

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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Chapter 2

Seeing her stories

A woman's stories are seen

Encounters with the image are potent

You see my stories

Reflected

You story your seeing

Stories in the expression of your face

I see my story of you

Seeing our stories together

This chapter explores the theoretical context of this research, discussing the notion of “seeing” and how it has been explored by art therapists, the concepts of “story” and “her stories”, and how the idea of “seeing her stories” underpins and is interpreted within this research.

What is “seeing” and how has it been explored by art therapists?

Browsing dictionary definitions of the word “see” gives some insight into the layers of complexity that we engage with in the act of seeing (See, n.d.). “Seeing” can be used to describe the way we perceive the external world with our eyes, and the effort we make when we look at something. In this way, seeing, as a sense activity, can be described as both receptive and active (Findlay & Gilchrist, 2003). We can also see things in our mind’s eye, with our memory or imagination. Seeing can be used to describe the way in which we are aware of, have experience of or know something, to visit a place, or to discern or understand meaning. Seeing can be used as a way of indicating that we appreciate or recognise a point of view, as in “I see what you mean”. It can be used to describe interpersonal relating, such as visiting or meeting socially, consulting a professional, hosting a meeting or having a romantic relationship, or to usher someone out, as in “I’ll see you to the door”. Seeing can also be used as a way of describing ways in which we deliberate, consider, think, find and inquire.

Art therapy’s roots run deeply in the practice of visual arts. It can be said that the sense of sight is to visual art as the sense of smell is to perfume, and the sense of hearing is to music. To engage visually with artworks requires the act of seeing. Looking at how art therapists have been researching, writing and theorising about seeing artworks, as an essential ingredient in our practice, provides us with insights into changing lenses, views and perspectives that have been part of our professional landscape across the past decades (McNiff, 2011).

During the phase of the research in which I was investigating the professional landscape of ideas, I found myself drawn to painting landscapes from life – especially from elevated perspectives to get a big picture view and a sense of the lay of the land. I have interspersed some of these landscapes throughout this section.

The ways in which seeing has been explored by art therapists in our literature reflects the spectrum of meanings associated with the word “see”. Seeing artworks has been theorised, examined and discussed in the field of art therapy from divergent points of view. In this discussion I present an illustrative selection of examples from the literature. I look into the relationships between these varied ideas and this inquiry into seeing her stories, moving from the most dissonant to the most resonant.

“Seeing” (Gilroy, 2008; Harrow, Wells, Humphris & Williams, 2008; Kellman, 1996; Skaife, 2001) in art therapy has been described using a variety of visual sensing terms including “looking” (Cox, Agell, Cohen & Gantt, 2000; Lanham, 1998; Mahony, 2001; Gilroy, 2008), “visioning” and “visual processing” (Kellman, 1996), “witnessing” (Franklin, 1999, Zago, 2008), “beholding” (Skaife, 2001), “visualising” (Harrow et al., 2008), “gazing” (Gilroy, 2008; Smith 2008), “active eye movements” (Gilroy, 2008), “observing” (Cox et al., 2000; Franklin, 1999, Zago, 2008), “viewing” (Cox et al., 2000; Parsons, Heus & Moravac, 2013), “aesthetic experiencing” (Byrne, 2014) “envisioning” and “re-visioning” (Carr, 2014).

Authors such as Cox et al. (2000) emphasise a clinical approach, in which art works are viewed as providing evidence to support or dispute psychiatric assessments. Kellman (1996) hypothesised that artworks can provide evidence of particular kinds of perceptual brain functioning related to autism. These ways of seeing involve looking at clients’ art work with a diagnostic gaze. The stories that are told about this kind of seeing use phrases like “objective observation”, “scales for variables” and “reliable measurements”. Seeing and describing art works from perspectives such as these can contribute to perpetuating the kinds of discourses that I seek to disrupt. They are scientific and medicalised stories, in which clinicians are experts and the voices of art makers are lost.

