman, I smiled at her", and feel guilty that she had to smile back ... now I think, "What on earth was I thinking!" It is just a common courtesy to do that, but because my brainwaves, I don't know, it was cross-wired ... I am learning that I am unique, there is only one of me.*

Both Rosie and Elizabeth explained that the physical presence of their portrait validated who they are, and who they wanted to be:

*Every time I feel I am going back into the "I can't do that!", she inspires me.*

Barb: *Nude* (Figure 15)

Contrary to the many burdens, including fear and anxiety that Barb carries as a result of her abuse, she saw herself as "rebellious". She saw art, and particularly creating in mosaics, with its reliance on colour, as the place where she could exercise this rebelliousness. She viewed *Putting Yourself in the Picture* as a chance to immerse herself in the rebellious person she would like to be, and a means to step away from the anxious and frightened one she was:

*So this is a last ditch effort to just say, "Hang it, just go and do it!" I am hoping to find a kindred spirit there who has a similar feeling and we could support each other, "Come on, let's be brave and put the red with the yellow!" Hang it! A bit of Thelma and Louise may be.*

Coupled with this literal expression of rebelliousness, I believe, was another: the pursuit of her creativity was a rebellion against her controlling, abusive upbringing and her soulless and now failed marriage. Barb said of herself, "I don't consider myself an

artist, but I love art". Yet she recognised art and creativity as an essential part of who she is. An artist's life might have offered her form and sanctuary.

Her entire life had been curtailed by the experience of childhood sexual abuse and rape. Unlike her personal life that had been emptied out of a pleasurable and loving intimate life, her artwork is full of these things. Silenced and shamed, she was mute in the verbal expression of her corporeality, whereas in her artwork she was fluent:

*Who would you like to be? I thought I would just draw myself nude!*

She drew on her great love of the modernist paintings by Modigliani and Matisse to affirm and inform her intuitive decision (and one that astonished her and "absolutely startled" her psychiatrist) to "draw myself in the nude".

*I never really thought I could draw, it just came out, I drew this and I said, "She looks good!". I thought, "Well, why not!".*

She then made it more seductive and asked, "Who cares? My mother is dead; my husband has left". She reconfigured aspects from these beloved artworks to incorporate her aspects of her life, including the use of mixed messages, which had been the form of communication upon which her family life and understanding of relationships had been founded. One mixed message is located in the hand, seductively gesturing to men "come hither" and expressing her sexual desire, while at the same time it also says "If you do, I will thump you".

Hers had been a privileged life until recently. She says there were high costs for that privilege. One was an impervious veneer of respectability. At every decision point in her drawing, an inner voice, with which she conducted an internal debate, questioned the propriety of what she was doing:

*Why not? For goodness sake, yes this is how you would like to be. I could go on more about my views and how this is the rebellious act and how this can be aggression and I don't give a stuff that I have made it. Normal artists wouldn't think it's sexual at all, but from my background, it is.*

Her imperative to conform was fighting a lifelong battle with her yearning to rebel, and she was only able to satisfy that yearning through her creativity. Her skills in design and extraordinary ability to put striking and seemingly clashing colours together, screamed from beyond her good manners to her timidity, fears and pain.

Art also became an enabling language through which she confronted the decline of her once slender and beautiful self through its periods of anorexia until it collapsed into obesity and skin disease. Her trauma has, in her words, caused her to “miss out on my life”. She confronted the faded possibility of a pleasurable intimate life while also permitting a flicker of hope for one to remain. The soft, blonde shells she chose for the nipples of her exaggerated breasts invite touching: “To be honest with you I felt they had to be tactile”. Yet, as with the hand expressing mixed messages, here in the jagged, sharp edges she used elsewhere in the mosaic she also wanted to repel touch. The words rejection and sensuality were simultaneously mouthed.

There is mourning and anger present in this self-portrait. “I still have a lot of trouble accepting my life and my history”, she says, her deep sorrow reflecting a life contaminated by her abuse. *Nude* may not, at first, appear to be a dark work. There is so much in its colours, voluptuousness and vibrancy to lead viewers back to Matisse and Modigliani and to the sensuous body so appreciated in art rather than towards anger, yet it is this emotion that underpins the work.

The face had a large yellow nose: “It is strong, it has got a toughness, an exotic look about it and it is interesting to have a such a nose”. However, Barb felt it made her

*Look too aggressive, too threatening, I seemed too angry. I really love it, but I don't want it to be me.*

In the process of drawing and making *Nude*, Barb unearthed, and captured in her artwork, deeply buried and previously inaccessible feelings. These were now present and in full view, drawing her focus to all “[I] missed out on a life”. Their presence was confronting: as she said, “I am recognising this for the first time”. When she took artwork home and put it on view, the confrontation with her anger and aggression was “too much”. She replaced the yellow nose with a less striking, less affecting one:

*It doesn't make a statement any more ... and I still have reservations about it because I had made a statement but I found that the statement was a little bit too close to the truth.*

The creative process propelled her towards confronting the depth of her anger, requiring her further consideration. The removed nose was kept with the thought that she might put it back in again,

*and admit to myself, you are angry that you missed out on enjoying your body and now your body is used, abused, neglected and not appreciated by men or others in a loving way. I am angry about that and this yellow nose reflected how angry I am.*

Strangely, when she was removed from the immediacy of the relationship between herself and the artwork, and considered the older version as it appeared in the 2008 SECASA calendar, she was more objective about it. In this context Barb viewed the work less as a reflection of herself and more as "a strong kind of woman". It is as if she viewed the work and the person who made it as someone other than herself, and with that distance saw the qualities she was not prepared to acknowledge in herself.

The creation of this artwork was profoundly affecting. It was a synthesis of her emotional life and physical body, an acceptance of the truth of her abuse, her changed body, broken marriage, loneliness and disappointments. It enabled her rebelliousness. The shamelessness of putting it all into the work also made her laugh, but its deepest potency was found in her confrontation with anger:

*So, it was poignant to me to do it like this. All of a sudden I am out there and that fact that I'm out there and fat, that is great. I am angry about all of this.*

*It was like opening a key. I didn't think about it, but the more I did it, the more I knew exactly what I was doing and why I was doing it and what it meant.*

She loved the work and only regretted that it was not bigger. When asked how big she would have liked it to be she replied "life-size".

Indi: Little Devil (Figure 16)

Her experience of abuse as young girl while her mother did not or could not protect her led Indi to have a preoccupation with being "the perfect mother" to her three young sons. Her confidence in her mothering skills had been discoloured by her own experience; on the one hand, she lived in fear of not being able to keep her own children safe; on the other, she felt incapable of emotionally connecting with them. Theirs seemed to be a relationship of disjuncture. Consequently, she mostly felt like a failure.

*It would be nice to be able to get confident, maybe do some of the (mosaic) projects with my kids. I am always wanting to look for something that I can do with my kids that is enjoyable. They sometimes start out as enjoyable but don't end up ... so much fun, maybe because half the time I am doing it blindly too. I don't know what I am doing...*

The design of *Little Devil*, with its tail and horns, was intended to be cheeky and masculine, a reflection of Indi's three young sons and her relationship with them.

Processing the past and present was a common thread in *Putting Myself in the Picture*. *Little Devil* is a meaningful and thought-changing artwork; one that encompassed "letting go of something" and "strengthening something". It was designed and made with consciousness, rather than intuition:

*I did the little beads, one for each of the boys, but I did it as a heart. That was really important to me.*

She researched, carefully considered and decided an orb would be held high by the devil, "because I wanted to represent different aspects of myself". Her evolution as a human being was an important consideration, as was the inclusion of a spiritual metaphor. The orb is a meditation on Indi's inner life. The mosaic juxtaposes her lightness of being and the love (albeit at times vexed) and pleasures she receives from

her children with her conflicted internal processing of her past difficult experiences in the context of her present and future life. Glass stones, chosen for their strength, form the centrepiece of the orb. Concentric rings circle out from the glass. Each ring is complete, suggesting a new beginning and, at the same time, responding to the centre, the origin: "It kind of gets bigger and stronger".

Constrained by the limits of the timber shape – "You can't make that circle go on forever on a piece of mosaic" – the final and outer circle is made up of all the colours, a symbol of eternity:

*At least it has got all the ideas that it can branch off to next levels – the next part of evolution, for me.*

The mosaic drew into it a complex debate between Indi and herself about forging a meaningful life following her abuse, fulfilling her yearning for a more enjoyable relationship with her children and her desire for a loving intimate relationship. Her sense of humour is also present, as is the awareness of her strengths. It evolved from the stain of her abuse, which it might also be said was at the centre of the orb, flooding her with self-doubt and depression.

Like other participants, she chose to use different mosaic styles to underpin her metaphor. The ordered and carefully cut tiles in the orb were "organised and expected, like a life-cycle" and the randomly broken tiles of the devil were a further reflection of the rupturing effect of abuse:

*I don't think I am broken. I used to think I was broken. There are so many parts of ourselves, but what I liked about it was that it showed there are lots of fractured parts of us but the grout really holds it all together.*

She recognised that the artwork was capable of carrying a range of feelings and experiences, including her humour, love for her children and personal challenges:

*We were busy doing the mosaics and because we were creating something beautiful or creating something that was part of us, part of us being able to let go.*

Of what were they able to let go? Part of the answer is the devastating feelings of worthlessness, the “I’m bad totally bad” or “I am crap at everything”, discussed earlier. For Indi:

*“Letting go” is not having to be perfect about everything, not feeling like I always have to over perform. I don’t have to be perfect.*

In making *The Little Devil*, Indi released herself from the burden of attempting to be the perfect mother and instead decided to be what Winnicott calls “the good enough mother”. The effect of this project did not end with the grouting. Indi’s participation in the art group and making the work became part of family conversations. Her sons were delighted to be included in the work, seeing that as an overt symbol of her love of them: “That’s us in there!” Being able to “let go” allowed a new space to open up between her and her sons, where she was able to see and trust her already successful mothering of them, and their capacities as sound human beings. Becoming less fearful of mothering was one of the significant shifts that occurred:

*It made me feel a little braver about having to face things and have a conversation with my sons about the sexual abuse if it comes up.*

*My biggest thing to take from it is to be able to do something with the kids, and we have been spending time thinking about projects that we could do together.*

*I felt liberated. I felt liked it unlocked something, I don’t know how to explain it, but I just feel so much more at ease with them. It is awesome, it really is. You don’t think you’re going to do some class that is going to help you with your kids. How does that work? I don’t know.*

In undertaking the project with serious engagement, most participants submitted to the offers implicit within it and then reaped immense benefit from it. Participants found that the project's strengths were in both making the portrait and their reflective processing of the work before, during and after its making. Participants' insights were profound and go to the heart of what each felt it is to be human. The self-perception of either having no identity or one that was valueless was re-shaped and re-created in and through their artwork to reveal an identity that was seen and understood to be of consequence to themselves and others.

As well as being a profound experience for the participants, *Putting Myself in the Picture* was both a surprising and an enriching experience for me.

## **Public creative spaces**

Most art makers will acknowledge feeling immense pleasure and satisfaction when their artwork is shown in a public place. Showing work was one way of connecting the women's art with the wider world and acknowledging both the makers and the work itself.

We took, and created, a number of opportunities to showcase the work and to connect the women's mosaics with the wider world in the small public spaces of SECASA, a large public space of Monash Medical Centre and in an even larger public realm with the publication of a calendar featuring the work. The main aim in each case was to showcase the women's creativity; other aims were to promote wider awareness of creativity as a means to wellbeing, as well creating greater awareness of sexual abuse.

Lockie McDonald describes the impacts of exhibiting work made by people with a mental illness in his essay discussing DADAA's *Freight* gallery (in *Proving the Practice*). The acknowledgement exhibitors receive through showing their artwork "actually makes people feel better" he says. Providing a public outlet for their creativity empowers them, affords them dignity and "rebuilds a positive identity" because "people are determining their own sense of worth as artists" (37).

In placing art in the public realm, the maker becomes somewhat removed from the immediacy of creating it and the intention with which it was made. It can more easily be viewed as an artwork, rather than “my artwork”. As I demonstrated in my reflections on Barb’s work *Nude*, when their work was in the public realm participants could be objective, more complimentary and less critical of their creative effort.

Facilities to hang artwork were installed in both SECASA buildings. The rather bland workspaces were animated by the vibrancy of the work. Exhibiting the work was an affirmation of the women’s creativity and skills, and gave the message that their artworks are worthy of display. They were thrilled to see their work displayed.

The mosaics brought pleasure to staff and other SECASA clients and were inspiring to those at different stages of their journey towards wellbeing. The artwork generated feelings of hope in clients when they realised the work had been created by women like themselves, who only a few weeks or months earlier had felt similar fears, anxieties, isolation and inadequacy. The work was evidence that restoration after abuse is possible.

The project coincided with SECASA’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations, which presented further opportunities to showcase the work. I initiated and co-designed the publication of a strikingly colourful 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Calendar for 2008 (Appendix) featuring mosaics made by each of the women. Inspirational quotes chosen by the counsellors added poignancy to each page. The calendar was launched at the Monash Medical Centre as part of the celebration to acknowledge the advocacy work and counselling that SECASA had provided since 1977. Many of the mosaics were also displayed as part of the launch.

The discussion with participants about how they would like to be identified in the calendar offered them opportunities to consider their silence and its usefulness, or otherwise. A considerable number chose to use their full name in the publication as a testimony of the abuse and in recognition that “I wasn’t to blame”. Others, still cautious of the potential impact of such a proclamation, chose to use their first name only or a pseudonym.

It is hard to underestimate the significance of this public acknowledgement. That the work was published, particularly in a quality production, was seen by many participants as a public recognition that their abuse was real:

*I thought that it would be a more powerful tool for me to try to work my issues out in the US [with the prosecutor] to get my point across because, one, it was in print, two it was commercial calendar and three, he was really looking at me trying to explain it [being raped] ... Maria*

One participant believed the calendar, in its beauty and presence, would empower her and others in the group for all of 2008:

*The calendar was amazing. Maybe when you put it on the wall on the first of January you will be feeling so powerful that you can accomplish anything; there is strength in that calendar – not just in my pieces but in everyone's pieces, showing our strength and skills. That calendar is such a strong piece for 365 days next year. So, yes, I am looking forward to next year.*

"Looking forward to next year" was an immense step towards imagining a different future. Earlier in the conversation, this participant had spoken of her suicidal thoughts and decision, as a result of the art project, to "stay on the planet". Others viewed the calendar as a gift of hope to other women in similar situations. I see it as verification of the strength of art and its capacity to bring out the best in women who have been so deeply damaged by others.

*It just shows that someone can scoop up a group of people, show them a skill of how to express themselves, put them in print and give them this every day for the whole of 2008.*

Its beauty made the calendar welcome in workplaces and homes both here and abroad; on every page the message "against sexual abuse" contributed to the advocacy for victims of trauma. I hoped others who had experienced sexual abuse might draw enough strength from it to realise that they were not alone and could seek help if required. Being appreciated in the public creative space further collapsed any

residual belief a woman might have had of herself as “useless” or “bad totally bad”. The evidence before her eyes and ears was simply too overwhelming to ignore.

Therefore, one recommendation of this thesis is that victims of trauma, particularly sexual trauma, have access to more opportunities to publicly acknowledge, mourn and share their experiences. The dominant trend in Australia towards privacy can have the (probably unintended) effect of keeping victims silent. In that silence some significant benefits that are available to victims may be overlooked. I observed that the women’s considered participation in public events and publications such as the calendar, the SASS 2009 Show,<sup>23</sup> conference presentations, and speaking in public about this art experience, provided them with opportunities to claim and acknowledge their experience and to show their skills and talents. I add to this recommendation that victims of trauma may also need, or may benefit from, guidance through any such publicity.

## **Bountiful shadows**

*Art is an experience; a greatly emotive experience and it helped me.*

*It has been immensely ... freeing.*

Christina

The impacts of the mosaic project upon each participant were considerably more wide-ranging and profound than I anticipated. The effects spilled out from the creative space of the art-room into everyday lives and were witnessed by the counsellors as they worked with the women as clients. The art continues to enhance women’s homes and SECASA workspaces. As well, its effect rippled out to include other people affected by sexual abuse and who lived with the 2008 Calendar for twelve months and were inspired by the creativity within it.

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<sup>23</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Survivors of Sexual Abuse Art Show, Stony Brook – State University of New York, October 2009. The work of approximately twelve project participants and group works were exhibited as digital photos.

This chapter maps the landscape in which the work occurred, establishing that additional to the trauma of sexual abuse, related deficits in health, education, social skills and sound relationships had significantly impeded each participant from enjoying a stable and meaningful life. That participants experienced considerably depleted lives, sometimes for fifty years following the abuse events, painfully reiterates the profound, far-reaching and long-lasting negative effects of sexual abuse. Additionally, my observations of the silence that surrounded and continues to surround sexual abuse confirm what is in the literature (Herman; Margolin). They also suggest that for some, the current recovery modes available to victims of sexual trauma are unsuccessful and/or insufficient for redressing some of the fundamental aspects of lives devastated by abuse.

In restoring or discovering and then nurturing their creativity, the victims of sexual abuse in this project also confronted and reconfigured the distortions that had inhibited them for years. In addition to the creation of art objects, relationships with the self and others were enhanced, opportunities to grow and flourish were enabled, and a world rich in its range of positive, negative and neutral experiences was opened up through creative engagement.

*It was a place to be someone, not your background. Even though I knew that these people were coming from hard backgrounds, that is not what we brought into the group, it was all art ... Elizabeth*

Visual arts are also visual language. It follows that as more skills were developed, the women's visual vocabulary became richer and more capable of exploring, expressing and communicating with fluency. Rather than having to work with the limited existent visual vocabulary, which one could have compared to a child's, these enhanced creative skills contributed to victims of trauma communicating with eloquence and the language of an adult.

By continually stretching the women's artistic capacities, encouraging careful looking and facilitating projects in which techniques appropriate for particular applications were taught, participants learned to distinguish, practise and improve the skills appropriate to a task. Rather than replace one set of concrete, inflexible thoughts and practices

with another, participants grew to accept flexibility and change as part of the creative process. Skills in using tools and materials, in creative thinking and self-regulation were also gained. The teaching of skills to those with extremely low levels of self-esteem, as well as affirming the worthiness of each individual to be taught, signalled my belief in participants' capacity to learn and be creative. Once offered and provided with these opportunities, the work "just poured" out, as one woman described it. This positive and new experience significantly contributed to the wellbeing of women who others and/or who themselves had thought of as "stupid". It reconfigured the remnant negativity of those who had had poor experiences of education:

*And you see that the praise that you were giving me every week was absolutely like a drug. How do I put it? Almost like a food. Sustenance. Elizabeth*

The creative space provided the forum and scope in which participants could interrogate beliefs and behaviours that, having been borne for years, or a lifetime, curtailed their lives and wellbeing. Primary among these were ideas concerning perfection, of being "bad all bad" and "crap at everything". Mosaic-making enabled the discovery of participants' capacity to learn, think and practise creatively, to complete tasks and make beautiful artwork. *Putting Myself in the Picture* instigated almost seismic shifts within some participants. It was fundamental to some women re-thinking themselves as "human" and "worthy", and for others to confront, contemplate and remedy aspects of their lives. The project facilitated powerful shifts of perception, as well as the expression of a range of emotions that had barely been thought, let alone voiced. It enabled women to express and celebrate their individuality; to discover what their imaginations had already suggested was present within them.

As women slowly began to appreciate their worthiness they also felt more connected to others, particularly to fellow group members. Rather than continuing to see themselves as isolates, as "me and the outside world", the group and projects' successes made it possible for each individual to perceive herself as a likeable, creative being, with ideas and skills to share. Validation was a new experience for many and contributed to participants meeting one of Briere's goals for therapy (and recovery): "Therapy aims to debunk the notion of the inevitability of danger in close relationships" (Briere). Although for some isolation and loneliness remained a reality, some

impediments to social connectedness had fallen away and steps had been taken to reconnect with “the outside world”.

*I am not that bad a person. People did speak to me there. People didn't reject me. I learnt, I persevered, through some times that were a bit tough, so I do feel like I am not right yet. Barb*

The creative space provided a sanctuary in which existing and new ideas could be interrogated. When women showed their art or revealed their vulnerability, a leap of faith was required; when this was honoured, rather than exploited by others, participants learned that they could be safe when showing their vulnerability. The experience of being met with care was new for many women and contributed enormously to re-drawing boundaries around trust. They learned to trust their own capacities (believing the work was “ok”), as well as the goodwill of others.

Group discussions, through the language of aesthetics and techniques, enabled the creative collaboration that was instrumental in developing participants' capacity to assert opinions and ideas. Participants learned to negotiate with sensitivity towards others and the self and, importantly, learned to enjoy the experience of working creatively with other women.

A number of impediments to victims of trauma working collaboratively with others were also identified through the group projects. Seeing *Elements* led some St Kilda participants to observe that by being too risk-averse and not trusting others, growth and pleasure can be inhibited. Their assumption that the process would be fraught suggests that in future projects participants are likely to benefit from a larger discussion about how to more successfully negotiate and compromise.

One reason for participants' perceived, and possibly real, past failures is that they are often overwhelmed by tasks and expectations. Projects, skills and concepts were introduced gradually. Participants were guided, step by step, through each process, which helped them learn skills for tackling complex tasks. As a counsellor commented:

*You tend to forget that we have had a baseline, and not everybody else has. And it wouldn't even occur to us to think: "You have to think about breaking things down to make it manageable?" Well, yes you do! We might have done that in childhood but some of our clients haven't been that privileged, that lucky to have someone who has been able to guide them through that. Some of them didn't have a mum who sat down beside them and said "You know, if you manage this little puzzle first, then we will get you to do the bigger one", you know, and if they haven't had those building blocks, those foundations to start with. I think we really tend to overlook that and how vital those skills really were.*

Participants set aside spaces in their homes for their mosaic-making, which they saw as a meaningful way to their fill long, empty days and a means to self-soothe. The mosaics helped participants creatively rest at times, and at others helped them to be mentally and creatively active. The purposefulness and focus demanded of mosaic-making helped the women develop a practice of sitting with a task rather than giving into avoidance or distraction. With time, this practice can disable the constant intrusion of trauma and enable creativity and pride to flourish.

Unfortunately, the violations of sexual abuse had been very deeply etched and the accompanying undermining messages remained thoroughly instilled. The effort and work to shift this damage was hard, and long term it is reasonable to expect participants will again sink into despair and negativity. The successes achieved by their participation left women with physical evidence and knowledge that each is creative, competent and likeable. Participants now have a new scale on which they can measure their responses. The work provided individuals and others (counsellors, for example) with reference points, a visual map, from which an individual's developing creative skills, both practical and intellectual, could be identified and honoured. This visual mapping of self-development and creative awareness presented participants with indisputable evidence and appreciation of their enhanced capacities (McCarthy et al. 41).

An important outcome is the sense of hope the work engendered. Because of what was already achieved creatively, socially and emotionally, participants were able to

visualise a different and better future: one embracing beauty, meaning and friendship. This was a significant achievement, especially for those who had frequently contemplated suicide. The effects of art on participants' restoration and wellbeing, post trauma, indicates it is time to thoroughly engage in discussion about how victims' lives are most usefully restored to meaning and fully recognise that a creative practice restores and transforms differently from the way talking therapy does. For example, in acknowledging women as creative, productive, social and competent human beings, rather than victims, it became possible to witness their successes and progress, as one counsellor remarked:

*It gave me some insight on how they interact in the outside world. So it gave me a framework into thinking, "This is what I see in the room, but not necessarily what is going on in the outside world". Seeing it in action gave me a different sort of perspective.*

Participants also found that the activity and focus of art-making was, at times, more useful than talking therapies, and at others, a valuable complement to it:

*The mosaic actually contributed to unsticking me and I find it easier to verbally talk in my counselling sessions. Christina*

Artists, art therapists, counsellors and other professionals share many interests and concerns about the wellbeing of others, as I do, with the counsellors who provided care for the participants in this project. One recommendation emerging out of this thesis is to undertake a comparative study examining how art-making, participation in a creative group and therapy can work separately, but collaboratively, to further the wellbeing of victims of trauma, loss and grief. I believe it would be enlightening to research how arts projects such as these influence, are influenced by, and interact with a participant's talking therapy; where the strengths and weakness of each lies; and where each activity is most likely to be useful.

The reinstatement of meaningful activities not solely focused on trauma was useful in re/claiming some of what was lost or compromised because of abuse. Loneliness,

reliance on sleeping medication, inactivity leading to issues of inertia, and overeating out of boredom were also countered by victims' pursuit of this meaningful work.

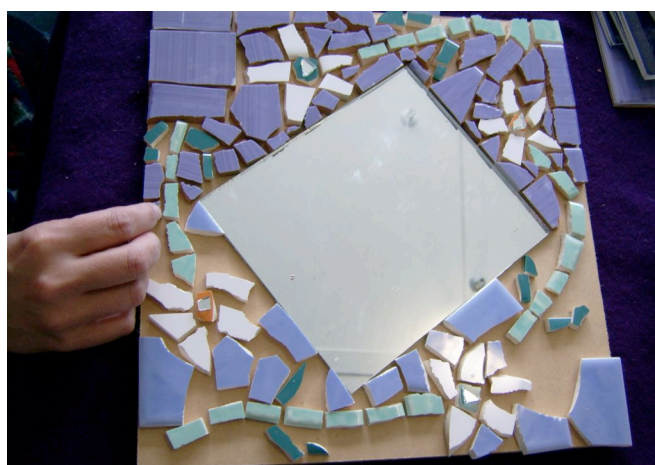
In the exit interviews, participants spoke of their emotional shifts, the "key turning", "the unlocking", "the knowing without knowing". Movement, shifting, unblocking, dislodging: the same themes were repeated, the same words grappled with and partially rejected because of their inadequacy to fully explain the mystery of creativity. Even in their imprecision, these descriptions are worthy and useful. We must accept that sometimes there are no appropriate words to describe the experience. The women's words may be unspecific or inaccurate; however, the meaning within them is not.



**Figure 1** Paver



**Figure 2** Mirror



**Figure 3** Mirror



**Figure 4** *Earth*



**Figure 5** *Air*



**Figure 6** *Fire*



**Figure 7** *Water*



**Figure 8** Paver



**Figure 9** Paver



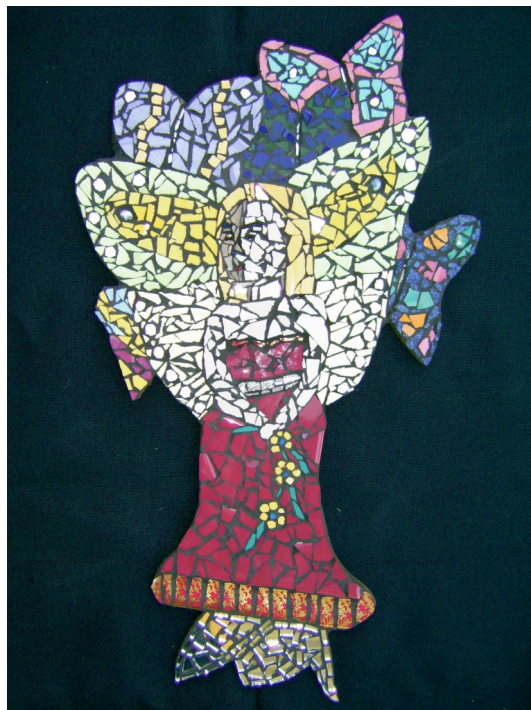
**Figure 10** Paver



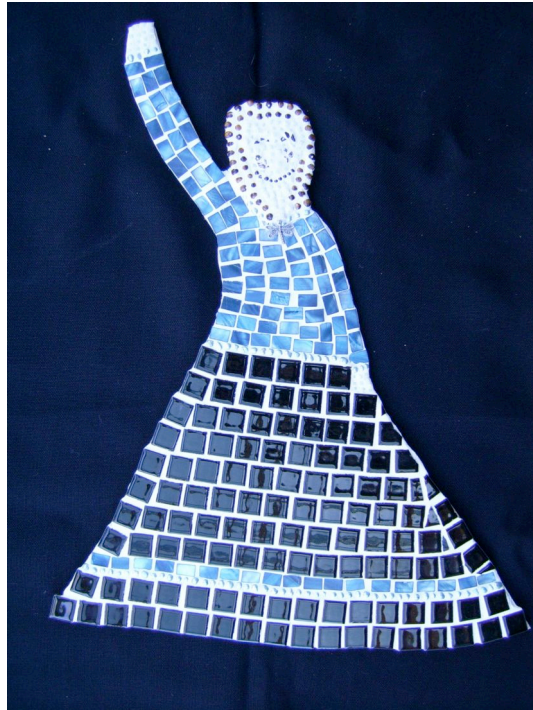
**Figure 11** Birds



**Figure 12** *Me*



**Figure 13** *Milady*



**Figure 14** *Mini Me*



**Figure 15** *Nude*



**Figure 16** *Little Devil*

## 6 ART IN THE SHADOW OF TRAUMA, LOSS AND GRIEF

In this chapter the artist emerges from the researcher. This is an invitation into my realm; my place of contemplation, activity, thought and wonder, mess, order and uncertainty, revelation and transformation. In presenting my arts practice and speaking to some of the many works made, the emphasis is on what the artist does, sees and brings to a discussion about trauma, loss and grief specifically, and about human connectivity more generally. To this discussion I also bring a selection of the many artists who have created work responding to profoundly painful human experiences, and cultural practices that have supported communities through sorrow, which have either helped shape, or make sense of, my arts practice.

In placing this chapter between "In the Shadow of Trauma", and "In the Shadow of Loss and Grief", I put the artist, and particularly the artist's practice, at the centre of the thesis as the bridge between the experiences of trauma, loss and grief and wellbeing; between disconnection and connection, distraction and engagement, dissociation and feeling, pain and pleasure, oblivion and restoration.

