

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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An abstract painting of a field of flowers. The composition is dominated by vibrant, textured brushstrokes in shades of red, purple, yellow, and green. The flowers are depicted in various stages of bloom, with some showing distinct petals and others as more abstract shapes. The background is a mix of these colors, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is expressive and painterly, with visible brushwork throughout.

Chapter 4

Methods of inquiry in “Seeing her stories”

Previous page: Figure 4.1 “The little flower”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

This is the first painting of this research that I painted in situ, in nature.

Project narrative: How the process unfolded over time

This chapter provides an account of how the organic structure of the research grew over time and the methods that I employed to arrive at my findings. I have included an overview of ethical considerations, a brief introduction to the research participants, descriptions of what I did and why, and explanations of the methods involved in the various cycles of inquiry with reference to the MIECAT form of inquiry (Lett, 2011). I have interspersed images of my artworks to show what and how I was painting at each phase of the research, to illustrate the development of my artmaking practice, and the relationships between the contents of my artworks and the other research activities.

In summary, the art based inquiry research design included:

- Initial planning and application for ethics approval
- Establishment of an ongoing practice of journaling in relation to the research process
- Beginning of ongoing engagement with relevant literature
- Preparation of artworks
- Interactive exhibitions of my artworks at MIECAT and online
- Ongoing painting practice to produce further collections of art works
- Recruitment of research participants from the people who had viewed and responded to the exhibitions
- Interviews with participants about their experiences of seeing
- Painting portraits of participants
- Further conversations with participants
- Writing narratives of the interviews and conversations



Left to right: Figure 4.2 "The road". Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.3 "Out the side window". Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.4 "My dolls". Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.5 "Visiting Oma". Carla van Laar, 2008.

- Focus group dinner party with participants
- Transcription of focus group
- Preparation of autoethnographic account of the research, integrating the research journal, the interview narratives and the focus group transcript
- Thematic analysis of the autoethnographic account using key words and clustering
- Photographic documentation of all artworks
- Iterative analysis of themes, transcripts and artworks to refine themes and link them with relevant stories and images in the research source material
- Mapping keywords in relation to the themes
- Focused literature review to examine how the identified themes have been explored in the art therapy literature to date
- Further painting and exhibiting of artworks
- Initiation of the 'art sitting' project
- Writing as inquiry and thesis preparation.



Figure 4.6 "Woman on top of the cliff". Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.7 "Ladders". Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.8 "The trigger". Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.9 "Minor catastrophe". Carla van Laar, 2008.

The women participants in this inquiry include myself, and:

- Belinda, an art therapist, improvisational musician and doctoral researcher who has worked in remote communities with people seeking asylum
- Freya, an early childhood educator, who has lived and worked in Papua New Guinea, New South Wales, and North Queensland during the life of the project
- Gretel, a social worker and family therapist, senior clinician in a government youth mental health organisation
- Jan, my supervisor
- Jane, a planner and policy advisor, cultural researcher and senior manager in a not-for-profit organisation specialising in dealing with issues of homelessness
- Julie, a psychodramatist, screen-writer, author and educator who works as an independent contractor
- Linda, an art teacher of primary school students, and an active bushwalker and camper
- Lorraine, an established painter, arts and health worker and philanthropist who has held many international artist in residency appointments and exhibitions
- Marty, a Professor of social work in Melbourne, who is a craft maker and social researcher
- Nicola, a musician, composer and practitioner of energy healing, who has worked with women in social justice, educational and entertainment contexts.



Figure 4.10 “Henry and me on the rollercoaster”. Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.11 “My desk”. Carla van Laar, 2008.

Figure 4.12 “Laura May”. Carla van Laar, 2009.

Ethical considerations

While ethics committees and review boards have usefully raised awareness of the ethical issues in research proposals, it is important that research ethics not be reduced to institutional risk management, lest we come to think that having things right on paper, all the boxes ticked and the warnings issued, can guarantee ethical relationships and ethical practice. (Liamputong & Rumbold, 2008, p. 7)

The “Seeing her stories” research was approved by the MIECAT Institute Ethics Committee, and by the time I had held the first exhibition and started recruiting participants for this inquiry, some important ethical decisions had already been made. These included questions such as “What is worth researching?” and “How shall I begin it?”.

My choice of research focus, “Seeing her stories”, reflects meaningful ethical choices I made early on. I decided to give attention to a particular focus that I believe is crucial to both the practice of visual art and art therapy. I decided to emphasise women’s stories, and I made the choice to use storying, both visual and textual. This choice is in keeping with my values about how art based ways of knowing are central to the work of therapeutic arts practitioners.

I have striven for congruence, interconnectedness and co-creation in my area of research interest, my artistic practice, my art therapy practice, the values that underpin my methodology, the methods I employed in my research, and the way that I present my knowings. These are all art based at their core.

In order to begin exploring the question, “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?” I created the opportunity for people to see my paintings at the exhibition in the MIECAT space in inner urban Fitzroy.



Figure 4.13 "Nicola sings a response". Carla van Laar. 2010.

Figure 4.14 "Julie's portrait". Carla van Laar, 2010.

Figure 4.15 "Lorraine". Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.16 "Croajingalong looking up". Carla van Laar, 2011.

Liamputtong (2013) recommends providing extensive information regarding the research in order that people can make a well-informed decision about whether to participate in the research. In keeping with this recommendation, guests to my initial exhibition were invited to engage with me on my research journey based on their interest and willingness to be involved. A verbal invitation at the exhibition was followed by expressions of interest from potential participants, and the participants were provided with an information and consent form that included full disclosure about the nature and scope of the inquiry, what might be expected of them, how I would generate data, or source material, and how I would use it. As new participants became involved, they were likewise given both verbal and written information to enable them to make informed choices about their participation. This included informing them that the nature of the inquiry would mean that participants would be identifiable as part of their involvement because I might paint representations of them, interview them, photograph them, video record them, name them and acknowledge their

authorship of any creative works they contributed. As all of the participants were adult women capable of making such informed choices, the MIECAT ethics committee approved the decision to identify participants. The participants could withdraw their consent to participate at any stage throughout the life of the inquiry.

The duty of care towards research participants extends beyond the initial information giving and choice to participate (Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008; Liamputtong, 2013). The values and ethics within an intersubjective approach in research acknowledge the interacting subjectivities of the researcher and the research participants (Heron & Reason, 2006). Research conducted from an intersubjective perspective values the willingness of all participants to engage in a process of inquiry in the knowledge that they will all be somehow changed through the process of intersubjective engagement together. For these reasons, the ethics of an intersubjective inquiry include being sensitive to participants' eagerness to be involved, relationships between the researcher and participants, attention to respect, privacy, dialogue

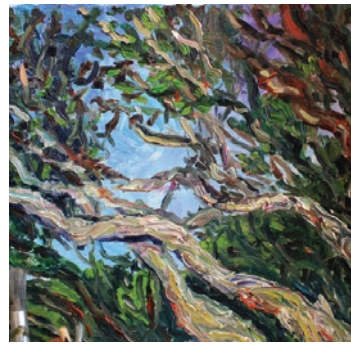


Figure 4.17 "Henry in the hammock". Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.18 "Henry". Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.19 "Henry's canopy". Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.20 "Gretel's portrait". Carla van Laar, 2011.

and mutual exchange. Valuing interconnections from an intersubjective perspective means that research can be impactful for individual change and growth, and also for social transformation and development in areas such as empowerment and belonging.