Harrow et al. (2008) looked at artworks made by cancer patients about their cancer. They proposed that the artworks were representations of the art makers’ beliefs. From their perspective, they discovered that some of the art makers’ beliefs were medically inaccurate and could be rectified with more accurate

information. On the surface, this outcome appears to be helpful for the patients. However, looking a little deeper at the underlying story, or the lens through which the artworks were seen, we can find clinical experts looking with a medicalised gaze and, in this instance, making assumptions about fixed meanings and judging the correctness of visual expressions.

Another way in which seeing has been theorised in art therapy literature is illustrated by Smith (2008). She draws on ideas informed by attachment theory (Winnicott, 2005), and uses these to help her make sense of what happens in the relationship between herself and her client as she sees both her client and her client’s artworks. This perspective attends to ideas about the therapeutic quality of the gaze and empathic witnessing that can occur when artworks are seen. This example demonstrates a therapist telling a psychotherapeutically oriented story about seeing artworks. The author herself notes that she never discussed these ideas with her clients to check if they were congruent with the clients’ experiences, and consequently the story about seeing remains the therapist’s story, and an hypothesis.

The “Seeing her stories” project differs from these examples. The authors I refer to above appear to be motivated by applying psychiatric, psychological and psychotherapeutic theories to the seeing experiences that occur in art therapy. My motivation in this inquiry is very different. Ever since I started studying art therapy in 1998, I have been intrigued by the idea that art is a way of knowing, and can be a way of researching lived experience. From the very beginning of this inquiry I was excited to find out what could happen if I resisted looking through theoretical or medicalised lenses and remained true to my roots in art based practice. I have been determined to listen



Figure 2.2 "Apollo Bay from Nicola and Garth's place". Carla van Laar, 2016.



Figure 2.3 "Bernie's place". Carla van Laar, 2016.

carefully and sensitively to participants' descriptions about their experiences of seeing my art works. I am genuinely interested in women's own tellings of what happens when a woman's stories are seen. By doing this, it has become clear to me that what is seen in an artwork and how it is experienced is not about static meanings or definitive facts, but that when we see an art work we engage in a dynamic living encounter.

The perspective offered by Carr (2014) illustrates a dual perspective approach to understanding seeing. The viewers in her study were clients whose portraits Carr had painted. She was interested in understanding what happened for her clients through seeing these portraits of themselves. She conducted phenomenological interviews with them to understand their experiencing. She then reviewed neuro-biological research to make links between her phenomenological findings and scientific explanations

for what had occurred. In her study, seeing the painted portraits was described by participants as enabling them to see themselves from another's perspective, remember the past and envision the future, and strengthen their sense of identity, all very personal and meaningful subjective experiences. Carr's (2014) research also describes seeing as visual perception, and the artworks as sensory visual stimuli. She encourages us to consider the experience of seeing artworks from a scientific perspective, with visual perception being a "‘bottom-up’ neurological process driven by sensory stimulus from the outside world" (Carr, 2014, p. 62). This perspective is in keeping with trauma informed approaches to therapy such as somatic experiencing, in which the therapy includes the use of sensory experiences including seeing, hearing and touching rather than talking about problems, which is considered a "top-down" approach.



Figure 2.4 "Wild Dog Valley". Carla van Laar, 2016.

Some of the findings from the “Seeing her stories” project could be seen as in keeping with Carr’s (2014), in particular the descriptions from participants about how seeing artworks gave them a heightened awareness of the present moment and their embodied experiencing. I find Carr’s (2014) study interesting because it attempts to integrate approaches in which both people and artworks are examined as both subjects and objects. In the “Seeing her stories” inquiry, the line between these perspectives on seeing is blurred on occasion by the participants themselves, who at times describe themselves as meaning making viewers of an artwork, and at other times actually feel as though the artwork is actively leaping out at them, pulling their eyes towards it.

Parsons et al. (2013) depart from psychotherapy’s traditional focus on the individual in therapy and broaden ideas about the potential of seeing artworks by using a community oriented perspective. They conceive



Figure 2.5
“Crow trees”.
Carla van Laar, 2015.