My work and practice is not put forward as a place of promise or certainty. Rather, following Christian Bastian and Jeannot Shimmen's explanation of Beuys's creative process (74), it is a kind of "anthropological field work", one of recording, identifying and imagining. Like the journey of trauma and grief (Worden, Rando, McNab, Herman), creativity is not linear but rather a process of wondering and wandering. Therefore, in this chapter I am especially content with inconsistencies and imprecision, to reveal my difficulties in coming to terms with the realities of sexual abuse, and creating artwork in its shadow. The discussion reflects the artist's processes, which, unlike those of the researcher, cannot be detached from the heart of the subject, and were in this project undertaken with feelings of immense sadness, bewilderment and at times fury.

One recurring theme is the silence surrounding sexual abuse, the turning away and refusal to see, or the seeing and refusal to act or truly acknowledge. In a comment which could be applied to sexual abuse (although it was made about Hitler's war atrocities), Helmut Krausnick, in *Anatomy of the SS State*, argues that because it "is so

obviously condemned from all points of view, people are tempted to think too little about it" (Fraser 94). The common response to sexual abuse is one of horror and disgust, yet it is endemic; perpetrators are absolved, even publicly revered, and victims continue to suffer. This suggested the question, if silence contributes to the lack of wellbeing, can art contribute to wellbeing by rupturing the silence? This discussion pivots on the power of the visual, and on the visual metaphor of art as "an instrument of thinking ... a catalyst in a new state of being": as Gormley suggests, a means to speak about the unspeakable, to look at the unbearable and to offer the audience a way to face a most difficult aspect of humanity (qtd in Nesbitt 32).

One ever-present concern in visually representing "the atrocious", however, is to encourage voyeurism, inertia and self-satisfying responses of shock and revulsion that can lead viewers to believe they have engaged and emoted appropriately, without ever being mobilised into either serious thought or action. In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag asks what is achieved by making and viewing graphic representations (particularly photographs), and whether seeing photographs of people in pain evokes a sadistic pleasure rather than the expected feelings of empathy.

Artists such as Salcedo and Kiefer, and myself in this work, do not portray the site of the wound, and therefore do not invite the viewers' shock or horror. Instead, in moving the eyes from the site to the effects of the wound, another way of expressing the unbearable has been found. In my work here and as an artist, I draw attention to the consequences of trauma, to the failures of humanity, the sorrows, the experiences of being "stuck in the memory" and therefore compromised in adulthood. The debilitating effects of childhood sexual abuse that prevail long after the physical signs have vanished are also examined.

Considerable deliberation on my upbringing and life in comparison to the lives into which most participants had been born or continued to live was provoked by my exchanges with the women and this infiltrates my art. When parents absolve themselves of their responsibilities, when appropriate and consistent care is not given, when boundaries are transgressed and when sexual abuse has a presence in the home, just where might the effects reverberate? When the home is groaning and collapsing beneath the burden of abuse, how can a child flourish and grow well?

Sexual abuse, the inspiration behind many of these artworks, is not my experience and therefore this body of work is an immersion into other peoples' experiences, lives and stories. From the fragments, snippets of lives, scraps of relationships and oddments of thoughts revealed, an authentic artistic response could only ever be the incomplete interpretations of an outsider, moments of perception, confusion and the hope that in the processes of making and exhibiting, the work might offer insights into this complex subject.

Odd, distorted and uncharacteristic artworks appeared, and did so without the usual accompanying ideas that guide and shape early works into a cohesive body. At first, this was strange and disquieting. The elusiveness of my anticipated articulate, interconnected response was symptomatic of truly understanding and expressing the ambiguities of the territory, and possibly was a reflection of how victims also feel. I decided to accept the work as it emerged, trusting that my artistic endeavours would eventually yield up their own cohesiveness and that viewers would meet the work with sensitivity, even if it might also be met with bewilderment.

## **Materiality**

Rather than finding the expression of trauma, loss and grief wholly in the art objects created, it was found within the materials themselves. This discovery became one of the project's most potent revelations. An exploration into materiality reduced the impulse to create a narrative and instead evoked responses to experiences and assumptions, helped deliberate on cause and effect, covering and revealing, availability and dissociation. The exposure of materials to extreme conditions, or tension, was one way of materially conceptualising and expressing the effects of sexual trauma, and this idea of tension leading to transformation became one of the works sub-structures. This was largely achieved in a kiln, attaining temperatures of up to 1100°C.

One obvious example of a material transformation occurs in the making and firing of a clay object. The first of a number of transformations occurs in the crafting of a lump of earth into an art object; the second, when this malleable material becomes brittle and fragile through drying; and the third in the firing where, through a chemical

process, the clay is transformed into a changed and permanent object. Processes of grinding and moulding, and materials being fragile, are also part of a creative journey towards resilience.

Another example is the transformative process of cremation. Experimental animal bone cremations at 1050°C<sup>24</sup> have revealed that regardless of the size, a bone's form is maintained although its strength is lost. Depending on the type and age, bones become porcelain-like, or porous and friable; their earthy tonal range is lost with the acquisition of a brilliant whiteness or blue tinge. As with human cremation, the process eliminates the association with decay and the bone's original purpose, returning instead viewable remains hinting at but cleansed of death. Cremated bones take on symbolic roles that open possibilities to creatively express themes of fragility, mourning, delusion and misplaced beliefs in power – one's own and others'. The inevitable association with mortality alludes to the "little deaths" of the abuse, but here the idea of fragile bones raises questions of whether "death" in the context of abuse may be conquered.

In this project, in the kiln's extreme environment metals such as wire and nails similarly maintained form but lost potency, suggesting useful metaphors for examining power and strength, and the perceived endlessness of suffering. As with the cremated bones, the inclusion of metals into clayworks provided another means of expressing fragility. Building clay sculptures around or into combustible materials offered scope to express the absences implicit in trauma, loss and grief, and the impacts of trauma – the intangible fears, anxieties and residue. These and other material transformations enabled a new artistic language to emerge, one that more fully articulated the complex range of responses to trauma than had been possible in my earlier arts practices.

Similarly, by stretching materials to their extremes, German artist Otto Dix furthered his forthright narrative of his First World War. The suite of prints, *Der Krieg*, is an example of Dix distorting the printmaking process. By allowing the acid to excessively

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<sup>24</sup> Achieved over eight-hours compared with human cremations which occur in two to three hours in temperatures of 700-1100°C.

[www.everlifememorials.com/v/urns/cremation-process.htm](http://www.everlifememorials.com/v/urns/cremation-process.htm)

[www.perryfunerals.com/index.php/grantley\\_perry\\_sons/a\\_guide\\_to\\_cremations](http://www.perryfunerals.com/index.php/grantley_perry_sons/a_guide_to_cremations)

corrode the plate, he created a language to describe the destruction of war, the corruption of the land, and the decomposition of flesh (Karcher). While Dix was not a conscious inspiration for my own experimentation with materiality, there was a richness gained from seeing one's own interests reflected back from the works of admired artists and in recognising that the struggle to express trauma has before required artists to seek out and use techniques that lie outside the conventions of traditional arts practices.

The objects' multi-layered metaphors are found in the relationships between how and from what they were made and the transformation of these materials. This requires an approach to making and viewing that considers what the materials are revealing as much as what they are representing. As the work is a deliberation on the effect of the sexual abuse, materiality opened an important means to explore and express the subject, particularly those aspects that are intangible and hidden from view.

## **Body**

In *The Heroic Images of Rape*, Diane Wolfthal discusses ancient and medieval traditions of creating small and private effigies as spells to arouse sexual passion in an admired woman. Effigies were also created to achieve one of a number of other purposes, including inflicting pain and revenge on enemies and neighbours, binding two people in love, deterring rival lovers or keeping one's lover faithful (Sophistes).

According to Wolfthal, a man suffering unrequited love might commission an effigy so that the object of his desire would have a taste of his pain, or in an attempt to force the woman to fulfil his sexual desires. The iconography of these effigies is strangely violent; hands and feet are bound and the body pierced with needles or nails. It is an iconography that would not, by contemporary mores, induce a woman to fall in love. The piercing, choice of materials and bindings are interpreted by Wolfthal as a means to inhibit the subject's free will, to torment her or to paralyse certain aspects of her body, such as sight or movement. The subject's desires, or lack of them, apparently were of no concern.

Ancient effigies, of which few remain, were made of wax or clay; materials that were appreciated for their pliability, a quality thought equally admirable in a woman. Some believed the wax best represented the female body, and I found the idea has some resonance as I noticed its translucency and colour in my work (Figure 1 at the end of this chapter). Hair, fingernails and clothing connected to the subject were also embedded into the effigy, adding further potency to the spell.

These historical effigies acted as an evocation, an inspiration behind a body of works through which I explored the victim's desire for vengeance and vindictiveness. The desire to inflict pain, to influence or awaken feelings in another person implicit in these effigies, provided scope to explore feelings of anger and vengeance and to contemplate whether expressing ugly emotions might lead to catharsis or to more misery. Individual works act as an antiphon to victims' written accounts of rape and their desire for retribution (Sebold). There was a macabre sense of pleasure in contemplating where best to position nails, wire and glass to effect the most damage; and pleasure in placing effigies of those who use their bodily strengths to violate another into contortions and poses of vulnerability. In between the sense of accomplishment in exacting revenge, and the knowledge that violence is an unsatisfactory response to violence, is the underlying recognition that art objects can safely contain venomous emotions. Art-making legitimately and usefully can say the things that in most situations would be considered inappropriate, unacceptable or requiring moderation.

However, victims rarely exact vengeance. When they do attempt it, their acts of vengeance rarely redress the pain of their trauma and cannot realistically be a catalyst for happiness and wellbeing (Herman). Rather, vengeful fixations or acts only keep victims stuck in their misery and emotionally connected to those from whom they most need to disconnect (Hanh; Tutu). I discuss this point further in Chapter 7 in relation to participants' creative expressions of vengeance.

*Uncomforted and Comfortless* (Figures 2 and 3) hang from the ceiling in my studio, casting large, distorted shadows across the walls, symbols of the elusiveness of vengeance, and an indication of the continued dark shadow of the abuser lurking in the desire for vengeance. In his wonderful exploration of the shadow in art, Stoichita

discusses how the distorting and the magnifying of the shadow are techniques used to proclaim the negative side of a person's character. The shadow represents the imaginary enemy and instrument of evil, and "fighting our own shadow" expresses a confrontation with our own negative side and thoughts. After working with this shadowy theme both artistically and metaphorically throughout the thesis, the discovery of Stoichita's account of the shadow's historical presence in art brought depth, connections and richness to the theme that I had not expected and was delighted to find.

Fleshless bodies constructed of barbed and normal wire, glass and clay hold the silent despair and enduring impact of abuse; the feelings of being pared back and emptied, and of being left with nothing available to meet the world. The nails and wire that were gouged into the "flesh" of the effigies in an exterior wounding are here part of the figures' structure. They are the means of holding these figures together, and their sharpness and brutality tears at the flesh from the inside.

These strange works were made before I met participants and emerged from imagining the traumatic pain and grief carried within the body and victim's feeling of being exposed by the experience of sexual trauma. I worried they were histrionic and overstated but soon realised they were indeed "accurate and realistic", in the same way Rosie described *Mini Me* (in "Putting Myself in the Picture", Chapter 5). One participant, visiting my studio, noticed one of the least resolved and more dismembered of these sculptures: "That's how I feel," she said. I recall a conversation with a victim who told me that like an arm, or a disability, sexual abuse was part of her. It has influenced, and continues to influence, the person she is and how her life has unfolded.

I also see an aspect of self-wounding in the depleted figures. They are a reflection of victims' propensity to self-harm, to tear into their own flesh in an attempt to excise the poison or further punish themselves for their "badness". They are a reflection of the victim's absorption of blame and responsibility, of turning inwards the emotions that should rightfully be directed outwards, and accepting responsibility for behaviours and consequences that do not belong to them. Feelings of hopelessness, ineptitude, anger and being unlovable destroy any sense of being human, of being whole.

Distorted forms hang lifelessly; those with a face have the vacancy of a death mask. These stripped back figures of abjection also cast shadows that move in and out of focus, further into and out of distortion as the sculptures move slightly. Comfort is unavailable. A bank of lights cast shadows of varying intensity; the darker shadows are more menacing, whilst the barely visible shadows seem to push all hope of consolation further into the distance.

Alongside the awfulness, depletions and violations described, there is also the miracle of the human spirit that prevails in spite of the intentions and inflictions of others. Without diminishing the impact of the trauma, during this project each participant revealed a considerable reserve of strength where little was expected, and showed remarkable generosity and kindness. These qualities are honoured in many artworks, including *Beyond Skin Deep* (Figure 4), *Cascading into a Leap of Faith* (Figure 5), and most of the works in colour. These are few because the overall intention of the work was to gaze into trauma, loss and grief; to observe and reflect upon a subject few want to examine. If I portrayed those who have experienced sexual abuse only as victims, I would rob them of everything else that is also who they are. Yet to focus heavily on their beauty and strength may be to fall into the trap of suggesting that “You can just get over it”, or that sexual abuse is not profoundly traumatic and damaging, thus diluting the intention of the work.

## **Nourishing**

The journey through Austria, Germany, Belgium and the UK with fellow artist Pip Stokes in 2008 was an examination of sites of memory, memorial and remembrance. These were different circumstances in which to observe cultural and religious practices of mourning trauma (predominantly war-related), loss and grief, as practised over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. The contrasting attempts in Germany and Austria at state, community and individual levels to acknowledge and honour the horrors of the Second World War, particularly the Holocaust, highlighted the difficult and immense tasks of absorbing and meaningfully expressing the incomprehensible. This thesis has been enriched by observing artists yearning to properly mourn the effects of catastrophe.

The oversized and triumphant, and oversized and maudlin sculptures attempting to respond to the magnitude of the war, such as those at Mauthausen Concentration Camp,<sup>25</sup> felt inappropriately bombastic; a meeting of brutality with more brutality, the unimaginable with easy resolution. Both responses felt hollow. Other attempts to honour and remember like the extraordinarily poetic Holocaust Memorial in Vienna, were compromised in other ways. In this case, texts accompanying exhibits failed to accept, or did not respond meaningfully to the issue of national responsibility for the atrocities. The most successful sites of remembrance reflected complexity – the layers, the silences and inactions, while in the smallness and preciousness of individual losses was located the immensity of the loss of so many.

At Mauthausen, the French mourn their losses on simple marble tablets with words of “*Regrets*” (Figure 6). Pebbles are placed at the feet of a statue of a mother mourning the Jewish deaths. In the Buchenwald Concentration Camp<sup>26</sup> forest human-height steel poles, bearing only numbers, mark the graves and mourn the thousands who were executed there. These human-scaled, humble monuments draw the viewer’s attention towards the individual’s pain, fear and loss, before inviting authentic responses of sorrow. Recognising and contemplating the enormity of the losses born of traumatic events is enabled by placing the focus of loss on the individual. When proper attention is paid to the loss to and of individuals, it becomes possible to more comprehensively grasp and grieve for those who have been the victims of trauma on a mass scale, and to comprehend its residual affects. In this instance, we better understand the loss of six million Jews because we confront the face of one. When viewers are not invited to honour individual losses, it is possible to be only momentarily aghast, emotionally and intellectually disengaged and unmoved by the story behind such monuments and sites of memory.

Local and church graveyards were found to hold remarkable artworks, images and practices that nourished the desire to recognise and express mortality; to mourn and face the limitations of humanity. Each, in its contained space bordered by tradition, has provided its community with opportunities to give and receive consolation. They presented a rich visual language that has been clearly spoken and understood across

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<sup>25</sup> Mauthausen Concentration Camp is approximately 20 km east of Linz, Austria.

<sup>26</sup> Buchenwald Concentration Camp is approximately 5 km from Weimar, Germany.

vast distances and periods of time, some of which I re-interpret in contemporary artworks, such as *These Ancient Sorrows* (Figure 7), a series of small floral paintings on tin.

Most clarity and potency about mourning, however, was found in the work of artists. The artist Joseph Beuys witnessed and experienced the Second World War. In the Joseph Beuys Archive<sup>27</sup> there is an anthology of strange and wonderful works of art, artistic scraps, ideas and thoughts described in sculpture, plaster, paint, found objects, art and other materials in which Beuys explores, then draws attention to the immense endeavour required to understand, mourn and in some way recover from the events and aftermath of the war.

In each of the thousands of works exhibited, Beuys contemplates a specific thought about his subject. Objects are wrapped in bandages; others are placed together as collage, sculpture or installation to evoke new ways of contemplating loss, wounding and healing. The artist provides shelter, food and comfort, raises questions and immerses himself in the ugly, ordinary and wonderful. Ideas are painted, carved, scratched, moulded and assembled. Matter and objects never before employed as art materials offer themselves to the artist to be re-created, re-assembled into "grim reminders of what is essentially impossible to imagine" (Lerm Hayes), salves for the wounded, and hope for any of us who care to look and seek it.

I met here in a fellow artist many of my own struggles to cohesively express the incomprehensible. Beuys's work planted the seed to work with the plaster casts with the SECASA groups (see Chapter 7) and his remarkable and lifelong examination of the minutiae of his subject affirmed the eclectic nature of my current work and practice as appropriate responses to the incomprehensible.

The artworks created by Beuys and myself, although initiated by different events, respond similarly to wounding and cruelty, and attempt to comprehend, mourn and heal. However, regardless of how one cognitively processes war or abuse, ultimately,

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<sup>27</sup> Located in the Schloss Moyland, Bedburg-Hau, Germany.

when the experience is so alien and so catastrophic, its comprehension remains partly unattainable.

### ***Trees and Bones: Distortions and Revisions***

For thousands of years trees across Europe have been permanently stunted and wounded by a practice known as “pollarding”. It is a means of controlling growth and the tree’s impact on the natural or built environment. Pollarding is also undertaken to shape tree crowns to meet the aesthetic desires of the landowner. This ancient winter practice of amputating branches starts early in the tree’s life, and once commenced, must be continued if the tree is to survive. The extreme and possibly unsophisticated pollarding I saw frequently in Belgium reduced mature trees, such as poplars, to stumps as small as one metre and into an almost unrecognisable version of a typical tree of the same species. In past eras, the discarded branches provided fodder for animals, building and weaving materials for peasants, and firewood.<sup>28</sup>

Espalier is another means of controlling and distorting commonly practised throughout Europe. The trimming and manipulation of branches, particularly of fruit trees, achieves decorative, productive and manageable shapes and is typically seen in formal gardens and streetscapes. Branches are pegged, wired, twisted and trimmed into contortions completely at odds with nature. As with pollarding, the practice of espalier must begin when trees are young and branches flexible enough to bend and be trained; and similarly, once commenced, the practice must be continued to ensure the tree’s survival.

In the spring and summer, regardless of the amputations, the stunted, wounded and contorted trees burgeon into life, bringing forth new shoots, branches and fruit. They prettily shade, majestically line streets and appear healthy, green and productive. However, nothing disguises the truth that theirs is a strange and misshapen beauty, quite at odds with their genetic potential.

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<sup>28</sup> Information about pollarding and espalier practices was informed by a number of gardening websites including, [www.garden.usask.ca/trees/espalier/html](http://www.garden.usask.ca/trees/espalier/html), [www.derby.gov.uk/LeisureCulture/ParksRecreation/Treepruningtechniques.html](http://www.derby.gov.uk/LeisureCulture/ParksRecreation/Treepruningtechniques.html).

Although there are many reasons to validate the practices of pollarding and espaliering, I chose to experience them as brutish examples of human domination.

Artists delve into shadowy places. We inhabit spaces and are fascinated by what is repulsive to others. Bones, death, corpses and materials provide artists with endless opportunities for metaphor. These are mostly intuitive, rather than intellectual, connections to the body of work and the concerns of the artist; often, their meaning is offered up some time later as more work emerges and time is set aside for contemplation.

The practices of pollarding and espalier are used as metaphors in *Distorted and Contorted* (Figure 8), a forest of painted trees on animal bones. Death has already laid claim; already is the winner. What hope is there to dream in the grip of winter, in the face of amputation, brutality and wounding? Yet hope of the spring is implicit in the distorted trees. They evoke feelings of hopelessness, then dare the viewer to believe in hope. The painted bones call to mind the writer Tuija Saaremsa's despair, then failure to accept oblivion, in the face of trauma and loss: "I ought to be dead and yet I am not dead. This death which ought to kill me did not kill me". She takes this quote from Cixous and Calle-Gruber<sup>29</sup> and reshapes it to emphasise her survival from tragedy: "There was nothing left. And yet there was something left" (603).

Regardless of what may burgeon in spring, for the trees or victims of abuse, there is no denying that some crucial part of their being has been killed off by others. In their sanitised evocations of death, the bones in this artwork are a version of a *memento mori*, the reminder of the ever-presence of death. Here, rather than point to the imminence of death, they point to an already present death. Painting the distorted trees on the bones, however, was an attempt towards acknowledgement and restoration; a gathering up of the discarded and the wounded then returning them to purpose.

From Salzburg, we travelled high into the Alps to Hallstadt, a tiny village clinging to the side of a mountain and seemingly in constant peril of plunging into the icy lake below.

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<sup>29</sup> Cixous, H. & Calle-Gruber, M. (1997). *Rootprints. Memory and life writing*. London: Routledge.

As land available to the village is limited by its precarious position, after a designated period, bodies are exhumed from their mountainside graves. The bones are cleaned and in cleaning, their association with death and decomposition is ended. As they are placed into an ossuary on sacred church ground they, too, are given new purpose.

Committing bones to a community ossuary is not an uncommon practice in Europe. However, in Hallstadt, the skulls are first adorned, decoratively painted with the names and dates of the deceased, before they take on their symbolic role (Figure 9). This practice brings the tenderness of the traditions of grave-tending to the skulls in their now revised position. The skulls gaze back as a tangible history of the village and a salient reminder of mortality. In their decoration and careful arrangement, they have also become objects of beauty and wonder.

Bones are on show throughout Europe. They are carefully and sometimes elaborately laid in ossuaries and present in churches in the form of relics, statuary and on headstones. They appear in *vanitas* paintings.<sup>30</sup> Their presence has significant religious and cultural purpose, a topic beyond the scope of this work. Nonetheless, one underlying message of the public display of bones is that death cannot be escaped, as this gravestone text reminds us:

*Remember me as you pass by,  
As you are now, so once was I,  
As I am now, so you will be,  
Prepare for death and follow me.*<sup>31</sup> (Figure 10)

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<sup>30</sup> *Vanitas* is related to the word vanity and to transience. The term refers to the opening verse of Ecclesiastes in the Latin Bible "*Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*": vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Seventeenth-century Dutch paintings often feature symbols of transience, especially still lifes. Skulls, hourglasses, extinguished candles and similar elements refer to the evanescence of existence. Vanitas paintings are intended to remind the viewer of how short life is and that it should be lived with due regard to God's laws. [www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl).

<sup>31</sup> Origin unknown. Commonly found on gravestones in Europe, UK and elsewhere. Seen in German text in Austria, 10 March 2008.

For millennia, architectural places and spaces have been set aside for proper acknowledgement and mourning of the dead, like the Hallstadt ossuary and local graveyards. Although the religious context has become irrelevant for many, there remains the desire to examine the ugly and the sorrowful, to face mortality and mourn. Within this commitment to looking, I have observed that people do not necessarily turn away, as is often claimed. To the contrary, the issues of mortality and purpose that have concerned humanity for thousands of years continue to have relevance. Yet now it is more difficult to confront and share them as a community, and more difficult to hold loss and grief among the “everyday”; that is, encountered and incorporated as a natural part of life.

This gap can, at least in part, be filled by the artist. In understanding and drawing from ancient to contemporary concerns and practices, the artist creates objects and spaces of meaning relevant to needs of those who mourn.

## **Domestic illusions**

*In my work with female survivors of CSA, the issue of self-blame, lack of parental validation of abuse, and generally non-supportive and unprotected family environments have been offered, in varying degrees, by them as being the major contributor to the current distress.*

Christine Baker (57)

The metaphor of the emergent butterfly is commonly used by victims of trauma, including project participants, as a simple and effective means to express their personal transformations.

*I had become a butterfly, Madame Butterfly. The trauma has somehow lifted and I am able to live. I can't be put back into the cocoon – won't fit.* Elizabeth

Their metaphor aroused my curiosity about the nature of the cocoons from which victims were emerging and provoked rumination on the ways a sense of home might be distorted by abuse.

*Forbidden Memory* (Figures 11 and 12) is one embodiment of my ruminations. When aberrant behaviours and secrets inhabit a space, honest, gentle and loving interaction is no longer possible. Home is not a place of rest or comfort; nor can it adequately provide for the young to emerge safely and securely from it. *Forbidden Memory* alludes to the distorted homes in which many victims of abuse reside, reflecting the failure of adults to create a secure home or provide sanctuary.

In the feel and use of natural materials, most of these cocoons are exteriorly beautiful, intriguing to look at and suggest a sound habitat; however, their seductive materiality camouflages overwhelming inhospitality. Below the surface, materials such as wire, glass, clay, human and animal teeth, bones, twigs, twine, fabric and beads work separately and together to evoke reflections on desolation, fear and entrapment. They echo victims' lives in unsustaining and threatening homes, in the paucity of comfort, or in the shadow of violence. *Forbidden Memory* is symbolic of neglect, secrecy, torment and incapacity.

In one example, the white, undulating layers of the waxy, filmy materials of the cocoon evoke a reflection of the wedding dress and intimate love. The beauty and seeming gentleness it presents to the world cannot, however, camouflage a much harsher reality of entrapment in which many abused women find themselves. Also insinuated in the beauty of this cocoon is the façade of respectability behind which many participants are abused and with which most, particularly Barb (discussed in Chapters 5 and 7) and Catherine (discussed in Chapter 7), still grapple.

In a second example, a loosely held bunch of twigs is barely recognisable as a cocoon. They are entwined, as if by a spider's silken thread, with fine copper wire in an inadequate and vain attempt to create a sound and secure environment. This insubstantial cocoon is a contemplation of the efforts of those who have been sexually abused to construct a sense of security by weaving their threads of perfection around an unsound structure. These worthy attempts and inappropriate threads are incapable of providing support, shelter or protection.

Two groups of *Doilies* (Figures 13 and 14) continue this domestic rumination. A doily is an understated object of protection, a decorative layer between one precious item

and another. The lace, crocheted and embroidered doilies commonly found in homes are crafted from the threads of generations passed, along with skills and wisdom, from one family member to the next. I think of them as representations of care. My created doilies are emblematic of a lack of care and the victim's yearning for protection.

Many of our other skills, such as sleeping, social interaction or tackling a task step by step are, in their ordinariness, often regarded as innate; however, these too are passed from one generation to the next. When a child is being abused, their focus is on self-protection, self-soothing and coping. Their development may be stunted; they fail to learn, interact, function and unfold into their potential as a capable, secure individual. Important skills may not be passed on.

Abandoned pieces of linen and hand-made doilies are gathered up, carefully arranged and embedded with layer after layer of a thin clay slip<sup>32</sup> blended with paper pulp. The inherent flexibility of this slip enables objects to be fully coated with clay without the common and vexing problem of clay cracking as it dries and shrinks. The detail and form of the fabric is maintained by applying it in several thin layers.

As the fabric and paper burn away in the firing, a fine and insubstantial layer of clay remains. The clay doily's altered materiality and relationship to the former object is intriguing, and its beauty invites touch. Although the fired clay suggests robustness, like much of my work contemplating the domestic, this quality is an illusion; the doily's new materiality renders it vulnerable to the risk of disintegration and incapable of performing its proper task.

These fired objects are symbolic of the lost layer of protection and of the care that has not been made available; their fragility suggests the individual made vulnerable by abuse. The work opens the door to examining a world that looks plausible, as many people and families affected by abuse do, only to discover the frailties, the carelessness and the deceptions that exist beyond. These frailties, and the illusions

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<sup>32</sup> Slip is liquid clay, usually used in slip-casting, decorative work and adhering clay work together.

embedded in *Doilies*, are an expression of what is barely possible for us in “the outside world” to imagine, let alone comprehend.

*Mourning Doilies* (Figure 14) are a further reflection of the distorted family and are a contemplation on the child’s yearning for protection. In finding none, the child attempts to create her own. These non-traditional objects are crafted from discarded children’s clothes, reconfigured into yarn then crocheted, with varying success, into items of protection. *Mourning Doilies’* purple hues reference the Christian use of this colour as a symbol of mourning. Although not a primary theme of the work, the church’s involvement in sexual abuse is also suggested.

My mother taught me to crochet. She passed on skills learned from her mother, and under her guidance I too learned and became proficient. After more than thirty years without practice, I still have the skills she shared. In making these strange and sometimes purposefully crude objects, I understood further what is lost when a child evolves without care, and as Indi lamented (Chapter 7), when a mother is unavailable to impart the lessons of learning, mothering, practice and mastery, guidance and encouragement, or admiration or praise.

The theme of the corrupted home filtered into a number of artworks, including such objects as the plaster tablets and casts into which domestic objects were embedded – flattened of life and of any potential to return to purpose. The artworks contemplate, observe and wonder at the effects of abuse upon victims, and pose the question: “How can anything not be tainted by it?”

*Seeping into the Groundwater* (Figure 15) is a chest of drawers into which the unsaid, the unseen, unknown and unnamed are carefully and silently stowed. Observations, secrets, events, entanglements, failures and neglect are hidden alongside the vulnerability and tightly wrapped pain which, barely known and untended, still manages to seep into victims’ lives even fifty years after the abuse. The drawers contain objects as shadows and suggestions rather than definitions. Scissors and thread suggest domestic crafts not passed on; dead roses and thorns hint at love fouled by abuse. *Seeping into the Groundwater* is one response to victims’ descriptions of imperfect and fragmentary memories, thoughts and reflections.

Participants spoke of some that were definite and assured and others that were only partly known, dreamlike and vague, as Roberta Culbertson also describes. This is, in part, a response to experiences that are confused, blanketed by time and numbed by pain.

## **Presence and absence**

*But we were denied the screen of willed ignorance ...  
The ocean of pain, past and present, surrounded us and its level rose  
until it almost submerged us ...  
It was all around, in every direction, all the way to the horizon.*  
Primo Levi (65)

These fragments of participants' lives were revealed as we spent creative time together and the trust between us grew. Sometimes my attempts to find coherence in their dark accounts felt akin to an archaeologist's task of piecing together a civilisation from tiny remnants of clay memory. Participants' experiences were painful to hear, not because of my own needs or any desire not to hear, but because of the immense sorrow of knowing so much pain and damage had been inflicted on these women whom I like very much. My sorrow was possibly compounded by the fragmentary nature of their accounts that were never fully contained or complete and left me unsure of where the story journeyed, although I had a strong inkling of its destination.