Along the way, I made meaningful choices with the intention of showing respect and care for the women who participated. I offered to be available for follow up conversations and debriefs, and checked whether they needed any extra care if distressing emotions or material surfaced. I was careful about what I included in the final thesis, and I omitted parts of their narratives where the information was too personal and sensitive. When I had written the thesis, I involved all the participants in "member checking" (Liamputtong, 2013, p. 32) by sending them the text where they were mentioned or quoted, and any images they were represented in, both artwork and photographic. I invited them to alter or delete any text or images in keeping with how they wished to be represented.

In some of my own stories, my son Henry is mentioned. He was not a research participant,

however I engaged in the same process with him, giving him the opportunity to have choice about whether he was mentioned, and how he was described, quoted and represented through images. At the time of writing this document he is a young man of 23 and able to make an informed choice about being named in this project.

The fact that I had personal relationships with all of the participants that extended beyond the parameters of the inquiry impacted in a number of ways. It is likely that our ongoing relationships enabled a sense of commitment and long-term engagement from the participants, and this benefitted the research. At times when I met individually with participants, and also at the focus group dinner party, I created dedicated time and space to attend to the inquiry process, and asked that we have our usual mutual social encounter at another time. Some of the challenges included reconciling that my care and respect for my relationships with the participants extended beyond the inquiry, and this resulted in meaningful choices such as refining the portraits of participants until I felt that they were satisfied with

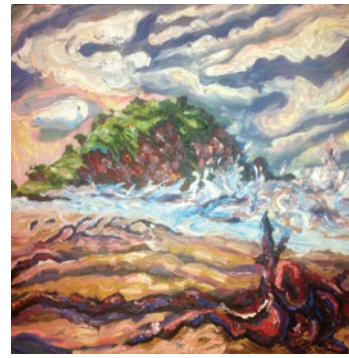


Figure 4.21 “Belinda in the studio”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.22 “Fran and Malcolm’s tree”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.23 “The rock”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.24 “Corindi Beach Hibiscus”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

these representations. Likewise, I came to understand and value that the participants’ ongoing engagement was a reflection of their care and respect for me.

In a way similar to my care and respect for the participants, I have made meaningful choices about how much of my own personal material to include. I have attempted to ask myself critically, “How is this story benefitting the inquiry?”, and likewise to protect myself by not disclosing sensitive material that may jeopardise my wellbeing. Where I mention, in passing, people who are not participants in the inquiry, I have fictionalised them by changing their names and identifying details (Davis & Ellis, 2008).

Journaling

Throughout the entire research I have kept journals incorporating text and sketching, both handwritten in notebooks and typed into my computer. I later used these as source material along with the other written documents that I describe later in this chapter. Throughout this thesis, I insert quotes from my journals to illustrate my reflections and musings over the course of the research.

Engagement with literature

Early in the research I engaged in reading theory from the art therapy field, focusing on art based research. I explored feminist theory and phenomenology, as well as fine art texts about practice as research, biographies of artists and art philosophy. I read broadly about approaches to qualitative research and more specifically narrative research and autoethnography.

This broad reading was rather like a gathering process, looking at ideas that might be relevant to my research, following my interests, and reading what was required for my work. I imagined having conversations with various authors and asking them what they might have to tell me that is important for my research. I imagined them talking to each other about ideas that they share and where they see things differently. I wrote about these imagined conversations in my research journal. The various perspectives that I engaged with throughout this research have become part of the context that frames this project.



Figure 4.25 “Hasting’s Point swamp after the flood”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.26 “Pandanus”. Carla van Laar, 2011.

Figure 4.27 “Weaving branches”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

Figure 4.28 “Light pushing through”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

Preparation of artworks: Painting stories from my life

During an early supervision meeting with Warren Lett, I explained my feelings of “stuckness”, confusion, and not knowing how to begin my research. His question, “What do you feel like doing?” prompted my response, “To be honest, I feel like going home and painting”. Warren replied confidently, “Then I suggest you go home and paint. We will meet again in a week.”

This conversation led to the creation of a series of paintings that became the first exhibition in the research. I decided to use stories from my life as the connecting theme of the paintings. In addition, I decided to make them all the same size and shape, and to use a similar monochromatic palette in all of the artworks. I hoped that these commonalities would give some cohesion to the works as a series. The subject matter of these artworks was, by contrast, stimulated in diverse ways.

The first two images (figures 4.2 and 4.3) were inspired by photographs I had taken while driving between my city life in a full-time job as a therapist working with young men who had sexually offended,

to my weekends escaping to the beach with my (then) primary school aged son. The images that I created were based on an attraction and interest in these photographic reminders of moments I had been in, moving through space and time, and what I had seen outside myself in those transitory instants. These paintings were a way of returning to a fleeting moment and spending more time with it, unpacking it visually, exploring my intuitive interest and sense of some significance to be found in creating the image. The process of creating the first painting in the “Seeing her stories” project, the image of the road, reflects the phase of research that I was in at the time, beginning, moving into the unknown, experimenting and following my felt senses. The metaphor of a road, being on a journey, travelling towards the horizon, a destination and moving towards the light, resonate with some of the findings that would emerge as threads of meaning, particularly “change and continuity”, the subject of a later chapter.

Other images (figures 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8) were created with the reference source coming from inside myself, from my memories, dreams or imagination.



Figure 4.29 “Foliage study”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

Figure 4.30 “Shapes between the leaves”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

Figure 4.31 “Branching”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

Figure 4.32 “Back to the garden”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

The subjects of these paintings came from my urge to put these images outside myself, to view them externally and interact with them physically through manipulating materials to represent what I saw inside my mind’s eye. Once these expressions of my inner world were solidified through paints on canvas, I could observe them and relate to them differently (Lysaght, 2009).

The dream image of ladders falling from my ceiling (figure 4.7) had been scary when it first occurred, however when the image was painted, it seemed to suggest the possibility of an ascent, and my fearful feelings about the image transformed into feelings of anticipation. The image of the woman atop the cliff (figure 4.6) was created after running along a beach at the base of a cliff face, and imagining being a woman up above, arms outstretched and leaning into the wind. Painting this image enabled me to honour the solidity and texture that I found comforting in the cliffs, and an experience of feeling connected to the elements, change and movement all at once.

The image I titled, “The Trigger” (figure 4.8), was in response to being robbed at gun-point on a New

Year’s Eve holiday in Rio de Janeiro. I had a delayed trauma response to this experience two weeks after I returned home safely to Melbourne and had been back at work. This potent image became the “trigger” for exploring disturbing pre-verbal memories that began to surface following on from this armed assault. Placing this image outside myself – through art materials on canvas – had the effect of reducing the flooding of flashbacks in my mind’s eye and marked the beginning of a healing journey that would lead me into my surfacing childhood memories, and exploration of the effects on me of traumatic events experienced by my female ancestors before my birth one, two, three, four, five, six, seven and eight generations ago.

Other paintings in this first series included one after visiting my Oma – paternal grandmother, (figure 4.5) and one of my son Henry and me on a roller coaster ride (figure 4.10). The composition of each of these images spoke to me of my relationships with my grandmother and my son.