Figure 2.6
“View from Wombat Hill”. Carla van Laar, 2016.



Figure 2.7
“Tower Hill”.
Carla van Laar, 2016.

of seeing visual artworks as “iterative.... Whereby one story naturally prompts another from the listener, urging the listener to recall other stories related and told” (p. 168). For them, seeing visual stories can contribute to the co-construction of new cultural discourses and social action.

Mahony (2001) investigated her own experiences of viewing artworks, and found that the setting she was seeing in greatly impacted on her seeing experiences. She highlights that seeing art works is often a facilitated experience. Sensitivity and respect in where and how artworks are displayed will make a difference to how the seeing is experienced. From this perspective, seeing is contextual.

Gilroy (2008) draws our attention to our own professional socialisation and how we look at visual artworks as art therapists, and urges us to be aware of “the particular requirements, values and attitudes of an occupational group or place of work” (p. 259). This may influence us to “become mediators between different discourses” and “moderate the language” that we use (p. 259). Finally, Gilroy advocates: “(re)-turning to art historical/visual discourses and practices, alongside those that habitually inform our practices of looking, could be a rejuvenating process, both personally and professionally” (p. 261).

The possibility that an artwork can at once be an actual object and a lived experience – as can a person – is an inherently post-modern perspective. When this artwork and this experiencing



Figure 2.8 “Wild Dog dam”. Carla van Laar, 2016.



Figure 2.9 “Under the tarpaulin”. Carla van Laar, 2017.

person are part of a community and culture that they participate in and are influenced by, layers of meaning are added to our understandings about what happens when artworks are seen. This is a multi-faceted viewpoint, and hints at the complex intersubjective relationships – in which seeing is at once a sense activity, a relational process and a discursive practice – that became visible through my inquiry.

What are “her stories” and how have they been explored by art therapists?

The word “her” can be used either in reference to a female, as in “I saw her today” or to describe something possessed or related to a female, as in “I saw her art work today” (Her, n.d.). Both of these uses are relevant in this inquiry. I use the word “her” to describe stories and experiences belonging to a woman – myself, and a group of women – the participants, and more broadly to link this research with feminist perspectives.

The word “story” is most frequently used to describe various kinds of narrative, usually written, and sometimes spoken or performed (Story, n.d.). The use of the word “story” in Aboriginal English implies an “account of one aspect of the Dreaming which touches on fundamental elements which should guide the individual and society” (Story, n.d.). The dictionary also tells us that storying can mean “to ornament with pictured scenes” (Story, n.d.). In this inquiry, I conceive of art works as being visual stories, and that these stories perform meanings and values. I link the word “stories” with ideas from narrative oriented theories.

Art therapists have considered how ideas and practices from feminist and narrative perspectives can be integrated with art therapy. Within the “Seeing her stories” project, I consider that feminist and narrative approaches are both discursive practices, and I use the term “her stories” in ways that reflect this view.

Art therapy is a profession of mostly women practitioners. The numerous classrooms in which I have taught students of art therapy are often all women, with occasionally one or two men present. The many art therapy conferences I have attended are likewise highly populated by women, with male colleagues often joking that they are easy to spot among the female crowd. Despite the largely female population of practitioners in our profession, most of our literature overlooks the “her” in art therapy, speaking from genderless voices or perspectives that disregard our female identities, lived experiencing and stories (Hogan, 2012b).

In the later part of my research project, I have looked again for the “her” in art therapy literature, and find myself asking questions. My questions are ripple effects from moments of practice over the past decades. The absence of women’s stories in the dominating discourses of organisations I have worked in is one of my own many stories that ignited my heart with a passionate belief in centralising women’s voices in this project.

I have asked myself, could the absence of gendered voices in art therapy be an indication of our assimilation into discourses that are unseeing of differences in gendered experiencing? Is this tendency perhaps evidence of our internalisation of male dominated institutional cultures? Could our non-gendered voices conceivably point to a blind spot in



Figure 2.10 “Nicola sings a response” – first detail. Carla van Laar, 2010.

