

# 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.

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## Chapter 3

# Art based inquiry: Practice led, interconnected, organic

Figure 3.1 “Tree canopy, Thurra River”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

In this painting I am paying attention to the interconnecting organic world of trees and sky.

*Values*

*Need to know*

*Drawn to*

*Uncovering*

*Exploring*

*Imagination*

*Dreams*

*Objects*

*Purposeful collection and compilation*

*Arrange*

*Still life, altars, installations*

*Landscapes*

*Artistic visual elements*

*Interaction with things*

*Creating*

*Creating artworks of stories*

*Creating stories about artworks*

*Industrious work makes creative products*

*Productive creativity*

*Creating in action*

*Delighting in creativity*

*Poetic expression and meaning making*

*Gathering, collecting*

*Sorting important messages of meaning*

*Image, metaphor, symbol, music and artefact*

*Performing meaning*

*A web of meaning*

*I gain self-awareness, insights, healing and make new choices*

*Insight and knowing are facilitated*

*Realisation, awareness and clarity*

*Frameworks, tools and systems emerge*

*Presentation creates space for and examines*

*Unique, evocative, reflective, art based, symbolic and narrative  
illustrations*

*Women's stories*



Figure 3.2 Painting at Freycinet National Park. 2014.

## **Art based inquiry: Practice led, interconnected research with an organic structure**

In this chapter, I explain and illustrate how I developed a methodological approach that is congruent with the topic of my research, “Seeing her stories”. Within this approach, I conceive of values as the glue that holds the project together.

I introduce the philosophical and values-based foundations of my approach to art based inquiry. This approach is practice led (Barrett, 2007), and draws on narrative research methods including autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997), as well as the MIECAT form of inquiry (Lett, 2011). I describe how the concepts of interconnection in research and organic structure are inherent to this practice led approach. I draw parallels between the process of inquiry in this project and Barrett’s (2007) ideas regarding practice as research. I include reference to other literature as relevant to what happened in the process of conducting my inquiry.



## A practice led approach to art based inquiry

I was first introduced to the idea of art based research in 1999, in the second year of my Master of Creative Arts Therapy, when I came upon McNiff's (1998) now classic text, *Art-Based Research*. I remain true to McNiff's (2012) consistent use of the term "art" as inclusive of all of the arts, and I use the term as he does. As an undergraduate of fine arts, life long painter, and art therapy student, my imagination and passions were inspired by the idea of using my "mother tongue" (Einstein & Forinash, 2013, p 77) as a research and knowledge producing practice (Barrett, 2007). In my Master's research, I combined art based inquiry with an heuristic framework, meaning that I researched an aspect of my own life experience, (Moustakas, 1990) to produce a visual and narrative project *Snapshots of a Bereaved Mother's Heart* (van Laar, 2001), an adaptation of which was later published as an illustrated therapeutic book (van Laar, 2008).

During my Master's research, I became fascinated by what the combination of art based and heuristic inquiry enabled, and also the limitations of the approach. One of the unexpected findings was that during the process of investigating my lived experience, my relationship with the original experience was transformed, and my findings became a narrative of my changing experience, rather than a more traditionally phenomenological description of essences. This sparked my interest in using a combination of visual art and narrative research approaches. I was also curious to explore research that included the intersubjective experiences of others as well as myself. When I decided to use an art based inquiry methodology for my Doctoral research, I committed to conducting my art based research by investigating things as they happened rather than retrospectively, doing this together with others, and documenting the moment to moment unfolding of process. Along the way, I have engaged with numerous ideas, many of which have been adapted and integrated into what has become a complex approach that resonates with Fenner's (2010) description of her art based methodology as layered. In the "Seeing her stories" project, these layers include parallel and iterative processes of art making, collaborating with participants, generating and working with source material, engaging in practical research activities, reviewing relevant literature, writing and editing the thesis, moving through the various phases of the research and the emergent generation of themes that would become the findings.

Figure 3.3  
Painting at  
Thurra River,  
2017.



Figure 3.4  
Painting at  
Creative Agency,  
RMIT during my  
Artist Fellowship,  
2018.



