

SEEING HER STORIES

An art based inquiry

Carla van Laar

This book presents the research project “Seeing Her Stories” that was completed in fulfilment of the qualification Doctor of Therapeutic Arts Practice.

First published 2020

by Caravanlaar.com

27 Wilson Avenue, Brunswick, Victoria 3056, Australia.

Copyright 2020 Carla van Laar

All artworks copyright of Carla van Laar

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-6487679-0-9

Design by Vic Segedin, Dragonfly Design.

Printed and bound by IngramSpark.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Portrait of a moment from the “Seeing her stories” research project, 2010



Figure 1.2 Marty at the dinner party, 2010.

Marty offers, “There’s this one time, which still sort of fascinates me, about my engagement with Carla’s research, and it sort of happened slowly, and it still fascinates me. I went to the exhibition down at MIECAT, and I looked at all the paintings, and of course, I can relate to all of them, but then there was this one ”



Figure 1.3 "Woman on top of the cliff". Carla van Laar, 2008.



She points to the figure on top of the cliff

*“and it just grabbed me, and I couldn’t stop looking at it, and, it did something, and I thought,
‘Oh, that’s going to be everybody’s favourite, that’s obviously the best one’.”*

Jan laughs.

Marty goes on, “Then, I heard Julie saying, “That road, it just grabbed me.””



Figure 1.4 "The road to Coronet Bay". Carla van Laar, 2008.



More knowing chuckles around the table.



Figure 1.5 “My dolls on Grandma’s suitcase”. Carla van Laar, 2008.



“And then, somebody else said, ‘Those dolls, the dolls...’,



Figure 1.6 “Henry and me on the rollercoaster”. Carla van Laar, 2008.



and so for everybody – well, maybe not for everybody – but for many people, it was a different painting ...



Figure 1.7 "Visiting Oma". Carla van Laar, 2008.



Missing my memories
You've always been there
a little girl. You are perfect
I love you



Figure 1.8 “Minor catastrophe”. Carla van Laar, 2008.





Figure 1.9 "My desk". Carla van Laar, 2008.





Figure 1.10 “The trigger”. Carla van Laar, 2008.





Figure 1.11 “Ladders”. Carla van Laar, 2008.



I've been amazed to have that reaction to one painting, and then see other people have a very similar reaction, but, to a completely different painting. So, there's obviously something happening there."

Jan responds:

"Paintings 'reach out' to people.

*The painting actually has an energy which brings it to us
stories of experience of paintings
the emotional strength of that
the swoon."*

She gestures to the blurry image of the road looking out of the side window of the car:



Figure 1.12 “Out the side window”. Carla van Laar, 2008.



*"It seemed bigger than all the others.
It came to meet me."*

My interest in the topic

For as long as I can remember, seeing has been a source of pleasure, fascination, knowing and being in the world. Noticing what I see intrigues and delights me, prompting me to make artworks and show them to others. I have been doing this since I was a child.

I have pondered on how works of art act like conversations between people. I have noticed myself being impacted by others' artworks in ways similar to how others report being moved by mine. I am fascinated by these exchanges and how they change us and our lives in ways that are sometimes small, sometimes momentous, and the meanings that these exchanges hold for us.

As an adult woman, painter and art therapist, over the years my curiosity about seeing artworks has continued to be a source of infinite amazement and mystery. I have shared this intimate passion with other people in many ways: as an art lover and visitor to exhibitions, as a painter, an exhibiting artist and published author, as a community worker and art therapist, and as an educator in art therapy. I have noticed the deepening of connections and relationships with others as we share our seeing experiences together. I have been moved many times by the responses others have to my paintings, telling me that they have been touched in many different ways. In particular, many women have thanked me for sharing my stories through art, letting me know that this has been meaningful and somehow life-changing for them.

When I published my book *Bereaved Mother's Heart* (van Laar, 2008), based on my Master's thesis, I purposefully created artworks that related to the range of my experiencing following my son's short life. These included themes that I had not been able to find in the public domain, aspects of my story that seemed to be unmentionable, taboo, unspoken and unseen. Many women responded, writing to me and telling me in person how they had been touched and moved, how they identified with the book, and how they had found parts of their own experiences affirmed by the visual artworks. This fuelled my interest to understand more fully what happens when a woman's stories are seen.

My work as an art therapist in the community, justice, health and education sectors likewise propelled my interest in women's stories. I share the conviction of narrative therapists (White & Epston, 1990) that cultural and institutional stories perform values. These embedded values serve the interests of particular individuals and groups, often at the expense of others, and are integral to perpetuating and maintaining systems of power and the status quo.