Throughout the rest of this chapter I include details from my paintings that show portraits of women that illustrate some of the visual “her stories” of this research. I revisit these portraits in more detail in the following chapters.

our art therapy literature? These questions link inextricably with my inquiry and prompt me to ask, what can happen when women's stories are seen in art therapy literature?

Lupton (1997) highlighted that art therapy has been a little slow to take up the valuable contributions that cultural studies, particularly feminisms, could make in relation to "critical art therapy practice" (p. 3). Referring to Foucauldian perspectives that link discourses, power relationships, subjectivities and societies, she highlights that discourse "refers not only to verbal communication but to visual images. Discourses serve to shape representation, and therefore experience, subjectivity and understandings of the world" (p. 3). Given that Lupton's (1997) recommendations are now two decades ago, it is surprising to see the continued scarcity of feminist perspectives

published in art therapy literature. Although there are some examples (Baines & Edwards, 2015; Burt, 1997, 2012; Butryn, 2014; Hahna, 2013; Hogan, 1997a, 2003, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2013b, 2015) of feminist approaches being used in art therapy, it seems that the concerns raised by Lupton (1997) remain valid in our field.

In Lupton's (1997) discussion, she asserts that within feminist approaches to art therapy, art becomes a political and social activity, and art therapists become activists by seeking "to challenge dominant practices in the medical or psychiatric treatment of illness or disability, or to draw attention to the ways in which certain social groups such as women, the poor, the disabled, gay men and lesbians, the elderly, the unemployed and immigrants are routinely stigmatised and disadvantaged in the dominant culture" (p. 1). She draws our attention to art therapists who are "consciously working towards an approach that calls into question and addresses the notion of inequality as it relates to women's social and economic position" (Lupton, 1997, p. 1). She acknowledges that women are not an homogenous group, yet are still a "distinct social collective" (Lupton, 1997, p. 3). As art therapists, she encourages us to ask questions about "how the meanings of femininity are reproduced and constructed in art works and other forums such as medical and mental health literature" (Lupton, 1997, p. 5). Reflection on these issues in art therapy, and our own roles in contributing to representations and discourses of women and our experiencing cast art therapy into a



Figure 2.11 "Julie's portrait" – first detail. Carla van Laar, 2010.

changing landscape, where we actively participate by “moving away from the personal and towards the political” (Lupton, 1997, p. 8).

Hogan (1997b), like Lupton (1997) emphasises embracing a critical and activist approach as women working in art therapy. She emphasises the danger of unwittingly contributing to “social and cultural conditions which pathologise women and cause distress” (Hogan, 1997b, p. 19). She reminds us that art therapy has the potential to be “oppressive (reproducing the socio-cultural content in which individual pain is generated) if it relies on reductive theoretical formulations and focuses on the individual’s personality alone” (Hogan, 1997b, p. 20). She urges us to look at “cultural theory which is not psychoanalytically based as a stimulus for a reappraisal of how we work as art therapists” (p. 19), and strive towards approaches that are “empowering and liberating, allowing women to challenge their lot and critically apprehend their position in society” (p. 20).

In response to my own questions, a feminist “her” has been present within the seeing her stories inquiry. In choosing to highlight my gendered voice in the title of this project, I acknowledge that my artworks, experiencing, interactions and stories are those of a woman. I see this as a liberating statement in itself, one that challenges the dominance of certain discourses or “his-stories”, such as the medical discourses adopted by Cox et al. (2000), within art therapy and the broader fields in which we live and work. For me, the contexts I have worked in, in which his-stories prevail, have included the justice system, sporting culture, hospitals, mental health systems and educational institutions. At their worst, the cultural stories that predominate within these settings serve to perpetuate power dynamics that can de-humanise, belittle, dis-engage, pathologise and disregard diversity.