Finally, I used my desk as inspiration (figure 4.11), the clutter on it seeming to tell a complex story,

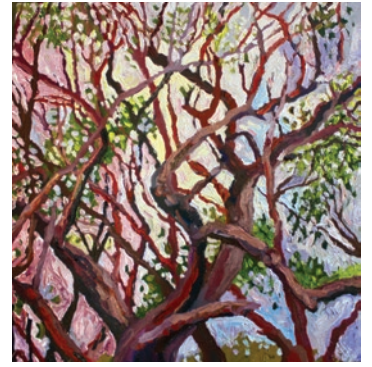


Figure 4.33 “Bush flowers”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.34 “Bush berries”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.35 “Purple flower”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.36 “Tree canopy, Thurra River”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

and the familiarity of it to create an intimacy. In this image I painted carefully from direct observation, looking at what was in front of me, to tell the story of what I was seeing. I found this practice to require focus and concentration, presence, skill, patience, relationship and attention. I would become conscious of my breath, my posture and my gestures. I felt that I was communicating and learning from my direct surroundings and my own senses, that we were in dialogue with each other.

The paintings in this first series inspired by photographs, memory, imagination and painting from life reflect the phase of the research where I was sharing stories, gathering and generating source material, and engaging participants in co-inquiry. The visual content in these works is autoethnographic, invitational and evocative. They pictorially evoke the threads of meaning that would emerge as woven throughout the project: presence and embodiment; context, risk and safety; change and continuity; relationship, connection and co-creation.

Interactive exhibitions at MIECAT and online: Viewer responding and recruitment of participants

In order to engage participants interested in exploring the question, “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?” I created the opportunity for people to see my first series of paintings at an exhibition in the MIECAT space in inner urban Fitzroy, with about sixty people in attendance. My overall feeling sense of hosting this exhibition was one of curiosity and slight bemusement. I had some hopes that something significant would happen, however I was unsure what it might be, and how I might recognise it if it did.

During the exhibition, I explained to the visitors that I was conducting research and that this exhibition was part of the process of recruiting participants. I invited the visitors to talk to me and to complete a contact form if they were interested in becoming part of this research project. Here is a portion of the story I wrote about my experience of recruiting participants by inviting them to respond to my artworks.

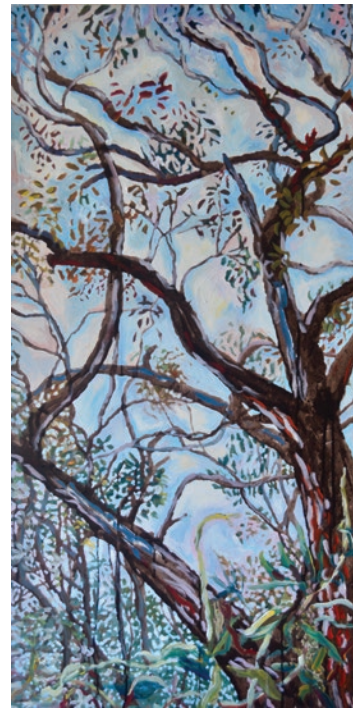


Figure 4.37 "Welcome tree". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.38 "Looking through the tree". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.39 "Dancing trees 1". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.40 "Dancing trees 2". Carla van Laar, 2013.



When the moment seems right, when there is engagement and conversation in the air, when I've given enough time for most guests to arrive but not before they start to leave, Jan calls the guests' attention, welcomes everyone and introduces me. I stand in front of everyone and make a speech, explaining the research and inviting people to engage with the stories they see in the artworks.

I invite the people in the room to become involved in the research by noticing their own responses.

I ask, "What happened for you in seeing the artworks in the exhibition?"

Can you remember what attracted your attention?

Was there a particular image or images that stood out for you? Try to unpack the moment that you remember most significantly.

Can you give a rich description of your experience?

Can you describe your emotional reaction?

Were there any sensations in your body?

Did this seeing bring any memories to mind?

What did you physically do while you were seeing the artwork?

What was your experience of seeing the artwork?

You may feel like responding in words, literally or poetically. You may wish to produce an image by drawing, painting, photographing, collaging or digitising. You are welcome to produce a response in some other media, such as sculpture or song, or you may wish to respond using a variety of modalities.

If you would like to join me in my research journey, I welcome you! Please let me know! There are forms here you can fill in, or you can visit my website, or please feel free to just come and talk to me today."

After the formalities we are mingling in the space. I feel elated to have reached this landmark moment in my research. The space is large and open, the walls big and white, my monotone paintings in horizontal format invite attention and people stand in front of them looking alone, looking together, drinks in hands, inquiring with each other about what they see. I am intrigued as I



Figure 4.41 "Backyard pot plants". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.42 "Urban courtyard". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.43 "She". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.44 "Nathan's flowers". Carla van Laar, 2013.

observe who is drawn to what; I am watching the scene carefully and with interest.

After many interactions, conversations, laughter and connections, the crowd dissipates and I and my family are left to clear up the food together. Aunty Meg has enjoyed herself thoroughly she tells me. As we load the empty platters into my car, she pauses beside me, "I think I'd like to talk to you about a painting I'd like for my new shop", she says.

This method of recruiting research participants resulted in the engagement of two women who are close friends, Nicola and Julie, who agreed to have in depth interviews with me about their experiences of seeing an image during the exhibition.

I created an online gallery and posted the original series of monotone paintings there with room for visitors to the site to leave comments. I sent invitations to my email contacts informing them about my research project and asking them if they were interested to have a look and leave comments that might contribute to the research. Five women left comments, and one of these women, Freya, became

part of the research project. She later attended the focus group dinner party and gave me an art based response to her experience of the road painting, and this is detailed in a later chapter.

The online gallery did not become an ongoing forum for connecting, and I found that posting my later paintings on social media was a much more active forum for generating interest and discussion. In particular, this activity became a forum for others to see my artworks, and I invited friends to select one and take it home or to work to hang in their own spaces. They would then post photos of my artworks in different contexts, and comment on what it was like to have the artwork present in their own environments.

Over the course of the research, the other women became involved through their interest in my artwork and the research project. They were all given information about the research project and how I would record and work with their input, to which they agreed, and I describe their involvement in the following chapters.



Figure 4.45 “Nasturtiums on the fence”, 2013.

Figure 4.46 “Geraniums against the bricks”, 2013.

Figure 4.47 “Potted lily”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.48 “Backyard lilies”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

Ongoing painting practice: Painting Laura May

I had not expected my Auntie Meg’s response to the MIECAT exhibition. She did not offer me her experience of seeing; she was prompted by the exhibition to ask me to paint a picture for her shop in a small Queensland country town, a haberdashery that she named after her Grandmother, my Great-Grandmother, Laura May.

This step in the research involved a visit to her house, a 2000 kilometre drive from my home in Melbourne, accompanied by my young son Henry. During the visit we spent days unpacking boxes of historical family documents and photographs. I compiled a book of notes and diagrams of various branches of the family tree, and made copies of family photographs stretching back to the 1800s. Auntie Meg selected three photographs of Laura May and when Henry and I packed up to drive home, the photographs were with me to help me with the painting of Laura May. Given that seeing the MIECAT exhibition had prompted Auntie Meg to ask me to

paint the portrait, I stayed with the limited colour palette and horizontal format I had been using so far.