A vital theme of this research project from its inception has been the importance of centering the art. By this, I mean that art practice and artworks are of central importance to the project and not merely complimentary additions to positivist or psychotherapeutic methodology and methods. This is in keeping with my philosophical stance towards my professional practice as an art therapist. I align myself with other art therapists who believe it is crucial for us to cultivate our artist identities (C. H. Moon, 2002).

The values that underpin this research project are the values that I strive to bring to my work both as an artist and as an art therapist. As I discussed in the previous chapter, some of the things that are important to me in my work include making space for unique personal stories to be created, seen, heard

and read – as in this thesis. This is the case in both my practices as an artist and as an art therapist. Making artworks is how I enact these values in practice. My practical understandings of how art is a way of inquiring into aspects of experiencing underpins the ways I have centralised art in this inquiry.

In *Studio Art Therapy*, Catherine Hyland Moon (2002) articulates the journey of art therapy as a profession. She describes the roots of art therapy as being “in the studio” (p. 19), and reminds us that many of the individuals who championed the development of art therapy were “artists interested in using their art to help others” (p. 19). She suggests that from the 1950s onwards, art therapists sought to validate their practice by borrowing and trying on theories from other professions and creating hybrid approaches to art therapy that





Figure 3.5 Painting at Anderson's Inlet, 2018.



are informed by practice from other disciplines and theoretical perspectives including psychodynamic, gestalt, cognitive, Jungian, existential and narrative approaches. The irony of this theory borrowing and attempts at professional validation is highlighted by Catherine Hyland Moon (2002) as she states, “our contributions as artists is the aspect of our professional identity that makes us unique among other therapeutic professions. It is what we have to offer that is distinctive” (p. 20).

Philosophically, art as a way of inquiring can be linked with the concept of “praxical knowledge”, or the kind of knowledge that arises out of the practice of human interaction with, handling of, and working with various physical materials (Bolt, 2004; Ihde, 2010). Barrett (2007) expands on Heidegger’s notion that all knowledge has a material basis, saying, “Praxical knowledge implies that ideas and theory are ultimately the result of practice rather than vice versa” (p. 6). It is this kind of praxical knowledge that is employed in my practice led approach to art based inquiry. This is the case for visual art making and other visual methods such as mapping, and also prose and poetic forms of writing.

Heron and Reason’s (1997; 2008) expanded epistemology can be helpful in conceptualising how art practices can engage multiple ways of knowing and inquiring into and understanding aspects of lived experiencing. Heron and Reason (1997; 2008) challenge normative and dominant assumptions about how we know things that are traditionally espoused by “positivist oriented academia” with its “abstract propositional knowledge” and “narrow empiricism” (2008, p. 367). Primary to their perspective is an underlying belief that we come to know the world as experiencing and interacting subjects, rather than

as objective observers. This leads to a premise that knowledge is not waiting to be discovered, but, rather, that we create knowings through our inquiring. Their expanded epistemology extends theories about how we know to include and value experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing and practical knowing. Essentially, we come to know by doing and experiencing, we can present what we have come to know in various modes of communication including but not limited to art, story and performance, we can propose meanings about our knowings and we can know things in a practical sense, when we know how to do something. Heron and Reason (1997; 2008) reinforce the value of including these four ways of knowing in research subject matter, methodology and presentation. Art making shows evidence of the interactive layering of all the ways of knowing. Art making requires experiential activity; artefacts present evidence of these activities; we can come to new understandings and knowledge through reflecting on our creative activities and the artefacts they produce; and we can come to know what needs to be done next as we move through our creative processes.