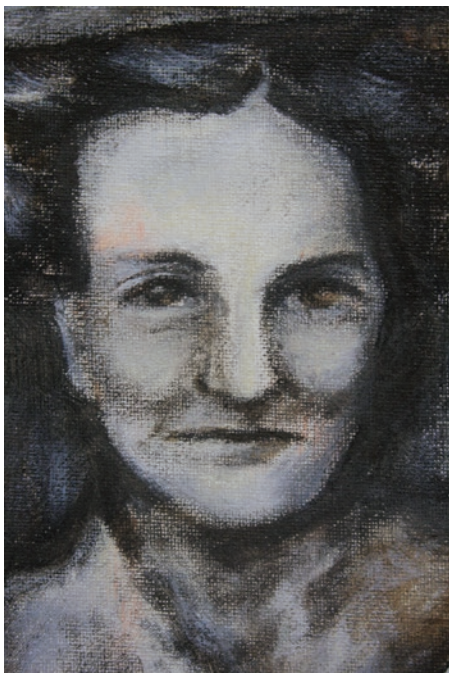


Figure 2.12 “Laura May” – first detail. Carla van Laar, 2009.

This detail shows the portrait of my maternal Great Grandmother I painted from a photograph of her as a young woman in the early 1900s.

In my intention to subvert practices such as these, I have gone about my inquiry in ways that draw on feminist approaches. As I discuss in the “Life-enhancement” chapter, the group of co-inquirers were not selected through the dominant practice of grouping by problems such as a shared behavioural issue, illness or diagnosis (Lupton, 1997). The participants in this inquiry came to be involved through our life enhancing shared relationships and interest in the subject. It was important for me to have female participants as I wanted to bring women’s voices into my project and the broader field of art therapy, not as people experiencing particular problems, but as a group who share experiences of being women, with our own uniqueness and commonalities. As I illustrate in the “Methods” chapter, I was interested to see what would emerge if we remained committed to exploring our experiencing together, to reflect together, and share meanings together, without resorting to discourses of psychiatry, psychology or psychotherapy. In these ways, a feminist “her” has been present throughout the research. The ways we explored, the discourses we embraced, and the inclusion of artworks, embodied contextual experiencing and voices of women as the primary subject matter and source material are evidence of “her” presence and importance.

In the chapter, “Change and Continuity”, you will encounter words from the co-inquirers resonating with Hogan’s (1997b) emphasis that our female experiencing goes beyond our own personalities and life histories. Layers of our stories overlap with other women’s stories. Within our individual stories there are also traces of the collective stories that we share with other women, our pasts, our awarenesses of each other’s challenges, losses and strengths, and

our connections with each other as parts of a “distinct social collective” (Lanham, 1998, p. 3) that cross time and space. Our “her stories” can serve to connect us as members of the social group we call “women”. The connecting aspect of this membership is part of what can happen when a woman’s stories are seen and is illustrated in the chapter “Relationships, Connection and Co-creation”.

In looking at the development of my art making practice from feminist perspectives such as Lanham (1997) and Hogan’s (1997a), my artworks have become stories of a woman, myself, as a sensorial, experiencing and creating subject. This personal action positions me politically in counterpoint to representations that understand women from the outside, or discourses that layer meanings on to women. In coming to comprehend my position in society, I have been able to make more liberating decisions about what kind of a place I can help to create for myself and other women in various societies. My most recent artworks, and stories in the chapter “Presence and Embodiment”, provide evidence of myself as a woman who has come to her senses, with my female body as my own precious and valued living breathing organism for coming to know, encounter, and be part of, the world. For me, this means a deepened sense of being present with and able to trust the information I glean through my own sensory perception, the pleasures of my physicality and my capacity to be active in the world.

Narrative theory, narrative therapy and narrative research have been explored by art therapists interested in making use of postmodern perspectives. Narrative practitioners have likewise been interested in the roles of visual and art based stories. With their Foucauldian roots in ideas about the inter-

relationship between power, discourse, context and experience, narrative practices value the subjectivity of the researcher, multiple perspectives and voices, the externalisation of stories, the sharing of non-dominant stories, subverting the power structures inherent in dominant stories, “outing” stories that masquerade as truths, using personal accounts as ways into understanding, and the power of stories to disrupt and generate ways of knowing (White & Epston, 1990).