Painting this image (figure 4.12) became an activity that facilitated a deep sense of connection to the women in my family, that speaks to the findings that would later emerge in analysing the research material.

Here is an extract from the story I wrote about my experience of painting Laura May in 2009:

Standing in front of the painting that my Auntie Meg asked me to paint about my Great Grandmother, Laura May, I stare at the middle portrait of her in the 1920s and think, “You are the age that I am now”. She squints back at me. The photographer must have insisted that she stand facing the sun. Unlike the demure and softly lit Edwardian portrait of her as a fine young lady in her early twenties, this photo shows Laura May in her mid-thirties, bright natural sunlight casting shadows across her scrunched eyes, brow showing the evidence she has probably spent years squinting into the bright sun. I imagine her hanging out load after load of washing with her face titled upwards while she works. The third



Figure 4.49 "Potted blossom". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.50 "Our backyard". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.51 "Lucky tree". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.52 "Lily leaves against the outhouse". Carla van Laar, 2013.

portrait in the painting is Laura May in her late sixties. Her children are grown and she looks lively and sparkly, as though she is having fun. I look at the three pictures and notice that across all three there is a similar twinkle in her eyes.

Gazing at this picture, memories take form ...

I'm three years old, visiting my Grandma and Grandad's house on a family holiday to Mackay, in North Queensland, on the East Coast of Australia. It's bed time, my Mum is carrying me and about to take me downstairs to tuck me in. Great Gran sits in her rocking chair as

always, beside the top of the staircase, and my Mum leans me over to give Great Gran a good night kiss. Her old skin is so soft and hanging from her face that it gets sucked into my lips when I pucker up and kiss her.

Now I'm nine, and there she is again, prolifically sitting in the living room and crocheting day after day, doily after doily, and covering coat hangers with beads and plastic twine. My Mum has a drawer full of family heirloom doilies, many made by Great-Gran, many by my Grandma, and others made by my mum herself and her sisters.



Figure 4.12 "Laura May". Carla van Laar, 2009.



Figure 4.53 "Pot plant on the windowsill". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.54 "Lily in the courtyard 1". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.55 "Flowers on the fence 1". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.56 "Lily in the courtyard 2". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Back in the present and I'm wondering if I'll live until I'm a hundred. I remember my Mum telling me how Laura May was widowed young. After that she worked as a maid. Laura May worked hard enough to ensure that her daughter, my Grandma, Valma Margaret, could go to teacher's college. I wonder if Laura May wanted to safeguard her daughter against the prospect of having to work in domestic labour.

My eyes rest and drift on the objects in the painting and they speak to me of my memories of Great-Gran. The doilies and coat hanger are made by her own hand. The thimble is my own and a reminder that my first job was as an apprentice milliner, where I too was initiated into the experience of sitting day after day in a women's sewing circle, creating objects from soft fibres with my hands.

Looking into the painting, I see that the spool of thread connects the elements that I arranged on my mantel piece.

I am moved by noticing this, and I step up to the painting with my paintbrush, to highlight that connecting spool of thread. As I observe the objects in front of me and paint,

the connections of blood, tissue, genetics, memory, values, talents and love resonate through me, tying my life to that of my family across time and space, reminding me of how very much my family are part of me, and how honoured I am that this is the case.

The process of painting Laura May felt like a "warm up" to the next phases of the research, interviewing the research participants and painting portraits of these living women.

Interviews with participants about their experiences of seeing

Following on from the MIECAT exhibition, I arranged to meet with Nicola and Julie individually and inquire with them about their experiences of seeing a particular image. The interviews were conducted in a style that reflected the overall approach, philosophy and intention of this research. I was interested in deepening my understanding of what happened for the participants in viewing my artwork. I wanted to hear about their experiences and listen carefully to their own words and ways of describing their



Figure 4.57 “Flowers on the fence 2”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.58 “Lily in the courtyard 3”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.59 “Princes Park”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

seeing experiences. I asked open questions with the intention of accessing rich descriptions of their lived experiencing, such as, “Can you tell me about what happened for you when you saw the artwork?”.

I also let them both know that I would like to paint a portrait of them as part of the research and as preparation for that I would like to photograph them. I wanted to paint these portraits as a way of visually and artistically responding to the interviews and the things they shared with me during the interviews. I asked them to think about where they would like to meet and what they might like to be doing or have with them in the portrait photos.

I met with Nicola at her home and I met with Julie at my beach house. I made handwritten notes during the interviews, which I then read back to each of them so that they could correct, edit or add to what I had written.

I had taken the painting that Nicola responded to, the woman on the cliff (figure 4.6), and given it to her to hang in her studio. She is a musician and composer, and had written a song in response to the painting

that she performed for me after our interview. I took photographs of her while she was singing.

Julie had responded to the painting of the road (figure 4.2). She is a writer and story-teller and has a personal practice of creating altars by arranging objects to create spaces of reflection, beauty and meaning. She brought a number of significant objects to the interview. After the interview with Julie, she arranged herself and her objects in the place of her choosing – the middle of the road leading to a small bay beach – and I took photographs of her sitting there.

After the interviews I used my handwritten notes, including quotes of what they had said about the images to which they had responded, to write stories about my experience of interviewing each of them.

Painting portraits of the participants

I created collages using the photos I had taken of both Nicola and Julie during the interviews, and used these to compose a scene for each of their portraits. The



Figure 4.60 "Tropical foliage study". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.61 "View from the balcony". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.62 "Lake Wanaka". Carla van Laar, 2013.



Figure 4.13 "Nicola sings a response". Carla van Laar. 2011.

process of painting occurred over a number of months for each of them. I was working full time and would paint in my home studio or beach house on weekends.

At times during the painting processes, Nicola and Julie sometimes visited me and looked at the work in progress, offering comments about what surprised them, what elements they appreciated, and also elements that they found discomforting or disturbing.

Nicola gave me a CD of her recent compositions and I often listened to her singing while I painted, feeling that this would help me to tune in to her energy and spirit. As I painted Nicola (figure 4.13) I was conscious of the weight in her body, where her foot was pressing on the floor, the other on the piano pedal, how she held her body so that she could breathe and sing, the shape of her hands as she played the notes, and her closed eyes and open mouth as she sang. I also noticed the scattered objects and toys around the floor indicating the presence of children and her world of motherhood. The two round ornamental vessels in the background seemed to echo her current role as a breastfeeding nurturer. In this portrait, I painted my own image of the woman on



Figure 4.63 “Bush on a hill”. Carla van Laar, 2013.



Figure 4.64 “A hill to climb”. Carla van Laar, 2013.



Figure 4.65 “Mountains on the coast”. Carla van Laar, 2013.

the cliff hanging on the wall behind Nicola, showing the link between this image and the previous series. The contrasting colours of the keyboard seemed also to echo the original paintings, and the patterns on her t-shirt matched the colour of the keyboard but also seemed to dance lyrically like the tune she played and the words she sang.

Painting Julie (figure 4.14) posed some challenges, first in composition, then in colour palette, and finally in creating an image that Julie was pleased with in terms of likeness.