A number these fragments became embedded in me and symbolic of much of what I heard and learned. One participant, whose abuse began as a small child and continued for many years, spoke of the indescribable pain of her aloneness: "A mantra just goes through my life, why won't any one help me?". Another who said, "I was abused almost from the womb", described a life where no semblance of family comfort was ever made available to her. The sexual and child sexual abuse that had previously deeply offended me from afar was now in my orbit. The shockingness of these childhood experiences provoked many questions, eventually synthesising into just one: "Why *didn't* somebody help her?"

This question challenged my creativity and artwork to comprehend the incomprehensible, to view the unviewable and to touch the untouchable. Two bodies of work, *This Unwept Loss* (Figure 16) and *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood* (Figure 17 and 18), endeavour to invoke contemplations of the impact of sexual abuse upon the child.

Separately and together, these works invite the viewer to look beyond the exterior, beyond beauty and allure, and beyond the mystery of the objects, to examine and contemplate what sexual abuse takes away from, but also imprints upon the child, and how it makes children both fragile and seemingly impervious to emotion.

The children's clothes in *This Unwept Loss* are splayed, steamrollered and flattened. Like the children they represent, the clothes are drained of life, and almost obliterated by their encasement. With each layer of thin plaster then gesso that is applied, the garment is made more inert. It became less prone to cracking but more removed from its original state. It is less vulnerable, but at the cost of being unviable, colourless and purposeless. Imperfections were sanded back and removed, fractures mindfully restored. Like the pollarded trees also carefully contorted by human intervention as a means of control, *This Unwept Loss* is suggestive of grooming. Like *Contorted and Distorted*, the pollarded trees painted onto bones, death has again laid claim; this time to the child and the childhood distorted by abuse.

The happy, content childhood is imprisoned, along with the abuse, within the garments' now flattened, inert form. They bring to mind the post-traumatic stress experience of the person being stuck in a memory, or as one participant remarked, "an old woman trapped in the trauma of the child". *This Unwept Loss* speaks of life reshaped by trauma. It hints at the gleaming white scar tissue that signifies a form of healing, a closure of the wound, but does not claim a return to normal. And like scar tissue that diminishes the capacity to feel or move, *This Unwept Loss*, in its reflection of the child's trauma, denotes a reduced capacity to feel or move.

Although in their transformation the clothes have a new beauty, there are present in the remnants of fabric oblivious to the whiteness, moments of the rebellion Barb yearned for, the desire to step beyond the constraints and constrictions of the family

and the abuse. This glimmer of the past prompts us to contemplate a different beauty that is likely to be found buried within each victim of trauma.

The second of these two bodies of work, *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood*, further explores the vulnerability of the child. The treatment of the children's clothes with clay slip/paper pulp instead of plaster and gesso, however, allows for a different emphasis to prevail. As with the other artworks using this material, the object and paper burn away, leaving a thin and fragile clay shell. Here in the careful attention given to the form of the garments and the retention of the integrity of the fabric, the memory of the body is embedded, the ghostly remains of innocence, of a lost childhood.

Although within most adults there is an innate desire to hold children (especially the infant) safe, in responding to this work one must also gaze into the disturbing context in which these works exist and the failure of some adults to protect the vulnerable child. The innocence, vulnerability and smallness of the child are enfolded into the ceramic clothes to evoke feelings of immense sorrow at the plundering of that vulnerability, and in the fallen, crumpled and discarded clothes hints of abuse remain.

The pure white ceramic garments are beguiling and extremely fragile. Viewers, unsure of what exactly they are looking at, unconsciously reach out to touch. However, to touch is to endanger them.

The themes of *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood* mirror some of the themes of after-death photography discussed by Helen Ennis in *Reveries: Photography and Mortality*. Comparisons can be drawn, for example, between *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood* and W H Corkhill's photograph *Woman holding a young child* (c1900) and Patterson and Preswick's *Portrait of unidentified boy lying in state* (c1885-97). Each portrays the loss of the child, while preserving the child in an eternal state of childhood and death. In the first image, light streams across a dying child, reflecting off the nightgown and pale skin before falling into the darkness that is the mother's knowledge of the imminent death; in the second, the unanimated waxiness of the face and the whiteness of the clothes and coffin lining assert an undeniable truth of life having drained from this child. In the first image, the light emphasises the fading child's body moulded into the folds of its pale gown, but in the second, the clothes too seem bereft

and emptied of life. The angelic whiteness of the clothes accentuates the tragedy of the lost child.

The association of the colour white with purity and innocence attempts, but fails, to offer any real consolation; it simply tries to make pretty what is painful and possibly ugly. In the whiteness and the restfulness there is hope of transcendence, a desire to believe that within this beauty, the pain of the children's external worlds have fallen away. But this is to deny the undeniable, the death of the child. A hundred years later, the viewer still probes for answers and still feels the anguish of loss.

Other photographs, such as in the hauntingly beautiful series *In My Father's Garden* (2001) by Anne Ferran, and Ruth Maddison's *The Beginning of Absence* (1994), use the space around or previously occupied by their subject as the evocation of the lost person and their relationship with the world and loved ones. In these series of photographs, as in *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood*, both the presence and absence of the lost person is implied; visual language provides the vocabulary to express the traces of the lost person, which are felt and found in residual spaces and objects and which speak of the permeation of loss and grief.

The theme of presence and absence is further explored in my work *This Memory of Beauty* (Figure 19). These fledgling birds were found dead in the transitional phase of life, poised between infant and adult, and in this work they connote the young, the inexperienced and those ready to embark on an independent life. As the birds were encased in layers of clay slip, strangely, more of their essence was revealed. Their underlying bone structure and flesh became more pronounced, and with that, their delicacy and smallness exposed and accentuated.

The body of the clay-encased bird was cremated in the kiln; unlike *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood* where the fabric was lost in the firing, the bird's remains are contained within what is now both a symbolic and literal embodiment of trauma and loss. Trauma is both present and absent in this transformation from death into an art object. *This Memory of Beauty* might be viewed by some as violating a creature in death; it may raise ethical questions of artists who use the detritus of trauma to express trauma, as these and the works with bones do. More accurately, however, by

looking closely at, rather than away from, the unsightly, the artist honours the creature in death and respects its loss. The process of making these delicate objects was not a pretty one; it goes to the heart of death with all its attendant realities of decomposition. The artist's gaze and hands touch the trauma, facilitating a transformation that re-presents, returning the bird to the world as an offering about trauma and grief. One of the important roles of the artist is to interpret, then re-present the unpalatable or difficult in a way that enables others to come towards a subject.

The viewer is drawn into the works' beauty and intrigue only to be confronted and repelled by its materiality. This response of attraction then repulsion is one I saw participants make to artist Linde Ivimey's sculptures in bone (discussed in Chapter 7). But the artist does not lay bare the full truth of the trauma and loss, rather s/he veils and softens, then offers the viewer an object of beauty rather than one of decay. It is a kinder, sympathetic and metaphoric means of gazing into the shadowy reality of trauma, loss and grief. The viewer can engage deeply with the subject because the artist has, through the art object, made it possible to look into it, rather than being forced to look away through horror or despair. The softening enables the gaze and the gaze evokes empathy.

The capacity of art to hold both the present and absent, attraction and repulsion, beauty and sorrow, and the visible and invisible worlds are amongst its very significant offerings for expressing the complexity of trauma and grief. Art's ability to express a perception of the physical world as well as what is "below the threshold of perception", as Beuys describes it (Bastian and Simmen 91), provides the artist and viewers with the means to convey and relate beyond the narrative, which can only ever be part of the story. The effect of trauma and grief can also be addressed.

## **Impervious spaces**

Glass is new material in my artistic vocabulary and one with potent qualities. The amount and nature of the tension to which it is exposed determines how glass responds. It can withstand heat, take on a new form, crack, break, shatter,

completely flow away, change colour, become opaque or remain clear. It can be made flexible or rigid, sharp or soft-edged and it can be moulded over materials. Materials can be embedded into it and impressions left within it. Glass transcends the spaces between being solid and liquid, dangerous and benign, clear and opaque.

The quality of transparency in glass makes this a material uniquely able to contribute to the conversation about trauma, loss and grief through its ability to visually describe "the space between": that impermeable space separating the individual from the "outside world". Glass gives material form to feelings of being "in the world" yet separate from it, touched yet untouchable, present but not there. It is the space behind which every emotion, every response is held tightly in for fear of it spilling untidily over others.

The "space between" is a common feeling when in pain or experiencing grief; it is a physical and invisible space that cannot be transgressed. It provides a useful insight into the term "dissociation", which describes the victim's disconnect between mind and body in order to emotionally self-protect during a traumatic event. Although it may be a useful strategy for self-protection during the traumatic event, in its aftermath emotional disconnection can be counterproductive.

The concept of "the space between" is one route through which I contemplate the enigma of the unavailable mother: the space between the child and the mother who does not see; the mother who fails to protect. The participants' venomous attitudes towards the mother, rather than the abuser, were at first striking and unexpected. I was unprepared and perplexed to hear blame and vitriol being poured over the mother and not the man who was the perpetrator. The relationship between the mother and victim in a sexually abusive context is complex, the subject of considerable investigation in the social sciences but beyond the scope of my thesis. Baker, Kendall-Tackett et al. and Featherstone, Finkelhor and Ricker, referred to earlier, do provide useful insights into some of the motivations that guide these vexed relationships. While I understand the theoretical work, as an artist I chose to investigate and respond to the women's expressions of pain, loss and anger at the failures in this primal relationship. My artwork was an attempt to bring form to these feelings.

From within their deep hurt most participants could acknowledge some reasons, or at least offer some explanation, for their mothers' failings; but few could forgive. The mother's abandonment of the child to the other was not only a form of death to the child, it was viewed by some participants as death to their mother, and some admitted to going as far as conducting fake funerals for them. That these participants were unable to surrender their animosity towards the mother indicates how devastating the breach was, and how deep the resulting chasm between mother and daughter. As most of those flawed mothers are now dead, the possibility of any renewal or creation of a sound mother–daughter relationship has been fully extinguished and only bile and hurt remained.

The complexities that lie behind mothers' responses and role in childhood sexual abuse is one area I would like to explore and understand further. However, here in my artwork, I simply responded to the participants' pain of abandonment and the unavailability of their mothers. I puzzled over the collapse of certainty; how a child lives and survives in the realm of a mother who is incapable of providing the most basic care required. Embedded in my response is not the judgement, "How *could* you?" but the mystery, "Why *couldn't* you?" What was missing? What had disabled that fundamental desire to care or to offer and enact care?

My ruminations upon the mother led to a range of artworks into which the mother's immobilisation or unavailability is absorbed. They are a reflection on the mother's stagnation of purpose, the petrification of appropriate mothering emotions and the loss of motherly guidance. *Epi/dermis* (Figure 20) references the mother in the ceramic dresses and in the glass, as it slumps over the dress and moulds to its shape, the barrier between the mother and the child, the impenetrable "space between".

When glass melts over such a ceramic dress, especially one that has relatively high peaks and troughs, it can become too thin to cover it fully. Weak spots form. Small holes sometimes appear and fragments of the mother's dress are exposed. These openings, faults to a glassworker, evoke uncertainty. Can these gaps in what was thought of as the mother's impenetrability, imply it is opening or closing? Hopeful or hopeless?

## **Accommodation**

Art-making keeps the artist's body and soul together. In the face of almost any life situation it nourishes and expands the imagination; it is the place where we seek and locate understanding and can acknowledge mystery. It is where solace and restoration are found. Nature also has and shares its gifts of restoration, wonderment and vitality. Nature's transformations towards restoration in the face of obstructions, disaster and carelessness are the inspiration behind my paintings (Figures 21 and 22). These wondrous natural transformations open up a meditation upon the human potential to grasp and hold firm a belief in a changed but worthwhile life following trauma.

The multitude of causes that influence the changing shape and direction of a river as it passes through a landscape is a metaphor from which I draw many comparisons, first with the trauma and then with the hope of restoration. Frequently at the heart of this meditation sits human recklessness and the desire to control and impose.

Over-clearing of trees, overgrazing of stock and intensive development along riverbanks have had a devastating effect upon the health and flow of a river. At times of heavy rain, the loss of vegetation and compacted soil can cause excess water to flood into river channels that are unable to carry the additional water. Banks break and the topsoil is gathered up from the unvegetated land and dumped into the river. The excess water carves new meanders and flood channels, and from these a new course for the river emerges. The cost of recklessness is high.

This recklessness can be interpreted as the removal or weakening of structure. The human recklessness of sexual trauma similarly impacts upon the victim, compromising the structures on which a sound and happy life is built. Trust collapses, self-confidence crumbles, anxiety and depression overwhelm and flood a victim in sorrow and misery. Yet the river, like espaliered and pollarded trees and victims of abuse, has a remarkable tenacity for life. The reshaped river sculpts a new form into the landscape, gouging out sections and depositing sediment in others in a journey of change and accommodation. Change born of trauma can allow a new and different beauty to emerge. At times, this beauty reveals the burdens of the past, but sometimes, as participants lamented, the evidence of trauma is so deeply concealed

that outsiders may barely notice its existence. Regardless of the cause of trauma and loss, the experience inevitably requires a change of course, possibly u-turns, and the accommodation of a new way of being. The rivers in my paintings carve a new path through this landscape.

With care, rivers, like humans, can be restored. The reinstatement of vegetation, like the reinstatement of trust, offers strength to support the careworn. Gradually, as the roots grow into and merge with the land, the lost structure is regained and with it, the river's capacity to better support life in the land through which it flows. The series of paintings, *Recoursing the River* (Figure 22) and the collection of landscape paintings are a gesture towards acceptance and hope.

The small *Shadow* paintings reflect the recurrent theme of the thesis and serve as a metaphor and reminder that little about trauma, loss and grief, or the journey towards wellbeing, is static or clear. The constant movement of shadow and light across a surface, shifting in and out of darkness, most depicts how I view the terrain: where understanding oscillates between being ungraspable and profoundly clear; where victims move between states of despair, confidence, doubt, pride, activity and inertia. These paintings describe changing perspectives; the thoughts, reactions and feelings that need not, or cannot, be pinned down.

The movement of light and shadow is both beautiful and comforting, calling to mind Langer's discussion of paradoxes and aesthetics, and her assertion that resolution cannot be found through "a resort to polarity" (17). In following Nietzsche, she gives as examples the poles of emotion/reason, freedom/restraint, instinct /intellect, ethos/pathos, arguing that any rigid inhabitation at either end of the spectrum denies the values of the other, and particularly of the spaces in between. The shadow similarly reflects this view and offers a means to suggest that in healing and recovery from trauma, loss and grief, resolution is unlikely to be found by holding onto fixed positions – either as a victim or as someone offering a way towards recovery.

Art-making, and especially the landscape paintings provide a buttress for the artist. The intensity of work and focus demanded by a thesis are great, as is the emotional

engagement that comes with an immersion into the lives of people who are deeply affected by their shadowy pasts and uneasy presents. I feel my most authentic when I am making art and sensuously alive when I work with oil paints or have my hands deep in clay.

My creative arts practice is, as Gertrude Stein said of hers, "for myself and strangers". It is the artist's desire to penetrate life, to look deeply into the difficult, unfathomable or ugly, to return this view transformed into a artwork which is "both honest to the horrors and ... transformingly beautiful" (Spurling and McDonagh). Eco (in Claire Bishop) regards the work of art as a reflection of our existence in our fragmented modern culture, whilst writers and theorists like Ranciere, Bourriaud, Kester and Bishop see the exchange between artwork, artist and strangers as "relational" or "dialogical". In simple terms, art is a language for inward communication with the maker and outward communication with the wider world.

In the endeavour and work of all the artists discussed in this thesis is a shared struggle to artistically confront the failures of humanity, the difficulties of mourning and the challenges of expressing these complexities. The mysteries of humanity, such as the relinquishment of or failure to care, the reckless imposition of one person's will upon another, the indifference and cruelty demonstrated in the behaviours of the powerful, and the feelings of abandonment, pain and vulnerability, as well as qualities of resilience seen in the vulnerable, are intensely scrutinised with the artist's eyes and in the artist's hands. The artist labours to bring forth artworks that challenge, reveal, evoke and soothe and into which a viewer might surrender him/herself in order to be transformed (Spurling and McDonagh).

I like to exhibit my artwork in non-art spaces. This is to invite a conversation between the art, the artist and the "everyday"; with passers-by, those who inhabit these spaces and who, by their own admission, are unlikely to visit an art gallery. Having put my work in the path of others on many occasions, I have witnessed and experienced how chance encounters with art effect profound interactions between the work and the audience and the audience and artist. I have seen viewers weep and heard them

express gratitude that “there are people like you who can express the feelings of people like me”.<sup>33</sup>

Placing my artwork at the centre of human activity, in this instance a major public hospital, embodies my contention that creativity and the subject of the work – trauma, loss and grief – are also at the centre of our humanity. As these are amongst the constant experiences of human existence, they deserve a place in our everyday lives. Locating the artwork, and therefore the meditation on trauma, loss and grief in the public realm partly mirrors the purpose of the ossuary in Hallstadt; that is, it honours then offers a visual acknowledgement of feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in the midst of an unfamiliar and frightening world. Just as the space, contents and placement of bones within the ossuary are tended with care, so too the placement of art in public spaces is made with care, empathy and the intention of holding viewers safely in a creative space. In its reflection of human frailty, art expands experience beyond the immediate and makes an offer of a return to peace and beauty. Art offers a means to hold sorrow and hope together.

An additional imperative for this body of work, and for placing it in the public realm, is to advance the discussion about sexual trauma, and particularly its devastating and long-term impacts. The challenge I faced in finding an institution prepared to accept an exhibition about sexual trauma, loss and grief suggests a reluctance to look into the repulsive and accept that sexual abuse is a serious and confronting community issue. Those who have been open to the work and its context, like Southern Health, also open opportunities for the concerns of the work to move out from my creative space and into a public space where it might contribute to an expanding contemplation and discussion of this community issue.

A recent survey conducted by The Childhood Foundation and Monash University reveals a significant reluctance amongst adult survey participants to report observations or suspicions of childhood abuse (Lauder). Many gave “not wanting to get involved” or “not knowing what to do” as the main reasons for their silence. My aim for the work, and for placing it in the public realm, is to contribute to a growing

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<sup>33</sup> Viewer at *Ritual, Light and Land. An artist's journey through the Western Front*. Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne. April-May 2004.

public discussion about sexual abuse and to shifting that abnegation of responsibility. I hope one day when a child asks: "Why won't somebody help me?" the response will not be silence.

Much of the artwork I have made during work for this thesis has its origins, or affirmation in the stories, experiences and responses of the participants. It has been nourished by the journey through Europe, which provided substantial opportunity to examine ancient and contemporary practices of mourning. Drawing inspiration from the evolution of new artistic dialects, such as Joseph Beuys's, I have become more assured in the abandonment of the narrative to a vocabulary of materials and metaphor. My expression has grown more precise as the artworks became symbolic of feeling and affect, and capable of alluding to the bodily as well as emotive shadows cast by trauma.



**Figure 1** *Uncomforted and Comfortless*  
Wax Effigies  
various sizes average approx 8cm h

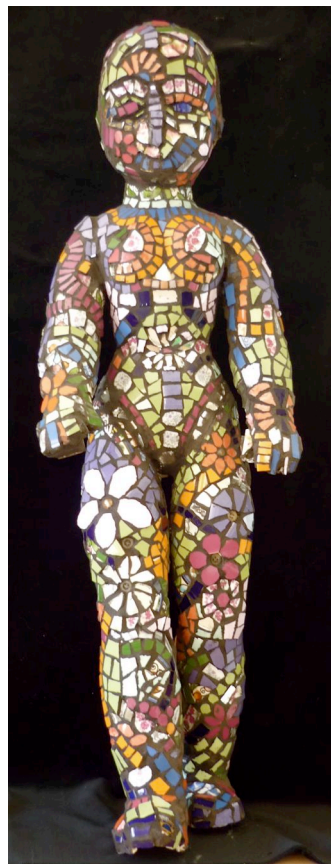


**Figure 2** *Uncomforted and Comfortless*  
Clay and wire effigy and shadows



**Figure 3** *Uncomforted and Comfortless (selection)*

Clay and wire effigy with shadows. Various sizes, average approx 35 cm length



**Figure 4** *Beyond Skin Deep*

Tiles, plastic doll, grout. Approx 50 cm h



**Figure 5** *Cascading into a Leap of Faith (selection)*  
Ceramic, cotton on steel rod. Various sizes average approx 12 cm h



**Figure 6** French Memorial at Mathausen (detail)



**Figure 7** *These Ancient Sorrows (selection)*  
Oil paint on tin. Various sizes average 30 x 30 cm



**Figure 8** *Distorted and Contorted (selection)*  
Oil paint on bone. Various sizes



**Figure 9** Ossuary at Hallstadt, Austria



**Figure 10** Gravestone



**Figure 17** *Forbidden Memory* (selection)  
Ceramic and nails (approx 80mm x 30 mm)



**Figure 18** *Forbidden Memory* (selection)  
Fabric, wax, teeth, hair (approx 400 x 200 mm)



**Figure 19** Ceramic Doilies



**Figure 20** *Mourning Doilies (selection)*  
Recycled children's clothes



**Figure 15** *Seeping into the Groundwater*

Mixed media, incl. timber, wax, bird wings, tiles, bird, scissors, wire



**Figure 21** *This Unwept Loss*  
Children's clothes and plaster



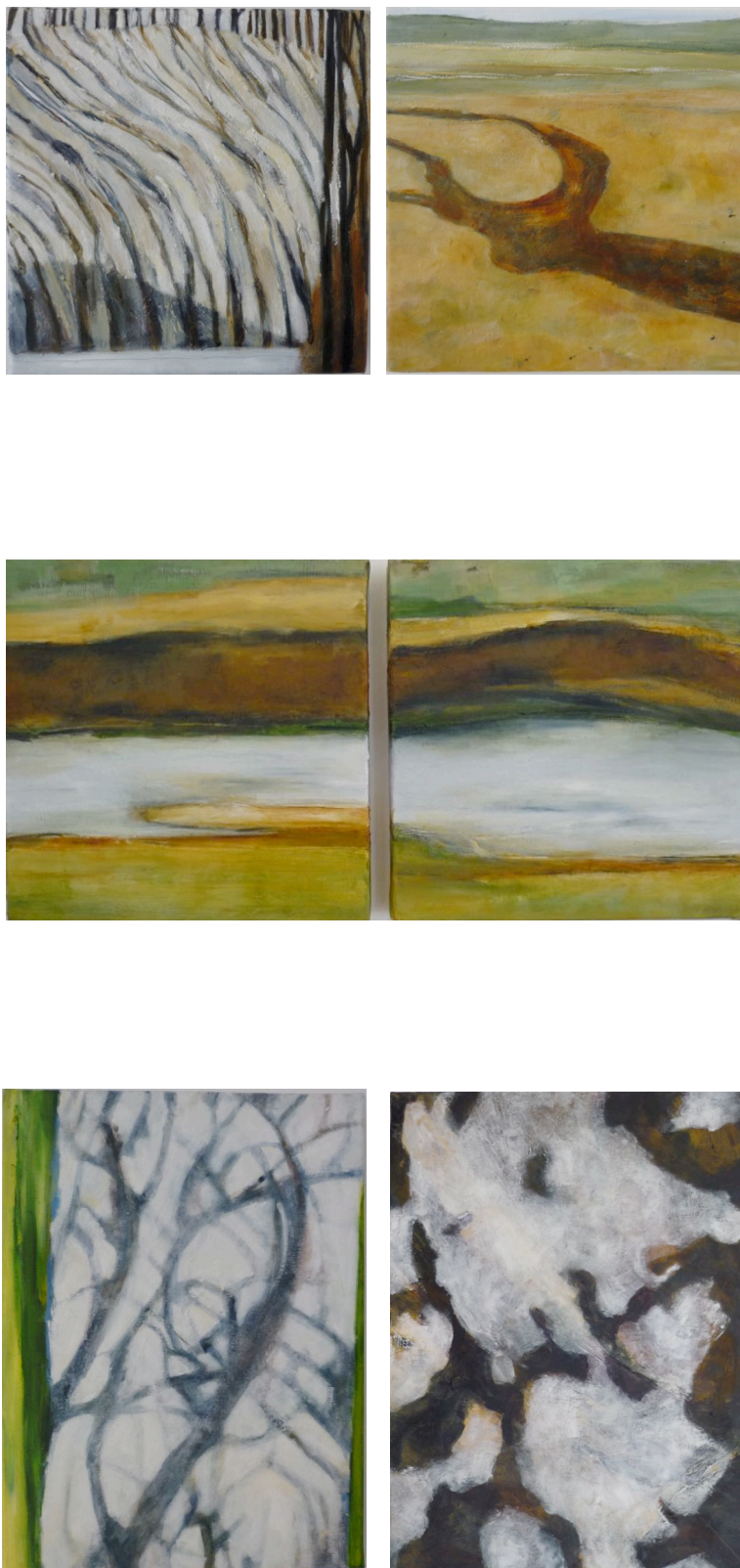
**Figures 17 and 18** *Ghosts of a Lost Childhood (selection)*  
Ceramic



**Figure 19** *This Memory of Beauty*  
Ceramic and ceramic paint



**Figure 20** *Epi/dermis* (selection)  
Ceramic and glass (approx 330 x 250 mm)



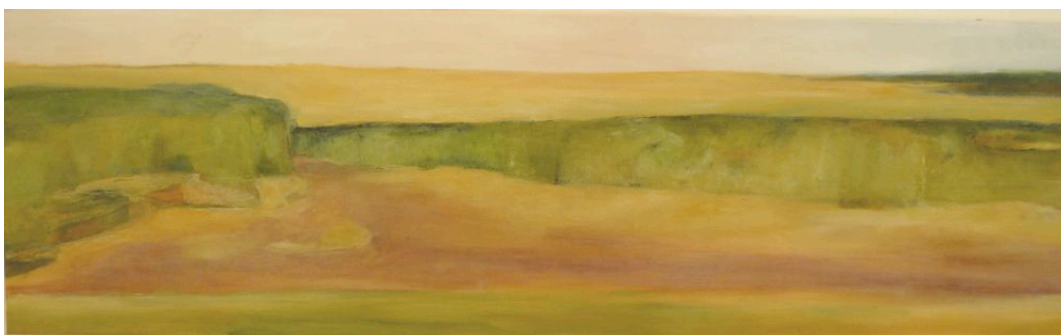
**Figure 21** selection of small river and shadow paintings  
Various sizes (200 x 200 mm and 400 x 300 mm)



*A Crack in the Landscape*  
Oil on canvas (1500 x 300 mm)



*Recoursing the River I*  
Oil on canvas (1500 x 500 mm)



*Recoursing the River II*  
Oil on canvas (1200 x 300 mm)

**Figure 22** selection of large river and landscape paintings

## 7 ART IN THE SHADOW OF LOSS AND GRIEF

*Alas! Must it ever be so?  
Do we stand in our own light, wherever we go,  
And fight our own shadows forever?*<sup>34</sup>

In this chapter I discuss the second community art project I conducted where women who had been sexually abused were led on a supported and guided journey to creatively examine and express loss and grief born of abuse. The project differed from the first community research project in a number of ways. For example, whereas the mosaic project was grounded in developing creative thinking and practice, the loss and grief project applied those processes to creating work with a specific focus. Additionally, a new range of materials, including clay, plaster and other sculptural materials, were used and there was no group work component.

While many struggle to find meaning, visual artists, musicians, architects and writers (amongst others) have, for millennia, peered deeply into their own and others' wounds and transformed pain, sorrow and loss into works of poetry, lamentation and consolation. Images of the Crucifixion and Deposition; buildings such as the Taj Mahal and the Shrine of Remembrance; paintings of war, migration, love and death, are examples of artworks that profoundly touch viewers through such sensitive and eloquent expressions of loss and grief. Artworks and artists' expressions of complex human emotions acted as beacons for this project's themes and discussions, offering participants visual permission to artistically express emotions that had been restrained or constrained.

Participants identified many losses associated with sexual abuse that had leached into all aspects of their lives. Not finding a loving partner or having children was a significant loss for a number of participants; for others the desire to leave an abusive family had led them to making an unsound choice of partner, sometimes at a young age, and had taken them into other unsatisfactory and sometimes abusive relationships. The failures of those who should have cared more actively and properly

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<sup>34</sup> *Lucile* (pt. II, canto II, st. 5) Lord Lytton.

were commonly identified as significant losses, as were fractious or non-existent relationships with children, parents and friends, all of which led to profound loneliness. Compounding these feelings was the additional loss of not being confidently able to manage difficult situations. Poor education often resulted in an inability to access a higher education, or sound and sustainable employment, and many lived on extremely limited resources. Poor health, including mental and physical illness and stress, were viewed as losses; addiction to drugs or alcohol manifested in the loss of wellbeing. The loss of a sense of safety, the enjoyment of theirs and other's bodies, and the ability to express a complex adult emotional range were also identified as losses resulting from sexual abuse. Manifold losses prevented women from participating in, and enjoying what they considered a normal life, with its usual and complex range of ups and downs.

In addition to describing the art projects from the point of view of the artist/researcher, I have used participants' processes and artworks, together with extracts from my discussions with them, to discuss their creative expression and its contribution to their wellbeing. Participants' artworks, together with their commentary in interviews, reflected a deepening self-awareness, greater understanding and a growing ability of participants to express themselves with clarity. This evidence indicates that creative participation contributed to improved relationships with family and friends, improved physical and mental health, having less anger and an improved work life, as well as a more productive engagement with counsellors and other people in their lives. Most significantly, this expression of self through creativity led participants to a restoration of meaning; to the inhabitation of a place where it became possible to visualise and live a happier life and to desire or include romantic love as part of it.