Passionately concerned with issues of social justice, Linnell (2010) questions whether it is sufficient to practise art therapy from a narrative perspective. She writes candidly about “the (im)possibility of poststructural research” (Linnell, 2010, p. 97), and the perplexing possibility that her book “is necessarily haunted by the ironic dangers of becoming certain about uncertainty” (Linnell, 2010, p. 98). The final chapter of her book is titled “Inconclusions: (Where will it all end?)” (p. 204).

In looking at my descriptions of the ways in which seeing her stories happened in this research project, and engaging with Linnell’s (2010) ideas as I do so, I find myself wondering about how visual artworks can act as stories, and how stories can act as art. Within this research, the experiences of “seeing her stories” as described by myself and the women who participated, reveal that the stories seen in artworks are not fixed. They are subjective, changeable and dynamic, as illustrated in the “Change and Continuity” chapter. Linnell’s (2010) exploration of art psychotherapy and narrative therapy, and her determination to



Figure 2.13
“Gretel’s portrait”.
Carla van Laar, 2010.



Figure 2.14 “Laura May”
– second detail.
Carla van Laar, 2009.

This detail shows the portrait I painted of my maternal Great Grandmother from a photograph taken of her as a working class Australian mother in the 1930s.



Figure 2.15 “Henry
and me on the
rollercoaster” – detail.
Carla van Laar, 2008.

create inconclusive stories about their relationship with one another, has prompted me to ponder. Certainly my relationship with the various stories, both visual and textual, that are presented in this project, has been different at various points in time throughout the inquiry. Although I have placed the stories in particular places within this text to illustrate distinct threads of meaning, I am aware that the stories themselves are multi-layered and open to infinite responses.

I have found Linnell's (2010) work challenging and affirming. Her stories provide examples for me of some of the quandaries and values I have attempted to embody and enact in creating this project. Like Linnell (2010), I have tried to collaborate with other women and honour their voices in my work here, while acknowledging my own voice and authorship of this work. Like Linnell (2010), I feel passionate about sharing important stories, yet equally passionate about the importance of remembering that these stories are acting more like art – dynamic and open to engagement – than like a definitive supposition. Each see-er and reader participates in generating meanings each time the work is seen or read.

As I continue to explore, unpack, illustrate and describe the sometimes mysterious and elusive experiences of “seeing her stories” within this project, I am touched by the idea that my visual and textual stories might somehow acquaint you, the current see-er and reader, with “the feeling” of what can happen when a woman's stories are seen.

Like Linnell (2010), I will try not to be overly conclusive, knowing that ripple effects of this project will keep expanding after I finish working on this book and it is printed. However, in the meanwhile,

I will try to show and say some things that are relevant and important for how we can work in ways that are art based, embodied, socially active and generative of stories that work like art. These art based ways of knowing are explored in more detail in the coming chapter, “Art based inquiry”.

Burt (2012) explores the tensions she has noticed as an art therapist working from places of feminist and postmodern perspectives. She may consider my viewpoint, in which it is important that my stories are acknowledged as being authored by a woman, as a “feminist standpoint perspective” (2012, p. 22). This is in keeping with ideas that “knowledge and research have to be experienced or re-experienced through the viewpoint of a woman or a group of women in order to counteract the century-old male bias of viewing everything through a male lens” (2012, p. 22).

Burt (2012) finds connecting threads between feminism and post-modernism with their Foucauldian common interest in the discourses and power structures of social conditions and the impact that cultural stories have on the experiences of individuals. She refers to narrative therapy as an example of postmodern therapy that is compatible with both art therapy and a feminist perspective. Externalising problems, authoring preferred stories, and recruiting audiences and allies to share them are value-based responses that can sit well within each of the three approaches, creating overlaps and meeting places, and, perhaps, acting in a way that is in keeping with Rolling's (2010) idea of art based research as being post-paradigmatic, as I will discuss more in the “Art based inquiry” chapter.