Examples of such power structures in my own lived experience include working within male dominated systemic structures that make decisions regarding women's welfare, being aware of men at the top of organisations exploiting their positions for sexual relationships with female employees and students, and noticing men being promoted to positions of power over more qualified and experienced women. More subtle examples of these power structures can be observed in educational conventions where positivist ways of knowing and forms of evidence such as statistics and randomised controlled trials are valued as superior over other ways of knowing, including first-hand accounts and artefacts.

My work with girls and women as clients has exposed me over and over again to women who have been silenced in fear after being abused and disempowered. In my work I strive to enable people to feel safe enough to find art based ways of telling stories that subvert oppressive power structures by being authentic to lived experiencing. While I identify as a woman and as female, I don't identify with socially constructed gender roles that are limiting or disempowering. I understand that within the spectrum of people who identify as women in many different ways, there are people whose stories are more marginalised than mine are. However, my own stories of being a woman and an artist are part of a bigger social story in which particular stories are subjugated, less privileged, and afforded less opportunities to be seen (Richardson, 2016).

Contemporary interest in the stories of women artists has inspired the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) to host an exhibition titled "Modern Australian Women" that they introduced with this statement:

It is late 2018, a year that has come to be associated with a renewed critical analysis of the expectations and challenges facing girls and women throughout the world, from the #metoo movement to the United Nations HeforShe campaign and beyond. A new display at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia offers a reminder that this discussion is a longstanding and still very pertinent one. (NGV Magazine #13, 2018, p. 34)

As a life-long painter, I recall the first time I was gifted a book entitled *Women Artists* (Petersen & Wilson, 1976). I was sixteen at the time, and I remember the dawning in my awareness that I was a member of this group of people – women artists. I read with intrigue the stories of anonymous nuns in the 17th century who had painted tiny yet insubordinate illustrations of female saints on horseback in the margins of illuminated biblical texts. I was fascinated by the differences between paintings of pretty and reclining women painted by men and paintings of feeling and active women painted by women. With my eyes, over the years, I have absorbed many more images made by women, witnessing things like the choices of subject matter, appreciation of organic shapes, honouring of craft and textiles, and feminist artworks that overtly reclaim the female form from the classical male gaze (Grozenick, 2001).

At the beginning of this research, I had become interested in what would happen if I started to paint and make artworks that were neither conceptual – following the trend in fine arts education, nor exploring a particular theme, as in *Bereaved Mother's Heart* (van Laar, 2008) – and as many artefacts of art therapy do – but were simply artworks painted based on my interests, life and experiencing at the time.

The resulting artworks now act as a record, like a visual diary or journal, of my unfolding interests and developing art practice. This shift from investigating a heart-rending lived experience, to simply painting from interest, is significant in that the women who became participants in the research do not share similar life problems typical of many art therapy research studies. Our shared interest has been in seeing a woman's stories painted on canvas and paper, and in sharing our experiences of this seeing together.

This interest has so captivated me that I have spent a decade, or nearly a quarter of my life investigating my research question:

“What can happen when a woman's stories are seen?”

What can happen when a woman's stories are seen?

This question is crucially important to the field of art therapy, and more broadly, the practice of creativity for health and well-being.

Seeing is implied whenever we discuss visual art. As art therapists, it is our responsibility to inquire into ways of seeing, and the implications for ourselves, the people we work with, our profession and our culture.

Visual images can be thought of as ways to show stories in presentational forms that can be seen by ourselves and others. Normative cultural stories steeped in patriarchal values dominate much of the popular media and many of the systems and institutions art therapists find ourselves working within. The normative stories that dominate our Western culture are those told from perspectives that are male, anglo, middleclass, scientific, heterosexual and able-bodied.

My personal stories differ from these dominant stories primarily because they are stories from the perspective of a woman and an artist. While I do identify with the gender identity of being a woman, I do not identify with socially constructed roles, terms or conditions of being a woman that are limiting or oppressive. As an artist, I seek to make authentic images of my lived experiences as a woman painter, rather than contribute to the dominant culture of visual stories about how to be a woman and how women should be seen. These are my unique stories.

Other people's unique stories include those from perspectives of cultural diversity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and living with disabilities and illnesses, among other distinctive stories. The underrepresentation of diverse stories in society's mainstream media, systems and institutions can contribute to experiences of isolation, being misunderstood, unacknowledged or unacceptable, a sense of not belonging, and simply being somehow wrong or even the existential dilemma of not being real. Authentic and subversive personal stories are the kinds of stories that are given visual voices and spaces to be seen, witnessed and validated in art therapy.

