

**SEEING
HER
STORIES**

An art based inquiry

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

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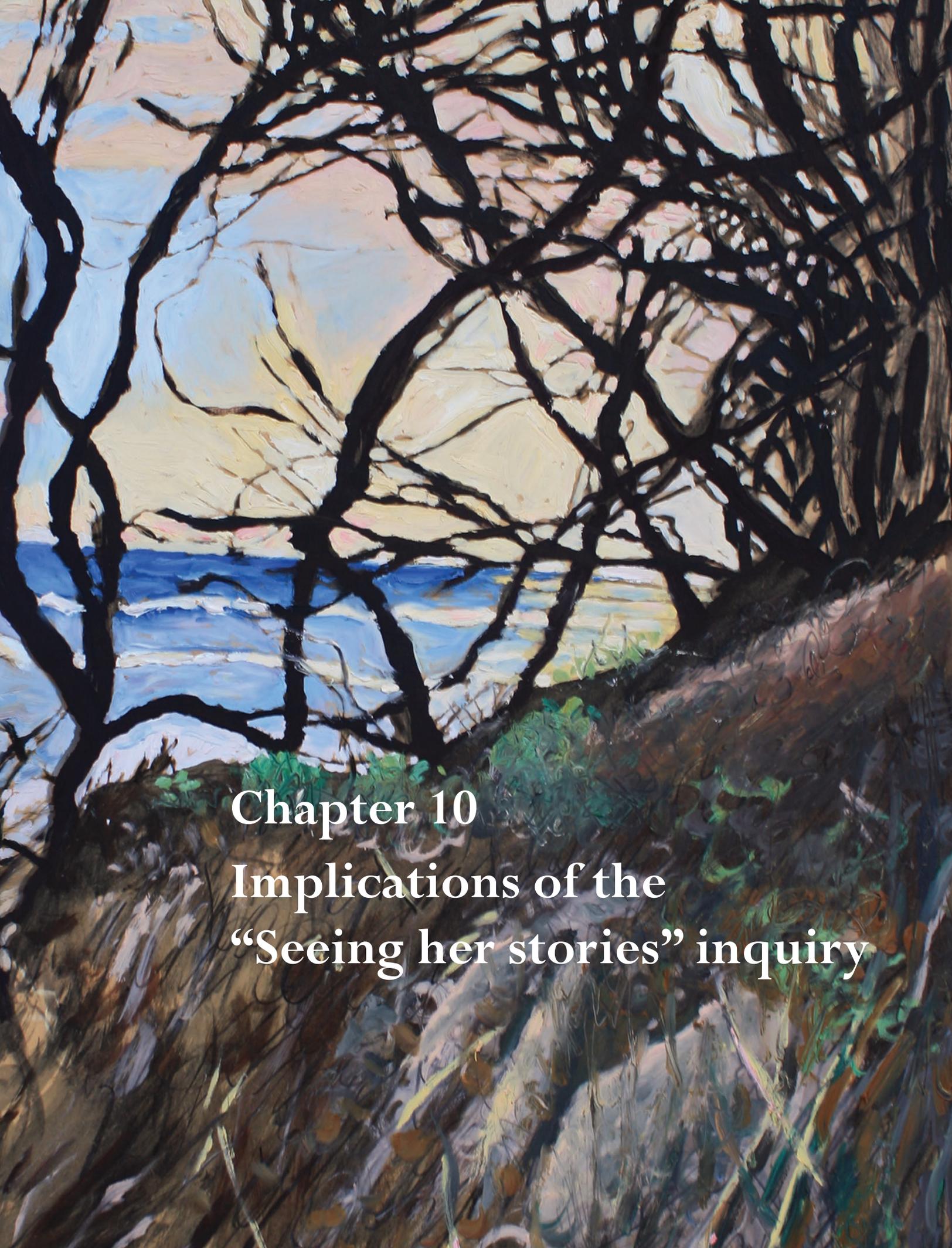
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Chapter 10
Implications of the
“Seeing her stories” inquiry

The “Seeing her stories” research project is part of and contributes to changing perceptions that challenge, reposition and re-shape the future of art therapy. This chapter provides a synthesis of the findings that have been presented throughout the previous chapters, and discusses the implications of the “Seeing her stories” project. I consider how art therapy practice can be opened up in ways beyond clinical and studio based models, and the possibilities of being an artist / art therapist. Ideas about stepping outside conventions in making time and space for seeing artworks, and ways in which we might facilitate multi-layered seeing experiences are considered. I then look at what it means to see and be seen, and how making our stories visible through art makes a difference.