In keeping with a values-based approach, as I outline in the “Art based inquiry” chapter, Burt (2012)

finds that her values are the glue that make it possible for her to create a cohesive approach to her practice in which various paradigms co-exist and interact. Burt (2012) highlights that for her, the feminism, or the “her” in art therapy, is about anti-oppressive practice. Postmodernism expands this to include “recognition of the multiple perspectives that comes with the diversity in the human race” (Burt, 2012, p. 30).

An aspect of the feminist postmodern artist “her” in this art based research project is the emphasis on values as a guiding and validating force. I have a strong connection to and faith in the value of sharing my stories, as a woman, and that my personal stories have ripple effects in spheres that are public and political. Some of these are discussed later in the “Implications” chapter.

Seeing her stories in this research project

In this research, my use of the term “her stories” reflects the idea that my artworks are visual stories authored by a woman – me. I am aware that this could be a controversial position.

For one senior male colleague who I admire and respect, in his sharing with me of his experience of seeing the first story of this project – my painting of a road – gender did not seem at all important, either mine as the painter, or his as the “see-er”. He was more interested in the qualities he observed within the artwork than the gender of the artist or viewer. He made a comment to me along the lines of

“I don’t see how it is important that a woman made this painting.”

Looking back at my findings with postmodern attitudes and differences of opinion about gender in mind, I am prompted to wonder how attitudes and differences of opinion about “her” gender were present within this study. For one of the co-inquirers, seeing the road, and knowing it was painted by me was quite different from the experience of my male colleague that I mentioned above. She emphasised how the significance of our shared experience of being friends as women on our journeys, and our connection to the struggles and journeys of all women, seems to have been very significant.

The contrast between these two viewpoints prompted me to reflect on whether it was important to me that I was a woman painting the image of the road. And yes, it is. My journaling at the time of painting the road gives a glimpse into this importance,

“I don’t know where this road is going, but I’m driving the car”.

Being in the driver’s seat is an empowered position. I am aware that, as women, myself, my mother, my grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother have not always been empowered to choose the direction of our lives.



Figure 2.16 “The road” – detail. Carla van Laar, 2008.

I am conscious that many of the young women I have worked with in youth justice here in Australia, in the emancipation from sex slavery movement in Nepal and the young mothers of many cultural backgrounds who are facing homelessness after escaping domestic abuse in my hometown Melbourne, have been less empowered than I am to choose the course of their lives. Working with them towards empowerment and agency in their lives has challenged me to my core to keep striving for empowerment and agency as a woman myself. I have left relationships and institutions when the values I bring to my work are incongruent with the conditions of my personal and professional contexts. I share more about this in the “Context, risk and safety” chapter.

Disregarding gender differences in favour of the commonality of human experiencing, or as an action whose intention is in creating equality, as I suspect my male colleague’s intention may have been, poses risks when we share our seeing experiences. Under-acknowledging the contextual differences that impact on a person’s capacity to have a similar experience runs the risk of being blind to the obstacles that have been overcome along the way, and the resourcefulness, strength and resiliences that are present and worthy of celebration. This is true not only of gender differences but of other differences too.

For example, for an Australian girl, like me, born in the early 1970s to parents with European backgrounds and university degrees, and raised in Victorian suburbs, it would be rather unsurprising and even expected that I would complete secondary school in the late 1980s. For a

peer age Aboriginal Australian boy born to a teenage mother and raised in traditional culture by his Grandparents on an island mission in North Queensland, completing secondary school would be an unexpected outcome, and an even bigger surprise if he excelled. I have no doubt that there were more obstacles in his way than there were in mine when it came to accessing and completing secondary education.

Being conscious of our differences and how these can give us more or less access to empowering opportunities in various contexts has been part of my experience in being a gendered “her” within this project.