I chose a tall canvas that I felt reflected Julie’s stature as a tall woman with a strong presence. Although Julie was seated in the image, the shape of the canvas suggested height, and allowed ample room for sky above her head and the shape of a tall tree on the left side of the canvas. The tree seemed to me to be another echo of Julie’s embodied presence. I chose a photograph of Julie’s face to work from that showed her hair swirling from a burst of wind. I liked the contrast between the stillness of the seated pose and the movement and energy of the wind in her hair.

The colours of this painting puzzled me and I changed the palette several times before stopping work on this image. In painting Nicola I had shifted from the monotone palette I had been using by introducing orange-based flesh and timber coloured hues along with the blue in her denim jeans; a complimentary scheme. In painting Julie, knowing her love of ocean blue colours, I worked in colour first, blocking in the blue of the sky, the purple of her dress and the green of the grass and foliage. This left me confounded about what to use as a complimentary colour, and I proceeded to experiment with finding a satisfactory colour combination.

I worked on this painting in my studio with the collage of photographs on the wall beside the canvas as inspiration. I would sometimes send Julie a photograph via phone or email and she would respond to the developments in the image. At one point, she described the mouth on the face as ‘disturbing, devouring’. My decision to keep working the face until she felt comfortable with it indicated another theme that would later become evident in the findings – the theme of co-creation.

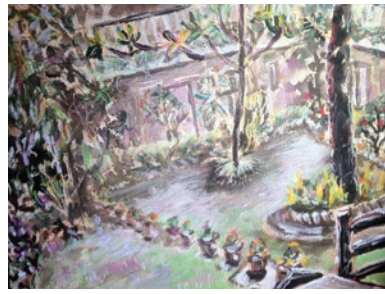


Figure 4.66 "Tree growing and sky glowing". Carla van Laar, 2013.

Figure 4.67 "Monastery courtyard". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.68 "Pilgrimage to Monet's garden". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.69 "Vaughn's flower". Carla van Laar, 2014.



Figure 4.14
"Julie's portrait".
Carla van Laar,
2011.

When I met Lorraine at her studio, I was significantly affected by seeing her artworks and I decided to include my own experience of being a witness to her work as one of the stories in this research.

I invited Lorraine to become a research participant and this led to photographing her in her studio as we talked, and then painting a close up portrait (figure 4.15) using one photograph as reference material. Here is my story of this process:

Lorraine's many canvases are often large, loosely worked, with images drawing on evocative motifs such as water, shadows and flowers. As I looked through Lorraine's images I felt I was entering her inner world of symbol and meaning, and that in many ways the imagery of her inner world overlapped and dialogued with my own. We both laughed that even the dress I wore that day was covered in giant pink and red roses, a mirror image of her current canvas in which she was exploring the flower motifs on bereavement and condolence cards — which I hadn't seen until I stepped in the door of the studio.



Figure 4.70 "French blossoms". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.71 "Alice's cottage". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.72 "Talking to the coconuts". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.73 "Still talking to the coconuts". Carla van Laar, 2014.

I photographed Lorraine as she described her process of creating the artworks and making meaning through them. I was moved as she reached out her hand to touch her artwork as she spoke to me, dialoguing with it, still curious and engaged in the conversation she was having with the piece and wondering what else it may have to tell her. A sense of mystery and questioning prevailed, meanings were not fixed, and images were open for exploration. In many of the works a mask-like shape was present, as an outline, like an upside-down egg. Lorraine has an interest in shadows and outlines, and there are many of these in her art work. Following my interest about the mask shape outlines, Lorraine then showed me the original mask, a three dimensional object whose outline was later imprinted across canvas after canvas. It was a grief mask, covered in a collage of sentimental floral motifs. Lorraine had created this mask from the condolence cards after her son's death. She then showed me a fruit bowl full of small white balls. On closer inspection I could see the balls were made of torn up card, with bits of words emerging here and there; papier mâché from all the messages in the bereavement cards. The sight

of these emotionally charged objects is still imprinted in my inner vision and as I conjure up the memory I am once again experiencing a gut-wrenching grief empathy that produces my own tears.

In looking at Lorraine's expressions of grief I am reminded of my own creations that became part of my book, "Bereaved Mother's Heart" (van Laar, 2007). These little balls of Lorraine's remind me of the day I spent rolling clay into small tear drop shapes and felt that I could do this activity for the rest of my life and still not make enough tear drops to express the depth of my love and loss.

On return to Melbourne I browsed through the images I had taken of Lorraine, looking for something to work from for my portrait of her. Initially I thought I would want to paint her in context in her studio, to show her productivity and the delightful creative space — a portrait of her as a woman creator, as I had with Nicola and Julie. As I looked through the photographs though I decided to zoom right in on Lorraine's face. It was her expression, the range of emotions in her eyes that



Figure 4.74 “Spring in Princes Park”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.75 “Spring in the Brunswick backyard”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.76 “Figs and garlic”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.77 “After the dinner party”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

intrigued me the most. I wanted to observe and honour the warmth, curiosity, humour, wisdom and sadness all present and lingering in Lorraine’s face, all emotions I connect with and that resonate in my memory of being with Lorraine in her studio and seeing her art.

During the research I engaged in many conversations with other artists who are part of my social network. One such dynamic conversation led to a comment that became a significant turning point in my art making practice and this research,

Dan’s been looking at my paintings. “You’re a good painter”, he says.

“But you know what?”

“What?” I ask.

“You’ve got to stop painting from photos. Images painted from photos are lifeless, they have no soul. You need to loosen up. Your paintings take too long. Stop taking photos and just paint whatever is in front of you. Do sketches, but with paint. Paint from life. Trust me, you will thank me, I know what I’m talking about.”

This conversation challenged me to consider the difference between my images that were painted from the various sources – imagination, memory, dreams, photographs, and immediate observation. The unmediated exchange that occurred when painting from “life”, in situation, felt dynamic and energising. The element of time was intensified. I felt a heightened awareness and sense of being in the moment, as well as an openness to my surroundings, to the subtle shapes and forms, and a sensitivity to changing light and the relationship between myself and the subjects I was painting.

On a camping trip to Croajingalong National Park with family and friends in the summer of 2011, I packed up my oil paints and canvases, and started a new phase of painting from life. I started with the natural environment (figures 4.1 and 4.16) and then moved on to painting my son Henry while he relaxed in a hammock beside our tent under a canopy of trees (figures 4.17, 4.18 and 4.19).

These paintings from life became records of a lived encounter occurring in real time. They gave form to the sensory information I attuned to as I



Figure 4.78 "Freycinet sky". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.79 "Campsite dining table". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.80 "Trees in the river". Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.81 "Tree home". Carla van Laar, 2014.



Figure 4.17 "Henry in the hammock". Carla van Laar, 2011.

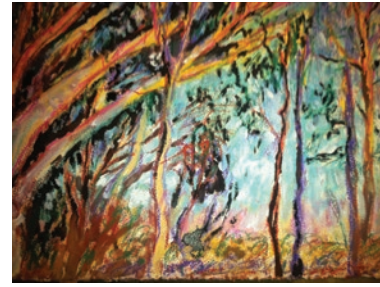


Figure 4.82 “Road to Honeymoon Bay”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.83 “The heart”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.84 “Twilight in the heart”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.85 “Tree house”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

interacted with both people and the material world, and also became an expression of the energy of connecting with the “other”.