“Seeing her stories”: Synthesis

The idea of seeing stories resituates and reimagines how people’s stories are experienced. This research shows how seeing a woman’s stories through art is a process that is multi-faceted, layered and intersubjective. The fabric of intersubjectivity (Crossley, 1996) includes experiencing that is sensory, temporal, relational and discursive. “Seeing her stories” then, is a process that interactively connects the embodied presence of people and the materiality of artworks. This process occurs within temporal and spatial constraints, and layers of culturally constructed epistemologies and ontologies.

“Seeing her stories” can be life enhancing in complex and interconnected ways. A person’s experiences of seeing stories include being aware of the present moment and embodied sensations. However, in “Seeing her stories” we became aware of changes and a sense that there are threads that continue over time. The cultural layers of “Seeing her stories” include the ways that contexts make a difference in our seeing, as well as how these contexts can create safe or risky conditions. “Seeing her stories” with others enables connections, through which relationships flourish and we engage in the life enhancing co-creation of meaning.

In various moments of experience and reflecting on experience, the embodied, temporal, spatial and cultural aspects of “seeing her stories” came to the foreground and into focus. An expanded perspective that includes the multiple threads available within the fabric of intersubjectivity can provide a bigger picture of “seeing her stories” – or seeing anyone’s stories – through art. This research shows how seeing artwork is, at once, a sense activity, a relational process and a discursive practice.

Opening up what Art Therapy can be

The findings of this inquiry have implications for how we conceive of what art therapy can be. Conventional roles such as therapist and client, places such as clinics and even studios, and structures such as those that exist within institutions of health or education can be seen as part of the big picture of art therapy, but certainly not the whole vista.

This study shows how aspects of creating and seeing artworks can be life enhancing in a diversity of ways that could be described as therapeutic, without being activities that might traditionally be understood as therapy. As Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) emphasise, this provides a welcome relief from any polarised theoretical discussions regarding art versus therapy. The MIECAT Institute have acknowledged the challenges embedded in the name of “Art Therapy” as a profession and changed the name of their degrees to “therapeutic arts practice”. I see this initiative as vitally important in closing a perceived gap between art and therapy. This point of view opens up infinite possibilities for what Art Therapy can be. Art therapists might consider that valid parts of our work

can include making and showing our own artworks, creating unconventional and artful environments where art is made, seen and engaged with, and facilitating seeing experiences that debunk dominant ways of seeing and enable see-ers to access expanded and multi-layered ways of seeing.

Dominant stories of therapeutic practice often emphasise assessments, interventions, and measurable changes such as decreases in distress, pain or unwanted behaviours. An expanded view of Art Therapy emphasises lived experiencing, quality of life, health, well-being, enablement, authorship, participation, resilience, interests, values, skills development, community strengthening, collaboration and engagement. Art is seen as a valuable way of knowing and knowledge production. Listening carefully to descriptions from participants, co-inquirers, companions and the people we work with, can provide us with unexpected, unique and valuable ways to understand and describe how art based and art informed practices can be life enhancing. Rather than layering borrowed theories over art based practices, we can use art making and artefacts as ways of understanding our experiences, connecting with our values and with each other, and coping with the changes and challenges intrinsic to life. Part of our roles as Therapeutic Arts Practitioners becomes bringing art out of clinics, studios and galleries, into lives and into the world. The ways in which we can do this are limitless.

Artist / Art Therapist

Conducting this research has clarified how cultivating my ability as an artist makes me a better art therapist. By consistently practising my skills in remaining

present with and attentive to my surroundings and my art making, I nurture skills that help me to be aware, present, attuned and in connected relationship with the people I meet, interact, work and collaborate with, and the artefacts that they produce. My art practice helps me to be a more sensitive and perceptive person.

Through my ongoing painting practice I work with persistence to fine tune my own sensibilities and skills in seeing. This is an incomplete activity that requires me to engage in regular careful and rigorous observation. I am not content with imagining how things look, guessing how things look, or making up how things look. I want to see how things are as they appear before my eyes. I am continuously aware of my desire to cultivate my own sensitivity in seeing details, subtleties, energies, and movement, as well as the big picture, connections and patterns.