My views resonate with Hogan and Cornish’s (2014) postmodern perspective on gender in art therapy, and their assertion that

It may be useful for training courses to offer more work on the construction of gender and on the intersections between ethnicity, cultural affiliation, geographical location, socio-economic status, health, age and gender. (Hogan & Cornish, 2014, p. 134).

My respect, regard and awe of my male colleague, could have influenced me to discard the focus on gender within this project. I could have omitted the “her” in my title, and presented my findings simply as “Seeing stories”, focusing on a combination of art based and postmodern narrative approaches. In doing so, the gendered voice would have been absent or considered unimportant within this project, and I may have been complicit in reproducing a particular institutional practice.



Figure 2.17 “Visiting Oma” – first detail. Carla van Laar, 2008.

This detail shows a sketch of Lenie, my Oma, paternal Grandmother, drawn from a photo I took of her when Henry and I visited her in an aged care village in Brisbane.

Discarding the gender focus in this research would have been particularly disempowering for me, as it has been important for me from the outset to include a women’s standpoint perspective. I believe this would have disrespected my group of women participants, who have known the title, “Seeing her stories” since their involvement began, and who have shared in many ways how being women was significant in this project. Our differences have been important as well, and have included differences of age, professional field, geography, cultural history and sexual orientation. However, within our limited diversity, and through listening carefully to the stories of the



Figure 2.18 “My desk” – first detail. Carla van Laar, 2008.

This detail shows a mini portrait of me with my two little sons, Vaughn and Henry, from a photo amongst the clutter on my desk in the painting.



Figure 2.19 “My desk” – second detail. Carla van Laar, 2008.

This detail shows a mini portrait of my maternal Grandmother, Val, also from a photo amongst the clutter on my desk in the painting.



Figure 2.20 “Visiting Oma” – second detail. Carla van Laar, 2008.



Figure 2.21 “Laura May” – third detail. Carla van Laar, 2009.

In this detail I have painted Laura May from a photograph of her as a mature woman in her sixties when her children have all grown up and had children of their own.

research participants, I remain convinced that, in this research, our gender was important. Our gendered voices have been important in ways that include being aware of the particular challenges faced by women, even privileged ones like us, and our ancestors and sisters around the globe. They also include being witnessed in a supportive group of women, and subverting the cultural male gaze that dominates our society and its institutions and can even impact on how we see ourselves. Being seen by each other was important. Our female relationships have been important, sharing with each other as mothers, daughters, grandmothers, sisters, nieces, aunts and friends. Our gender as women, and how this is part of our seeing experiences, is one of the “her stories” that you will find woven throughout the fabric of this project.

Through my immersion in what happened during this inquiry and working with the source material, I have discovered things that are extremely significant for the work of art therapists, and how we understand and communicate what we do when we use the arts in practice. My findings about seeing her stories draw together and expand previous understandings within our field. They provide a bigger picture of seeing and storying experiences in which seeing her stories is at once a sense activity, a relational process and a discursive practice. This holistic perspective opens up possibilities and implications for how we practise, research and educate in the field of art therapy.

The next chapter details how I developed a methodological approach that is philosophically congruent with the focus of my research. The approach is an art based inquiry that draws on narrative research and uses processes from the

MIECAT form of inquiry. The “Methods” chapter gives an overview of how this approach was employed in practice, and provides a narrative account of what I did to generate and work with my source material and the parallel processes that unfolded over time.

I then invite you to travel with me through the rest of the chapters as I show and describe how, when a woman’s stories were seen: we were brought into the present moment and became aware of our embodied experiencing; contexts made a difference to our seeing and contributed to our experiences of risk and safety; we became attuned to constant changes alongside persistent continuity; and our relationships and sense of connection with each other and the life of the universe grew and developed our appreciation of co-creation.

Finally, I review how these experiences were life-enhancing for the women who participated in the project, and discuss how the findings of this research have implications that can inform practice in the fields of art therapy and art for well-being.



Figure 2.22 “Belinda in the studio”. Carla van Laar, 2011.