As discussed earlier, participants still grappled with the negative impacts of trauma, sometimes falling into despair, arriving at the group in a state of chaos, and finding it difficult to work co-operatively with others. As these issues were discussed in depth earlier, I do not revisit them in detail here. However, in understanding the work of participants, it is important to recognise that achieving a sense of wellbeing following trauma is a convoluted journey; rather than anticipating continuous improvement, it is more realistic to recognise that occasions will sometimes arise when victims of trauma will again be overwhelmed by sadness and negativity. Nonetheless, participants noted

that they were able to temper their negative emotions because of the new understandings of the self and others gained through their creative processes, the revelations found within their artworks and new experiences of intimacy gained from being part of the project. While participants recognised that trauma would always be part of their life, one lesson of the creative experience was that it did not have to continue to be a debilitating one.

Although all participants identified their pain, hurt and anger throughout the interviews and the mosaic project, few had considered these feelings in terms of loss and grief originating in their abuse. It was only when I suggested that loss and grief must surely be a consequence of sexual abuse that sense was made of lifelong feelings of disquiet and unhappiness. Participants' reflections indicated that issues of loss, grief and other emotions had never been addressed, nor had any of them been guided through a process of grieving for these very significant losses.

*I never, even five years ago, would have thought there was grief involved in the abuse. I thought [the art group] would be about working out how not to feel hurt, I never would have thought ... feelings would have come into it. So when you focus on a feeling or identify a feeling it enables you to focus in, rather than on this nebulous "Why am I feeling yuck?" Feeling grief is normal for what we have been through. Barb*

Counsellors verified the difficulty of addressing these immense feelings in counselling:

*I have seen people become quite stuck in their pain and grief and as a counsellor I have found that quite challenging in terms of enabling them to move on ... The only way I can describe it is being stuck, not being able to move past or move forward or heal ... Yes, I would say that generally in my experience clients, or survivors, generally have trouble in being able to name their sadness and name in their body where they feel it. Counsellor*

Herman argues that mourning is crucial if victims of trauma are to heal, but she also indicates that victims prefer to avoid their feelings of loss and grief for fear of opening themselves to uncontrollable tears and mourning (188). However, the over-

subscription to these groups, together with observations made in this and other projects, led me to suspect this view is not an entirely accurate one. Rather, I propose that victims crave the opportunity to mourn even if they fear they will “unravel”. I suspect that the failure to acknowledge then mourn more accurately reflects the impediments to mourning in therapy and when no guidance is offered to victims.

One observation of this thesis is that feelings of wretchedness exist precisely because the immense losses associated with trauma have not been properly acknowledged, and therefore not understood, mourned or accommodated. It is my contention that if victims are to enjoy a more harmonious life they must be courageous and move towards, examine, sit with and hold their sorrow in mourning.

*I am always scared of opening that Pandora's Box. It felt like, if I started, I would unravel. But I know now that things got put into that box slowly, and I think I have dealt with it in the same manner ... letting it come out in little bits and pieces. Indi*

As outlined in Chapter 3, texts relating to loss and grief rarely attend deeply to sexual or other forms of abuse; while texts relating to sexual abuse rarely pay appropriate attention to issues of loss and grief. The loss and grief literature is the more useful of the two as it offers guidance towards acknowledging and managing grief, although the focus is generally upon loss through death. Francis McNab takes a pragmatic approach to grief, arguing that it is necessary to address it in order to live an enjoyable life, albeit reshaped by the experience of loss. To remain in a state of grief is to “withdraw from life and inhibit its flow”, to commit “a gradual suicide”, he argues, a view that strongly mirrors my own observations that loss and grief work is imperative to wellbeing (41).

While informed by the loss, grief and abuse literature, my thesis, including the community projects, draws principally on the work of artists, including mine. Artworks and creative expressions of loss were brought to classes to deepen participants’ understanding of how complex human emotions might be contemplated and creatively expressed, as well as to offer a safe path along which to explore this emotional and painful territory.

Kollwitz, for example, is important for her accessible and compelling works that frequently have the mother and her grief at their centre. The memorial statues, *Grieving Parents*, discussed in the final chapter, provide important insights into human grief. Gormley and Ivimey reveal in their works the artist tackling and expressing the effects of alienation and silencing; for example, how these deep emotions can be expressed powerfully but with minimal detail. Dix, and Wolfthal's examples of *Rape in Art*, inspire a daring to express ugly emotions and situations, while artists such as Beuys, Ivimey and Kiefer, in stretching materials to new limits in their endeavour to articulate loss, gave participants the confidence to use what was available and required in their art without feeling undue constraint (Karcher; Wolfthal).

The artists' integrity and courage to explore humanity in artworks that demonstrated the complexity, density and richness of the human condition impacted deeply on participants, as did their growing understanding of how gruelling it can be to express intense feelings and ideas together. Each artist had swum in and, at times, almost drowned in these realms of humanness and sorrow. Each amassed a huge body of work as testimony to their immersion, and emerged intact, if not significantly altered by their experiences. That others had gone before, honoured, explored and expressed aspects of humanity in meaningful and accessible ways, was a revelation to participants who had lived much of their lives feeling alone in their sorrow and pain. Building on the discussion in the previous chapter on the creative use of materials, these artworks and artists are brought into consideration here for their potential contribution to participants' work and wellbeing.

The particular materials selected for each of the two community projects were, for one participant, useful metaphors for her own journey towards wellbeing. Where mosaics have a fixed exterior shape, clay has "no boundaries"; it's "more free". Where mosaic was putting "broken pieces back together", moulding the clay, shaping and reshaping is about moulding a future: "to feel a sense of possibility, creation". With clay, there is no need of tools. In this direct relationship between the hand and the clay, the work and the maker are truly integrated (indeed "body" describes both the maker and the material).

*That is probably why the clay is appropriate; the moulding is appropriate, because it is like creating, physically, myself. Christina*

Langer similarly describes this moulding as art “giving form to the world, it articulates human nature: sensibility, energy, passion and mortality. More than anything else ... the arts mould our actual life of feeling” (401).

Twenty women were each on an individual journey of loss and grief. Common threads of trauma, loss and grief connected them. Therefore, I structured the work around themes that were loose enough for creative exploration yet secure enough to safely contain participants’ emotions. Each week new themes, such as gesture, relationships, vulnerability, anger and letting go were introduced, enabling intensive work to unfold as participants held, acknowledged and expressed their loss and grief in their work. Participants interpreted themes as they found them to be useful, at times directly connecting with their sexual trauma, while at others relating them to seemingly unconnected losses, such as the death of loved ones. Each theme was supported by artworks and visual references. In the final weeks participants were encouraged to make the work necessary for their own expression and wellbeing. I no longer offered group themes but continued to offer ideas and themes to the few individuals needing guidance.

Loss and grief specialists argue that restoration is found through the important and challenging endeavour to find meaning and purpose post loss (Gillies and Neimeyer; Neimeyer; McNab). Meaning in the context of sexual abuse might include searching for reasons why and how the abuse occurred. However, I believe a search for meaning is often a search for understanding and a voice. It may be that comprehending the motivation of others will forever remain elusive. However, understanding one’s own emotional, intellectual and behavioural reactions to abuse need not remain so. Participants’ vulnerabilities, fears and ways of relating can reflect their immature state at the time of the abuse. Due to the trauma, these behaviours may not have significantly altered in the transition from child victim into adulthood. Part of the loss and grief work, including the search for meaning and restoration, was to examine and reflect, as adults, upon events that had occurred in

childhood and the feelings experienced at that time, as opposed to reflecting upon them with all the inherent fears and vulnerabilities of the child in danger.

Each participant made approximately ten to twelve art objects. The limitation of this chapter therefore is that only a small number of these works can be cited as examples, which feels restrictive because so much must be omitted. Nonetheless, through the examples I have chosen to discuss, the discussion here illustrates some of the many transformations that can occur through art-making, and shows how restoration of meaning through art takes place.

## **Artworks**

### ***Casting***

The loss and grief work was introduced through casting, chosen for its artistic and emotional manageability, especially for those with little experience of working in clay or plaster.<sup>35</sup> As a facilitator I needed to be mindful of participants' emotional vulnerabilities, particularly of overwhelming participants as they settled into the group. Plaster casting is a technique in which a tablet of wet clay is sculpted, impressed or drawn into and a low wall is built around the clay, creating a box-like structure into which Plaster of Paris is poured. Once the plaster has set, the clay and plaster are separated. Every impression made into the clay is present in the plaster cast, but transformed into a mirror and opposite image, thus indentations are raised, while raised areas become indentations; left is right; up is down; negative is positive. Distortion is the norm in this reverse and opposite artform.

One intention for introducing the loss and grief work through casting was that it offered a language through which participants could reappraise the impact of trauma and the behaviours of others, as well as participants' views on perfection and preconceptions about art. Perhaps this reappraisal might shift participants' distorted views of self-worth and capacity, as well as illuminate some of the many entrenched

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<sup>35</sup> The process described can be seen on the DVD of the work, included in the Appendix.

emotions and attitudes that had never been confronted. Casting encouraged participants' submission to the processes of creativity, to the work, making, touch and expression and encouraged participants to examine and abandon their brittle desire for control, to know the end before they had begun the work. In essence, participants were encouraged to be open to the process. Casting was a potent format through which the expression and impact of trauma could be examined and revealed. The imprint of touch, its ferocity or gentleness, even a fingerprint, can be captured first in the clay and then the plaster and as the clay is discarded after casting, with it go the physical marks made by the hand; all that remains is the scar, the shadow, the residue. With this technique, it became possible to physically express the trauma that remains within, long after physical marks have vanished.

Participants were encouraged to open their minds and eyes to looking and making, rather than relying wholly, or even partially, on conveying a narrative. If participants' artworks were to express authentic feelings of loss and grief, then learning to look at, think about and make art in ways that extended beyond narrative and what was currently known about art-making was an important first step. Visual pleasure and the "affect" Bennett describes is derived from the marks, textures and presence of the maker's hand on the surface of an artwork that imbue a work with emotion that is felt, as well as seen. In this work, art was about evoking rather than telling; giving expression to what is felt, silenced, unacknowledged and not understood.

Casting provided a vehicle to discover the non-verbal and non-narrative expression of feeling or affect through the sensation of making, then through looking and experiencing. It is not easy to shed assumptions. Some participants struggled with the conceptual nature of the project while others embraced this negative/positive approach and applied it readily to their particular situation:

*As a rape victim, you feel something; as a rapist, they feel the opposite. They would feel egotistical and elated, whereas as a rape victim, you are rock bottom; obviously the rapist has got an ego, and the rape victim hasn't.*

*I thought that (the casting) was really good, because what is bad for me and horrible to me would have been great and acceptable for him. Maria*

The creation of personal, meaningful artwork is a private endeavour; its purpose is to communicate principally with the maker, and sometimes with a wider audience. However, as participants had already experienced significant lack of care from others, it was important that each develop a personal visual language that incorporated meaningful symbols and metaphors that could shield their vulnerabilities from those who may cause them harm. Participants brought objects to press or embed into the clay and these became public symbols for private losses. Baby shoes, keys, screws, plant life, figurines and dolls were amongst the objects chosen. Many casts are exquisite in their beauty and beguiling in their intent. We rarely shared the story behind artworks, but learned to look and allow our emotions, rather than our intellects, to respond.

*Broken Child* (Figure 1), a cast of an articulated doll, is a striking example. The dismembered doll is reconfigured with legs akimbo, head separate from the body, one arm raised and the other lowered at the side. It references feelings of fragmentation and sorrow. The participant underscored her message, possibly redundantly, with the words "Broken" above and "Child" below. Its crudeness, unsmoothed-off areas and wobbly lettering contribute to the expression of the rawness of her emotion. Although no details of her circumstances are revealed we are left in no doubt of her torment.

Rather than detract from the artwork, the lack of narrative enables *Broken Child* to communicate widely. In expressing herself thus, the maker touched her own pain as well as connected to other participants who similarly felt "broken", and with those of us who do not:

*It took me back to places that were useful and painful, addressing it before you move on. We talked about doing a few [casts] and bringing them [the pieces] back together; but I didn't really ever see it coming back together. Jade, maker*

*Oh this broken child one, it absolutely knocked my socks off. I thought ... even as an adult I feel like this broken child ... Elizabeth, fellow participant*

Those who felt alone and largely not understood found that the creative communication with themselves and with others, between the maker and the viewer, and between making and looking penetrated the desolation of loneliness. This may be an example of the “dialogic aesthetic” Kester discusses. When others in the group understood a participant’s artwork, feelings of being “the other” were reduced and a potent step was provided to reconnect with “the outside world”.

In her entry interview, Deirdre said that she wanted to reconnect with the creativity she felt had been lost in the sorrow surrounding her abuse and subsequent mental illness. The creation of a large and complex cast, *Angel* (Figure 2)<sup>36</sup> enabled her to reshape, indeed create, feelings of comfort where none had previously existed:

*I loved that one above all the others. The angel I pressed into the middle represents me as a child, kneeling down, and all around the edge are the little angels. It represents me as a little child with angels surrounding me, protecting me; well that’s how I would have liked it to have been.* Deirdre

Art-making enables the exploration of the loss of what might have been, as well as what once was. Robert Witkin’s observation that the artist is “not representing the world, but creating one” (in Minge 270) reflects Deirdre’s motivations for creating *Angel* and participants’ discovery that the love and security not properly provided by others could be available through art-making. In the creation of their own world, participants found the means to self-soothe, and a place of comfort.

The conceptualisation of casting and its application to their own experience of trauma and loss was too abstract for some. One participant felt “only frustration” with the technique; nothing worked as she had hoped. Nonetheless, one piece, she said, “really had a powerful effect on me. When I took it home and I opened it up, I felt real movement, of the pain”. Hers had been a life of extraordinary abuse and pain.

The casting process helped detach the maker from the sorrowful and negative emotions that inhabit every cell of their bodies yet defy expression. The

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<sup>36</sup> Photo of *Angel* featured on the cover of the 2009 SECASA calendar.

transformation and objectification of their emotions into plaster helped participants witness their pain. "It does upset me", the participant says, "but that's ok, because I usually don't feel anything". The participant was referring to her habit of dissociation. Significantly, she was articulating how art-making enabled emotions to emerge naturally and be accessed through the senses and subconscious. She indicated that locating, then describing the trauma history and its effects verbally had been largely unsuccessful in accessing deeply buried memories and feelings, whereas art-making had "kind of help move a rock, a solid lump that verbalisation and counselling wasn't actually accessing".

Most participants were engaged by the casting process and its possibilities. One participant, whose usual habit was to think and talk in metaphor, found the process helpful in reshaping her understanding of positive and negative, and what constitutes right and wrong. Casting prompted her to contemplate the fluidity of the truth; and her contemplations again reminded me of Dori Laub's story of the Holocaust survivor recounting the destruction of the Auschwitz chimneys, mistaking in the magnitude of the destruction of one as signifying the destruction of all four (Felman and Laub 59).

*I found the plaster technique of the "in and out", the "positive and the negative", and the rationale you chose to express in that medium, was amazing and very useful ... to see a positive or negative reaction or effect to my situation. When you were explaining what kind of effects that you could get into the plaster and the clay, that was really exciting.*

*The thing is that unless you are consciously thinking about positive and negative, you can get something wrong. So obviously, when you are telling someone a story, you might be telling the truth, but it might be coming out technically incorrect. But legitimately, the reason is correct. That was very interesting, because if you are explaining something or a situation it can go a little bit like Chinese whispers; it can go a little bit wrong. So I thought that was a really good introduction. I thought that was amazing. Maria*

Counsellors considered the process of casting for its therapeutic values. One viewed it as "incredibly powerful" for its ability "to stimulate the brain to develop new

neurological pathways”, helping participants “make new directional pathways for the life that they want to live, rather than the one they have been living.” The “back to front, upside down” process of casting usefully illustrated that when the brain does not have a schema to work through the idea, it creates one. This leads participants to recognise their capacity to learn and be flexible: “then you can move them in new directions that they may not have been able to move in before” (Counsellor).

## **Clay**

Following the plaster casting participants were introduced to working sculpturally with clay. Its inherent qualities as an organic material with the smell and feel of the earth were among the reasons it was selected as a useful material for the group. It is visually, emotionally and sensually pleasurable to use and, because of its affordability, it is easy to be generous with it. Additionally, because most participants were not familiar enough with it to have preconceptions about it or their capacity to use it none had formed opinions about what is “good” or “bad” art in this medium. Clay is rarely tainted by the disabling attitudes held towards other materials, such as Derwent coloured pencils’ association with beauty or status, or paint and its connection to masterful works of art.

I have been surprised to hear and read of therapists’ concern for client’s wellbeing using this material, for reasons including the user’s aversion to touch, clay’s materiality, including mess, and its ability to “move people emotionally and quickly”.<sup>37</sup> My descriptions of participants’ engagement with the material are offered to allay some misplaced concerns.

The participants’ enthusiastic responses to the qualities of clay – its texture, “squashiness”, “being able to poke it” and mould it – indicate that the material itself provides one of the deepest pleasures of creating, and this had a considerable impact on participants’ enjoyment and engagement with the work and the discoveries they made. Their expressions of utter joy and excitement in working with the material were surprising and pleasing; their anxieties about their emotional issues were eclipsed by

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<sup>37</sup> Discussion with an art therapist following creative arts training, conducted by Centre Against Sexual Assault, December 2008.

the desire to use the clay, and “just getting my hands into the heavenly stuff ...” motivated participants to continue with the grief work, even at its most difficult.

*I felt like I grew a bit more within myself by using this particular material in being able to explore myself. Amelia*

The natural feel of clay calms and soothes. The sensuality, coolness and moistness of clay engaged participants with the pleasures of touch, offering victims of trauma satisfying sensual experiences. Its messiness offered one way for victims of childhood sexual abuse to experience the lost pleasures of their childhood and shed the constraints of maintaining control.

*Touch for me is probably a way of releasing pain ... because I’ve always liked doing things with my hands. I find it gets in touch with me; it seems to get in touch with something in there. Christina*

The clay, unlike moulding materials such as plasticine or “school clay”, is a professional-quality art material and therefore functions according to the tasks required of it. The provision of appropriate materials validated both the women and the work, and said to those who felt “unworthy” that they and their expression and artworks were worthy.

*It wasn’t like the brick clay used at school, no stones. You could do the composition you wanted. The freedom of it! Paula*

Clay has a capacity to accept emotion, a phenomenon that is difficult to explain, although many participants commented on it: “Emotions flowed through the fingers” into the clay, and the work “just appeared” and “it would be right”. One participant said that when she relaxed and focused the art sometimes emerged naturally:

*I would just get the posture or an expression on the face, and I would think, “that’s just what I wanted”. I’ve actually, sort of managed it ... You have unconsciously thought, “I had to do this, I have to do that”, it just sort of happened sometimes, not always, but sometimes. Linda*

These almost accidental creative moments ought not be dismissed for their lack of cognitive intention. Rather they must be valued and respected for the wonder of the maker and material working in harmony to access and express what can be intangible, and intellectually and verbally inaccessible.

*In the beginning, my hands were just feeling the clay and I was just poking with my finger. I had no idea why but it just felt good. One day when I wanted to do something, it didn't work, and that was really frustrating. When I let my mind go ... then what I want to do with it came. Does that make sense?*

Bella

Participants were encouraged to experiment with combinations of materials, including paper and natural fibres. These enabled unorthodox creative expression. How materials are transformed by the intense environment of the kiln became a useful metaphor, just as it had in my own work (Chapter 6), leading to new possibilities of exploring and expressing strength, resilience and transformation, as well as thoughts and feelings difficult to verbally describe, such as the sensation of feeling “dead inside”, or separate from the world. One participant applied this metaphor of transformation by comparing the clay and the women. Like the clay, she said, women seem soft, malleable and weak. Like clay being made durable by the firing process, those who have survived extreme tension find they too have remarkable resilience and strength.

As it tended to embed fragility and unpredictability into the work, this experimentation had the unexpected consequence of liberating participants from their anxieties about how their work might emerge from the kiln. Accepting it might break, some boldly pushed the materials to their limit. The collapse of one artwork in the kiln was accepted by its maker as furthering her metaphor of vulnerability and fragility.

Through this experimentation with materials, a practice that lies well outside any conventional community ceramic practice, participants developed a specific visual language to convey their experiences of trauma, loss and grief. In this, the thesis can claim truly new territory.

## ***Gesture and Body***

For figurative sculpture to communicate with its viewer, gesture must be amongst the considerations of the maker. Gesture is the pose, the expression of human form and movement; it is the map of the weight and bends of the body. The gesture also expresses emotion.

Group discussions about gesture revealed a lack of visual awareness of the human body in general and individuals' bodies in particular. Few understood how one body part connects with another, how the body is articulated to move or balance, or the proportions of the body. Women who have experienced sexual abuse are known to have unhappy and often unhealthy relationships with their bodies (Herman) and most participants' attitudes reflected this; they seemed disengaged from their own bodies. In addition, some had an eating disorder, were obese, or were self-harming through cutting; most were unable to see their body's beauty, or enjoy it sensually or sexually. Most participants dressed somberly in clothes that obscured their feminine curves.

Participants were taught the skill of close and careful observation and how to speak about the body using objective and neutral language. This equipped them to observe and discuss their own and others' bodies without embarrassment. The links between body and mind that had been severed through abuse were being reconnected through observing, thinking creatively and metaphorically touching their own and others' bodies in clay. Once encouraged, and with a vocabulary for engaging with and discussing the body, personal revelations and uncertainties about the body emerged. Themes such as the body altered through childbearing and menopause, ignorance of the male body, and other bodily subjects were gently offered for discussion. While this sort of intimacy may be typical of all-female groups, in this group it was profound demonstrated that art-making and the connections it enabled provided women with the tools and courage to go to the heart and site of their wounds.

Making the work was hard and demanded perseverance. The artworks, especially the early pieces, were confronting as they uncovered emotions that had long been concealed from view and thought. Christina's circular piece *Pain* (Figure 3), *Heads* (Paula, Christina, Catherine), Catherine's *Woman Crying*, and Bella's *CASA Dolls*

(Figure 4) captured agonising pain and sorrow through the integration of bodily and emotive gestures, leaving viewers in no doubt of the distress of the maker. On the one hand, these works seemed to almost demand they be made and, on the other, they had almost to be dragged out of the participants. The pieces were revelatory and eventually became much-loved precious objects because of what had been emoted through them.

*Well, the screaming is just frustration, and the crying lady is just feeling stripped of dignity and anything else that you want to put in there, just really having an absolute fall apart session, totally exposed. I suppose that is how I felt. The screaming ones, this is the result of what has happened and I am still trying and I'm getting there, trying to muddle my way through life and undoing all that was done in the past. The way of thinking, the way of being, bringing up kids, gee I didn't have exactly the best role models ... Catherine*

Because the abuse had compromised the capacity for emotional self-regulation, the emotional reactions of this population could be extreme. Excessive and loud talking and laughing were among behaviours repeatedly used by some participants to avoid confronting the emotionally challenging tasks of the work. As the distractions impeded the work the women had come to do, I frequently and actively refocused attention towards the artwork, sometimes playing quiet music and insisting on silence for short periods. The reduction of noise was an important step towards making what I call honest work, art that can only emerge from a deep emotional engagement.

The women learned new ways to express their intense emotions that challenged their reliance on comfortable, but ultimately unhelpful habits, such as avoidance. My urging of participants to give full attention to their artwork helped them understand that it is possible to access and express their difficult emotions without "unravelling". The process showed they could exceed their own limited expectations of their abilities to cope.

*I think that's what art is – it is the mindfulness. You're mindful of that moment and looking at it for what it is, rather than getting confused with all the rest of it, what is going around it. Indi*

Taboos were largely conquered soon after participants stepped into this quieter place, which was so recently uncharted territory. Participants and counsellors noticed significant shifts in how issues so recently unspoken or unspeakable were raised, discussed and resolved. The women's isolation had tended to reduce their exposure to social opportunities that might have offered them the chance to measure their thoughts and vulnerabilities against others'. In sharing their "unspoken" issues with the group, insight into their own and others' behaviours was gained, comfort was given and received, and how to regulate emotions was learned or practised. This helped to limit some distortions:

*... the social aspect of it and the ability to practise of those social skills. In watching many people over the course of the group, it was a coming together of those skills, learning tolerance with other people, to be less defensive ... feeling safer within that environment and as a result becoming more relaxed into the work and not so focused ... on anxieties. Counsellor*

## **Empty**

One recurring expression, "that empty feeling in my stomach", suggested participants felt their losses in their bodies; yet most were unable to name the feeling or identify a precise reason for the sensation. A significant contribution to participants' search for meaning, touched on in the plaster-cast discussion, was that not only was the concept of presence relevant, so also was acknowledgment of absence.

Two photos, one of a stone niche in an English church and the other of a hollow in a German beech forest floor (Figure 5), illustrate how empty does not necessarily mean "not full" or "without". These are sites of trauma. Both reveal and conceal the occurrence of a traumatic event, yet neither display suffering. The niche is empty of a statue destroyed, along with much church iconography, during the Reformation. The hollow is one of the many thousands of graves of prisoners shot and buried in the forest of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Rather than being empty, as it appears to be, the hollow is full. In their beauty and tranquillity, neither the image nor the place reflects the trauma and brutality that created them. However, the perceived emptiness cannot negate the trauma that created it.

Some participants shared this inability to reveal their suffering. Many had realised that, like these beautiful places, outwardly they too appeared one way – competent, or as Barb claimed, “mad” – while below the surface their trauma and suffering had lain largely unnoticed and unknown.

*If you have a disability like one leg shorter than the other, people notice it, and you know you're limited by that disability, but you find ways to adapt. But you are never really the same as everybody else. I think the huge impact of grief is pretty much the same thing. The difference is nobody is aware of it, nobody makes allowances for you, nobody will give you a hand up because it is unacknowledged and invisible, and so you find ways to adapt, ways of coping, acting as if everything is just fine. But it is always with you. Helen*

The sense of living this disjointed exterior and interior life augmented women's feelings of isolation and disconnection. The images of the niche and hollow along with the surrounding conversations offered clarity and legitimacy to feelings of emptiness and absence. Participants also saw creative ways to explore and express this nebulous emotion.

In Figure 6 we gaze into this emptiness in an uncomfortable and comfortless woman bent almost double in anguish. Her arms fall before her, empty of the infants she did not bear; her head is oversized and featureless. Nearby are four unformed babies. This is an unambiguous distillation of sorrow and loss.

*I spent ages doing this; smoothing it down and you pointed out, because I wasn't even aware of it but that stroking thing was like an integral part of the comforting thing and I hadn't really thought of it like that, but it's true. I just wanted to make it all smooth, but that emptiness, you see, there are no breasts, there is no womb. It is all empty. That is obviously to signify the loss of the babies.*

*The babies are all over here. They are kind of discarded. She is grieving their loss, they are there but she can't hold them, she can't reach out and touch*

*them, she is just apart from them. So that was really important for me, yes very, very important. Helen*

The work's significance lies in its physicality. "There is something about moulding it and holding it", she said, referring to the tactility of the material, the "stroking" the mother and "moulding" the babies. The temperature and structure of clay is reminiscent of skin. Her stroking and moulding enabled acts of love and of self-comfort; there was an acknowledgement of her own very great pain and the expression of motherly love and care she was unable to provide her lost babies. In the empty arms, the mother's loss; in the empty breasts, the mother's inability to nurture; in the making of the babies, the opportunity to "hold each of those little babies whilst I was doing it. It was a way of acknowledging that, yes, these are my babies that I lost".

The symbolic making of lost loved objects was significant. Its importance lay in the maker's defiance to lovingly acknowledge each of her lost babies when those responsible for the losses deemed them inconsequential. It also lies in her now showing care for the lost babies and herself, which had previously been impossible. It is reminiscent of the care Christina showed towards her mosaic child, *Me*, in the face of an uncaring sister (Chapter 5).

Helen says the work "took me a long time". Although speaking literally about making the sculptures, she might have been talking about the time it took her to arrive at the point where she could mourn her losses. The experiences over which she and others grieve so deeply were frequently born of events that occurred many years before.

*It is all just hushed up and you keep walking along as if nothing has happened. And inside, you are just so ruined. Helen*

This loss and grief group was the first occasion any participant was offered a sanctuary in which to openly and purposefully mourn. Carving out "special time for me" to attend the group each week ensured that the creative expression of sorrow was respected by the women themselves and those around them. Participants gave

thoughtful consideration to their emotional, past and present lives between sessions in the knowledge that time was available to them for creative processing. The sessions were a point in the week to look forward to, for their pleasurable activity, but also a means to contain emotions from spilling uncontrollably over others or into the rest of the week. For some, the journey to and from the creative space provided time to prepare for, and then reflect upon the work being undertaken.

### ***Creating Relationships***

The early theme *Create a Relationship* offered participants space to acknowledge the role others have played in their lives and losses, and encouraged an unflinching look into an important relationship. The theme touched aspects of emotional lives that had lain dormant for years, making visible the pain of loss, fears, guilt and personal limitations.

Some participants chose to examine the relationship between themselves and their abuser, while others chose to spend time with lost relationships, especially with now dead family members. One woman attempted to create a work around the possibility of romantic love, but found it unachievable at the time.

For Indi, and many others, the mother was near the centre of the abuse experience; feelings of being betrayed by their mother's inability or unwillingness to keep them safe, and the mother's lack of care following the abuse, resonated negatively. Indi's own poor experience of being mothered tainted the perception she had of herself in the role of mother (discussed in Chapter 5), which had been particularly overwhelming each time she was pregnant.

Her relational sculptures were of a small girl being pursued by a larger man. The girl is cowering with hands to her head in fear. In the making, Indi revisited her pregnancies, a time when she felt unsafe and overwhelmed by fears of being unable to keep safe her soon to be born child, "I had that primal feeling of protecting your young". Her work, however, not of a mother protecting but a child cowering, was at

odds with this intention. What did she want the artwork to say? "Fragility, stepping around people out of fear, eggshells, vulnerability and failure", she said.