My continuing practice develops my skills in articulating my seeing through the modality of visual art. The more sensitively I see the world, the more mindfully I can select materials and make nuanced gestures and marks that convey how I see. Looking carefully at subtle variations in colour and tone, I observe light and shade and contrast. I witness and strive to visually describe form, weight, texture, substance and the shapes of spaces in between objects. I become attuned to patterns and interconnections, and aware of metaphoric content in the paintings I produce.

In my painting practice, seeing – as a whole body experience – is an epistemological tool that brings me into a sense of connection and relationship with my surroundings in the material, living world. I use my senses and kinaesthetic interactions with materials as my ways of knowing this world. In using my senses,

I deepen my connection with my own embodied perception and come to trust it as a valuable way of knowing that is intensely my own. What I have come to know from this first-hand experiencing is that the world is a place of sensation and movement – alive and interconnected.

I remember the potency of my encounter with one of Georgia O’Keefe’s flower paintings when I visited the museum of modern art in Chicago. In that instant, I simultaneously felt a sense of resonance with how she saw and painted the flower, I loved her and everything she stood for as a woman painter, and I felt that she had given me permission to paint.

As a producer of artefacts, I have learned how creating opportunities for others to see my artworks in various ways supports connection, intimacy and relationship. People see my artworks at exhibitions, online on social media, on the walls in my home and art therapy studio, in their workplaces, in their own homes, and during social interactions when they appear interested and I show them pictures in miniature on my phone. They also see me making art when I work in public places and improvised studios where I set up to paint. By sharing my artwork I bring more of myself into my therapeutic practice; I allow intimate parts of myself to be seen. Something of my sensibilities as a person is communicated to people through my artwork. When people see something in my artwork that they are drawn to, curious about, moved by, or resonate with, they can feel a sense of related connection with my artwork and this can extend into a sense of related connection with me. This sense of related connection can create conditions of trust and intimacy in which people feel invited and permitted to be vulnerable themselves, and to trust me with some of their own stories. Seeing my stories

can become a generative experience for viewers as they are inspired to produce their own creative work, and through our iterative art making and sharing of our artefacts we engage in mutually knowing aspects of each other.

I have learned that sharing my skills in art making is important and valued by others who find satisfaction in developing their own skills. Learning to visually articulate experience in ways that are sensitive and aesthetically satisfying can be rewarding and create sensations of mastery and authorship for others as it does for me. These insights have implications for art therapists; having our own creative practice can support the development of qualities that are central to being effective at our work.

My commitment to being an artist / art therapist and sharing stories through art is strengthened and affirmed by what I have come to know through the “Seeing her stories” inquiry; that sharing our stories through art can create connections, deepen bonds between people, enable insights into values and meaning, address important social issues, and help to co-create life enhancing stories that we can live within.

Making time and space for artworks to be seen

If we accept that being in a space shared by artworks can be life enhancing, the world is our canvas.

Creating spaces for stories to be seen that are outside the conventions of therapeutic spaces and galleries opens up enormous opportunities to expand the ripple effects that the presence of art can have. If we also value making time for engagement with artworks, this has implications for how we structure our time-limited sessions, and how we might create

circumstances where art can be seen for extended periods of time outside of our face-to-face encounters.

We can start by considering places where Art Therapists already work, such as hospitals, schools, prisons, rehabilitation centres, aged care settings, disability services and private practices. How can we bring more encounters with art into these places? During my recent visits to a local hospital I noticed how the music therapy department had signs around the place promoting how music makes us feel better and can even help us to heal. As I walked through the corridors of the hospital I encountered musicians who had set up with their instruments to play live music for people in waiting areas and on the wards. I was an out-patient myself at the time, and I found myself profoundly moved by the care I felt as I listened to the music and watched the musicians playing. I found myself reflecting on how a huge and diverse range of music is accessible to nearly everybody, and almost omnipresent in day-to-day life in shops, restaurants, train stations, cars, workplaces and personal devices. I wondered what it might be like if encounters with a vast array of visual arts were as accessible as music is, and permeated institutions like the ones listed above. I am reminded of Adrian Hill’s (1945) early efforts to bring art into hospitals in a variety of ways through artist talks, postcards of artworks and art on walls. Imagine if the walls of every hospital room displayed an artwork chosen by patients, if artists set up easels in school playgrounds, if public arts programs were delivered in prisons, if residents in rehabilitation centres practised painting from life, if aged care settings employed artists in residencies, if disability services hosted rotating exhibitions of community artwork, and if private practitioners let their clients borrow artworks to take home and live with on