Eisner (1967; 1982; 1988; 1998; 2002), for decades, advocated for the use of art as a valuable way of knowing within a qualitative research paradigm. Leavy (2009) sees art based research as an expansion of the qualitative research paradigm, while Barrett (2007) views art based research as a paradigm in itself. Rolling (2010), from another perspective, suggests that art based research is post-paradigmatic. Leavy (2009) emphasises that art based research is characterised by its employment of stories, images, sounds, scenes and the senses. Art based research is evocative, re(presenting), political, consciousness

raising, emancipating, and its quality can be assessed by its authenticity, truthfulness, and its ability to compel. Leavy (2009) describes art based research as transdisciplinary. She says:

former disciplinary boundaries are disrupted within the expanded qualitative paradigm – making way for integrated cross-disciplinary practices and emergent practices that are not “housed” in any one disciplinary context. This is another way in which these practices push the borders of existing research paradigms. (p. 257)

Personal interest and experience are often features of art based research. In art based research, generalised discourses make way for instances of particular experience, which can be transformed into something culturally and collectively relevant through their presentation in art (Barrett, 2007). This is often achieved through the effect that the artwork has on the viewer, audience or witness, and might include emotional resonance, or the presence of existential themes, values and meaning. Using art as a way of researching and communicating subjective experiences that may disrupt or challenge dominant discourses is philosophically linked with a Foucauldian interest in subverting practices that objectify people (Foucault, 1984). The instances of particular experience that you will encounter in the “Seeing her stories” project include first-hand accounts from myself and the participants. It is my intention that these stories and images might evoke connection with others’ unique stories and be experienced as meaningful and relevant to their own practices.

Within art based research, arts practices, processes and products can be utilised in a plethora of ways. These can range from the inclusion of visual

data collection to compliment participant interviews within mixed methods inquiries, to research design that is informed by art based processes including doing, relating, reflecting and producing, to studio art practice as the method of investigation, generator of knowledge, evidence and presentation of findings (Sullivan, 2006). Typically, art based research projects are emergent in their structure and methods. Each practice stage leads to art based decisions about the next step and these are reflexively actioned through the continuing arts practice (Barrett, 2007).

Narrative approaches to research similarly value the acts of story-telling and story writing as a form of inquiry. Through the processes of telling and writing, the inquirer comes to know things that they had not previously known. In this research, I have drawn on an autoethnographic narrative approach as it resonates with my valuing of practice as a way of inquiring, and is open to the use of art making as a form of story-telling (Ellis, 2004; Gray, 2011, 2015). An autoethnographic approach to inquiry centralises the relationship of researcher to research topic, research process, the presentation of the research, and a connection to the broader community (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2008). The presence of the researcher within the research is evident throughout, and particularly in the final presentation of the work. The researcher is always a connected, present voice within the project. The stories told in autoethnographic research are biographical, and situated in particular socio-cultural contexts, providing insights into the dynamic and mutually influential relationships between human experiencing and the cultures we live in. In this particular inquiry, I have chosen to privilege the voices of myself and the woman participants, and use language that is art informed, as ways to challenge,

disrupt and expand on some dominant discourses within research in general, and art therapy literature more specifically.

In developing my methodology, I have been inspired by the work of art therapists who I consider to be mentors. Catherine Hyland Moon (2002) is one of a collective of art therapists who champion the idea of looking to our own distinctive art based practices as the source for developing knowing, understanding and meaningful theories to guide our art therapy practice and research. Art therapist Pat Allen (1995) used the phrase, “Art is a way of knowing” as the title of her influential book. She utilises herself as a case example to describe her experiences of art as a way of exploring and coming to practical, methodological, personal, collective and propositional knowing. Allen (1995) describes the creation of images as a way of telling our stories, and sees this as a valuable activity, saying, “It is in the telling and retelling, as truthfully as we can, and in the genuine witnessing of all the stories of all the people that we heal ourselves and the world” (p. 199).

McNiff’s (1998) advocacy of art based research in the art therapies continues to be a source of resonance, inspiration and hope for me in my

methodological stance. I too, see it as natural to choose art as a primary mode of inquiry within the field of art therapy (McNiff, 2013). I too, feel compelled to be part of generating “theory indigenous to art” (McNiff, 1986, pp. 6-7), and developing ideas, methods and language that reflect my philosophy and practice. Like McNiff, I aspire to “transcend introspection for its own sake” (2012b, p. 8) and produce knowings that are useful to others in their capacity to be remembered, to inspire and convince (2012b, 2014). In my research, I present my artwork as one form of evidence of my process of inquiry (McNiff 2014). My artwork also serves as a visual means of communicating and connecting with you, the viewer, and reader, directly through your senses. You are engaging with my “sensible signs of experience” (McNiff 2014, p. 255). It is my desire that this experience will bring you into your senses as you continue to engage, and that through this first-hand encounter, you will come to know something directly, that your witnessing of this evidence will be memorable, persuading and have ripple effects in our shared world.