The habit of contorting appropriate emotions until, once again, the victim is at centre of fault and blame was common amongst this population. It was an extraordinary and painful thing to watch. Women carried "in their sack", as one described it, a plethora of thoughts and feelings that had little to do with who they were or how they behaved, but rather, reflected others' behaviours or attitudes. Minds had been "programmed", as another describes it, to believe the received messages of failure, worthlessness, ugliness and incompetence. Having now known Indi for more than a year, I could see she had not failed her children; a negative self-perception maligned her achievements and was the burden she carried.

Together we interrogated the destructive emotions, her truth. The questions I posed responded to offers she was making through her art, and hinged on a discussion about gesture. Is this a girl or a mother? What is she doing? How does the gesture inform the intent of the artwork? Our discussion was useful in "clarifying the thought; clarifying the feeling", she said, and led to the re-creation of the female as a largely pregnant woman being pursued by a now smaller man. His outstretched arm reaches for her shoulder. The woman re-emerged in another sculpture as erect, voluptuous and steadfast in her intent. She is saying "No!" (Figure 7).

*I really had trouble trying to put those feelings into an action, because I was so upset that day. But I think you helped me; because you were giving me specific words that I could attach the emotions to. Indi*

Artwork helped legitimise and honour participants' feelings. When reflecting upon those artworks that were especially difficult to create, participants noted that the physical presence of their emotional turmoil in their artwork was extremely important. The object made it possible for them and others to witness the maker's pain. Art-making helped participants separate out, then deal with specific experiences and feelings; in so doing, emotions were contained. Rather than being overwhelmed by the weight of their emotions, "the jumble in my head", as one woman described it, the women were soothed by creating.

One participant used the concept of “separating out” her feelings to meditate upon a range of traumatic events and losses:

*They were something separate. I made sure that I would move back and mentally think about the losses, whether that would be people, or animals or family or wars that surfaced, and my own unique experiences. Kate*

Through the creative consciousness required to physically separate and put confused emotions into an artwork, a sense of clarity was reached that many acknowledged was more useful than avoidance and more sustaining than talking with a counsellor. The ephemeral nature of the spoken word can limit the possibilities for truths to take hold and for these women, to make sense of their abuse and its impact. By contrast, however, the physical presence of the artwork made feelings and experiences real.

*I found it so useful because you don't always get that from going to speak to a counsellor. I think a lot of the focus is just about how to deal with and then move on that from that space; in those moments it gives you the opportunity to deal with that emotion at that moment, not just brush it off. By brushing it off, it surfaces again. I think that was a huge thing for me. Indi*

### ***Difficult Emotions and Relationships***

Linde Ivimey's intriguing humanlike sculptures are made of bones and rough-hewn earthy-toned fabrics; heads are covered, and silent, and all but a few are faceless. The most potent exude powerlessness, innocence and feelings of imposition. Bones stripped of their internal structural obligations are instead made visible; they creep out from fingerless gloves, serve to adorn, and are hand-sewn into a mesh-like exterior more evocative of the Middle Ages than the twenty-first century. The former interior of the body is rendered decorative and impenetrable, beautiful and revolting, benign yet born of death. Participants were drawn towards these enigmatic figures only to be repelled by their shocking materiality. Ivimey's work alludes to human vulnerability, particularly of the innocent and the child. Curious relationships constructed between figures, and between figures with other creatures, bring to mind stories that

participants told of relationships they had fostered with animals, and in one case a spider, to ameliorate their desperate childhood loneliness.

In *Primus and Felician*, two headless adults stand hand in hand holding a distraught child caged in a playpen above their heads. The two standing figures are united in their activity but disconnected and seemingly oblivious to the child's distress. It is not difficult to imagine why this work aroused participants' passionate responses: Ivimey had touched an open wound. In her capacity to hold the vulnerability of the voiceless, the powerless and the child, the artist showed empathy, offered affirmation of the child's pain to those who felt abandoned and alone in their sorrow and who most needed to receive such affirmation. In another work, *Twelve Apostles*, figures walk shoelessly in single file; each head is fully covered, with nothing of the face visible. The specific intentions of the artist, or mine in showing the work, were of no concern to participants, whose emotions were vehemently provoked by the sensory deprivation depicted.

*It was really quite moving for me, maybe it was their heads and they don't have faces, they don't have mouths. There was just the sense in those of being voiceless. They weren't speaking, they couldn't speak, because they looked like they were marching, didn't they? They are acting out life, they are going through life but they don't actually have any voice. Christina*

*Twelve Apostles* opened a conversation about the voicelessness and silencing that surrounds sexual abuse, and the work's unique visual vocabulary opened new avenues through which intense and buried emotions could be explored and expressed. Where I saw vulnerability in Ivimey's figures, many participants, possibly noticing a reflection of their own subjugation and voicelessness, saw anger. They empathised with these hapless creatures and felt anger on their behalf, possibly a substitution for the unexpressed anger surrounding their own neglect and violation.

Throughout both my projects with women participants, an undercurrent of anger loomed like a threatening storm. This heavy emotion was hinted at in many conversations and in works such as Barb's *Nude*. However, it had not been released and most women instead turned it inwards and expressed it through self-harming

behaviours, depression, guilt and self-recrimination. Ivimey's work was the catalyst to releasing the pent-up storm. It provoked extraordinary discussions and artworks in which women revealed an anger that belied their external demeanours:

*I may look placid on the outside, but inside I am seething. I have a rage inside me that I know if it were to explode out, I could probably hurt somebody. Very badly.* Amelia

The visual vocabulary I developed and incorporated in my art practice (discussed in Chapter 5), and that of other artists was now especially useful in helping participants identify and express their anger. Although the intent behind the effigies Wolfthal describes is different from the purpose of this work, the materials used in the construction of these ancient artefacts provided a powerful material inspiration to participants to express their fury.

Otto Dix's overt and graphic style of depicting human moral vacancy, unsightly victims and animalistic sexual behaviours, was not emulated in participants' work. However, I suspect it obliquely contributed to the freedom participants felt to assert their most venomous emotions. Dix professes that art responding to war was sanitised: "one side of reality hadn't been betrayed at all; ugliness" (Karcher 43). Now, as then, most people prefer to veil scenes of human deficiency and ugliness rather than engage with the harsh reality of it. However, as the participants themselves experienced, Dix observes that rather than diminish with time, the memory of his trauma became more burdensome. Only by looking into the abyss and creating his uncompromising artworks were his own traumatic experiences assuaged. He believed that art is the only means of "banishing" the burden of the war years (Karcher 30). That artists were seen to express their full range of emotions supported participants to courageously "see things through different eyes", then gaze into and confront their own abyss.

Participants asserted that the expression of anger was rarely, if ever, included in therapeutic work. It is not only odd, but also aberrant, that victims' legitimate negative emotional responses to abuse are not, as a matter of course, guided into meaningful expression. How can a victim of violence move towards a place of acceptance and a fulfilling life without acknowledging her anger? It concerns me that

the fear of participants' anger being poorly expressed and causing harm to both the victim and others is overstated and further silences already "voiceless" individuals. It was clear from participants' admissions and behaviour their anger was held under very tight control, which, as I witnessed, harms women in different and insidious ways, such as erratic driving leading to car accidents, inappropriate emotional responses to people and events, and serious health issues.

*To be honest we haven't covered it, we haven't gone to that side of it yet with the counselling. Actually it was the first time I was able to express it here in the art class. I haven't gone that deeply with my counsellor with the trauma at this stage. But I am making great steps towards that direction now. I can honestly say that I have tried to express it more here than I have in my therapy. Amelia*

Unlike simply pummelling a lump of clay, shouting or using violence, creating an art object is a directed, contained and a useful expression of anger. It neither threatens nor harms. Rather than uncontrolled outpourings offering no real resolution, the creative expression of anger in this case was considered and thoughtful, enabling participants to confront angry feelings and assess the origin of that anger through expression. Creativity not only relieved, it released negative feelings, as the examples described below demonstrate, and it structures and contains, as I point out above.

Judith Rubin says: "The dark side is more easily expressed in art, precisely because the aesthetic and psychic distance provided by the symbol allows people to say things long before they are ready to own them". In her view, victims are often "deeply ashamed" of their "bad thoughts", taking a long time coming to terms with, then verbalising, them. Art-making expedites the process, she claims. Rubin believes that when "the unacceptable thoughts, feelings, and impulses can be seen and accepted, the individual is then free to use his or her energy for more constructive goals" (26). Many women attested to their creative expression of anger "speeding recovery up, because it was slow".

The *Man with Nails* (Figure 8) sits naked and relaxed, one hand gently beckoning "come on, come and sit with me", said Indi, who had been abused as a teenager. "I was really angry because it was the idea of him sitting on the couch, relaxed, coaxing me in ..." In abusing her, this man had also abused his position in her family. The participant first considered portraying her abuser as a "hideous monster". To view the abuser or others responsible for committing atrocities as a "monster" may be preferable to confronting a more unpalatable reality: that he is one of us or that the abuse is motivated neither by concern for nor indeed malice towards a victim. Hannah Arendt coined the term "the banality of evil" to describe such a reality. Arendt, an observer at the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, describes "the dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetrated them ... everybody could see that this man was not a monster". She sees in him "remoteness from reality" and wondered at "such thoughtlessness" that had wreaked "more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together" (Geddes 108).

Indi conceded that making her abuser human was necessary if she was to express her anger effectively, but "it was hard making him!". In reassessing her abuser from her adult perspective, she realised "he is just a normal looking human being", and in place of the "monster" she saw only a flawed man. The diminution of his immense power over her had begun.

Those who revealed aspects of their abuse often spoke of the abuser's "ordinariness", the "ordinary-looking" man, the "working" man, the "contributor to community life", and a man "respected amongst his peers". Yet, that "ordinary" person continued to loom large in many of the women's lives. The abuser's oversized character held participants in his power long after the abuse had ended, and in some instances, long after he had died.

Once the participant was satisfied with the "humanness" of her sculpture, she attacked. She nailed his "come on" hand to his leg; she pierced his eyes, penis and jugular with nails; and for good measure she plunged a screw into his brain. She and others commented on the effort required to push the nails into the clay, as if that effort was comparable to actually harming somebody. It does sound and look

gruesome, like it was “made by a crazy person”, she admitted, but “you kind of do it and then leave it. It doesn’t become this thing that then grinds away at your brain or your body. Because it is done, it is there.” The presence of the work validated her anger, then released of it.

Participants displayed an undeniable pleasure in artistically dominating the person who had once overpowered them. The transference of power, the weak becoming strong and the strong becoming weak became a theme that was revisited, in slightly different forms, throughout the project. The various materials’ metamorphosis in extreme conditions was a particularly helpful metaphor through which many contemplated and described this complex relationship between the abuser and the abused. The abusers, once seen as being all-powerful by the vulnerable victim, were now being artistically and publicly reviewed. In the process they were found to be very ordinary and very deficient.

*The reality is, that he doesn’t look like a monster so it felt really good then to make him look normal and then to totally be nasty. It was so ... “holy shit that felt good”! It really did, because it went from being, there was a part of me that really felt like that little kid again, making him comfortable and then... It gave me that moment of vengeance. I know it is not a real person. Indi*

When she saw the artwork again after it had been fired, she laughed, “I always wanted to do that!”. There was merriment, rather than hysteria, in the laughter she shared with the other women who similarly confessed to harbouring violent fantasies. Surprisingly, some visitors to the art-room, particularly those from organisations used to dealing with sex crimes, were disquieted by the work. One told me she had been startled by the women’s anger. I found these responses intriguing and wondered if the work had upset their perceptions of abused women.

The process of creating *Man with Nails* alleviated for Indi a long-carried desire to cause real harm to her abuser: “I always thought that if I saw him and I was in my car, I would run over him”. Although she was unsure of how she would react if she was to see the abuser again, she said she was better able to put her relationship with him into context, seeing him as:

*Someone who hasn't been in my life for so many years, to be free of that ... I don't even fantasise about seeing him and running him over.*

Making her artwork, as well as the artwork being witnessed by others, shifted her perceptions. She recognised her fantasy of harming the abuser had "held her prisoner" and commanded her attention, in various ways, for half her life. In shedding the burden of her desire to harm him, and her fear of acting on that desire, she was liberated to put that energy elsewhere. She described making the work as "huge".

### ***Breaking the Silence***

The women made some startling artworks. One that caught the attention of most was a sculpture of three upright penises bound in a noose; a heartfelt expression of what Catherine says, "ruined my life". *Three Penises* (Figure 9) emerged after Catherine arrived at the art session in a state of distress, and followed a discussion in which she bemoaned how her past constantly imposed upon her present and threatened her current happy relationship with a new and kind partner.

"That was a hard piece, it was a very hard day that day", she said, indicating the effort and pain involved in creating the work, which looked into the past to deal with current concerns. It would be a mistake to read the blatancy of the piece simply as a juvenile response to the freedom she had to express, or for its shock value. The confrontation caused her personal turmoil, drawing her towards the self-censorship witnessed in so many of the participants: "There was a part of me that thought: You shouldn't be doing this...". However, she allowed her inner censor to be muted because she believed that being part of an art group entitled her to freedom of expression:

*I thought, "Hang on a minute, that's art! Who's to say how it should be formed or how it should look at the end? And I thought, "No, I have got to do it".*

Catherine

It might be argued that as three individual penises they revealed little, and were juvenile and crude. However, the addition of the noose around the group "*changed*

*the whole look of it, instead of being what they were, it was, 'Oh, there is a point to you doing them'".*

The artwork that emerged expresses the force of her feelings: "It was from the abuse. That's what ruled my life. Guys". But rather than lassoing all men, the rope purposefully restrains only three, separating these males from her current relationships with her son, new partner and others she recognised as being good people. The rope portrays a boundary. In its shockingness *Three Penises* indicated her acceptance that all men are not the same; it helped move her to be more open to, and appreciative of, the good qualities of her new partner.

The work received much attention. It was difficult and embarrassing for her to look at it and receive commentary that did not align with the feelings she had when creating it:

*It is like you're one of those men that stuffed with my head and everything revolves around your dick basically and that's what I was trying to express and as I said, it wasn't meant to be crude it was just an expression of how frustrated I was because of the "important" men in my life ...*

The work of artist Louise Bourgeois was usefully brought to the conversation as an example of an artist working with similar themes. Traumatized in her early childhood by the sexual behaviour of others, Bourgeois deliberates through sculpture and drawing upon the effects that have lingered throughout her life. She contemplates themes of the status of women, sexual inequality, brutality and emotional carelessness. She dismembers the body and uses only the parts – the breast, penis, open female legs – to suggest the failure of some to become, or be seen as, complete and integrated beings. Her depiction of a penis hanging with a wire piercing its tip, *Fillette*, is one graphic example (Smith 14, Berndac). Bourgeois's work, like Dix's, provided the buoys to help participants navigate through the self-doubt and scrutiny of others. It helped participants express their challenging emotions, which helped anchor participants' work to the purpose of their creative expression.

*Three Penises*, and all this work about anger, invites questions about how and why the silence surrounding participants' sexual abuse had been perpetuated by the reluctance to engage with victims' ugly emotions. It was evident that through the artworks and the processes of making them participants had examined the emotional effects of maintaining their silence. However, they were also forced to acknowledge the potential consequences of their creativity:

*All I have done all of my life is skirt around things because I'm worried about what other people will think and what they are going to say.*

She gave a now familiar account of outsiders seeing only the effects of abuse, such as the victim's poor behaviour, without ever looking beyond it, asking questions or seeking reasons that might explain it:

*And this is my way of saying "This is why". And I am finally going to speak out, "No he is not as good as you think he is. No, he is not an upstanding citizen". So finally I am actually able to speak out without worrying about what they are going to think.*

Until victims comprehensively confronted their feelings about the abuse and their abuser/s, they remained partially emotionally arrested, frightened and intimidated; stuck in the emotions they felt at the time of abuse. The effect of creating the artwork after being silenced and not believed was, for most, like stepping out of a shadow to take their rightful place in adulthood. This participant no longer felt compelled to maintain the silence; she creatively liberated herself so she could better trust and maintain a sound adult relationship with her new partner and children. Some of her more impetuous behaviours fell away because her need to shout in order to be heard and understood had diminished.

Being in the creative space and part of an empathetic group enabled the work and therefore provoked resolutions. The creative time and space available were essential for this participant to pass through an initial stage of shocking, then work into the idea until it reached this place of resolution. Her "fictive kin" fully accepted, encouraged and supported her (Winter and Sivan). Catherine's journey towards resolution

emphasised the point I raised in Chapter 5 about women arriving in a state of chaos then achieving inner calm through making art. The creative space and process is the place for that intense emotion to exist, thereby diminishing its destructive potency.

*Three Penises* was one of about twelve artworks Catherine made, each addressing particular aspects of her abuse, losses and grief. Rarely were individual creations solely responsible for participants' big shifts of perception. An internal space in which Catherine could make this work and undergo a transformation had already been prepared by the artworks created in the weeks before, the conversations she had heard and contributed to and the art she had seen and felt. *Three Penises* is part of a continuum; more artworks, further explorations and revelations followed. Meaning was ultimately found through her total creative engagement, her creative processing through many artworks, the purposeful and supportive nature of the group and the time set aside for this task of grieving her losses.<sup>38</sup>

Whereas some therapists were doubtful about a creative expression of anger, the counsellors who were present in this project and witnessed the transformations, immediately understood that creating artwork expressive of anger is legitimate and valuable:

*To actually be able to put it somewhere, to poke nails through someone's eye or penis is actually quite profound and has a therapeutic value that you cannot put in the chair here ... which I could never have been able to do, I couldn't say to someone "get a knife and stab away".* Counsellor

One counsellor says the significance of the creative anger work was in the thought patterns that lay behind the expression. Channelling anger productively led participants to other transformations that occurred as a result of the creative work, as she observed in one of her clients:

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<sup>38</sup> Following her decision to maintain her silence no longer, Catherine agreed to be the subject of a local newspaper story about the project. She discussed her initial concerns with her partner and they both concluded that the value of talking about creativity and the project outweighed any residual doubts.

*The intensity of the emotion drastically reduces so it doesn't hold the same power; and that is still happening now ... her emotions are still continuing to transform today.*

Although the counsellor expected that some participants would eventually confront their anger through therapy, she recognised that the creative processing “actually facilitated an open door and allowed that transformation to flow quite nicely”. Like the participants, the counsellor felt much of the potency of the work was in its physical presence, which not only made the abuse “real”, as some participants had described, it also made their feelings about it visible. This counsellor further observed how participants’ distress levels quickly settled as they became involved with and created their artworks; from the viewpoint of a therapist, this was useful in “teaching them [clients] how to self-regulate”. As well as confronting the anger itself, the counsellor noted that participants also learned to confront the distress of confronting it, an important lesson in “how to sit with distress. That it is ok to sit with it. And they learned that in the group”.

Building on the benefits I describe, I would like to see many more creative opportunities being offered to victims of trauma so they might express their ugly emotions rather than being guided away from expressing them as so many victims currently are. An engagement with art and an artist offers victims the very tangible benefits of acknowledging their trauma, with all its accompanying emotions, to move towards a place of restoration.

### ***Fragility and Vulnerability***

The participants’ engagement with materials, in their original condition and expected reaction to tension, was beautifully used in Deirdre’s two *Hearts* (Figures 10 and 11). In her first work meditating on her emotional life, a figure lies prostrate and lifeless on top of a flat heart criss-crossed with lines indicating it is broken. A wire line similarly cuts the figure in two: the broken self. The work, which Deirdre did not wish to keep, expressed “how damaged I have been; there’s a little hole there for my heart”.

The second heart is sculptural, made from scrunched-up newspaper bound in wire, which communicates her pain and hurt; she then bandaged the heart with layer upon layer of fabric dipped in clay.

*Yes that was very therapeutic when I did that. That was very healing, that was very soothing for me to do that. Yes, yes, I enjoyed that. It was like healing myself.*

Through the creativity she believed she had lost as a result of her abuse, Deirdre expressed her feelings of devastation and also found a way to salve her broken self – the “creation of a world” referred to earlier. The power of the work lies in this participant’s ability to engage with and make use of the conceptual ideas that were offered to express her own transformations through the transformation of the materials.

The heart was a commonly used metaphor for participants’ emotional wellbeing; the danger is that it can so easily become a cliché and offer no particular meaning or insight. Here, however, the combination of materials imbued the heart metaphor with personal meaning and references. Deirdre used the wire in its original state to express her pain and then the clay-impregnated bandage to tend her wounds. The wire, in becoming fragile, and the clay, in becoming stronger, expresses her changing sense of wellbeing and reflects her belief and capacity to heal herself through her creativity. The heart encapsulates her growing creativity and wellness and her diminishing pain.

The sophisticated conceptual use of materiality gave the work its meaning and strength. Although the metaphors were largely hidden and consequently the subtleties not fully available to the viewer, the process of making was integral to its positive effect on the maker. A fellow participant reflected:

*The penny dropped that art was not so much about what anybody else sees in it, it is about what it means to you. Janet*

I hold the view that when an artwork is made with authenticity, even though some of the maker’s intention may be unclear, sensitive viewers can correctly interpret its

intention and recognise its importance. *Heart* demonstrates the effect of art and suggests why narrative can only be part of the story.

*Field for the British Isles* (1993), by artist Antony Gormley, encapsulates both the vulnerabilities and strengths of humanness in 35,000 barely formed, barely human statues. Each similarly featureless face is directed towards the viewer: inwardly turned eyes stare ahead as vacant, unseeing hollows. Every amorphic figure stands alone, untouching and untouched by others. In their separateness there is a questionable togetherness; it may be that the work reflects a sense of community or, conversely, the incredible isolation of the individual in the midst of the mass. Gormley's *Field for the British Isles* is a further example of artworks expressing emotion in unusual and deeply affecting ways that, without explanation, connect and communicate powerfully with an audience. In these, and also Ivimey's ancient-looking and mysterious figures, participants saw that the emotional and sincere communication between artist, artwork and viewer need not be constrained by narrative and detail.

Much of the significance of *Field for the British Isles* lies in Gormley's use of the multiple. The vastness of the project is inspirational. Participants placed themselves in the mass of vulnerable people, and experienced these strange figures' power to arouse an emotional response. The use of the multiple was discussed and considered for its capacity to creatively emphasise a point of view or emotion; Laub's story of the Holocaust survivor's account of the destruction of the Auschwitz chimney illustrated to participants how an inaccuracy in detail may nonetheless clarify the truth. Through Gormley's use of the multiple, the vastness of the work offered participants a new means of expression. Some of those who had been reduced, silenced and marginalised by abuse found the multiple expressive, and able to help emphasise the immensity of their unique experiences, aloneness, disconnection and desolation. Whilst *Field for the British Isles* did not necessarily directly influence how a participant's work physically looked, it did influence how it was conceived, seen and considered. Most participants began to grasp that art is less about getting things right and more about gesture, intent and integrity of purpose and execution.

Linda's *Boat* (Figure 12) is an example of Gormley's influence. Linda was a lapsed amateur photographer and new to working in clay; she believed achieving a likeness was an imperative to "good expression":

*I wonder whether because I'm used to photography, something is real and defined, and that is how I see things.*

She found it difficult, with her developing skills in clay work, to achieve the accurate likeness she desired and was frustrated in the struggle to get ideas to work. *Field for the British Isles* offered a new approach to creating and a way to restart a stalled artwork. "I changed my attitude to trying to create something that is visually accurate, with all the features." By focusing on the gesture and expression, instead aiming for accuracy, the work "would appear, just what I wanted. I've actually managed it".

Her engagement with Gormley's use of the multiple and sombre expression through gesture rather than likeness, is reflected in her *Boat*, in which each of the figures, although basic and similar, is distinct and unique. She also referenced artist Edvard Munch's expressions of loneliness and otherness when she separated one figure from the others to depict how, even in the company of others, one can feel separate and alone (Costantino). In seeing examples of artists working through concerns similar to their own, participants were encouraged to take new and different approaches to making. In her abandonment of the desire for "reality", Linda's artwork was ultimately successful in expressing the potency of her feelings of isolation and lack of care.

*It was quite cathartic. It is one thing to verbalise it and picture it in your head which for me has been twenty-five years or something, so to be able to ... create it and put it out there visually and particularly when people commented on it, they commented about the isolation and loneliness, and I thought "I had done something and people really understand it", and that was really good.*

Art-making, with artistic guidance and particular artworks as reference points, presented opportunities and means to express and convey Linda's feelings. In *Boat* she expressed herself and communicated with those who recognised and understood her isolation and loneliness. When the work was on display at the Monash Medical

Centre, a visitor to the hospital commented on the isolation present in this work, "It's me", she said, and she was crying.

## **Towards restoration**

*I have brought bread to the hungry, and water to the thirsty,  
clothes to the naked,  
and a boat to him who was boatless.*

R O Faulkner<sup>39</sup>

Conversations reflected a range of life events and experiences that, even after many years, were still deeply affecting. Some events and experiences (both negative and positive) clearly warranted that level of intensity; some would remain potent and continue to influence the direction of an individual's life. The negative experiences among them had somehow to be accommodated. However, participants seemed to express excessive emotional attachment to some other events and experiences, such as recollections of unhappy school experiences, which did not seem to warrant it. If participants were to live a more contented life, perhaps it was time to release some of these unnecessarily negative memories?

Towards the end of the project and after a significant amount of loss and grief work had been done, images of ancient Egyptian boats and funerary barges, which are both mythological and historical, were offered as a starting point to consider themes of transition, letting go and arriving at a new destination (Jones). The majesty and other-worldliness of the Egyptian boats inspired participants to examine their own life journeys, particularly the perceptions and memories they held. I asked participants to consider which among their life experiences were fundamental, even if not always welcome, and had to be accommodated; and which might have been less central yet be hindering their current and future wellbeing; perhaps it was a good time to cast this latter group off in a symbolic boat.

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<sup>39</sup> Dilwyn Jones quoting R O Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, London, 1985.

Some participants intentionally made their boat unsound. Maria made a raft of sticks upon which lies a coffin and a papier-mache effigy of the rapist. In the raft's flimsiness she references and disparages her rapist's love of expensive boats. A number of clay tablets, each with the name of people she perceived had either not helped or who had hindered her after the rape, lie on the body. It is an angry expression made with thought and careful consideration of materials and purpose.

*I loved that the raft was in sticks and the person [was] papier-mache and that at any time of my choosing, I could do away with that in whatever medium I want, sink it, or disintegrate it, or burn it; that that would be an interesting thing as well.*

This participant was still deeply involved in processing the rape and was not yet able to let go of any of it. She had, nonetheless, considered how, and from what, she would eventually like to be released. Her choice of permanent and impermanent materials articulated the aspects of her violation and its consequences to be retained, and those to be released.

Barb incorporated fragility in the work and also created an unseaworthy vessel. She embedded chicken wire in the clay boat in the knowledge that in the firing the chicken wire would deteriorate and lose its strength. She placed herself with no arms at one end of the boat and the oars at the other. There was never any promise of her being able to row her unseaworthy boat:

*I was left in a boat to find my own way through life without having the arms to paddle, to just float around, having no skills, no skills at all; and no opportunity to be in a solid boat were I could use my arms to work my way through life. I was powerless, and that's why I don't have any arms here and the oars were up here. I am angry. I wasn't nurtured in a way where I could have had a more fulfilling life, so there is a lot of anger in this one.*

The boat and the materials with which she chose to create it provided metaphors and language to express the anger she had, until now, been too afraid to visit. When I discussed these particularly emotional projects with participants, I asked if the journey

was worth the pain, whether it was useful to stir these emotions. Emphatically, the answer was "Yes". This was partly because the metaphor of the boat was so expressive, enabling participants to poetically gather and group their complex, disparate feelings. In her boat, Barb confronted her pain of not being nurtured either as a child or an adult, of being kept helpless and of being poorly prepared to confront the everyday ups and downs of life, let alone the complexities of her abuse. As a result, fear, anger and despair were her constant companions. It was not unusual to learn from older women with abusive early childhoods that "it has taken fifty years" to acknowledge their sexually abusive past. One lamented that she was further incapacitated by the conventions of her era not to speak about "unpleasantries". Barb felt crippled by the abuse and now, as "an old woman with the capacity of a child", the creative work enabled her to ponder and articulate its effects. For Barb and others, this was an entirely new experience. For those who had already gazed into their abuse, in the creative space they could examine and express it with a deeper understanding of its complexity. Both groups nurtured the development of opinions and emotions, including the negative ones:

*That is as a result of what was said and done to me by other people, so this really is my life as a mess. So yes, I am angry, I am really angry about that.*

Barb used the metaphor of the boat to consider her deficits in comparison with those who had a more solid foundation in childhood and who were properly guided and encouraged:

*Other people have boats which were solid, they have boats which enable them to go where they want to take them, they have strength in their own minds and bodies to take their boats, their lives, where they would like to go. I feel mine is rudderless ...*

In addition to the cathartic effects of making the work, its physical presence offered further opportunities for reflection. Although they could anticipate the nature of the transformation of the work in the firing, most participants were surprised by the actuality of it. In this case, because the boat was constructed around chicken wire it was especially fragile. But having withstood firing and transportation back to the art-

room, it collapsed when I moved it towards her; its disintegration, its failure to support her emphasised all the points she was making in its creation. The artworks of others opened important paths to understanding experiences that had largely been held in denial, and provided a useful foundation for work Barb was undertaking with her psychiatrist.

Other participants worked closely with the theme, filling their boat, as Amelia did, with the strange and curious artefacts she wanted to leave behind, the meaning of which a viewer can only wonder at. Bella loaded her unstable boat with drawers filled with her "CASA secrets" (Figure 13). The work triggered many painful memories:

*You bottle it away and you shove it into those little drawers, and you lock them up and then something lets it out; and each time it lets it out, it gets a bit better.*

Catherine's elaborate funeral barge was made of sticks beautifully bound together with red cotton. As she learned how structure provides stability in sculpture I wondered if she saw this as an allegory for life. By conquering the structure of the lower level, she could add a layer to the barge, upon which she placed a child, bound and gagged with red cotton in her screaming open mouth (Figure 14).