their own walls. These things do already happen. To me, all of these art based activities and practices feel natural and are part of being an Artist / Art Therapist. From a traditional view of therapy and the role of the therapist, these practices might be dismissed, diminished, devalued or simply not understood. Most Art Therapy practice emphasises the importance of clients generating artwork. However, my study has shown that making time and space for artworks to be not only made, but also seen and engaged with, is valuable and has many expanding and life enhancing ripple effects. The presence of artwork can enable seeing experiences that offer resonance to viewers and act as access points into relationship, connection and co-creation. Knowing this has radical implications for reconstructing art therapy practice, putting aside conventions, bursting open possibilities, and bringing in what is now known to create an expanded view of art therapy practice to include a great diversity of therapeutic art practices.

Imagine what it might be like if the senior academics in institutions where Art Therapy education is delivered were required to spend at least 30% of their time making art in a space accessible to students for making art alongside each other, to cross-pollenate ideas, skills and generate knowledge through art making. Imagine what might happen if we really walked our talk.

As well as imagining how we might bring more art encounters into the spaces we already work in, I have started imagining bringing our art making practices out of institutions where therapy is expected to occur, into unconventional places, and the ripple effects that this might have. Some of the places where I have set up an easel and made art include a camp site, a supermarket carpark, and an office surrounded

by computer desks. In these situations, people are consistently curious about what I am doing and approach me to have a look and make a conversation. It seems to me that in creating art in and about everyday environments, that I am acting as an artist / witness to everyday life and everyday experiences. I participate in the practice of making the ordinary extraordinary through art, an activity that can be transformative by making meaning visible in the otherwise mundane. Artwork makes the moment matter.

Recently, I was offered an “Artist Fellowship” which involved setting up a pop-up painting studio and making artworks in an office where a team of academics work – a creative research lab known as “Creative Agency” at RMIT University in Melbourne. Their core focus is research into creativity and social change, and the staff who work there are actively engaged in generating and gathering stories and interviews as data for their research projects. They wanted to see what it would be like to have art work being made alongside them while they worked. Having me present making art in the space of the creative research lab was a way of embodying the values that the director, Associate Professor Anne Harris, brings to her research – creative practice and its power to change social structures (Harris, 2018). This opportunity for me came about after Anne saw my artwork on social media, and was intrigued by seeing my paintings about urban backstreets – another ripple effect of what can happen when a woman’s stories are seen. In a conversation with Anne, we both became inspired by the idea that I could walk around the spaces in and surrounding the university and create a series of artworks about some of the places I found (figures 10.2 – 10.7).



Figure 10.2 "Bye bye backstreets". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figures 10.3 "North from building 51". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 10.4 "Unsung space RMIT". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 10.5 "Beside the baths 2018". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 10.6 "Looking up". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 10.7 "West off Union". Carla van Laar, 2018.

This was a fascinating process, and the paintings I made explored urban spaces that are well travelled, that I hoped might be strangely familiar and evocative for viewers, yet spaces that were previously uncelebrated due to their transient, neglected or un-designed nature. I used ink, chalk and house paint on particle board, materials that resonated with the urban scenes depicted in the paintings. I called the series “Unsung Spaces”. As has happened so frequently in my art practice, the content of the imagery became metaphorically linked with ideas I am forging about the implications of this inquiry. The “Unsung Spaces” in my paintings resonate with unsung spaces that exist within us all, our lived stories that are neglected, under-acknowledged, under-represented, unspoken, subjugated and/or unseen, like women’s artworks have been throughout history and continue to be in the art world today. The very act of being a woman and a painter and having my stories seen embodies my belief in the importance of improving conditions for women around the world in spheres that expand well beyond the world of art, but a world in which art plays a part. Elevating the status of material and external unsung spaces through my artwork, makes visible, through metaphor, the potential for enabling the unsung stories of our own existences to be more acknowledged, more represented, spoken about, liberated, and seen.

Through consistently spending time at the Creative Agency, I have developed relationships with the researchers who work there, engaged in conversations and discussions, and been introduced to ideas and authors who are likewise concerned with making spaces for diverse, subversive and enabling stories to be seen and heard. Making artwork in the space they work in has been part of a cross-pollinating

and iterative generation of stories and knowledges that can contribute to social change. This is the kind of thing that can happen when a woman’s stories are seen, and the kind of work that can be part of an expanded view of therapeutic arts practices.