On returning from the camping trip, I kept up the practice of painting from life, often getting out my paints when friends were visiting. One of these occasions is described in this story snippet:

Gretel is on leave from her position as a Senior Clinician. We met when we were working together in youth mental health. She as a social worker and family therapist, and me as an art therapist. We co-facilitated many groups and found the cross pollination of our disciplines very stimulating and fruitful. Gretel has since set up a Senior Practitioners Peer Supervision group that I’m a part of.

We have also become great friends over the years, and today she pops in for a chat and catch up while I sit in the shop selling off my unwanted clutter. Fresh from my daily painting in the bush, I ask Gretel if I can paint her while we talk.

A new series of portraits emerged (figures 4.20 and 4.21), they were not in response to in depth interviews or pre-contemplated; they were

spontaneous, small and quick. Two of the subjects of these new portraits – Gretel and Belinda – were so interested in their own experiences of being painted and how this could be part of my research project that they became involved in the next phase of the inquiry, a focus group dinner party in my studio where I displayed all the portraits and some of the earlier artworks that participants had responded to.

Focus group dinner party with participants

Earlier in the research process, I had been inspired by C. Ellis’ (2004) suggestion that the findings in autoethnographic research could be presented as a conversation between participants. I decided to host a dinner party and invite the women who had become participants in the research project. My intention was to generate such a conversation. In this case, the conversation itself became a forum for not only exchanging experiences and ideas, but also generating new ones together. The women who attended were Belinda, Gretel, Freya, Jan, Jane, Julie, Marty and Nicola, as well as myself.



Figure 4.86 “Wild Dog Creek”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.87 “The lolly tree”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.88 “Wild apples”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.89 “Gathering at Wild Dog”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

I sought permission from participants, which was granted, to have the dinner party focus group video recorded so I would have an accurate record of the dialogue. I hung the relevant artworks on the walls in my studio and cooked a feast of vegetarian food. When everyone was present, seated with plenty to eat, we began a conversation with the intention of sharing experiences in response to the question “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?”

The conversation lasted for approximately two hours with the participants engaged and interested in sharing and responding to each other’s comments, and we finished the evening with Nicola singing the song she had written in response to my painting.

I transcribed the video word for word, and then used the transcription, and the notes I took when I reviewed the video images noting gestures, interactions and body language, to create a story about what I saw in the focus group dinner party conversation. This writing became part of the source documents for this research. Significant excerpts from the dinner party are included in the following

chapters that help illustrate the themes that were generated in this inquiry.

Preparing the autoethnographic account of the research

During the next phase of the research, I compiled a 100,000 word autoethnographic narrative that told the story of my research journey. This document contained images of art work, quotes from my journals, my musings over the ideas of various authors I had been reading, stories of my interactions with family, friends, students and colleagues, interviews with the research participants, and the story of the dinner party focus group.

I attempted to create a narrative that included all these interacting elements within a larger story. My intention was to reveal the process of the research unfolding, my own experiences and what I felt were the significant influences in the context of my life. These influences included the literature I read, the impact of changing personal relationships, significant conversations and interactions during the research,



Figure 4.90 “Summer at Wild Dog”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 4.92 “Wild Dog Valley”. Carla van Laar, 2015.

Figure 4.93 “Wild Dog Creek after the rain”. Carla van Laar, 2015.

Figure 4.94 “Wild Dog dam”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

being in different environments, working in various contexts, and my painting.

My original intention was to present my thesis as an illustrated autoethnographic text. While my original narrative included rich descriptions of my experience of conducting this non-conventional, emergent, art based inquiry, it did not make explicit the main threads or themes that went to answering the research question. This understanding marked a significant shifting point in the research process. In consultation with my supervisor, my next major decision was to treat the 100,000 word narrative and all of my paintings as the source material for a further analysis, and to continue working with the intention to make the thesis meaningful for the reader.

Ongoing painting and exhibitions

During my engagement in this research I have travelled within Australia and internationally to participate in lecturing, conferences, festivals, exhibitions, retreats and visits with friends and family. These settings have inspired me in my painting and I

presented six further collections of my artwork for exhibition in my own gallery space in Brunswick, Melbourne, where I live. Hundreds of people have attended these exhibitions and responded informally in person and via the internet, offering me additional information related to the topic of this inquiry. My ongoing painting and exhibiting practice provided me with opportunities to continue exploring and expressing the research themes as an interactive and iterative process throughout the inquiry.

The exhibition, “In My Nature” (figures 4.22 – 4.32), featured artworks painted in oil on canvas during visits to Northern New South Wales among luscious garden, coastal and national park environments. I became very interested in the negative spaces between objects, the shapes created by the light pushing through foliage, and the subtle dance of plants, rocks, dirt, sky and light as they interacted with one another. I experienced a heightened awareness of relationship, connection and inter-relatedness between the parts that make up a whole. I felt that by focusing on the nature outside myself I was

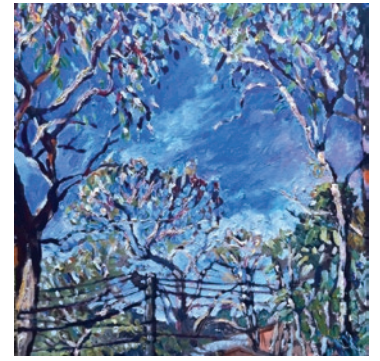


Figure 4.95 "Apollo Bay from Nicola and Garth's place". Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.96 "Crow trees". Carla van Laar, 2015.

Figure 4.97 "Apollo Bay bushes". Carla van Laar, 2015.

Figure 4.98 "View from Josie's balcony". Carla van Laar, 2015.



Figure 4.28 "Light pushing through". Carla van Laar, 2012.



Figure 4.99 “Bali atmosphere”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.100 “Bedside companions”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.101 “The broader field”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.102 “View from Wombat Hill”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

reconnecting with the nature within myself, one of creativity and organic growth.

The resulting artworks became representations of being present with my subject matter through first hand experiencing, and when I exhibited these artworks for others to see, we engaged in seeing them together. There are four collections in this series, “In My Nature” (figures 4.22 – 4.32), “Inhabited” (figures 4.33 – 4.53), “Some Small Matters” (figures 4.54 – 4.66), and “Meeting Places” (figures 4.67 – 4.90).

The early artworks in these series show the transition I made as I began the artworks by painting from life and later worked into them in the studio. I then began limiting my art making sessions to the time frame I had to engage in painting while in direct encounter with the subject. As I continued engaging in painting from life, I moved to using chalks, ink and acrylic on textured paper as I found these materials to be more portable and the quicker drying time enabled me to make the art works in the limited timeframe I had for each sitting.

During this phase of the research, I was simultaneously writing the autoethnographic

stories, and, on reflection, the qualities of looseness, immediacy and vulnerability are shared by the visual paintings and the written stories I created at the time. I next moved to working with my source material using the MIECAT processes to tease out the threads of meaning. I began examining the stories close up, making sense of the meanings embedded in my data, and connecting with the values woven through the inquiry. Again, the artworks reflect these processes of looking closely at what was in front of my eyes, appreciating living, dynamic and organic forms. These visual themes relate to the methodology as I have described it in the previous chapter, and findings that were emerging, as I will describe in the following chapters.