*It's really odd because at the start of the art class, I would never have thought that would have been my last piece.*

She says she didn't know where the project might end. To conclude it with "the burning raft", and sending it off, "and to actually put myself on there, not myself, but part of myself that I want to say goodbye to, and I don't want to have to worry about that any more", galvanised her resolve to release herself from the constrictions of silence and incapacity:

*Right, no longer are you going to be gagged or prevented from defending or helping yourself, you are going to stand up and break free of the confines of, I don't know the words ... which is a really big thing for me, a really big thing.*

In the discussion of *Three Penises* above, I discussed Catherine's claiming her voice and breaking her silence around sexual abuse. Her current reflections restated her commitment, and reiterated my point that the overall benefits of art-making to wellbeing are located in a creative process involving time and effort, love and work, rather than in just one artwork. I think in terms of dappled shadows, light being cast across a surface, bringing focus and attention to different areas through movement and shifting light. The creation of a body of work by each participant enabled light and shade to be brought to the complexity of issues surrounding sexual abuse.

In contrast, Indi's work is the epitome of gentle relaxation. Her canoe (Figure 15) is wound with warm-coloured cotton threads; a figure lies across the threads suspended above the structure of the canoe; her head is propped up and she is immersed in a book. A leaf nonchalantly rests behind an ear.

In this final work, Indi portrayed herself relaxed and doing what she loves. As with many of the artworks, the meaning behind the metaphors is open to interpretation. It may be that Indi's use of cotton represents the threads of her life, the beautiful colours and the entanglement suggesting her experiences; it may speak of beauty and art supporting her. Without doubt, the figure is in a state of rest. The leaf, Indi said, represents being carefree and the text of the book, *Solace*, "came" to her and was utterly appropriate for how she now felt. Since emailing me at the start of the mosaic group when she felt confused and in need of help, Indi had addressed many of her "demons". She was now happy in a new relationship, some steps had been taken towards a reconciliation with her mother (which at the start seemed improbable) and her relationship with her children was more relaxed and incorporated more family activities, including art. She attributed each of these shifts towards happiness to her participation and work in the two project groups.

### ***Transformations***

Participants began the loss and grief group with an underlying sadness and disquiet. Some had already identified these feelings as the profound loss and grief born of trauma, but surprisingly, most had yet to identify and name their feelings. In choosing to come, participants sought transformation; changes were necessary if they were to

lead a harmonious life. All but one who began the project completed it, and most attended at least nine of the twelve sessions, a clear indication of each woman's commitment to herself and the work.

The work was hard. "There was no place to hide in the art groups", one said. The chaos that can consume a counselling session was redirected towards creative restoration. Participants faced experiences and feelings that had lain unobserved for years, remembered experiences they would rather have forgotten, considered people who had done them harm, and experienced emotions they didn't like feeling. Along with being invited to let go of unhelpful habits and thoughts, they learned how to better accommodate others. The women nonetheless located enormous sources of inner strength to do this work and to stay with the process:

*I was in a group where I just had to be up front and face the loss and grief that I have encountered previously in my life. And I knew it was ongoing and I wanted to go each week, and it was just an ongoing process. It is hard to explain but I knew I just had to deal with things. And move on. Kate*

Kate's realisation "that I didn't have to turn my back on loss and grief" suggested that those who have been abused are not always presented with opportunities or guidance to express their very great feelings of loss and grief. In the place of such opportunities, habits and behaviours are often cultivated as coping strategies. The intent and focus of the project encouraged, as well as expected, participants to submit themselves to the process and not surrender to distraction:

*I knew that I would have to be a stronger person, and that the loss and grief would not be something to laugh about or just take lightly. It was something that was very personal, and very touching and it would be something that perhaps I should have been involved with a long time ago. Kate*

This participant, who joined the mosaic group seeking to "break down the walls of isolation", explained her transformation and restoration at the end of the loss and grief group using the metaphor of walking along a path already made walkable through her participation in the mosaic group:

*I felt I was walking along a pavement, and there were already stepping stones, because there was already the other ladies in the group that I was friends with, so I had a bit of a comfort zone buffer already.*

The “rocks on the pavement”, her pain and sorrow, ordinarily would have either tripped her up or weighed her down, but were no longer the impediments and burdens they once were. The attention and work she invested in her creative restoration enabled her to:

*... just keep walking along that pavement and instead of stopping at the rocks and picking them up, it just helped me to keep walking along the pavement. And just walking around the rocks on the ground, and maybe walking a little bit faster.*

The work she describes as “a very unique form of healing” gave her skills to observe her pain, the “rocks on the pavement”, and “just walk around them” rather than stumble over them. In her approach to the loss and grief work, she separated out her feelings and each week brought her full attention to one specific experience of loss. For example, for one session she contemplated losses relating to her indigenous heritage and people, and in another she confronted “her unique experiences” of abuse. She observed but was not overburdened by her history. She looked then saw she had become more resilient and able to cope. From her restored place of meaning and wellbeing she engaged in more activities in the “outside world”, including voluntary work, further connecting her to the community and particularly the local indigenous community, and began a search for paid work.

The challenges for clients in accessing and articulating their complex responses to sexual abuse in the counselling environment were outlined by a counsellor who said: “One can feel ... the vulnerability, quite naked from being exposed, sitting in that chair. It can be intimidating, very threatening”. The counsellors were “very surprised” by what emerged from the art groups and, importantly, how it emerged – with “vigour, passion and intent”. Unlike in counselling, where getting to the core of the pain is

commonly avoided, painful and slow, counsellors noticed how participants “would become engrossed in the task” and “could not be easily distracted from it”.

Understanding trauma through bodily sensations, as Rothschild and van der Kolk (van der Kolk; van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth) discuss could be extended to consider trauma work as the active involvement of all the senses. In this instance, both touch and sight were instrumental in transformation. Hearing too was involved, in the quietness, the possibility to listen to oneself, in the music and in the discussions. The involvement of the senses, and therefore languages other than the spoken word, opened participants to experiencing their sorrow in a comprehensive and authentic way and recognising the trauma is an infliction upon all the senses.

Kate, like most of us who think about trauma, loss and grief, accepted that negative emotions were likely to re-emerge from time to time. In her continuing metaphor, she eloquently expressed her improved ability to manage these challenges:

*It's ok to even look at those rocks on the pavement – just don't stumble down.  
If need be, you can sit down, if you do see a rock on the pavement, just take a  
deep breath and collect your thoughts and then get on the pavement and keep  
walking.*

The transformations in Kate's metaphor are explained, less poetically, by grief and trauma specialists as the relegation “of an event into one's history” and the integration of “implicit and explicit memories into [a] comprehensive narrative of trauma and aftermath” (Rothschild 150). Others, such as Rothschild and Parkes, speak in terms of “restoration orientation”, of seeking a “more realistic and mature set of assumptions about the world”, and the struggle to reorient in a world that seems to have lost meaning. However, Kate's commentary is put simply as another reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud's assertion that to work and to love is to be happy:

*It has made me love myself better because I have been able to let go of the  
past. And it has just enabled me to be more grateful and more respectful for  
people that I love and that love me. So I found it to be a very interesting form  
of healing.*

Kate's transformation led her to a place of gratitude and love. The trauma and grief experiences dominating her life when she first came to the groups had encumbered her with a heavy burden of isolation. She was now better able to recognise existing strengths and love within her relationships, and had made enriching connections with fellow participants. Her conversation should be considered in the context of her journey through both art groups, particularly through *Putting Myself in the Picture*, where she acknowledged her achievements as well as her past:

*That represents my life and it is a piece of artwork that I learnt a lot from you. It is something that I did myself from scratch, and it represents a journey that I have come on. And I have actually survived, because not so many women do survive such traumas. And it is something that is very, very dear to me and I'm very proud of it ...*

By enlarging her field of vision beyond her "unique past" and its consequences, she discovered the emotional space to encompass gratitude for the love she gives and receives. Gratitude in an emotional vocabulary suggests a victim's ability to experience positive aspects of the world and indicates she is seeing beyond the immediacy of the self to be aware of the goodness in others and their capacity to behave well. Her participation in the art group helped her establish a mature connection with the sadness at the centre of her life and from that she salvaged love, hope and belief in the future.

The plaster cast Kate created in the first week

*represents not getting married at an earlier age ... but I was having a lot of unique experiences and obviously didn't get married, I wanted to represent a bit of loss in my life. I consider that a bit of a loss.*

At the end of the project, she imbued the cast with a second and optimistic interpretation:

*But now I look at this piece as a piece of hope that I will get married. So, I changed. It represents two different emotions ...*

I find it intriguing that the plaster cast encapsulates two seemingly opposing truths, communicating about her past, present and future and meaningful in relation to each. Clearly, the artworks hold a complexity of emotions and meanings that emerged in the making and afterwards. The physical art object offers insights and revelations over long periods, sometimes years, as it is viewed and reviewed. A work made with integrity and with some skills will hold something of the maker within it, and it will communicate with the maker and others. I consider this one of the most important aspects of art work and one of the many points of difference between this work and art and verbal therapy.

### ***Hope***

In the final weeks, contentment, pleasure and love appeared in participants' artworks, revealing the emotional space made available for a happier future, as well as the desire for romantic love. Although the participants and I all began with the expectation a creative practice would help them reach a place of acceptance and release from the darkest shadows of their pain, the extent of their restoration and optimism came as a surprise to us all.

In Dora's *Family* (Figure 16) mother and father sit side by side nurturing a newborn infant. Male and female rest and lean on each other; neither dominates and both look adoringly at their shared child. "I wanted it to be loving and protective", she explained. The work is romantic and courageous. Christina's *Lovers* (Figure 17), the work she began but could not complete in Week Two, are captured in the movement into their embrace. The spatial device so exquisitely used by Michelangelo in *The Creation*<sup>40</sup> is exploited here by Christina to express her lovers' anticipation and movement; she is confident that the viewer will recognise the enormity of their impending embrace. Each woman reveals through her work that she has to some degree disconnected herself from entrenched negative thoughts and behaviours and has surrendered to possibility.

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<sup>40</sup> In the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Italy.

In a desire for romantic love, there is an implied admission of being lovable, which represents a significant shift from the viewpoint of being “bad all bad” and “crap at everything”. Romantic love invites the lowering of emotional and physical barriers, the abandonment of the self to another, reciprocity. Above all, it indicates a belief that intimate trust in another is possible and worthwhile. Dora’s artwork is a public declaration of her desire for wholeness; it states her desire to share herself lovingly, romantically and sexually with another and together to create a caring and secure family. Her work represents her concept of family – once tarnished by her abuse – being lovingly restored.

Trauma severely compromises optimism and a sense of the future. Most of Dora’s young life had been consumed by the sexual abuse that occurred within the family and the legal and other processes that followed it. “I hadn’t got around to really thinking about what I wanted in life ... the future, and I wanted to make something I could hopefully achieve”. In surrendering to her creativity and the substantial demands placed on her as a young woman attending this challenging group, she surrendered to love. As Garner says: “First the word, then the sentence”; first the work, then the possibilities.

Barb’s *Folds* (Figure 18) are also partially about abandonment and surrender. Abandonment may be a crucial step in the journey to transformation, the final shedding of the concept of “perfection” and the yearning to control, the relinquishment of the tight grip of the past; it may be this is the step beyond acknowledgement. In a dozen clay works evolving from the metaphor of an unfolding flower, Barb contemplated her life, and her life in comparison to others’ lives. Soft curves fold in on themselves creating open and hidden spaces, places for secrets and events that shaped her life. Into each space she consciously and conscientiously placed a memory. Some folds are sealed whilst others remain open. She “deliberately” (a term she used when her work took her into new and sometimes dangerous territory) referenced the female form, particularly the genitalia.

Barb’s personal life had been in turmoil throughout the three months of the project, largely as a result of an unhappy and unresolved encounter with her abuser. Her subsequent physical and emotional breakdown, including a period in hospital, led her

to approach her artwork and herself with gentleness and understanding, where previously her responses had been expressed through denial, avoidance, anger and extreme anxiety.

Barb's physical and emotional breakdown reflected the high emotional and physical toll of abuse upon victims. This is well documented in trauma literature (Herman; Gold) and was evident in the number of participants who had or had had in the past, serious health issues. These included a heart condition (two participants were hospitalised during the project), cancer, diabetes, mental illness, liver disease unrelated to alcohol use and an unspecific virus affecting the entire body, leaving the individual physically disabled and in need of twenty-four hour care.

The metaphor of a bud opening into a flower exemplified her life. The words she quoted from Anais Nin, "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom"<sup>41</sup> exemplified her need to express herself.

*You don't know how a flower is going to finish at when it is in a bud form You just don't know. It just will unfold. And I think everybody's life is like that, so I don't see these necessarily as being just reflective of people who have been abused, I see it as reflective of a lot of people's lives.*

In her explanation of the works she detailed how each fold and each hollow encapsulated her history:

*[There are] times when you are open up and times when you keep things quiet, and some parts are open and beautiful and some parts are crap and enclosed still ... I have kept a lot of my life closed up, and now I am realising that this part in here that I kept all closed up was rotten, it was awful, it was abuse and I didn't know it.*

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<sup>41</sup> Anais Nin, poem, *Risk*.

In her contemplations, Barb allowed herself to be more realistic, less jealous and more empathetic towards others whom she had irrationally considered had “perfect lives”:

*No one's life is completely flat and enjoyable. Everyone's life is folding and unfolding, and has secrets.*

This collection of works was an extraordinary conclusion because the unique creative language she developed and used in her “rolling ones” expressed her story and emotions better “than trying to do it figuratively”. She discovered, with consideration and sophistication of thought and creativity, as others did, that in moving away from the narrative (and the cliché) her work was truly expressive:

*Representative for me but maybe for nobody else. I am opening up my own history, believing my own history. Believing my own unfolding.*

As she worked on her *Folds*, Barb recognised the “gentleness in sorrow”. She used the soft edges to express her very great pain and to provide herself with the comfort she needed. She found hidden among the shortcomings on which she always focused, her inner beauty and desire to bloom:

*Certainly trying ... just trying to unfold, just really trying, otherwise I would have just done a ball.*

The work took her beyond her sorrows to pleasure. The *Folds* became vividly white and resilient in the firing; she loved them, and again she allowed herself to consider her talents and potential as an artist. She modestly admitted that if she saw the pieces in a gallery, she would like to buy them.

Bella's *Girls* were modelled on the non-anatomical dolls CASA workers use with victims of sexual abuse and which Bella always carried to touch and draw comfort from in times of distress. Her sexual abuse, referred to only as “her CASA stuff”, was buried so deeply she could barely speak of it, even to her counsellor. Yet, each week she made a clay doll whose gesture reflected a wretched existence born of trauma. One of the two in a foetal position is wrapped in a “blanky”, as Bella also wrapped herself to seek

comfort; others flop in pain and inertia, and one is physically broken in two. Like the CASA dolls, Bella's dolls are faceless:

*... never, ever was there going to be a face or anything because that would have been too much, I couldn't do that one.*

Her determination to give full attention, albeit privately, to the residual loss and grief took enormous emotional and physical effort. Having virtually closed herself off from any subject that might force her to confront her past, she was very easily distressed by the broad-ranging topics of group discussions, including sexual abuse and subjects that seemed innocuous to me. These triggered her emotionally and made participation especially challenging. However, the feel of the clay was instrumental in her facing her demons:

*It opened something, just a little bit! Just a bit! I did get there, every day even when I was feeling shocking. I wanted to do it. It was important and I would have felt a failure if I hadn't come. I loved getting into the clay and being able to put me into the clay. When it was tricky and people said you don't have to go I said, "No! I want the clay!"*

That the artwork and the clay shifted or opened women emotionally to hope and meaning must be understood as a most important contributor to wellbeing. "Just a little bit!" should not be read as insignificant, but as profound. As one counsellor said:

*[Once that happens] they are off and away. It becomes easier to work with participants as significant shifts in acknowledging and expressing their emotions and desires had already been made creatively.*

As I observed the dolls emerge from the clay each week I assumed each symbolised Bella in various gestures of her pain; but Bella says the dolls, which are arranged in a circle around the tiny one wrapped in the blanket, represent her daughters "protecting me". I expressed my surprise.

*I guess they are me as well; that is the one thing I didn't want to face in it.  
And that is one thing, one reason why I didn't put faces at all.*

Her final piece was a large upright doll nurturing a child who is sitting on her lap (Figure 19). Significantly, the large doll has eyes that seem to gaze both towards the child and outwards to the world.

*To put those eyes on it – to be looking out and seeing was huge, really huge  
and I didn't think I would get to that stage. I didn't think I would be able to do  
that.*

Like Dora's *Family*, this artwork exudes love and nurturing. There are extraordinary emotional shifts represented by the gesture in each of the dolls, and by the gaze in the larger doll. Instead of the pitiful wretchedness imbued in the early works, the last dolls are erect, touching and lovingly engaged. As this participant revealed little of her past, I enjoy her work with the eyes of a viewer and without yearning to know the detail that lay below each work. I view art-making and viewing as a largely private endeavour and I am still constantly astonished by its gentle power to change:

*And look at it! It is really wrapped round, and there is touch everywhere,  
everywhere, which is what I am aiming for.*

Creativity, like walking and talking, is a fundamental human activity. It is a language of expressive communication. In this project, and through her creativity and art-making, each participant primarily engaged in a conversation with herself. In turning to face the complexities of her emotional life, the impacts of trauma on her life now and in the past, as well as the possibilities for a different life in the future, each participant created artwork that responded, examined, expressed and mourned her sorrowful experiences.

The creative communication echoed outward from the participant into the community, finding resonance in other group members in its pulsations of connecting, sharing and feeling, and giving and receiving comfort. It reverberated further into the community, touching other SECASA clients similarly wounded, friends and family, and the broader

public through small and large exhibitions, the 2009 Calendar and publication of the work on the Internet.

Visual language speaks to the tangible and, importantly, the intangible losses – those unnamed feelings that sit like a stone in the heart, an irritant on the skin, which are the failure to flourish, to love, to feel part of a community. They are the losses that stick in the throat refusing to be spoken and refusing to be digested; losses that fill victims with anger, draining them of power; filling them with despair, emptying them of purpose. These intangible losses of a voice, of pleasure, gentleness and childhood, are pressed into the clay then recast as art and expressions of hope and beauty.

The materials, particularly the clay, were fundamental to the creative journey. As one participant described, clay can be moulded, and as each woman moulded the clay she was moulding herself and giving form to the amorphous. Even when the work was extremely difficult and challenging, the relationship with the clay was “calming” and “soothing”, and one reason why women remained attached to the project:

*The clay! I loved playing with the clay and having a chance to create my feelings, creating my feelings into a solid object. Paula*

Although confronting trauma, losses and grief was extremely difficult, the making was not; it was relaxing: “I was able to relax and when I relaxed, my brain relaxed”, said Paula. As tension fell away, an internal space opened in which participants might concentrate and surrender to their creativity and the intention of the work. When the cacophony in the brain is silenced, new thoughts have a place in which to be born.

*The artwork helped me focus more, but when I am talking with [the counsellor] ok, we get there, but the thing is there is a lot of sort of skirting around ... the art, it keeps me calm and focused. Catherine*

Artwork just “emerged from the clay”. This is especially remarkable considering participants’ feelings were not consciously articulated. Yet the artwork said “just exactly what I needed to say”. To learn of artworks emerging “exactly right” and without “knowing” is immensely important to appreciating that art-making breathes life

into the “barely known”, as Minge says, and those parts that were “closed down” or “shut off”, as participants described it.

Art-making is a light breath on a small flame that ignites the belief within each participant that she is a worthwhile human being. It incubates a gentleness that recognises and soothes sorrows and pain, warming the dark and cold space for mourning and acceptance to be born. It is the hearth in which difficult and painful emotions, such as anger and vengeance, can burn brightly and be safely contained; and here, without additional fuel to maintain the flame, it cools, leaving only an ashen moan. It breathes into and gives life to the hope of a better future.

In art-making the aberrant can be removed: “I can reform, change it. Improvement is possible”, said one participant. Reform is such an apt word to choose for its ambiguous meanings, for conjuring up visions of reform school and the compulsion to change, and at the same time for suggesting that a gentle reshaping can make something right. Reform or re-form? “To restore or re-establish peace, to change for the better, to cause to abandon a wrong doing through improvement, abolish or remedy (an abuse/malpractice)” says the Oxford Dictionary.<sup>42</sup> Art-making enables change. It declares to those women who felt battered by abuse and low self-esteem: “You are not who you think you are”, as one participant first said about the mosaic project and reiterated in this one. Art-making nurtures creativity, creativity nurtures courage, and courage whispers in the ear, “You can reform, change it; improvement is possible”.

Participants’ shadowy desires to confront their debilitating feelings, to speak out about their pain, to love and be loved, were brought into the light by the works of artists that reflected back the validity of participants’ desires and guided them to honour these artists by being creative, passionate and courageous in their own art.

*If you look at a lot of creative people, creativity often comes out of deep feelings. Deep feeling and deep sorrow. And deep happiness and a life of observation; and a life of looking inward and looking outward. And that’s*

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<sup>42</sup> New Shorter Oxford Dictionary, 2002.

*where art comes from; being able to put it into some context that the outside world can relate to ... so in order for that to happen you would have had to observe either within yourself or within other people. Barb*

The facilitating artist, as well as the artists and artworks brought to the project, inspired participants to think broadly, specifically, differently, intensely and sincerely. We urged participants to look deeply, search widely and think openly; and not give in to the misinterpretations of others, despair, depression or suicide. Barb observed that artists create out of a life of deep feeling and are, like the participants, vulnerable to human experiences and to the actions of others. Irish theologian Enda McDonagh describes the way artists “seem to capture the otherness of the world, the mystery of other human beings” and of “painfully bringing that otherness to expression in their paintings or sculptures or poems” (Spurling and McDonagh). Artists are, therefore, properly qualified to hold a light up so that participants might see.

The physicality and permanence of the artwork is both an affirmation and verification of the journey and transformations; like the paintings on the bone (*Distorted and Contorted*) and cremated birds (*This Memory of Beauty*) I described in Chapter 6, it transforms death and offers something back that is not only bearable to look at, but beautiful and cherished:

*I only just last week got my work back [from SECASA] and I have fallen in love with it all over again and wish that I was able to still be back in our class to do it.* <sup>43</sup>

Like a travel journal, the artworks are a diary of the journey, and like a map the art-making skills learned on the journey will help participants find their way should they become disoriented in the future.

In the following chapter, I leave the detail of the project, the work with the women and my own art, to reflect on and discuss art in a broader context, and how this work might usefully be applied more broadly.

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<sup>43</sup> Catherine, email to author, 23 September 2009. The work had been in the care of her counsellor for some months.



**Figure 1** *Broken Child*



**Figure 2** *Angel*



**Figure 3** *Pain*



**Figure 4** *CASA Dolls*



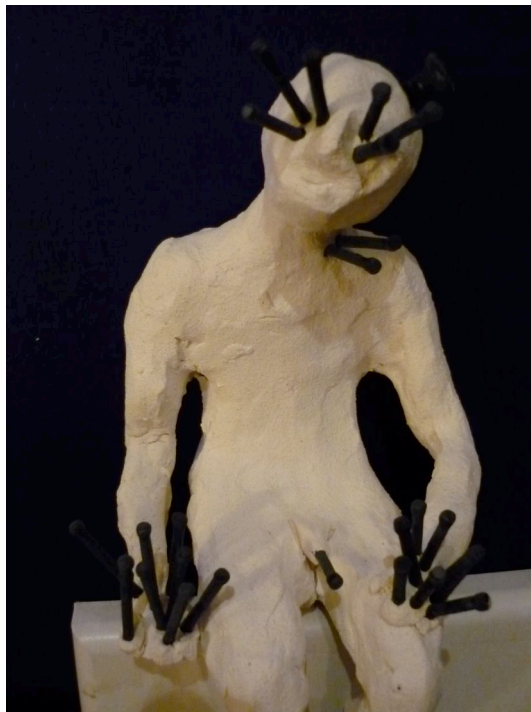
**Figure 5** Buchenwald Grave



**Figure 6** *Empty Mother*



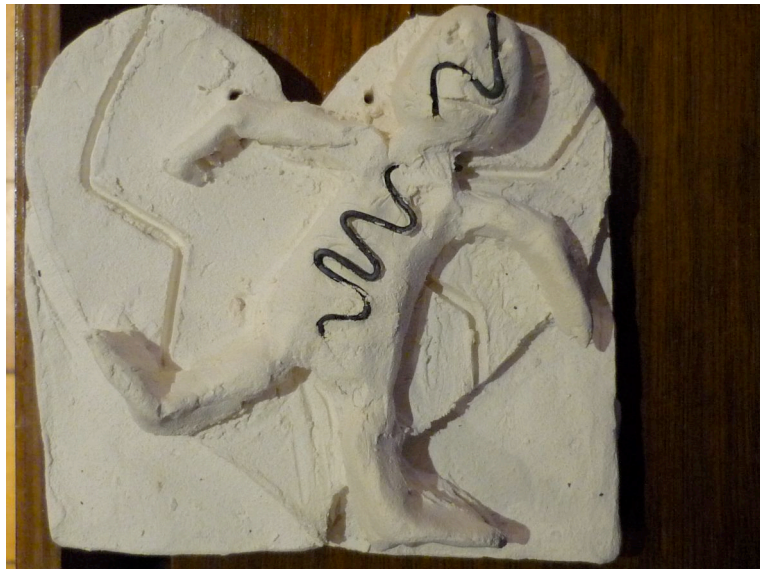
**Figure 7** *No!*



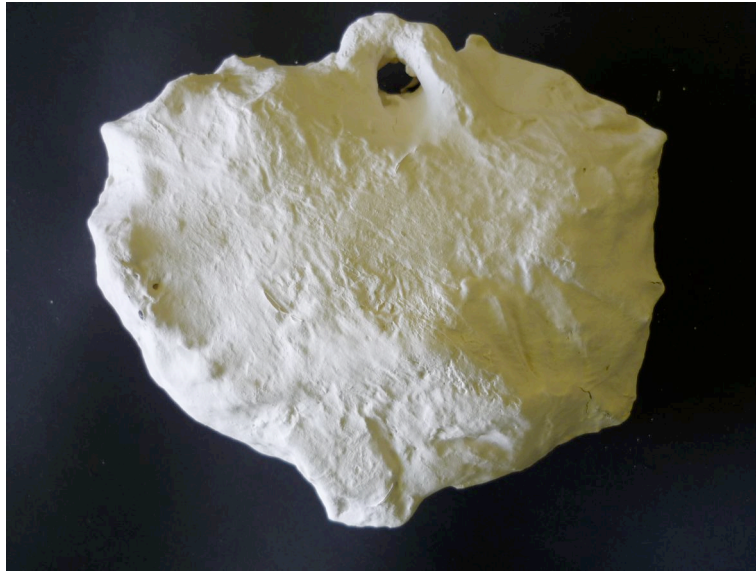
**Figure 8** *Man with Nails*



**Figure 9** *Three Penises*



**Figure 10** *Heart I*



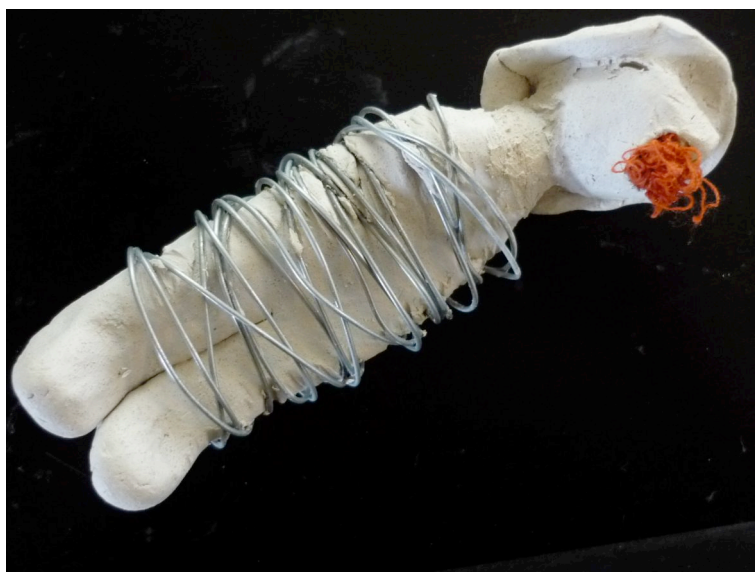
**Figure 11** *Heart II*



**Figure 12** *Boat*



**Figure 13** *Boat with CASA secrets*



**Figure 14** *Gagged child, unfired*



**Figure 15** *Solace*



**Figure 16** *Family*



**Figure 17** *Lovers*



**Figure 18** *Fold*



**Figure 19** *My Girl*

## 8 IN DAPPLED SHADOWS

I began this thesis with twenty-five years' experience in arts practice. As a community artist, working particularly with vulnerable people, I had observed so many remarkable transformations in participants that I was prompted to ask: What does creativity, art-making as part of a group, and the artist, offer to wellbeing? What does art and the artist provide, beyond the readily given and simple answers such as it "improves self-esteem" and "enhances social connectedness"? As a studio artist, I have long immersed myself in the realms of loss and grief. Although for most of that time my own experiences of grief and loss were relatively few, I felt a deep and constant urge to examine and reveal what is so often shadowy and reviled. I noticed viewers responding with depths of emotion that suggested the work, and I, were connecting with a part of their humanity that required such work, often in ways that were unexpected for them and increasingly significant for me.

I was seeing highly transformative responses to art from the very different viewpoints of makers and viewers through these aspects of my arts practice, and because of my involvement in both as the practitioner, I considered myself also at the centre. Like others whose works "stands on the shoulders of others", my work as an artist is nourished by the work and practices of other artists and this influence is crucial to how my work unfolds in both my community and studio work.

In undertaking this thesis, I aimed to rigorously examine what had been anecdotal and felt responses to art-making and viewing. I was driven by a desire to bring clarity to what I had observed in life were momentous responses to art but which in the discussions around art and wellbeing were often general and vague (Marsden and Theile, Williams). I noticed this particularly in the art and wellbeing literature, a relatively new field of research, and in conversations hosted by arts organisations. Many arts bodies and artists, myself included at the time, were and often still are ill-equipped or disinclined to coherently put into verbal and written form that which feels so natural and normal it almost defies description. To grasp in written form the processes and transformations I am referring too often felt as difficult as describing the value of breathing or loving. I recognised in those who do not share a passion for art

that this vagueness was unhelpful and kept the potential of the arts to contribute to wellbeing largely on the fringes, or perceived only as a form of therapy.