Over the coming months I am experimenting with taking my art practice into other unconventional places. I am taking up a position as artist in residence in a surf school based in a coastal Australian town. I plan to exhibit a series of artworks painted about the local environment, focusing on the winding pathways through tea tree tunnels that weave through the bush to emerge at the beach (figures 10.1, 10.8, 10.9, 10.10 and 10.11), and also a series of still lifes about small pieces of shell and coral collected at the beach. My intention in painting these scenes and still lifes is to connect with viewers’ own lived experiences of moving through and exploring the local landscapes, and the memories, emotions and meanings that these places of natural beauty evoke. I hope that my artworks will act, as they have throughout this research, as access points for people who might experience resonance with the values embodied in the paintings, and provide inspiration for people to begin making their own artworks. I am offering art workshops on the balcony at the surf school for people of all ages and abilities to paint from their observation of objects found during their own beach combing, as well as some longer expeditions into the environment to practise in situ painting together.

During the art expeditions, I plan to spend time with the art makers, helping them to pay attention to what and how they see. I will ask them to notice the movements of their eyeballs – what are the pathways that their eyes want to travel as they look around this environment? I will ask them to notice the effects

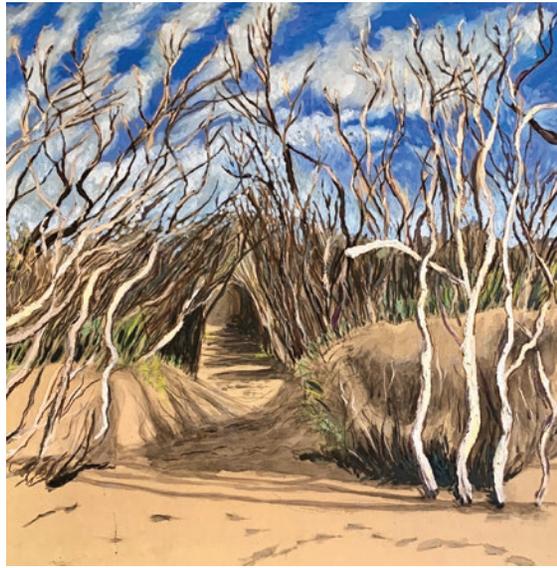


Figure 10.8 "Home time". Carla van Laar, 2018.

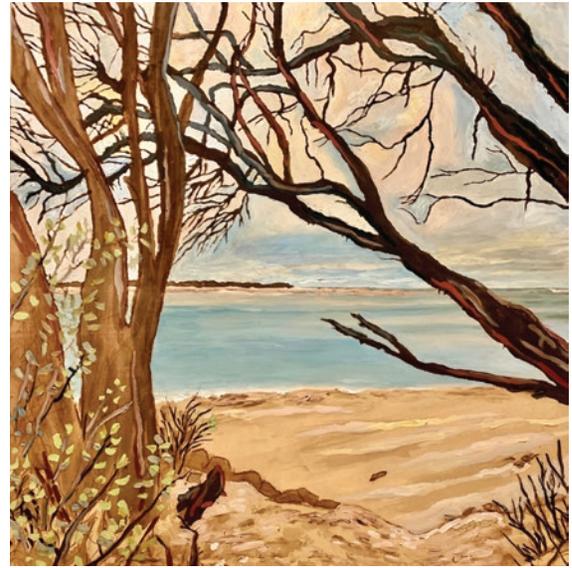


Figure 10.9 "Over the Inlet". Carla van Laar, 2018.

of being in this place in their bodies. Is there a particular place that they feel is inviting them to sit in it and make art? When they find a place to sit, I will ask them to notice what is attracting their gaze, and to start to pay attention to the shapes that are present... what are the large shapes that give the scene a foundation and structure? Can we make a gesture with our hand through the air that describes the shapes before our eyes? What are the smaller shapes and how do they overlap? I will draw their attention to what happens visually to objects that are closer compared with those that are further away. We will see how closer objects appear bigger, and have more intensity of chroma. We can see more detail on objects that are near us, and the contrast between light and shade is generally stronger on objects close to us. We will notice the spaces in between the shapes of trees and branches and leaves, and observe the windows of colour created by the sky. We will look carefully at the sky and tune in to the subtle variations of colour; where is there a touch of pink, yellow or grey? Is it a cool, smokey grey, or a warm brownish grey? What are the directional patterns, movements and the energy created by the shapes and layers of foliage? What kind of gestures could describe these directions, patterns, movements and energies? We will look carefully at the colours as we mix them and apply them to our canvases, noticing how the colours tell the stories of what we see, and altering or adding to them to achieve more satisfying visual results. There are many more things we will possibly do, that bring in multi-layered and sensitive seeing, and develop skills to create artworks that convey what and how each individual sees the environment that we interact with and in, together.