Thematic analysis of the autoethnographic account using key words and clustering

I used a MIECAT informed process (Lett, 2011) to work with and identify the themes that wove through the autoethnographic narrative. The narrative included dozens of stories about the research process and my



Figure 4.103 "Bernie's place". Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.104 "Tower Hill". Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.105 "Tree view". Carla van Laar, 2016.

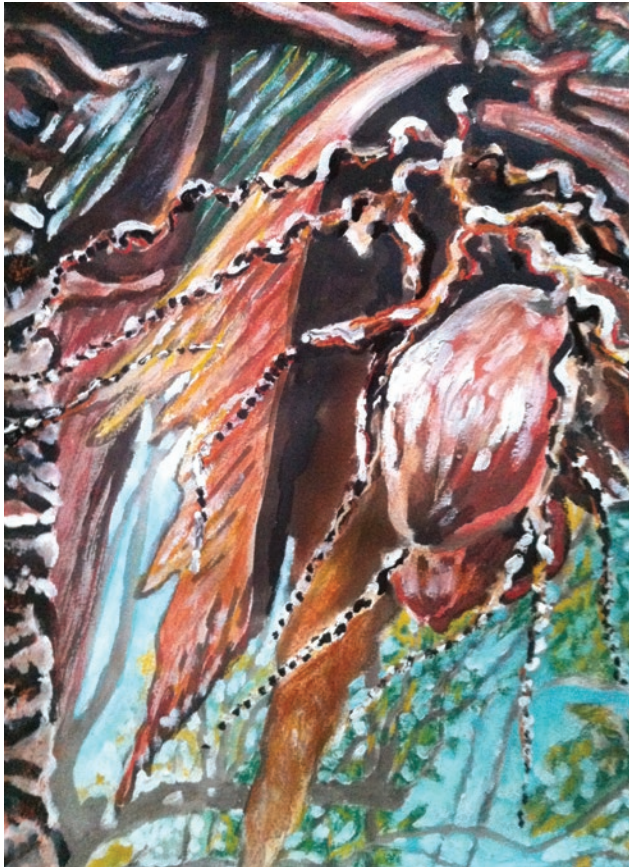


Figure 4.72 "Talking to the coconuts". Carla van Laar, 2014.

life experiences that seemed related or influential, even if I was unsure at the time, of the connection or meaning. The stories included conversations I had throughout the process with my friend Jane, my mother Marty and my son Henry. There were stories about each of the participant interviews, stories about painting my artwork, stories about exhibiting, stories about encountering ideas in the literature, stories about visiting exhibitions, stories about travelling, meeting people and places, stories about conversations as a student in supervision and as a lecturer with my students, the story of the focus group dinner party, and stories about my ethical, emotional and relational dilemmas throughout the process.

I printed out the entire text and read through each story individually. I used coloured markers to highlight key words throughout each story, and I colour-coded the highlighting, using a different colour for words that appeared connected – for example, I might highlight the words “excitement”, “joyful”, and “sorrow” in the same colour because they are all emotions, and then highlight the words “paint”,



Figure 4.106 “Thurra River grasses”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.107 “Mouth of the river”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

Figure 4.108 “Thurra River under the bridge”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

“arranging” and “free-form knitting” in another colour because they are all creative processes.

Once I had colour coded the key words from a story, I created lists of the keywords grouped by colour, or connection. Each story produced between eight and sixteen lists of related key words. Substantially long lists of related key words indicated a topic that would in all likelihood be developed into a theme. For example, one list from the story about painting Laura May included these words:

Aunty

Great-grandmother

You

I

Lady

Children

Grandma

Matriarch

Family

Mum

Generation to generation

Widowed

Maid

Daughter

Grandmother

Girls

Descendants

Mum

Family

Ancestors

Woman

Women's

Laura May

Family

Mother

Baby

Mother's milk

Part of me



Figure 4.109 "Under the tarpaulin". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.110 "Dune walk". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.111 "Campsite still life". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.112 "Nature's window". Carla van Laar, 2017.



Figure 4.91 Generating themes from the source material, 2015.

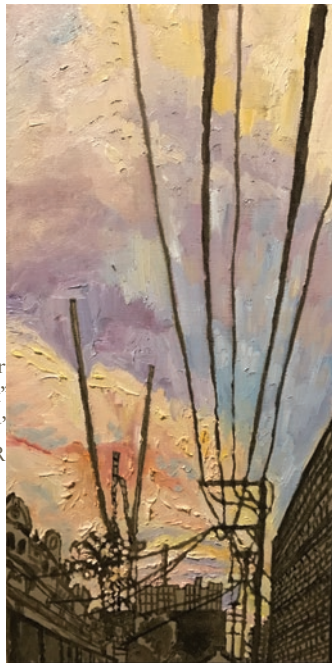


Figure 4.114 "Urban atmosphere". Car

Figure 4.115 "Shifting skies Victoria St'

Figure 4.116 "Pot plant in the window'

Figure 4.117 "Looking down Sydney R



Once I had created the lists for a story, I would re-read the lists several times and sit with the relationship between the words. I would then title the list of key words by giving it a summary sentence.

For example, for the list above, I titled it, *"Mother's mother's mother's milk is part of me."*

When I had completed this process of selecting, handling and grouping keywords, creating, naming and summarising themes of each story, I then wrote the titles of each list on to butcher's paper and cut them into strips so that each title was on a separate strip. There were 83 strips of paper. I laid them out on my studio floor and started to group them into clusters, again, working to place related themes together. I continued arranging and rearranging the pieces of paper into clusters of titles until I felt satisfied that the clusters contained meaningful related groupings that represented the themes that were woven throughout the stories of the research process.

In a supervision meeting with Jan, we worked together to look at the themes that had been generated. We gave each cluster a name based on

its overall content. For example, the title of the list above became part of a final cluster that I named "continuity". The names of these clusters; "women's stories are seen", "art based inquiry", "presence", "embodiment", "change", "continuity", "context", "risk and safety", "relationship", "connection", "co-creation" and "life-enhancement"; represent the themes that emerged in response to the research question, "What can happen when a woman's stories are seen?", and form the basis for the chapters of this thesis.

Iterative analysis of themes, narrative and artworks to refine themes and link them with relevant stories and images in the research source material

The thirteen clusters that emerged from the above process of reduction of the source material became an organising system for going back to the primary source material: my art work and the autoethnographic narrative. I revisited the autoethnographic narrative and extracted text that was organised under the headings that I had generated.

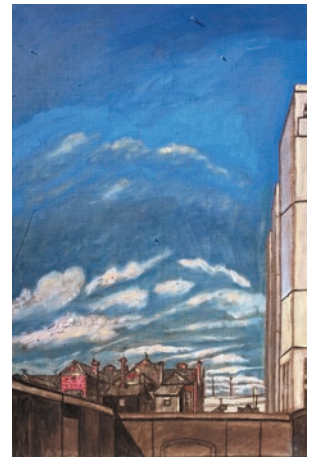


Figure 4.118 "Brunswick backstreet". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.119 "Atmosphere". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.120 "Vaughn's flowers". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.121 "Farewell patch of blue, Albert St". Carla van Laar. Ink and oil on canvas. Brunswick, 2017.