Artist Mona Hatoum identifies part of the problem of describing art when she shows how artworks operate on two levels. The first level, she says, is "the natural, physical aspect which I think of as the conscious aspect". It is, in other words, the artist's manipulation and shaping of form and materials. The second level is "the very complex cultural and unconscious aspect of the artwork that is rich in meaning and association, impossible to explain fully" (Hatoum et al. 25). Jill Bennett's view is that the response to art "is not born of emotional identification or sympathy" as much as "the sensation as it is registered in the work" (7). As words are on the side of thought and images on the side of feeling, she argues that art responds to and expresses experiences that cannot be spoken in the same way as they are felt (35).

Grounding the thesis in arts practice was therefore to undertake an enquiry into the unique qualities of art and how these are beneficial to trauma, mourning and wellbeing. It was to understand these for their differences from talking therapy, yet acknowledge how an arts practice may comfortably sit beside a therapy practice, or in place of one, to provide solace, acknowledgement and skills, and therefore wellbeing to those who suffer. In this thesis, I determined to create work that was not only useful to me, but also to those working in the arts, art and health, the fields of trauma, loss and grief, and broadly in the community. I aimed to go beyond anecdotal evidence to observe and describe some of the transformations that occur through an engagement with art.

Building on past observations, I knew that participation and creativity would most likely effect change in women's wellbeing and the relationships each had with herself and with others. I expected participants to revel in their newly learnt skills and creativity, and that their confidence would benefit. I expected connections to be made with the other participants and me, and that lives would be enriched by these encounters. I expected the work and the discussions about art would open the participants to being interested in engaging with art more widely than their three hours a week in the group. The important revelations of the thesis, therefore, are not in the discovery of these transformations, but in their layers and intensity. The richness and importance

of what is revealed in this thesis lies in how these transformations occurred and the impact of their effects on the lives of the participants, on me, and beyond.

The extent of these transformations was in part born of the profound despair and sorrow, the manifestation of the participants' abuse, and the emotional and bodily depletions that were so much more devastating and complex than I had anticipated. The journey each woman travelled from and through her shadowy world was, I believe, further, richer and more revealing than either she or I, as the artist or researcher, had expected.

Roberta Culbertson describes the memory of her childhood sexual trauma as "qualitatively different" (174) from other memories and experiences. Transient moments, snippets of events, looks, thoughts and feelings were present, but a cohesive narrative of the events was not. In explaining trauma memory as "the paradox of a known and felt truth that unfortunately obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech" (170), she attempts to make sense of the disconnected life that she and many trauma victims live with for years without fully grasping where and why these disturbing feelings exist. She describes the "fleeting images" (174), feelings of disquiet, profound sadness, and the inability to manage and cope well with life. She also notes that trauma memory, like art, functions on two levels: sense and thinking, consciousness and the known and felt. Culbertson considers these feelings are "below the everyday and constructions of language" (170).

Hatoum and Culbertson refer to our human capacity to understand and respond on both a cognitive, or "known" level, as well as on a felt, affective or "unknown" level. This functioning of art on two levels, which mirrors the trauma response, suggests one reason why art is a counterweight to trauma. In this thesis, I found evidence to support the view that visual language offered participants sanctuary from the frustrations of trying to find a memory, expression or meaning in a language that was unsympathetic or unavailable to the delicate purposes being asked of it. It provided a means to access and express the very things that are so difficult to otherwise locate and articulate. In their growing immersion in visual language, women found expression, transformation, restoration and the emergence, or creation, of a sense of self, as one describes:

*I am not who I thought I was. I got such a lot personally from it. I found that it's kind of helped to shift things that I never thought it would. It helped the verbalisation of me, myself. An awareness of me, who I was, who I am.*

Christina

The inclusion of my arts practice as a response to the broad issues of trauma, grief and loss, the specific issues surrounding sexual abuse, and to my relationships with the women added a dimension to the project that is unusual in either a community art or studio practice. It was one way I could see to maintain my own arts practice throughout the long period of the research. As the thesis unfolded, the dialogue between my arts practice and women and their experiences, with artists deeply concerned with these subjects, and the broader issues of trauma and mourning became increasingly important, revealing, grounding and necessary. By being actively creative, I also remained connected to one of the questions I was considering – what does the artist contribute to wellbeing?

The experiences of trauma and loss are depleting. They rob victims of life and potential and frequently spill out to affect other family and community members. Those who work with trauma can also be affected by it, as the psychiatrist Dr George Halasz<sup>44</sup> noted when he asked how I cared for myself while engaged with the women and confronting their experiences. The studio space and the making that went on within it, provided time, space and the means to acknowledge and process what were at times difficult and heartbreaking things to see and hear art; both were crucial to my maintaining my own sense of perspective and wellbeing.

Locating the work specifically with a group of women who have endured one form of trauma was, of necessity, a limitation of this thesis. But the many revelations contained here have emerged from an examination of this specific trauma, the underpinning of the work – the relationship with art-making and artists – is, I believe, universal and useful beyond the specificity of this population and experience. Indeed, the findings of this thesis have already been applied in the realms of family violence and mental health, and are of interest to those responding to the 2009 Victorian

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<sup>44</sup> Pers. comm. with Dr Halasz, 25 August 2008.

bushfires and to other communities both here and overseas where trauma has led to considerable community suffering. The exposure to art in the hospital environment of Monash Medical Centre inspired a number of medical professionals to consider how this work related to their own. Some asked how the work and I might contribute to various medically related issues like responding to chronic pain or childhood illness. Some saw the possibility for collaboration with the hospital chaplaincy and social work departments.

### **Art against oblivion**

A sub-text of this thesis might well have been “art against oblivion”. I recently saw this slogan in Judenplatz, the square in the centre of Vienna that had been the heart of Viennese Jewry and was the site of the Jewish pogroms of 1420-1. It is now the home of the Holocaust Memorial (Figure 1) which, as a contested memorial placed on a contested site, is about remembering and is a step towards restoration, a junction between the past and the present, the obliterated and oblivion. I saw this slogan “Art against oblivion” once before, in Ypres in 2002, a city also deeply impacted by trauma, and now wonder whether it was a call to action, or making a claim. In the context of this thesis, *Art against oblivion* is a reminder that it was an engagement with art that had restored meaning to the lives of those who had withdrawn from the community, who had been to the brink of sanity or suicide. Just as Wilhelm S Wurzer says, “inevitably, visibility reveals the in-visible, the unseen whole” (vii), it was art that had given form and visibility to events and emotions previously hidden in the shadows, and enabled participants to witness the complexities of experiences with greater insight and empathy.

In the earlier discussion of the mosaic project, I reflected how art-making developed participants’ understanding of the self and a belief in their capacities as human beings, and particularly as creative human beings, with skills and talents to offer and share. Through creativity, the pain that threatened to obliterate them was given perspective, and purpose was restored to women’s lives, or found for the first time.

*I enjoyed, I really enjoyed getting back to my creativity, finding that fun side that it brings it out in you and how your mind actually uses and creates different images inside the head, being able to use your hands to bring it altogether to make it alive, you know. That side of things makes me feel exhilarated inside and I can almost achieve whatever I want. Amelia*

In the intensity of trauma and its aftermath emotions may be closed off to limit their overwhelming burden upon victims, but while understandable this closing off is ultimately unhelpful (Bifulco and Moran). In addressing loss, grief and anger, participants confronted debilitating, sometimes unnamed and unspoken sensations that had permeated their minds and lives without clarity, understanding or resolution. Their creativity brought precision to the nebulous emotions that had tied them to their trauma for years. The immersion into art, including the calming and soothing nature of working with the materials, helped participants access and experience the full range of their emotions. Whether responding to materials, aesthetics, or with the unconscious connection Hatoum describes, of most importance was that art inspired a response – an indication of a victim being emotionally engaged. For some participants, the feelings of despair and frustration that arose in their art-making were the first indications of a returning or burgeoning emotional awareness. These signalled significant movement in their journey towards wellbeing and their desire “to live life as fully functioning, stimulating and healthy beings”, as McNab describes recovery (49):

*I feel as though I'm just starting to come alive again, rather like some little animal just beginning to wake up from hibernation. Helen*

Dori Laub insists that like psychoanalysts, “artists on trauma” have “an internal other”, a part that is compelled to look beyond the surface, to grapple with and express the underlying testimony of the individual experience (Laub). This sentiment is echoed by Enda McDonagh who argues that artists have a way of capturing the “otherness of the world, the mystery of other human beings and bringing that otherness to expression in their paintings or sculptures or poems”. McDonagh sees the role of the artist as vital in finding “order and beauty in chaos and fracture” (Spurling and McDonagh).

How artists think and where we work are pivotal components to understanding how art

and artists contribute to wellbeing. With that follows the appreciation of how this work fundamentally differs from art therapy, and how the artist's input is fundamentally different from that of a therapist or social worker. The artist's creative spaces, including my own, are where we gaze at what hurts, disturbs and stultifies in order to reveal, transform and restore. It is from these spaces that we move outwards to work with the community.

The creative practice and artworks of the artists of interest to this thesis offered validation to the enormity of participants' losses, feelings of sorrow and the paralysis that surrounds loss and grief. As artworks evoke emotion and locate meaning – especially at times when none seems available: they illuminate aspects of humanity that viewers may only be beginning to feel but are not yet capable of expressing, and express emotions that are profoundly felt but not precisely named. Artworks connect the experiences and observations of the artist with the experiences and observations of viewers with an empathetic thread that sutures the wounds of loss and grief, even as it traverses many centuries and vast spaces. In offering participants a light with which to see new ways to express loss and grief and to perceive themselves and others, artists also encourage the expression of hidden and silenced feelings. The artist's practice and work demonstrate the possibility of honouring one's uniqueness without surrendering to isolation or being trampled on by others; of being resourceful, confident, imaginative, creative and communicative.

In order to open the concerns and possibilities of the thesis to those with interests and experiences including and beyond the subject of sexual abuse, in this Chapter I also discuss some of the broader issues surrounding the expression of trauma, loss and grief through the work of artists Antonio Canova and Kathe Kollwitz. In choosing artworks rather than texts, and works other than the women's or my own, which I have already discussed, I aim to recapitulate some of the significant themes and findings of this thesis through a slightly different lens. I trust that the reader will extrapolate beyond them to consider how art can unfold into the lives, work and thinking of victims of trauma and all those who suffer and enhance wellbeing.

## Abyss

The marble tomb of the Archduchess Christina who died in 1798 (Figure 2) is located in the Church of the Augustines, Vienna. It is an exquisite embodiment of grief and an example of the artist grappling with, interpreting and expressing indescribable feelings of loss. Five white, bowed figures make solemn procession towards the open door of the tomb beside which a lion is also suffering in its mourning. Each figure is extraordinarily beautiful in its expression of overwhelming sorrow.

The potency of the work lies in the artist's depiction of the mourner's relationship with the empty dark space of the tomb itself – the abyss, a metaphor for the desolation of grief. In this cavernous blackness the artist, Antonio Canova, encapsulates feelings of hopelessness, and the desolation and utter despair of immeasurable loss. Its epitaph, *To the Perfect Wife of Albert*, the chief mourner and husband of the Archduchess, underscores the immensity of his loss: the loss of perfection and perfect love. Implicit in this title surely is the lament that his life after this loss will now be deficient; perfection may never again be attained. The sculpture is an embodiment of pure sorrow.

This artist, through the beauty and honesty of this artwork and tomb, confronts the gaping hole, the penetrating darkness, the loss of the future and the absence of meaning that accompanies all profound losses. By carving into the most awful and isolating of human experiences, Canova allows the work to hold the question that confronts all who experience trauma and those who grieve: "How is living now possible?". The artist, however, reveals his compassion by offering hope where none seems possible. He places a torch and flowers in the maidens' hands "to relieve the gloom and sadness of the tomb" (Stoddard). In so doing, he gives the sorrowing a promise of dawn, the inevitable conclusion of night, and the reassurance that life need not be lived in eternal darkness.

In addition to the empathy Canova conveys in this work, his capacity to express two opposing viewpoints simultaneously is one of his – and art's – very great strengths. Canova's expressions of love and loss, despair and hope, darkness and light guide viewers towards recognising the possibilities of acknowledging and mourning as well as

acknowledging and living. I referred in Chapter 7 to this gift of art expressing dual concepts and responses in Kate's contemplation of her plaster cast. She explained it as an expression of sorrow at not having married, at the same time as an expression of hope that she may marry in the future. This capacity to hold two opposing meanings goes beyond a simplistic explanation that "art can mean anything" and is worthy of note. In the example of the tomb, the artist consciously embedded complex metaphors to convey specific meanings, some of which I have described. For participants in this project, however, the complex or opposing meanings tended to emerge afterwards, and usually did so as they considered and acknowledged the transformations that had occurred during the weeks, months or years of their connection with the art and artists through this thesis.

This concept of dual responses to art, and the trauma of memory, was also present within the women. I failed, at first, to grasp that the women's highly emotive comments such as "not feeling human", of being "a nobody" or "a blank page" were honest self-perceptions. How could anyone *not* feel human? I did not, however, fail to recognise that each woman also yearned to assert herself as a valued and valuable human being, to be more than a "victim of trauma", "useless" and "crap at everything". Beyond the humiliations and inflictions of their abuse each also held a belief in her creative self and that she was worthy, capable and had inner strength. These positive viewpoints and beliefs sat in what I think of as an asymmetrical disharmony with negative viewpoints and experiences such as self-doubt, rejection and lack of care, which constantly threatened to overwhelm:

*I do hope that it sort of triggers something ... I don't know, sort of another side of me that I haven't been letting the world see. Christina*

*I had a little bit of a doubt, but I had so much excitement about doing it and then actually make something that I could say was my own – that I made with my own hands and things, so yes I knew I could achieve it – but it was just like, or maybe it might be too hard or something – I am not too sure, but overall I felt like I was going to achieve a lot out of it – out of the classroom and making mosaics ... Amelia*

Art objects gave form to the previously silent and silenced effects of trauma, bringing into being and consciousness obscured experiences and feelings:

*[The artwork] made me realise ... "Shit, I'm not really the person who I thought I was ... I'm not really the person who I think I have been ... I have been somebody else". Christina*

These objects enabled each participant to contemplate and interpret her life, to recalibrate her self-view then work with new awareness and strength to move beyond the stagnating effects of trauma. An extremely useful aspect of this recalibration was for those abused as children to recognise that the responsibility for the abuse did not lie with them. Their creative practice and art objects made it possible for these women to view and understand their abuse with an adult consciousness, and part of that consciousness-raising was a reshaping of their feelings towards their abuser.

Once participants had physically expressed and were conscious of the work's content, their debilitating and/or obscured emotions could take their rightful place as memories. It was possible for the women to step out of the shadows, and live.

An artwork, by its nature, has a life and presence beyond the time of its actual making, and beyond the desires that propelled the participant to create it. For some, an artwork may represent the maker's past, for others it may represent the journey and symbolise how far a participant had travelled towards wellbeing. For others, like Kate, it represents both the past and the future, and the belief that their journey will continue towards happiness. For all participants, the thoughts and considerations that inspired the creation of an artwork could not remain static; in the act of creating, in the engagement with the ideas, materials and work, transformation always occurred. Whereas Canova consciously embedded the concept of transformation in *To the Perfect Wife of Albert*, participants largely learned it through doing.

## **The artist's practice**

In his study of arts programs in community and institutional settings, researcher William Cleveland concluded that “the two most critical contributors to success have been a clear artistic focus and the high quality of the artists involved. The most successful programs have been developed by artists making art, not artists doing something else” (10). I share this view.

Community artists work with people who may be vulnerable, have a disability, are sick, traumatised, well, frail, needy, young or old; who may be socially, emotionally or physically disadvantaged. We often work with people and in a range of situations that are far removed from most people's daily or professional encounters. Making connections to worlds outside my own and relating to a diverse range of people with their own desires, histories, travails and triumphs are amongst the very great pleasures of such work. Discovering these connections through our shared pleasure of creating art together is a source of wonder.

Nonetheless, exchanges can be extremely challenging, as at times I found mine were with these women. Like other professionals working in demanding situations, artists must manage the exposure to others' difficult lives and find the means to hold these challenges safely without being overwhelmed by the relentlessness, horror or injustice surrounding them, but unlike most other professionals working in similar fields, artists rarely receive supervision. The creative space of the artist can be a place of sanctuary and rest, activity and restoration, as well as a place of enquiry, examination, nourishment and struggle in the face of such exposure. It is in here that the artist draws inwards to the internal self to find solace and comfort; it is where much of the essential holding and processing of these challenges occurs. From the creative space, the artist is then able to move outwards into the community. For the artist, the studio can be considered a sacred space.

A yearning to understand and process these difficult experiences of others fed my art, and my art feeds my wellbeing. I came to the realisation that much human misery is the result of careful planning, thorough attention to detail and a sense of entitlement

that overrides another's wellbeing. The lack of randomness in the women's suffering, along with the acknowledgement of parents' active role in their children's misery, was particularly shocking and required much creative and mental processing.

Learning how Beuys grappled with the events and experiences of his lifetime by creatively examining individual themes and thoughts in their minutiae gave me courage to accept as sound my intuitive responses to trauma. The separating out of my own responses and thoughts in order to examine my unease was an appropriate means to deal with a subject that is, by its nature, elusive and fragmented. The transition of the distressing, social and personal problems of others into art helped me accept some unpalatable truths and regain perspective. Rubin observes similar shifts: "Many patients, as well as most artists, report that being deeply involved in the creative process creates an altered state of consciousness and, most often, a sense of wellbeing that is hard to put into words, but remarkable in its power" (32).

In my creative space I surround myself with my work and confront its content with every glance and every step. As my eye moves, it rests on ugliness and beauty, pain and redemption, children trampled by abuse and women beautiful in their capacity to live and create. Distortions hang menacingly from the ceiling and fall as shadows across the wall. I see the mother, the child, hope and the abject failure to care. I cannot see pain without also seeing redemption; the child without seeing its dissociation; restoration without also seeing the inhospitable homes from which these people emerged. The creative space, like the art I have spoken of, allows me to view and hold complex and opposing views in sight at the same time; not necessarily one balancing the other but rather, like shadows moving across a surface, in different shades, with different aspects being brought into focus; coming in and out of view as the light source changes.

The place of the artist in the process of transformation is, as Cleveland notes, crucial. Without the artists – me in this particular instance – those revelations, transformations, discoveries, friendships or learning the skills described here, the promotion of the participants as capable, vibrant human beings, are unlikely. Transformation becomes possible when the artist is available and able to provide guidance, ensures the materials and tools are available, has some but not all the ideas and has a room that is

conducive for learning, transformation becomes possible. Although the participants, particularly in the mosaic project, did not always think of me as an artist, most noticed and appreciated the contributions and skills I brought to the project. This is, perhaps, partly a reflection of the artist's mastery of skills and partly of participants' reshaping their perceptions of what an artist is and does. As victims of trauma take tentative steps into any new territory, they do so carrying a sack, as one participant described it, heavy with expectations of incompetence and failure, and feelings of guilt. When an artist shares skills, guides and is brave enough to challenge the work and expectations of the victim, s/he helps a victim grow. To do otherwise is to leave victims in a perpetual state of incapacity, immaturity or, worse, oblivion. The leadership and guidance the artist offers is a demonstration of care and a belief in the person and their capacity to learn and flourish.

The small steps taken through creating artworks precipitate monumental personal shifts. As Helen Garner says of writing, "First the word, and then the sentence". Psychiatrist Dr George Halasz<sup>45</sup> suggested in a remark made to me that the shifts of perception participants' made through the mosaic project were akin to a child taking her first steps. These may be small in themselves, but like the difference between crawling and walking, art-making represented a fundamental shift in perspective and capacity. One important message contained within both Garner's and Halasz's observations, and within this work itself, is the significance of starting, and here starting was made a little easier by the existing familiarity and trust most participants had in SECASA. The entry interview, a requirement of the research but not typically part of a community arts project, was also useful in helping women start – it opened a space for participants and me to meet and exchange a little before the commencement of the group, ensuring that on the first day of the art group none of us entered the room without knowing at least one person.

Maintaining focus on the work was not always easy, nor was accepting criticism, regardless of how it was offered. At times it was obvious my input was not welcome: women did not always want to stop talking, or were reluctant to alter an area of mosaic that was not working. Yet, at other times, my input was welcome. My

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<sup>45</sup> Pers. comm. with Dr Halasz, 25 August 2008.

intervention asked participants' to examine entrenched viewpoints about their abilities and forced them to recognise that most tasks undertaken by most people include periods of learning, practising and mastering. Although participants were at times frustrated by my comments, they recognised and practised their freedom to accept or reject them. More importantly, they saw I had faith in their abilities long before they did; challenging was not about overpowering, but empowering them. In choosing to respond with tenacity rather than defeat, with openness rather than proscription, with generosity rather than fearfulness, women uncovered more substance, talent, skills and more likeable qualities within than most had expected to find.

As trust develops between participants and an artist, vulnerable participants can submit to the necessary work because they feel in the "safe hands" of the artist; they can also relax, rest and be revitalised in their creativity. Once relaxed, exploration and discoveries are possible, and creative endeavours can be achieved. As one participant said:

*When I relaxed, my brain relaxed. And when that happened ... it was like all these thoughts, that I hadn't thought about, whether I thought about them ever, or thought about again ... it was the moulding. Catherine*

## **Fictive kin**

Art is one means through which communities and individuals affected by trauma can rebuild and find rest, meaning and beauty. Another is through the "fictive kin" Jay Winter describes. Having spent most of their lives isolated by trauma, the women in this project expressed a desire to connect with others who had a similar experience. To no longer "feel alone in this" was among the principal motivations for joining the mosaic group. Overwhelmingly, most did not feel a need or desire to become immersed in others' stories, or to share theirs, but felt comfort in knowing that others "would understand without having to be told". Some hoped to find friends, while others were happy making temporary connections. As each found she could safely be herself in this creative space, she no longer felt it necessary to obscure the past from

the other women. Most were emboldened to explore and express their pasts and most found this enabled further self-discovery.

The creative practice and engagement with the group helped participants face and name the trauma, pain and other feelings, thus reducing the imposition of these on daily life. The energy formerly expended on hiding or justifying was put into the artwork, social interactions and having pleasure in a relaxed yet focused way. Although reserved at first, many participants slowly discovered points of connection with other participants. I observed how during the twenty-seven weeks of the two groups, the developing relationships appeared to unfold with a natural and unforced flow that usually began with art and their lives lived beyond trauma. The women showed immense care towards each other – helping when required, listening when asked, and sometimes by paying silent attention to each other's pain without feeling compelled to hug, or offer solutions. Through belonging and participating, individuals discovered they were likeable and that others cared about them; phone calls, offers of transport and other help, and an active engagement in conversation followed. I often felt sad to learn how this seemingly normal human contact was unusual for some.

Outside the group, some women are still in contact, go out together, and meet to make mosaics. Now, at least twelve months after the conclusion of the grief and loss group, a number still maintain contact with each other and with me. Women had been empowered by their sound experience of human connectedness through art which had nurtured a growing confidence and fostered emotional maturity. Having successfully developed secure connections with this group of fictive kin, most then created and/or developed links with "the outside world", for example, by joining other groups, feeling less frightened to take public transport, taking up paid and voluntary work, or embarking on, or desiring, an intimate relationship.

Although the scope of this thesis did not include measuring or researching the longer term impacts of art-making, I have some knowledge of how lives continue to be influenced by it, as this participant's email to me demonstrates:

*I have some news on the art front. I am going to enrol part-time in a Visual*

*Arts course at the local TAFE here. I went to see one of the teachers. I am planning on doing three electives this semester: one in sculpture, one in drawing and then one in ceramics. They start the week of 20 July and I am excited if a little frightened also.*

*I am sure I will be able to manage these hours. It will be good to meet people, to have some social interaction again and starting from an area of common interest. Next semester I can do screen-print making and digital art as well as painting; all good stuff. You certainly have played a role in this and increasing my self-confidence and in my moving back in the wider world. Once I get the rental situation under control I am going to buy a car. I am very excited about this prospect. Christina*

The mosaic and loss and grief projects, her engagement with other women and with me enabled the shifts from “feeling nothing” to being “excited”; from thinking of herself as “a blob” to feeling “like a human being”; from believing herself to be “crap at everything” and “bad all bad” to realising “I might be quite good at this”. During the mosaic project Christina described herself as “a dormouse”, as someone who never expressed an opinion and barely spoke, yet she wrote and delivered a presentation with me to a university audience describing the profound transformations she made through a creative practice. This continued beyond the life of the thesis; from being incapacitated by sorrow, anger, fear and pain and spending days in bed, she was able to approach an institution, not made up of vulnerable and traumatised women, but of the “outside world”, where she enrolled in an arts course. She continues to express and pursue her desire to be part of that world because she found connectivity to it through creativity.

## **Aesthetic redemption**

Artists are familiar with transformations. We experience them in our studios, through our engagement with materials and our subjects, and in our relationships with participants in our community arts projects. That they happen is not unusual, but how

each happens is unique and significant. For others, witnessing these transformations can be astonishing; as one counsellor said in response to seeing a client once silenced by abuse being brought to life by the “aesthetic redemption” Winter described:<sup>46</sup> “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it possible”. Another counsellor witnessing participants’ endeavours and commitment to the work and the seeming ease with which each expressed herself, recognised that creativity and working with an artist stimulated strikingly different responses to trauma than the counselling experience:

*I thought they would find it a lot harder ... It didn’t need much prompting ... I thought they would be much more withholding than they were ... they already had imaginative and innovative ideas. Through the creative means, they were able to express the very dramatic, painful situations they have experienced, and with such minimal stimulation and encouragement.*

Counsellors commented that “sitting in that chair” speaking about trauma and its effects is often an excruciating process for clients; the counsellors had not expected that art-making could and would circumvent many of the inherent problems of therapy or do so in a way that largely led victims to feeling enlivened and engaged:

*In a therapeutic session the drawing out, the probing, the exploratory part of the work, in terms of getting in touch with layers of trauma or issues which date right back to childhood, being able to verbalise one’s pain can be quite a gruelling, draining process for survivors ...*

*I was very surprised to see a lot of them, outside of your group, were keeping journals or bits of paper or notepads and they have been doing sketches over the week and I found that quite surprising as well because often in the therapeutic setting survivors will walk away and is not tangible, it is not something that is measurable, if you like, in terms of their insight or awareness into their behaviour or others’ behaviour; or the cognition, the thoughts that*

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<sup>46</sup> Jay Winter. Arts Public Lecture I – *War and Remembrance* at the Shrine of Remembrance Melbourne. 21 May 2007, attended by the author.

*they might have; it is not something that is easily measurable. But to see it translate into a piece of artwork, I found quite mind blowing.* Counsellor

Counsellors saw their clients in new ways. They observed them excelling, being useful rather than needy; as creative and social human beings rather than socially isolated, uncommunicative victims of trauma; being imaginative, committed and lateral thinkers:

*It gave me some insight, particularly with my clients, how they interact in the outside world. So it gave me a framework into thinking, "This is what I see in the room, but it is not necessarily what is going on in the outside world".*

Counsellor

Art-making gave voice to the deepest, most painful, difficult, elusive and frightening feelings and did so in ways that softened the pain of expressing them. Creative practice opened possibilities to examine their most unpalatable experiences and feelings then offer them back in viewable form. The artworks of other artists that were brought to the conversation were important in helping women address some of the most difficult aspects of their lives and the problems of expressing them. Although some of the artworks were difficult to appreciate aesthetically, especially for beginners, participants learned that creating aesthetic beauty is not always the artist's purpose; nor was it my purpose in showing them. Beuys's and Dix's large bodies of works, for example, are indicative of the artist's struggle to first comprehend, then communicate very challenging facets of human behaviour and experience. As they were at the time Dix made them, his post-war artworks were immensely confronting for some participants. His intention in creating art was to "banish" his emotional burdens of war and its aftermath, to convey something about human nature; it was not motivated by the desire to create work that viewers might like (Karcher).

Artists push the boundaries of what materials can do and what art is. The exposure to the work of artists such as Ivimey, Dix, Kollwitz and Gormley, among many others, and to my work through its stretching materials to their limit, opened the women to extraordinary possibilities of expression. These gave women courage to vigorously express the emotions and stories that had previously been silent or silenced. Even as

emotions poured from them, women sometimes tried to stop or moderate their intensity (as described above in the discussion about Barb creating *Nude* and Catherine creating *Three Penises*) but the fact that “this is art” was eventually enough to curtail self-censorship and for them to continue delving into the creative process. Women learned that visual language does not share the constraints and conventions of verbal language, nor does it require an adherence to politeness. Through their exposure to these artists’ work and my processes, they discovered a route into expressing what formerly had been inexpressible. Art materials could express pain, spaces could reflect loss, and the method of making – stroking, moulding, poking, cutting – could add further depth and metaphors to the work.

Kathe Kollwitz’s *Grieving Parents*<sup>47</sup> (Figure 3) is an example of one artist’s work that touched women profoundly. As representations of Kollwitz’s husband and herself, *Grieving Parents* mourn their son who died early in the First World War and whose grave lies in front of the statues. As a representation of mourning parents, they enunciate the universal and profound grief felt by all parents whose children die before them, and particularly the sorrow of those who have similarly lost sons in war; as representations of all people in grief, the work offers viewers permission to feel and grieve deeply. As both a personal and universal symbol of loss, the work is “a profound statement about individual grief for a collective catastrophe”, according to historian and writer Jay Winter (Winter and Sivan 58).

In this arresting and sorrowful work, Kollwitz eloquently expresses some of the most difficult aspects of mourning. In revealing individuals grieving differently and separately, she states that rather than bringing people together in a shared expression of sorrow, grief can wrench them apart. *Grieving Parents* depicts the emotional devastation of the mother and the stoic devastation of the father. The bent woman demonstrates all the expected traits of a grieving mother whilst, at first glance, the man seems stiff, emotionless and removed. However, Kollwitz, in carving tension into his grip, a deep furrow into his brow, acknowledges his pain. Facing forwards, he looks with downcast eyes across a field of the dead that includes the grave of his son. Perhaps he too is staring into the abyss?