## Interconnectedness in art based inquiry

Interconnectedness is inherent to art based inquiry. Connections exist between the researcher, her values and personal interests, relationships with co-inquirers, the contexts of the research, the subjects of inquiry, the methodology and methods of inquiry, the phases of the research, and the stories that the artefacts in art based inquiry produce and tell. As an art based researcher, awareness of this interconnectedness means that I accept the mutual influence that each area of the research has on all the other areas. The concept of interconnection can be linked with perspectives that include Barret's (2007) notion of situated knowledge in art based inquiry, intersubjectivity as a mode of inquiry (Crossley, 1996; Lett, 2011) and holistic perspectives that value the interconnectedness of all life (Neville, 2012).

Rather than emphasising binary perspectives towards research paradigms such as objective/subjective or empirical/hermeneutic, Barrett (2007) follows Bourdieu (1993) in suggesting that a range of approaches can co-exist and interact in one inquiry. Within art based research, subjectivities – such as those of the researcher and participants – interact with the material world – such as art materials and art works – and acquired knowledge can be understood as a “sense activity” (Grenfell & James 1998, p. 13). This perspective of art based research as relational and interconnected by its nature aligns well with Heron and Reason's (1997) participatory inquiry paradigm, integrating an expanded epistemology and a methodology based on cooperative relations. Barrett (2007) accentuates the situational disposition of art based research as an element of its relational character, highlighting that “we cannot separate knowledge to be learned from the situations in which it is used” (p. 5). She reminds us, “situated enquiry or learning demonstrates a unity between problem, context and solution” (p. 5). The subjective and relational nature of art based research requires an ongoing reflexive dynamic between artist/researcher, the researched subject, the materials and tools of art making and the context (Bourdieu, 1993).

Barrett (2007) suggests that the subjective, relational and emergent qualities of art based research lead inevitably to a position that is necessarily personally and socially situated and a magnet for interdisciplinary cross fertilisation. Art based research has the capacity to embrace and connect ideas from disparate areas of knowledge, and this can be developed as a strength with the potential to “create conditions for the emergence of new analogies, metaphors and models” (Barrett, 2007, p. 7). Crossley (1996), like Barrett (2007), acknowledges that experiencing is dialogical, social and contextual, with individuals, relationships, social structures and all elements of the environment interacting and influencing each other within every moment of experience (Crossley, 1996). He suggests that by adopting intersubjectivity as a given, it becomes “common

Figure 3.6 “She”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

In this painting I am examining the interconnections between tendrils and leaves of the nasturtiums on the fence in my courtyard.

ground” (p. 173) for convergence within a diversity of disciplines and academic traditions. Crossley (1996) describes his use of the word “fabric” as a metaphor for the connecting qualities of intersubjectivity:

I use the word ‘fabric’ ... for a number of reasons. Firstly, to articulate with the popular expression ‘social fabric’. Intersubjectivity is, I believe, precisely the fabric alluded to in this expression. It is what holds us together in an identifiable group or unit. Secondly, ‘fabric’ conjures up an image of multiple overlappings and intertwinings, organised and arranged in different ways, sometimes becoming disorganised. It connotes a sense of unity and strength which is achieved by way of this overlapping. No thread is either strong or significant on its own but the intertwining gives it strength and form. It is these different forms and patterns of overlapping that are being investigated ... Finally, the word ‘fabric’ suggests a certain material basis, a corporeal intertwining, which is again evident in intersubjectivity. Human beings are embodied beings and this is quite crucial to their intersubjectivity. Moreover, their intersubjective relations take place within and include material environments. (p. 174)