As practitioners interested in art and lived experiencing, art therapists are curious about and make space for unique and subjugated stories to be created and seen. It is with this intention that I chose to investigate the under-represented stories that I have the greatest access to through my own lived experiencing – my own stories of being a woman and an artist. I also recruited a group of women who were interested in the research to broaden out the stories and include the experiences of others with the intention of deepening my understandings about sharing authentic stories, and how art works between people.

In this research, I use my own “her stories” and those of the women participants to explore the research question “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?”.

This question is intentionally open ended and unfocused. It is a question that I posed at the start of my art based investigations, when I did not yet know what would happen. It is intended to be receptive to unimagined possibilities and for the answers to be grounded in the descriptions of what happened throughout the research process for myself and the participants.

I did not ask, “what will happen?”, or “what could happen?” as I was not interested in hypothesizing or pre-empting my findings, nor was I interested in claiming that what happened in this inquiry would be replicable or to predict that it might happen again. This is in keeping with my approach to art therapy practice and inquiry.

I did not, with a backward glance, ask “what did happen?”, because I had not yet done the actions that would generate experiences for me to examine. I was yet to create and exhibit my artworks and explore the lived experience of seeing these with a group of women participants. This is in keeping with both action oriented and art based approaches to art therapy practice and inquiry.

In finding answers to my question “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?” I use our stories, visual and narrative, as my primary data – or source material. This is a collection of visual and narrative stories generated by myself and the research participants over the course of the inquiry. In keeping with a practice-led approach to research, I have held the intention throughout the research for my findings to have their roots in lived experiencing.

In asking “what can happen?”, I seek to reflect on and learn from things that unfolded in this inquiry, with the intention of generating deeper understandings that can inform how we work using the arts, with people, in situations and contexts that are infinitely inimitable and unrepeatable.

I do this in honour of the great diversity of unique, alternative, subjugated and unseen stories that live within all of us in various ways.

How I investigated the topic “seeing her stories”

I used my own artworks as examples of a woman’s stories, and investigated what happened when they were seen by myself and other women. The various complex and overlapping relationships in which the seeing occurred were:

- me seeing my own stories through art work during making and afterwards
- other women seeing my stories
- me seeing other women’s stories through their visual art
- me seeing my stories of other women by painting their portraits
- women seeing my portraits of them
- seeing together and dialoguing about our seeing
- me seeing the film of our discussion about our seeing.

In the process of investigating “Seeing her stories”, I began by painting a series of artworks depicting “raw stories” (Tamboukou, 2011, p. 5) from my life, meaning that I painted whatever subject matter I felt intuitively drawn towards at the time, and did not conceptualise the themes. I showed them in an exhibition that was a planned part of the research. It

was a public exhibition, held at the MIECAT Institute, attended by people I knew, as well as their family, friends and colleagues. I also created an online gallery for those who could not attend in person.

I invited people to respond to the artworks and become participants in the research. Seven people from the MIECAT exhibition became ongoing participants in the research, two people responded to the online gallery and joined the project, and three more became involved later in the inquiry as they became aware of the project.

I engaged with the participants in various ways, depending on the nature of their responses to the exhibition and the ways they became involved. For one participant, I created an additional painting that she specifically requested. With seven, I conducted in depth one to one interviews. With five, after the interviews I painted portraits of these women. Four of the participants gave me written responses, two gave me a musical response, and three gave me visual art responses. Within this research, the participants were co-inquirers, with ongoing input, and co-creators of the meanings that became the findings. These activities and my processes of inquiry are described in more detail in the “Methods” chapter.

Throughout the inquiry, I kept a research journal that included verbatim accounts of interviews, my own experiences in art making, seeing, and reflections on the research process. The research journal also included photographic documentation of my art making processes.

After the earlier research activities, and in order to further explore “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?” with a commitment to co-inquiry, I initiated a dinner party focus group.

The artworks of the original exhibition and the portraits of participants were all on display. I presented a summary of the research to date. After introductions, the nine participants were invited to discuss what had happened for them in seeing my paintings, and any meanings and ripple effects this may have had in their lives. This generated rich discussion, exchange of ideas and co-creation of meanings. The dinner party focus group was filmed. I later transcribed it and used the transcription as source material, along with the other interviews, stories and artefacts.

My art making practice continued and developed over the course of the research activities. This resulted in changes within my art making process and the artefacts that I produced, most significantly when I made the shift to painting from life in direct observation of my subject matter. The process and paintings reflected, influenced, documented and pre-empted both the phases of the research process and the content of the findings of the inquiry. The relationships between my art making, the cycles of inquiry and the findings are described in detail in the next chapter.