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<sup>47</sup> Located in Vladslo German Military Cemetery, Belgium.

The participants' responses to *Grieving Parents* revealed a deep compassion for the mother but, surprisingly, more for the father. It occurred to me that whilst the women naturally might identify with the mother, it was the father's containment that may be more familiar. The work further resonated with those who felt their own awkward or inappropriate behaviours were judged harshly because others were unable to see beyond to the source and depth of their pain.

The space, the chasm, the nothingness between the *Grieving Parents* is potent and revealing. Both face outwards to the dead, and inwards to their thoughts and suffering. There is no visible emotional or physical connection between the two, although their grief is shared. Kollwitz originally intended the space between the *Grieving Parents* to contain a statue of their dead and absent son. However, she found that chasm could not be filled, no matter how she struggled to hold him. Her loss, like the Archduke's represented in Canova's tomb, and the participants' own work, had left a void she struggled and failed to fill, but which she knew had somehow to be accepted and accommodated. The space left between the parents is the painful realisation of her loss and, as Pearlman and Staub say, "that life would never be the same again".

Kollwitz's effort to understand, accept and mourn the death of her son continued throughout her life. It took her to the threshold of insanity and years to harness the spectrum of her emotions before she was able to create this monument, a memorial to her son, his fellow combatants and the countless parents who mourned them. In 1932, eighteen years after the death of her son, the statues were installed in the Belgian cemetery (Winter and Sivan; Kearns). In honestly expressing her own pain and struggle in *Grieving Parents* Kollwitz's work reaches out and gives courage, understanding and empathy to others who suffer. Most participants named this as the most poignant artwork I showed. In a wider context, the work has been useful in demonstrating how artists, by delving deeply and honestly into their own shadowy experiences, contribute to the wellbeing of others. In offering her grief and loss in a form that is viewable, Kollwitz, and the other artists whose work I discussed in the groups and in this thesis, generates conversations about some of the real and largely unacknowledged difficulties in mourning.

I said earlier that those who go through the experience of trauma know it is one of deadening and reduction, whereas creative spaces are alive and full of promise. In “creating a world”, as Witkin (in Minge 270) believes the artist does, and as I would add that art does, the possibility exists to create the place that was never available, comfort that was never given, love that was always denied, and beauty that was often tarnished:

*I remember trying to work on the pieces with the flowers and feeling like I had no beauty inside myself and how I am supposed to make something beautiful – like a beautiful flower? I felt, that particular day, I didn't feel that beauty so I was finding it hard to put the beauty in the canvas; fortunately, at the end of the day, it came, you know. Being able to venture into my creative side again in artwork has made me feel like ... what's the word?... going to a place for me that I would actually like to be in. Amelia*

A world can be created into which participants might safely and securely deposit the anger that could never be shouted and the pain that could never be shown. I witnessed and heard of, but have not fully described in this document, the significant damage to victims' health and wellbeing when they confronted difficult life experiences without the skills to properly express their negative emotions or negotiate their feelings. As Atkinson also notes in her research, such responses to trauma regularly turned into anger, then despair, before victims collapsed into serious ill-health that often required hospitalisation. The burden of its constant presence was lifted with the creative expression of anger, albeit temporarily for some, and self-understanding and gentleness became possible.

*I gave myself permission and [it] was really good to give myself permission ... because I was so horrifically abused even as a tiny child ... I wasn't even allowed to speak a lot of the time in my life then, so it is a huge statement, and I have given myself permission to make the statement. I have hardly ever allowed myself to feel angry in my life because I dare not; I was so abused that I just dare not touch it, let alone express it. So the process happened very quickly and I did allow myself to experience the anger and then I allowed myself to create a piece of art, or a picture of the anger, and statement ...*

*I allowed myself, for a very brief time, to feel the anger; to do something with the anger and channel the anger, to channel all the feelings and the thoughts that were there ... When you're that extremely abused, when another person would respond to something with anger, I don't even go there. I just go to hurt, then more hurt and then more hurt; perhaps there was a degree of that but I know I touched the anger. I felt the anger, I expressed the anger ... I have very healthy boundaries and I can make my statements and I can be heard. Rosie*

The harsh and violent work I created with nails, hooks, wire and glass firstly in response to imagined and written experiences of trauma, then to the women's experiences, were out of character and very disconcerting. I could see, however, that in moving beyond the immediate desire to recoil from the work I had encapsulated the potency of the subject. I did not show participants these, or others of my work, but rather, I shared the concepts behind them. One reason for this decision was to minimise the influence of my style of making. Another was that I did not want participants to interpret individual pieces of my work as an interpretation or judgement of them as victims or in any way deficient. Additionally, my work and thinking derives from a lifelong immersion in the subject of grief and loss; I was wary, just as I had been in showing Dix's work, that it could cause unhelpful distress.

Nonetheless, my influence, born of my creative practice, investigation and expression of the challenging emotions, was in this aspect of the project considered and considerable. When participants raised the subject of their immense anger, my work, via the methods I had used to make it, was usefully brought to the conversation. The guided journey through art-making powerfully touched the emotional centre, without violence of language or action. Those who had felt they "could really hurt somebody ... badly" if they dared express their anger, found the capacity to express it fully in art was utterly transformative and was one of the most revealing aspects of the work. The unequivocal communication of unpalatable emotions and pain enabled women to express themselves more capably in thought and words before they reached, as they had before, a point of crisis. Their home life, intimate life and work with their therapists was consequently enhanced.

An important finding of the thesis is that victims of trauma benefit and grow when they are guided towards expressing all their emotions. That both a creative practice and working with an appropriately mindful artist were shown to be capable of facilitating a mature, heartfelt and safe expression of challenging and unpalatable emotions, and of releasing victims of the torment of unsuccessfully trying to contain them, are amongst the significant contributions of this thesis.

## **Space and time**

In my inhabitation of the shadowy worlds of trauma, loss and grief and the particularly dark space of sexual abuse, I became familiar and sometimes outraged by the consequences of the secrecy, silence and immense and long-lived pain surrounding it. In trying to exhibit and speak about the work, I found I was also being rebuffed by those who seemed to find the work and subject unbearable – some even refusing to look at it. I found it illuminating and disheartening to discover denial and refusal in places where I had least expected to find them. I have also found the opposite.

Local and international organisations, such as SECASA and FECS,<sup>48</sup> which work with victims of sexual trauma and those affected by trauma, loss and grief, welcomed the thesis and its findings. They understand art as a conduit to wellbeing through the acts of making, its physicality, and through its capacity to bring these difficult subjects into the public arena through means other than talking. Southern Health,<sup>49</sup> having already made a commitment to include the arts in the network's health services, accepted my exhibition without recoiling from its subject matter or its content; it provided space for the work to meet an audience, and allowed that conversation to unfold naturally and unhindered.

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<sup>48</sup> FECS Health and Human Services System is a United States agency which hosts the Sexual Abuse Survivors Art Show, in which participants exhibited in 2009 and 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Southern Health is the largest of the Victorian Health Service Providers. Within this network are six major hospitals, including the Monash Medical Centre and SECASA.

The Monash Medical Centre is like a microcosm of the city of Melbourne for its diversity of people. Hundreds move through the exhibition space each day. The work was seen by those who chanced upon it, those who made a conscious decision to visit it, as well as others who pass through the space many times a day. This space is remarkably effective in generating interest in art and wellbeing, in exposing a wide audience to the work and its subject, in engaging the audience in a conversation with the artist and each other, and in provoking questions.

Entry and exit interviews also yielded unexpected benefits. In addition to the point raised earlier about the entry interview helping make participation in the community art groups easier, these interviews expanded my appreciation of each woman's specific experiences. Although I did not ask, nor always hear the details of their abuse, I learned of its effects and how it might impact upon women's participation. On those occasions when an individual's creativity stalled, the revelations they had made in the entry interview, such as a love of colour or pattern or desire for the clay, became useful resources for reinvigorating it.

The exit interview was an invitation to each woman to reflect upon her experience of making and participation. As each was surrounded by her artworks, the trajectory of her artistic as well as emotional and social journey was clearly visible; along with the discussion, this visibility intensified each participant's awareness of her progress, shifts in self-perception and perceptions of others. The exchanges and contents of the exit interviews gave me more and richer insights into the effects of the project than I had anticipated and were profoundly moving experiences for me. In addition to learning the range of benefits each person had received from their participation, also revelatory was the ease with which most offered their critique, discussed the frustrations of making and made suggestions for the thesis and future projects. While recalling occasions during the projects when women expressed their surprise that I "did not shout" at them for giving their opinion or making a mistake, I noticed how immensely capable each was of having an exchange with me in a frank conversation and how far most had journeyed. I have consequently incorporated interviews into my community arts practice.

The conscientious commitment with which each woman approached her role as a

research subject added another unexpected dimension to the thesis. Alongside the desire each had to help herself recover, many felt their participation also enabled them to help others, especially those who have been sexually abused, and many made a point of revealing things they believed would be useful to the thesis. Women believed that through their participation, public displays of artwork and the calendars, they could potentially have some influence in a number of areas: firstly, by putting the subject of sexual abuse further into the public domain; secondly, by providing hope to others in similar situations; and thirdly, by potentially influencing those involved in post-sexual abuse treatment to understand the merits of an arts practice and the diverse needs of victims. The seeking and validation of their opinions was a new experience for most participants and a further factor in shifting their self-perception from being “useless” to being useful.

Time is a further consideration of this thesis. I argue that a significant input of time is required if there is to be any restoration to wellbeing post trauma. In earlier discussions, particularly in Chapter 7 and of the Kollwitz statues above, I drew attention to the time necessary for victims to confront, acknowledge and express their abuse and sorrow. Trauma, loss and grief work, in any form, requires a significant investment of time if it is to achieve any of its goals and, similarly, a creative practice requires time if it is to achieve its goals of learning, developing skills, germinating and nurturing ideas, and starting, altering and finishing artworks. Importantly, a creative practice requires time for contemplation – for the maker to sit in conversation with the artwork and observe the connections to making, as well as the art objects and their impact upon world from which they emerged and into which they are being placed.

A significant period of time is needed if participants are to become comfortable members of a group, if relationships are to develop, and observations made through which shifts in perception and behaviour can occur. In this instance, twenty-seven weeks were devoted to the creative practice of the groups; additional time was spent in reflection and anticipation of the projects, in interviews and preparation for them, over the life span of both calendars, in the ongoing relationships between participants and between participants and their work. Time is required to make what I think of as the journey from the head to the heart; from an idea, to being lived and felt; from believing oneself to be “crap at everything” to thinking “I might be good at this”; to

*knowing* one is capable, from thinking about “me and the outside world” to being part of world time. Together, these represent a significant period of creative engagement and commitment to personal growth and wellbeing.

An investment of time honours the work; so, too, can a time limit. In finite projects participants realise the importance of attending classes each week, of doing and finishing the creative and emotional work. While some consider time-limiting projects to contribute to further loss, I argue that it empowers participants to seize and make the most of an opportunity. It also reduces the opportunity for participants to become dependent on the project or stagnate in the domain of recovery.

“Art tends to accelerate therapy”, says Rubin. “Despite the time involved in the creative process, art often reduces the amount of time required to get to important issues.” In acknowledging the difficulties in proving such claims, “because it is so hard to quantify all the variables involved in any psychotherapy, or to hold them constant in any kind of reliable research study”, she nevertheless states that this acceleration is “often expressed by art therapists and non-arts therapists alike” (29-30). This is a view shared by SECASA counsellors, as one observed:

*In a one-to-one therapeutic session the drawing out, the probing, the exploratory part of the work, getting in touch with layers of trauma which date right back to childhood, being able to verbalise one’s pain can be a gruelling, draining process for survivors. Through the creative means, they were able to demonstrate very dramatic painful situations that they had experienced with minimal stimulation and encouragement.*

Participants similarly attest to art “speeding up” recovery:

*I think it’s doing; you can get results a lot quicker than just talking. With doing, you are getting your feelings out in a physical form whereas with talking – ... I have been talking therapies nine years now and I am still going, you know –If I could have more of working with clay ... and getting my feelings, good or negative, out through clay, I think I would have healed a lot quicker.*

*Yes, because as I said, I have been in counselling over nine years now, every week, and it is just slow going, very slow going, and having this, just making things out of clay combined with that, would just speed up my recovery so much more, so much quicker. Deirdre*

Even allowing for some effusiveness, that so many participants said the art projects achieved more “in fifteen weeks than years of counselling” and that “in its slowness, it was really fast”, highlights the significant benefits of a creative engagement to wellbeing. This is one important finding of this thesis. Women yearned for art to be an ongoing option for them and others.

Beyond all the benefits to wellbeing discussed, it is also worth considering a creative practice with trauma victims in terms of cost effectiveness. For example, if victims of sexual abuse were to reach a place of wellbeing in eighteen months to two years rather than the nine years this participant spoke of, or the fifty years others have, what savings to the health budget might be anticipated, bearing in mind that most participants access a significant range of health services? Some questions arising from incidental observations during this thesis are worthy of further consideration. For example, does participation in a creative practice reduce the demand on mental health services and the use of medication? Does it alter compulsive eating habits leading to obesity and other health issues such as diabetes and heart problems? Might arthritic pain be reduced? Are smoking and other addictive behaviours reduced, and if so, how does this impact upon the demand for health services? Might there be a reduced dependence on the services of counsellors and therapists?

## **Dappled shadows**

I began this thesis with a description of shadows. I wrote of their transience, beauty, darkness and distortions, and how these descriptions could be applied to the shadowy world of trauma, particularly sexual abuse. I drew on the various qualities of shadows to literally and metaphorically describe a lived and felt world of darkness and distortions, in which much is not fixed or is uncertain, where rest may be found, and

secrecy may hover. I also used the motif of shadows to consider the miasma of grief and loss that surrounds this world. The phrase “in the shadow of” in the title of this thesis provides a lyrical way to contemplate the experiences of abuse that brought participants to the group and how each had been uniquely affected.

In my reflections in this thesis and my engagement with these twenty-five participants, it is the dappled, moving shadows that most resonate with the work. The in-between places of light and shade, shadows that in pulling in and out of focus draw attention to one particular focal point before moving slightly to reveal another, are captured in the metaphor. The image of dappled shadows holds the number and individuality of the participants, their shifting sensitivities and considered responses. It lingers as a perfect metaphor to describe the movement that the participants and I, as a studio and community artist and researcher, experienced in this journey; it hints at moments of clarity and obscurity, of darkness, light, rest and activity. Dappled shadows describe transience and above all, a sense of wonder in their gentle capacity to evoke; they accommodate difference and nuance, both crucial to grasping the complexities as well as the richness of the work. Dappled shadows suggests there is not one singular viewpoint, but many and varied viewpoints, and accepts shifting ideas, responses and interpretations as inherent in creative practice.

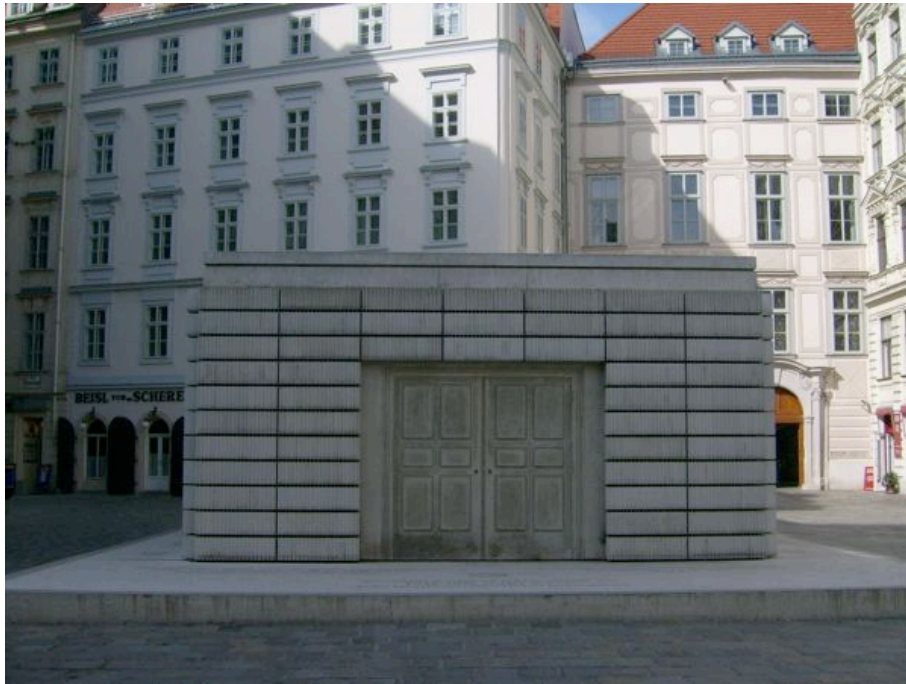
In this dappled shadowy world, I too sat with the fleeting, the hints, with infinite beauty and the deepest sorrow. I peered into the darkness but remained near to the light. Where I saw profound sorrow and hurt and every reason to be harsh, I also saw that these inspired creativity, kindness and openness. The possibilities inherent in the metaphor reflect the shifting influences upon my own creativity – the participants, literature, artworks and artists and the research journey through Europe. The various vantage points from which I made, viewed, used and exhibited my own creativity may be viewed through this metaphor, as might its subsequent impact on participants, viewers and those who work and are interested in this realm.

The women who participated in this study had for years hibernated in the shadows. Sheltering from harm, they tended their wounds in darkness, hoping that in that quiet, colourless, solitary space they could live serenely. Instead, most discovered that

robbed of sunshine and light, they couldn't see, and nothing would grow. They were effectively dissociated from life.

My invitation to leave this shadowy world was not an invitation into dazzling and blinding sunlight, but an invitation to discover a place where the light was not so intense as to immobilise and the dark not so gloomy as to obscure. This was an invitation into the creative space, a place of materials and art-making, engagement and retreat, trauma and mourning, anger and pleasure: a place of transformation, restoration and possibilities. It was an invitation to hold faith and sorrow together as part of the unequal harmony that defines the human – just as night sits beside day differently in winter and summer. It was an invitation into colour, texture and form; to work with contrast and change, with the present and with the past; it was an invitation to engage with others with a shared passion for art, and some with a shared experience of trauma, and to create.

It was an invitation to work and love.



**Figure 1** Holocaust Memorial, Vienna



**Figure 22** *To the Perfect Wife of Albert*, Antonio Canova



**Figure 3** *Grieving Parents*, Kathe Kollwitz

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## 10 APPENDIX

### Ethics approval

## MEMO

TO	Associate Professor Jenny Sharples School of Psychology St Albans Campus	DATE	20/06/2007
FROM	Professor Michael Polonsky Chair Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee		
SUBJECT	Ethics Application - HRETH 07/33		

Dear Associate Professor Sharples,

Thank you for submitting this application for ethical approval of the project:

**HRETH07/33      Trauma, Grief and Loss: A creative response (HREC07/078)**

The proposed research project has been accepted by the Chair, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval for this application has been granted from 20 June 2007 to 20 June 2008.

Please note that the Human Research Ethics Committee must be informed of the following: any changes to the approved research protocol, project timelines, any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants, and unforeseen events that may effect continued ethical acceptability of the project. In these unlikely events, researchers must immediately cease all data collection until the Committee has approved the changes.

Continued approval of this research project by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (VUHREC) is conditional upon the provision of a report within 12 months of the above approval date (by **20 June 2008**) or upon the completion of the project (if earlier). A report proforma may be downloaded from the VUHREC web site at: <http://research.vu.edu.au/hrec.php>

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 9919 4625.

On behalf of the Committee, I wish you all the best for the conduct of the project.

**Professor Michael Polonsky**  
Chair

*Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee*

## **Letter of invitation to participate**

June 19, 2007

(Printed on VU Letterhead)

Dear ...

### **ARTS PROJECT: The Creative Space : An exploration of the arts and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma, grief and loss.**

I would like to invite you to participate in a visual art group being run as part of a PhD research project I am undertaking at Victoria University. The project is being run with the support of SECASA.

I am examining if and how participating in an arts group, learning and making art with an artist may assist people after an experience of trauma, and the grief and loss that comes with that trauma. My particular focus is with people who have experienced sexual assault.

I am a visual artist with many years experience making art and working with a variety of communities, including SECASA (in 2005). You are invited to look at my websites [www.wooloo.org/annergigs](http://www.wooloo.org/annergigs) and [www.wooloo.org/communityart](http://www.wooloo.org/communityart) if you are interested in my background and experience.

I am including information about the project for you to read and consider. I would like to point out that this project is examining an arts activity and is not offering participants therapy – which can be accessed through SECASA if required. If you are interested in participating, I would like to telephone to make an appointment to meet with you to discuss the project and your participation.

Before I can telephone you I need to receive your written permission. Can you please complete the form at the bottom of this letter and give it to your SECASA counsellor, or post it to me c/o SECASA. If you prefer, you can contact me on my mobile 0417 526 636.

I hope those who choose to participate in the project will find it an enjoyable and useful experience.

Yours sincerely

ANNE RIGGS  
PhD Student

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I \_\_\_\_\_ give my permission for my telephone  
number \_\_\_\_\_ (name) \_\_\_\_\_ to be given to Anne Riggs and for  
Anne to telephone me to make an appointment.

Telephone number: landline \_\_\_\_\_  
mobile \_\_\_\_\_

Best times to call: days \_\_\_\_\_  
times \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

## Information given to participants

(Printed on VU Letterhead)

**"The Creative Space: An exploration of the arts and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma, grief and loss."**

### PROJECT INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

I am a visual artist doing a research project at Victoria University for a PhD. My area of interest is the community arts, and whether belonging to a group where the focus is creating and making art with an artist can help overcome feelings of grief and loss following trauma.

With the support of SECASA, I will be running an art (mosaic? clay?) group each week for 15 weeks where people come together to learn and create art. I would like to invite you to join.

The purpose of the project is offer participants an enjoyable experience, to learn or develop art-making skills alongside an artist and to be with a group of people who have a shared understanding of trauma. We will be making art together. Participants need not have any experience, as I will guide you with techniques, materials and ideas. For those who have experience, it may be an opportunity to develop and practice your skills. We will look at other artists' work, sources of inspiration, and ways to express your own ideas.

I have many years experience making art and working with a variety of communities (including SECASA in 2005). You are invited to look at my websites [www.wooloo.org/annergiggs](http://www.wooloo.org/annergiggs) and [www.wooloo.org/communityart](http://www.wooloo.org/communityart) if you are interested in my background or looking at some of the artwork created in other community art projects.

The details of the project are set out below, which I invite you to read and consider.

I am happy for you to contact me on 0417 526 636 or via my email [anne.riggs@research.vu.edu.au](mailto:anne.riggs@research.vu.edu.au) if you would like to discuss anything regarding this project.

**Dates:** 15 weeks, from (date) to (date)

**Time:** To be decided

**Location:** SECASA premises to be decided

**Purpose:**

To explore the potential of the visual arts to contribute to participants wellbeing following trauma, grief and loss. Of particular interest to the research are participants' responses to:

- learning/developing art-making skills
- creating artwork
- being part of a group
- working with an artist
- displaying their artwork

**Support:**

This is a research project being undertaken at Victoria University and with the support of the South East Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA).

Participants should be aware that it is possible to have a strong emotional response to creating artwork and being part of this group. A SECASA counsellor will be present at each art session and will be available to participants. Participants are encouraged to speak to the counsellor and/or your own support networks to better understand the issues that may be raised or the responses that you may have.

**Interviews:**

I will conduct two interviews with participants. The first will be before the project starts to discuss each participant's interest in joining the art group, and the second will be at the end to discuss participant's responses to taking part in this group. Participants are invited to be forthright and frank in their responses; positive and negative responses are helpful.

Participants will be asked to give me permission to record the entry and exit interviews (either on video or audio tape). The purpose of taping the interviews is to have a record of the discussion for analysis and consideration. Video or audio tape recording is useful to ensure that the full responses of the participant is noted. Pauses and facial and hand expressions, for example, can provide some insight into understanding a participant's response to the art program.

The SECASA counsellor will also conduct a short telephone interview with participants at the end of the project. The information given in this interview will be passed on to me in an anonymous format. Again, participants are invited to be forthright and frank in your responses. The purpose of this interview is to provide participants with the opportunity to give feedback to someone other than myself.

**Photos and video:**

With participants' permission, the art project will be documented on video and in still photographs. The purpose of this documentation is to look at and analyse the art group and artwork in the context of the visual arts' potential for wellbeing, useful to this research is recording information such as the ambience in the room, participants making their art, the decision making that informs creativity, and the interaction between participants. I would like to include images of the artwork in the thesis and I may wish to also include images of participants creating their artwork.

For the period of the art sessions, participants are welcome to request to view video footage and still images taken during the art group. On the final art session participants will be provided with the opportunity to view all images. Permission for the use of images, or selected images can be withdrawn.

A short DVD may be made to show the art project in the context of art and well-being. The DVD may be shown in talks and conference presentations.

Attached is a Photo Consent form for consideration and for participants to complete.

**Artwork:**

There is potential to exhibit some of the artwork created in this art group. We will discuss and decide as a group, if and how, this may happen.

I will be making artwork inspired by my interaction with the group, the issues raised and further research. The exploration of grief and loss, borne out of trauma, is the primary focus for this artwork. It will be publicly exhibited during 2008.

**Participation:**

Participation in this arts project is voluntary. Participants can withdraw from the project at any time.

If a participant decides to leave and is willing to participate in an exit interview, it would be useful for me to know the range of responses to the project.

Access to services provided by SECASA will not be affected by a decision to leave.

**Confidentiality:**

Entry and exit interviews are confidential and will not be heard or seen by anyone other than my supervisors and me. These records are kept locked at Victoria University and cannot be used for any purpose other than the analysis of the art group and artwork for this research project.

Should a participant withdraw from the project, all records of that participant (still images, video, audio) will be destroyed. Group images, which include the participant, will also be destroyed.

The art project will be considered and written up as part of a PhD thesis to be read by others. To protect participant's privacy, real names will not be used.

Notes from the interview between participants and the SECASA counsellor will be given to me, and SECASA will not retain a copy. Any other discussions between the counsellor and participants are confidential and will not be included in this study.

**Anne Riggs**

PhD Student  
Victoria University  
May 2007

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to Associate Professor Jenny Sharples, Head of Psychology, Victoria University (PhD Supervisor) [Jenny.Sharples@vu.edu.au](mailto:Jenny.Sharples@vu.edu.au), telephone 9919 2156. If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC. 3001, phone (03) 9919 4710.

## Recording consent

(Printed on VU Letterhead)

"The Creative Space: An exploration of the arts and wellbeing in the shadow of trauma, grief and loss."

### RECORDING CONSENT

I, [Click here & type participant's name]  
of [Click here & type participant's suburb] state that I am at least 18 years old and  
that I am voluntarily giving my consent

- |    |   |                              |                             |
|----|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. | Two interviews being recorded                                       |                              |                             |
|    | by video  | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|    | by audio tape   | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
| 2. | the recording, on video and in still photography, images of me      |                              |                             |
|    | creating my artwork and interacting with others in the group.       | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
| 3. | images of my work being used as illustrations in the written thesis | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
| 4. | images of me creating artwork, which include my face, being used    | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|    | to illustrate the written thesis                                    |                              |                             |
| 5. | images of my work being shown at talks and conferences              | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
| 6. | still images which include my face being shown at talks and         | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|    | conferences   |                              |                             |
| 7. | video and still images of me being used in a DVD record of the      | <input type="checkbox"/> yes | <input type="checkbox"/> no |
|    | project which may be used in talks and conferences                  |                              |                             |

Anne Riggs has explained to me and I have understood the sort of images that will be taken of me and/or my artwork. She has explained that until the conclusion of this arts project, I can request to view video and photo documentation, that all images will be shown to me at the conclusion of the project and that I can withdraw my consent.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this arts project at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed:

Witness other than the researcher:

Date:

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to Associate Professor Jenny Sharples, Head of Psychology, Victoria University (PhD Supervisor) [Jenny.Sharples@vu.edu.au](mailto:Jenny.Sharples@vu.edu.au), telephone 9919 2156. If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University PO Box 14428, Melbourne, VIC. 3001, phone (03) 9919 4710.

## **Entry and exit interview questions for participants**

### *ENTRY INTERVIEW*

1. "What brought you to this project?"
2. "What do you hope to get out of it?"

Please consider in your comments the following topics:

creating art

working in a group

working with an artist

in terms of its possible affect on your experience of trauma, grief and loss, and the aftermath of this?

### *EXIT INTERVIEW*

#### GENERAL QUESTION

1. "Can you tell me what about the arts project has been useful and what has not been useful to you?"

#### SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

2. Relating to the art process and artwork

"Please comment on":

The experience of creating art and what you made

Your response to working in a group

What the art object means to you

Your response to working with an artist

What showing your artwork (in a public space) has meant to you.

3. Relating to the affect participating in the art group has on the trauma experience and healing

"Can you talk about if/how *creating your artwork* has affected the way your experience of trauma, grief and loss impacts on your life."

"Can you talk about if/how *belonging to the art group* has affected the way your experience of trauma, grief and loss impacts on your life."

"Can you talk about if/how *putting the artwork up for others to see* has affected the way your experience of trauma, grief and loss impacts on your life."

#### 4. Relating to trauma and other interventions

"You have come to this project through SECASA and may be receiving counselling and/or other services through them or another organisation. I am interested to hear where the experience of the art group sits in relation to the other activities and relationships which may be contributing to your wellbeing. Can you tell me what each activity provides, or talk about where the overlaps might be."

#### GENERAL QUESTIONS

##### 5. About the program

"Is there anything you would change about the program?"

"Would you like to make any suggestions for future programs of this nature?"

"Would you like to make any comments or ask questions regarding this program?"

#### **2008 and 2009 SECASA calendars**

In DVD rear cover.

#### **Additional images on DVD**

Folders:

Mosaic community art group: additional artworks and works in progress

Loss and Grief community art group: additional artworks and works in progress

Anne Riggs: Artworks.

Anne Riggs: Installation photographs from the exhibition *Art in the Shadows :*

*Trauma, Loss Grief* (Monash Medical Centre, 25 November 2009–29 January 2010).