Using Crossley’s metaphor of fabric as inspiration, my methods, which are developed from autoethnography and narrative inquiry as well as the MIECAT form of inquiry, can be conceived of as threads within the fabric of methodology, all of which value intersubjective overlapping and intertwining connections, and indeed, use intersubjective experiencing as primary modes of inquiry. Evident

in this inquiry are people forming relationships, investigating together as companions, using multi-modal and experiential forms of exploration in coming to new knowings. Lett (2011) asserts that when a “companioning relationship” (p. 4) is formed during multi-modal inquiries, that “a deep intersubjective connection will be created” (p. 4). He describes these intersubjective connections as having “qualities of strong trust, resonance and respect for the importance of the content in the process of their relating” (Lett 2011, p. 4).

Crossley (1996) argues that to inquire into questions about and through intersubjectivity, we are ultimately engaging in the exploration of “existential questions about our very being” (p. 174). He reminds us that:

To confront the question of intersubjectivity is to consider the type of beings we are and the sort of world to which we belong. Considerations of this sort lie at the heart of all our projects, whether academic or not. (p. 174)

For me, these sorts of considerations did indeed emerge through the course of the project. As I became more and more interested in the intersubjective connection between myself and the subjects I was painting, my practice transformed and I began painting from life – as opposed to painting from photographs, imagination or memory. I became fascinated with painting in living environments in direct observation and in immediate connection with the living world. I felt myself drawn to eco-philosophy as a flow-on effect from this sense of connectedness that I experienced through my painting from life. Neville (2012), in his book, *The Life of Things, Therapy and the Soul of The World* explores eco-consciousness



Figure 3.7  
 “Princes Park”.  
 Carla van Laar,  
 2013.

In this drawing  
 I see layers of  
 overlapping and  
 intertwining, as  
 well as depth and  
 relationship, as  
 I examine this  
 familiar place in my  
 material world.



Figure 3.8  
 “Wild Dog Creek  
 after the rain”.  
 Carla van Laar,  
 2015.



Figure 3.9  
 “Pandanus”.  
 Carla van Laar,  
 2011.

and interconnection. For Neville (2012), the connecting thread in these ideas is that humans, the planet and cosmos are living organisms with what Rogers (1980) describes as an “inherent, creative formative tendency” (p. 129).

Neville (2012) describes Whitehead’s process cosmology, saying:

Each of us in our moment of aliveness is connected to every other experience of aliveness in the universe and it is this connectedness which holds us in existence. Through our connections we each contain the whole universe, and every other entity in the universe contains us. Everything we do has an impact, however slight, on the whole universe. Take away the connectedness and there is nothing left. (p. 92)

I see the interconnection of all life everywhere, and am fascinated by the complexity of interrelationship.

This sentiment was reflected by what unfolded in the “Seeing her stories” project. In keeping with an eco-awareness informed perspective, valuing and paying attention to interconnectedness has become more important to me in my art making practice and this research project. This perspective not only acknowledges the mutual and unique influences of the researcher, art making, artworks, research participants and surroundings through our interactions, but seeks to examine these and understand the nature of the interconnections more fully.

## Organic structure in art based inquiry

Well into the research, once my interests in eco-awareness and painting from life were established, an insight emerged into my awareness that my paintings, and nature itself, were telling me something very important about the structure of my research. It is organic. Structures, such as plants growing, forms of land, and skylscapes, became the object of my fascination and art making for the latter part of this research. I find them beautiful and challenging to observe. I love their irregular shapes, nuances and contours, their merging and overlapping, their inter-relationship with each other, and the way they change during the time it takes for me to carefully witness and visually describe my relationship with them.

The methodological structure of this research project can be described as organic. An organic structure is not necessarily predictable, not particularly linear, and at times not especially orderly. However, an organic structure is not chaotic or random, it is organised in living, growing and creative ways. Rather than being planned at the outset and then strictly accomplished step by step, in the beginning of this research, a seed was planted by beginning with creating paintings on canvas, followed by exhibiting them to be seen by others, and the structure grew from there. My choice of the word “organic” reflects my interest in the interconnectedness of life, and the complex, alive, growing, dynamic systems of nature. An organic structure is likewise multifaceted, animate, expansive and energetic.