The kinds of activities I employ as an artist in residence are an example of expanding the role of an art therapist beyond the space of therapy, out of galleries, and into the world. Importantly,

I begin with opportunities for others to see my artwork as the first part of the ongoing processes through which I will engage with community members. I imagine that allowing myself to be seen through my paintings will help to support the establishment of interest, intimacy and trust in making art together. This residency is not a therapeutic program targeting a population with identified needs such as stress reduction or healthier relationships, but rather an art based response to a particular environment, through which I aim to work within and with a community of people connected by geographical location and shared interests. This emphasis is more in keeping with ethnographic and strengths based approaches than clinical interventions. I do, however, imagine that some of the participants – including myself – will have life enhancing experiences in a variety of ways, like the participants in this research project, and that the residency will contribute to the life of the community. The design of this residency embodies what I have come to know about the mutual influence between contexts and artworks. My artworks respond to the context, and in doing so, become part of it, and part of the lived experiencing of the people interacting within it. I have a well-established trust in the value of the ways in which I work with people through art practices, and am open to unexpected possibilities, as well as the ones that I can imagine. I will remain curious about the ripple effects of our art activities throughout the residency.

An expanded view of art therapy opens up the possibilities for artist / art therapists to work as artists in residence in all sorts of unconventional settings including, for example, corporate offices, police stations or building sites. In practising art making with others in unconventional settings, what becomes important as a skilled therapeutic arts facilitator is not merely the design of the activity itself, but how we practise; intersubjectively, artistically, with refined sensibilities about the qualitative aspects of what we do. The findings of this inquiry have implications for how we engage people in seeing and art-making experiences that are life-enhancing and can therefore be described as therapeutic.

Facilitating multi-layered seeing

This research has illuminated the layers of experiencing that are possible to access through seeing artworks. The idea of multi-layered seeing challenges some culturally dominant seeing practices, and personal habits, which are often intertwined. Sometimes our seeing can be limited by common seeing practices that we are socially exposed to, and recruited into in our daily lives.

By simply noticing the visual images that we encounter in day to day life it becomes clear that those of us who live in, commute within and interact within developed and online environments will be subjected to copious advertising images. Noticing the effects that advertising images exert on us – such



as feelings of desire, of jealousy, or of ugliness – is important, and conscious efforts can be made to reduce the influence of these commercial images. I advocate for clearing visual junk from our own spaces and blatant refusal to give advertising a home. I recommend that we surround ourselves with artworks that nurture our senses and provide an aesthetic rest from the demands and messages of advertising.

The discourses of art criticism have a major influence on how many of us experience having our own artworks seen in early life, for example in the art room in Primary School. Art criticism emphasises the interpretation and evaluation of artworks, casting the viewer into the role of judge, and hence the artist becomes the judged. If a viewer feels under-resourced to participate in this system, the result can be a sense of alienation from artwork and the institutions that exhibit them. As de Botton and Armstrong (2013) have highlighted, this is the dominant discourse that prevails in art institutions and galleries, and can result in viewers of art:

[leaving] highly respected museums and exhibitions feeling underwhelmed, or even bewildered and inadequate, wondering why the transformational experience we had anticipated did not occur. It is natural to blame oneself, to assume that the problem must come down to a failure of knowledge or capacity for feeling. (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 4)

In this discourse, there are only two roles available – the judge and the judged. It can be worthwhile to consider whether we identify more strongly with either of these roles, or have internalised these roles and habitually enact them, either with seeing our own artworks or the artworks made by others. Learning

to identify and quiet the inner critic and/or the inner competitor is an important part of making space for cultivating ways of seeing that enable us to enact a greater range of roles as we engage in multi-layered seeing.