An important cycle of the research was the production of an autoethnographic illustrated text documenting my experience of carrying out the research, the participant interviews, the focus group dinner party, my engagement with literature and my artworks. This text became part of my source material.

Throughout this thesis I refer to my finished artworks, the photographic documentations of art making, my research journal, notes from interviews, the dinner party transcript and the autoethnographic

text as the source material of the inquiry. Using this source material, I used adaptations of the MIECAT forms of inquiry, as I explain in the “Methods” chapter, in order to produce the findings, or threads of meaning, that are presented in this thesis.

Becoming aware of the diverse and interconnected ways in which seeing her stories happened in this particular project prompted me to look to the broader field of art therapy. I was curious to discover where the understandings that have grown from my inquiry overlap with or differ from the perspectives of other art therapists in relation to “seeing her stories”, and to find my place within this landscape of ideas. This was an iterative activity throughout the inquiry. I also conducted literature searches to examine how the themes of my findings have been addressed within the field of art therapy to date.

The writing of this thesis has been an important part of the research process. In writing, editing and rewriting I have come to understand with more depth and clarity what it is that I now know, and what it can mean for how I practise art making and work through art with others.

What you can expect to read and see in this thesis

Although I have conscientiously applied myself to ensure that this research adheres to the rigor, content and quality expected of a Doctoral thesis, you will find that I have also departed from some traditions and conventions in the structure. The choices I have made are with the intention of creating congruence in my topic, my methods and my presentation of the findings.

The chapters have a logical sequence, beginning here with an introduction and overview of the

research, followed by the chapter “Seeing her stories”, that provides the background and context of the inquiry. The next chapter “Art based inquiry” details my methodology, and after that I present my methods and the research process. Next, there are five chapters that present the themes of my findings; “Presence and embodiment”, “Context, risk and safety”, “Change and continuity”, “Relationship, connection and co-creation” and “Life enhancement”. Finally, there is an “Implications” chapter where I present a synthesis and discussion about the significance and implications of the findings.

I have not included a chapter dedicated entirely to a literature review. Instead, you will find discussions of the relevant literature woven throughout the chapters. Because my findings have been broad, I have looked at mostly art therapy literature, as this is in keeping with my intention of understanding how my findings are relevant to our field of practice. I begin in the next chapter by looking at how art therapy literature has explored the subjects of “seeing” and “her stories”. In the following chapter, I refer to literature relevant to art based research and inquiry, and in each of the findings chapters I look at how the themes of my findings have been represented and understood in art therapy literature to date. This helps to situate my findings in the broader field, and to understand the particular contributions that this inquiry makes.

You will be encountering many of my art works; these are reproductions of the paintings I have made across the life of this project. I present them in chronological order in the “Methods” chapter. I refer to many of them again throughout the findings chapters as they relate to, and tell visual stories about, the themes of each chapter. When I present the same image more than once, it is because it can

be seen differently in relation to particular parts of the research. Each image can tell multiple stories. My intention is that in reading this thesis, you will engage in your own experiences of seeing my visual stories. I have included bountiful images to make this thesis a rich visual experience, in keeping with my topic.

You will find some short poetic compositions at the beginning of sections. These have been generated by working with the source material and I have included them to introduce the discussions that come after them. They are like appetisers to and also evocative summaries of my findings.

In the “Methods” chapter, as well as my artworks, I have included reproductions of photographs that illustrate the aspects of the inquiry I have engaged in throughout the research. I have included these visual documents because seeing as a way of knowing is integral to this inquiry. I hope that these images convey a rich sense of the creative processes that characterise this inquiry.

Throughout the chapters, you will come across stories that are presented in italic font. This is to distinguish these as stories that are taken directly from my source material. Although some of these stories are snippets and some are a little longer, all of them are unedited and the words remain as they were at the time of writing. Most are written by me, and some are written by participants. I have presented them like this to include the actual words that have been used to describe our experiencing. I have selected these stories because they relate to and illustrate the themes of the chapters they are placed within. They are not in chronological order, but, rather, organised by relationship to themes that occurred over time in different ways throughout the research.

You will notice that the language I have chosen is in keeping with my approach to art therapy practice. Rather than adopting terms that are common to research and clinical practice, I have consciously chosen language that is congruent with the values underpinning this project. Instead of referring to “data”, I speak of “source material”. Rather than saying “procedures”, I use the word “processes”. Instead of writing about “interventions” I talk about “responses”. I do this because I care about the way that language plays a part in perpetuating or subverting dominant stories about who we are and what we do as art therapists.

Finally, at times in some of the chapters, you will find photographs of the participants. I have included these with permission, and because there is significance in their body language that amplifies what they are saying with their words. I have included these as I believe that something important can be communicated by being seen.