The painting of the Pandanus (Figure 3.9), and the other artworks throughout this chapter, demonstrate my fascination with closely observing living, organic

structures through my art making. In looking to the literature, I found that ideas about emergent methodology and arts informed research overlap and connect with the organic structures I have come to appreciate and practise more deeply through this project.

A classic example of emergence in the organic world is the cathedral-like termite mound, complete with turrets, terraces, tunnels and towers. The completed mound is not pre-empted, but emerges through the complex system of interaction between the termites, humidity, air and warmth patterns, the material of the environment and the effect of the structure on the creatures who are building it. I find the emergent formation astonishing in its aesthetic qualities. The nature of emergence is unpredictability – it is unimagined and can be surprising.

Barrett (2007) discusses the intrinsically emergent character of art practice led research. She draws on the idea of emergent evolution described by thinkers who suggest that material configurations become more complex as systems develop. Eventually, when a critical level of complexity is attained, “genuinely novel properties – those that have never been instantiated before – emerge” (Barrett, 2007, p. 6).

As an artist I am constantly adapting to new situations throughout the process of this practice led inquiry. As an example, when I am painting a picture, each gesture, brush stroke and mark on the canvas is informed by a combination that includes my accumulation of skills and style, the current changing context in which I paint and subject to which I am responding, as well as the presence of my previous marks on the canvas. I could not have pre-empted the current brush stroke until the previous one was completed. This is also the case in the inquiry process





Figure 3.10 “Banksia nut”. Carla van Laar, 2019.

with research participants. I could not have pre-empted their responses to my invitation to participate, and their responses informed what I decided to do next, in repeating, expanding and iterative cycles.

In this art based inquiry, the creative process always informed the next decision in action. Because of this reflexive process, the “methodologies in artistic research are necessarily emergent and subject to repeated

adjustment, rather than remaining fixed throughout the process of enquiry” (Barrett, 2007 p. 6), and can be described only after the fact. This feels like an organic growing, rather than a planned construction. Similarly, emergent artistic inquiries, like this one, have organic structures. Like Barrett, I consider this to be a strength that can enable unexpected, unimagined and unique outcomes.



In my organic approach to methodological structure within this inquiry, my art making practice has been centrally located. The process of making has informed my learnings, insights and understandings along the way. The practice led art making, the interconnections with participants, and the art informed creation of the written narrative, have organic structures as their methodological foundation. It was with commitment to and in relationship with my overall methodological approach that I developed my methods of inquiry.

Throughout this research project I have used methods that are described in different approaches to art based research, such as art in research, art informed research, art as research and art as evidence (Eisner, 1998, 2002; Gilroy, 1996; McNiff, 2011, 2012b, 2013, 2014; Rolling, 2010; Varney et. al., 2014). Art is *in* this research because I chose to investigate the seeing of her stories, and these stories are artworks. The way of conducting the research has been *art informed*, because the way I have structured the methods has been an artistic process in which each new phase was informed by and improvised in response to what had already been done. The artworks I have continued to paint throughout the life of the project are art *as* research, and were ways for me to immerse in art based inquiry exploring the themes that emerged in response to my question, “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?”. The artworks that I present here in this thesis are now empirical objects that act as *art based evidence* of both my investigative process, and as symbolic and



Figure 3.11  
“Tropical foliage study”.  
Carla van Laar, 2013.



Figure 3.12  
“View from the balcony”.  
Carla van Laar, 2013.



Figure 3.13  
“Tree growing and  
sky glowing”.  
Carla van Laar, 2013.

metaphoric communicators of meaning. In all of these ways, this practice led, interconnected and organically structured inquiry has art based research as its underlying and surrounding methodological approach.

In the next chapter I describe how my art based methodological approach was put into action and became the methods of inquiry.





Figure 3.14 "Foliage study". Carla van Laar, 2012.