As Gilroy (2008) highlights, it is important for art therapists to be aware of how our seeing practices can be influenced by our own particular occupational contexts. For example, an art educator might be socialised to see through a cultural lens of evaluating conceptualisation and skill; a forensic clinician might learn to see through an institutional lens that magnifies risk of reoffending; a Jungian influenced psychotherapist might be inclined to see through a lens that is suited to focusing on symbolic meaning; a trauma informed therapist might see in a way that brings attachment styles to the foreground. Being aware of these influences can help us develop post-modern perspectives in which multiple ways of seeing are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but can co-exist within a multi-layered approach to seeing artworks.

Identifying and being mindful of cultural influences and dominant discourses in seeing artworks enables us to work at consciously disrupting their influence, and can assist us to cultivate alternative seeing practices. I use the themes of this inquiry as guides for accessing, cultivating and facilitating multi-layered seeing experiences.

Seeing can be practised as a bottom-up therapeutic activity that engages the senses, brings us into the here and now, and connects us with embodied experience. This can have therapeutic effects similar to those of mindfulness and meditation, as well as somatic experiencing. Some of these effects can

include calming the mind, emotional regulation, engaging with pleasurable and supportive external and internal resources and listening to information that we gain through our senses and embodied experience.

This enriched understanding can be adapted for how we work in art therapy. One of the ways that I adapt my understanding of “seeing her stories” in practice is to use the artworks on the walls in my art therapy studio as part of the session. I sometimes invite a client, or even a whole group, to relax, breathe deeply, and look around the room until they find something that their eyes are drawn to that feels good or is interesting. I might ask questions such as “Out of all of these artworks, which are you drawn to? Notice your response, what draws your eyes to it, grabs you, leaps out at you? What seems important in the here and now?” As they engage in spending time to simply sit and be present with the artwork, I invite them to become aware of what is happening in their body, their breath, heart rate, emotions and in their mind, in their thoughts, memories and imagination. Allowing time for tuning in to their seeing as a whole body experience is important. This tuning in can provide an access point as viewers experience a resonance with their own values. Through seeing, viewers can reflect on how they meet the artwork and what is important in that meeting. Seeing as a whole body experience can likewise be used as an access point to working with materials. In working with individuals or groups, I often create an engaging display of art materials and spend some time sitting with participants, inviting them to simply let their eyes rest on the materials, noticing what they are drawn to, and what they enjoy seeing. I encourage individuals or group members to notice any materials

they would like to touch and play with using their hands, and to select the materials that give them sensory and visual pleasure. Paying attention to what is seen can inspire the urge in the viewer to make artwork in response to the seeing experience. The resulting artworks can invite a robust collaborative seeing together, a potentially potent process in which the art maker might experience really being seen through their own artwork as I, and perhaps others, also see their stories, and seeing artworks together becomes a way towards co-creative meaning making.

The understandings that have been produced through this project have implications for how we present educational opportunities for students. Here are some of the ways I have noticed myself using what I have learned in facilitating art therapy education with students.

I often use a “seeing art work” experience as the starting point for activities. This can bring a group into the here and now of their embodied experiencing, and can be very helpful when conversations become overly abstract or theoretical. I show slides of artwork, bring in books, take students on visits to galleries, or have them walk around the city looking for street art. I encourage them to find an artwork that reaches out to them, and practise sitting with it, being fully present, receiving the artwork through their eyes and their whole bodies rather than looking at it through lenses of dominant discourse or personal habits. I ask them to notice and journal about what happens for themselves in their embodied responses as they remain present with their seeing. These embodied responses might include movements of the eyeballs around the artwork, or the whole body through space including urges to move closer to or further away

from the artwork, sensations that arise in the body such as tightness or tingling, emotions that arise and are felt as embodied responses such as to smile or produce tears, and responses that happen in the mind, including thoughts, memories and imaginings. This kind of exercise is a way of cultivating intentional presence with self and artwork, and can be expanded into developing skills in practising intentional presence with others.

When students are asked to collaborate on a group presentation, I have found it helpful to begin with seeing artworks together. This can help them to find shared interests as a way of group forming, and often leads to them feeling connected and engaged in the task at hand.

Engaging in connection with our environment and contexts using our senses can be a starting place for art making. I sometimes facilitate this by inviting students to go outside and imagine that everything they see is a potential art material. This is possible in urban, built, or organic environments. Students are invited to create an ephemeral or guerrilla artwork using what is available and to leave it there as a response and contribution to our context. Reflecting on this experience highlights how context makes a difference in our experiencing, and the potentials for co-creating environments for ourselves and others. This can be a way of presenting the idea that seeing and making artwork can be at once an individual sense activity, a mindful practice, a story, and a social action.

Being aware of things that change and things that continue as they present themselves in our seeing experiences has implications for how we practise art therapy and work towards arts and health. For art therapists, we are frequently seeing the artwork made

by the people we work with, although the idea of a fully in the present embodied seeing might not always occur. By practising our skills in present moment awareness and being mindful of our embodied responses to seeing the artworks of others, we can become attuned to changes in choice of materials, changes in process such as mark making, rhythm and pace, and changes in subject matter, composition or expression of emotions. We can notice and reflect these changes as a way of being present with the people we work with or our companions. Attending to change can provide hope that even in trying times, things are likely to change. As shown in the “Seeing her stories” inquiry, these can be things like perspectives, relationships, emotions and ways of being in life.

In addition to noticing changes, we can be attuned to threads of continuity as we engage with other’s artworks. Noticing what continues, as we have seen in this inquiry, can connect us to a sense of relationship with our ancestors and culture, and with our continuing sense of self, by connecting us to things that are important to us, and our personal value system. Connecting with this sense of continuity of values within our lives can help us to remember, uncover, discover, generate and co-create stories that are meaningful, hopeful and empowering and make choices that support these continuing stories. Attunement to continuity does not evoke conventional kinds of questions such as, “How can I change my behaviour / my emotions / my relationships / myself?”, but, rather, prompts reflective responses to questions like “How can I bring myself forward? How can I continue? What is important to me as I move from this present moment

into the future?”. For groups or communities, these questions can strengthen a collaborative commitment to shared values and the enactment of preferred and empowering stories, as collectives of people consider together, “How can we bring ourselves forward? How can we continue? What is important to us as we move from this present moment into the future?” Creative work can help us to see and understand patterns of experience that flow from our ancestors and cultures into our own ways of being. Seeing these patterns and engaging with them through the arts can enable new and restorative ways of responding, heal wounds that run back through generations, and create new, healthier, more productive ways of being that are passed on to those who come after us, our descendants. Artworks can be made that embody these stories, and the ongoing presence of the artwork can contribute to contexts in which diverse, embodied, authentic stories – and the people who make them – are welcome, acknowledged, valued and seen.

Seeing and being seen: Making visible

In this thesis, I have explored and illustrated the complexity and layers of inter-relationship between see-ers and the seen. I have used my own visual artmaking practice to examine and demonstrate aspects of seeing and being seen. The see-ers have been art makers and viewers, and the seen have included the artworks. Through the artworks, the art makers and viewers have themselves felt that parts of themselves and their lived stories have been more fully seen. The seeing of these stories has been enabled by, responded to, and facilitated the seeing of particular contexts that enable both dominant discourses and

under-represented stories – such as the stories of women artists of whom I am one – to become see-able and to be seen.

The themes that have been explicated as findings of the “Seeing her stories” inquiry are a part of the bigger intersubjective dialogue that occurs between people and the material world. As practitioners working within an expanded view of Art Therapy, the themes of this inquiry can be useful as a guide to cultivating multi-layered seeing experiences and practices that are life enhancing for the people and contexts that we co-create with and with-in.

Inter-related and multi-layered seeing, as demonstrated through this inquiry, requires – in fact demands – a responding and a sharing of stories that foster relational connection and growth into wellbeing. In my work, as an artist / art therapist, there is a mutuality of sharing. In an expanded approach to therapeutic arts practice it is significant for the art therapist to share themselves and some of their story, through art, enabling relational connection and a felt sense of belonging. This of course must be done mindfully with the purpose of cultivating wellbeing with individuals, groups, or communities. This research illuminates the importance for therapeutic arts practitioners to engage in artmaking as ways to develop and expand the qualitative sensibilities we bring to seeing our environments, seeing our own artworks and artworks made by others.

Seeing with qualities of presence and embodied empathy is grounded in the idea of interconnectedness as inherent to intersubjectivity. It is with this same intense quality of embodied, interconnected presence that we can attend to seeing our clients, collaborators and companions in ways that cultivate understanding, belonging, authenticity and enablement. These

become iterative conditions whereby more unseen stories can be generated, enabling even more stories that might have been lost, hidden, unacknowledged or subjugated to be seen; taboos can be challenged, lived experiences and things that are important can be shared, and life-enhancing stories of relationship, connection and co-creation become visible.



Figure 10.11 "In the flow". Carla van Laar, 2018.