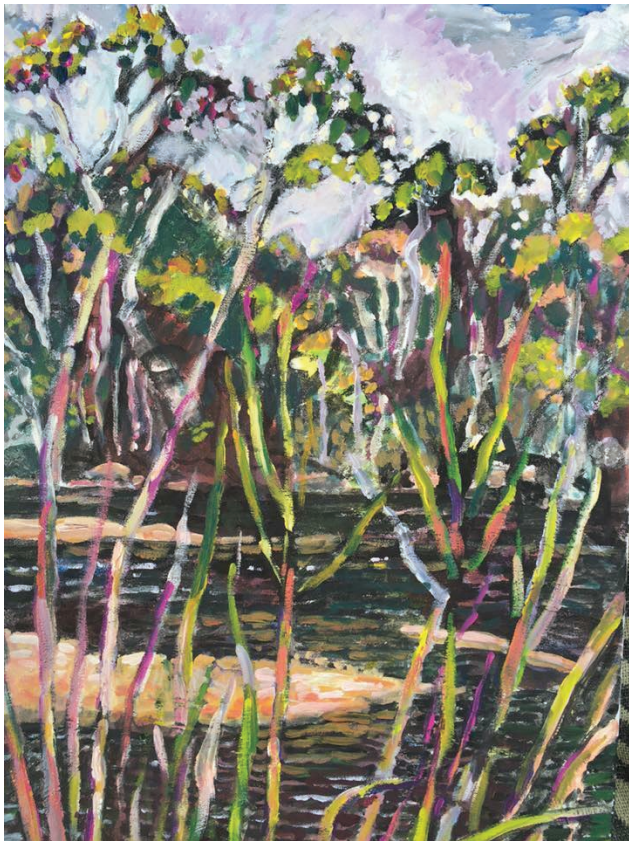


Figure 4.108 "Thurra River under the bridge". Carla van Laar, 2016.

I photographed all of the art works created throughout the project and initially organised them into a sequential order. I looked again at the paintings and selected full and partial images that seemed to relate to the headings described above.

Literature review

The themes generated through the various methods, processes, procedures and analysis informed where to focus my attention in continuing to review the literature. The literature I have included not only places the findings of this research process in context within the current fields of arts therapy, creativity and well-being, and arts based inquiry, but has also served to deepen my understanding of the themes.

As my painting practice continued to develop, I maintained painting from life, in living environments, using a combination of pastels, ink and acrylic paint on canvas. I started working on bigger canvases that required more of me physically, as I moved around the large canvases making sweeping gestures with my brushes. The locations I chose to paint in became more remote. I expended significant time and energy



Figure 4.122 "Bedroom blossoms". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.123 "Brunswick backyard 1". Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.124 "Brunswick backyard 2". Carla van Laar, 2017

to hike to these locations carrying my paints and canvas. During this cycle of art as inquiry I began by exploring living environments, and choosing places where I felt a strong sense of

connection. After transporting the materials and setting up, I would attune with the place using all of my senses, with, of course, an emphasis on seeing. The gestures I made



Figure 4.113 Painting "Tree view" in situ at Croajingalong National Park, 2016.



Figure 4.125 “Roses with gum leaves”. Carla van Laar, 2017.

Figure 4.126 “Wilkinson St.”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.127 “Along the train line”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.128 “Get well posie”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

in applying paint embodied my responses to the environment, creating representations that expressed the dynamic relationship between myself and the living world (figures 4.92 – 4.112).

The parallel processes that were occurring during this phase of the research project involved me looking to the broader field of literature in relation to the findings that I was developing from the autoethnographic text. I was engaged in a process of writing as inquiry (L. Richardson, 2000), as I developed the thesis chapters, as well as being in dialogue with the literature. I felt that through my art making and writing this document I was starting to locate myself within a broader landscape. The visual content of these artworks (figures 4.92 – 4.112) is evidence of my looking to the distance, to broader horizons, and birds’ eye perspectives. I was fascinated with the ‘lay of the land’, and all of these perspectives were resonant with the written findings of this developing document. My presence is implied in these artefacts as an embodied, interacting subject in relationship with my context, sensing, responding and creating.

Writing as inquiry and preparation of the thesis

The process of writing the thesis of the “Seeing her stories” project co-occurred in parallel with the art making all throughout the inquiry, and in the context of my broader life. I have described throughout this section how these processes reflected, interwove with, and influenced each other.

I decided to present the thesis in a book format that reflects my interest in art making and art based inquiry. The format is inspired by exhibition catalogues that I have found enticing and engaging, particularly “Monet’s Garden”, the catalogue from the Melbourne exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria (Mathieu & Matthiesson, 2013). Like that catalogue, I use images and text that interact to communicate the unique process, personal journey and significant findings of this research. The process of compiling the final art product has refined and consolidated my learning through the completion of a satisfying creative product, and starts a new cycle of a woman’s stories being seen.

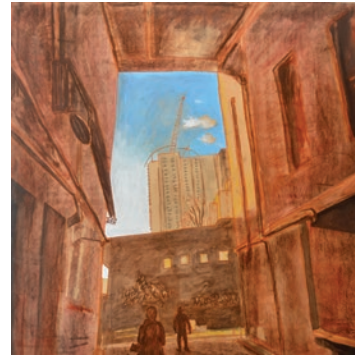


Figure 4.129 "Bye bye backstreets". Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.130 "North from building 51". Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.131 "Unsung space RMIT". Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.132 "Beside the baths 2018". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 4.134
"West off Union".
Carla van Laar,
2018.

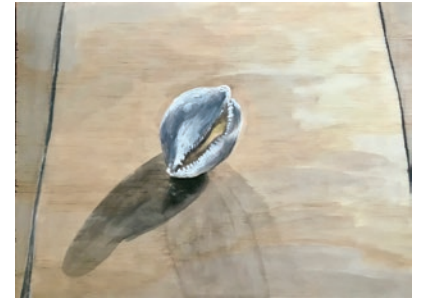


Figure 4.133 “Looking up”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.134 “West off Union”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.135 “Mentawai moments 1”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.136 “Mentawai moments 2”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

As L. Richardson (2000) highlights, while the finished text is a way of showing and telling what has come to be known, the processes of creating the text, the actual methods of writing, are “creative analytical practices” (p. 9), and cycles of inquiry.

The methods I used in my writing included journaling my lived experience, taking notes during interviews with the co-inquirers, writing autoethnographic stories based on the source material of journals and notes, selecting the most relevant parts of the stories and clustering them where they shared common threads of meaning, dialoguing with the literature through writing, identifying key themes of the chapters, and finally writing, rewriting and editing the chapters.

As L. Richardson (2000) says, “Writing stories can situate your work in contexts, tying what can be a lonely and seemingly separative task to the ebbs and flows of your life, yourself” (p. 943). The various approaches to writing that I used supported me to make meaningful choices about inclusion and exclusion for coherence, to respond to ethical dilemmas arising, and hopefully to create a piece

that is aesthetically engaging, has clarity, and is able to communicate directly to the reader. Multiple stories through journaling, descriptions of interviews and the like have allowed me to become intimately connected with the content of the inquiry. Through the creative analytic practices of gathering together, weaving, crafting and rendering the narrative of this thesis, I have made conceptual and artistic links, come to understand things in greater depth, and become attuned to subtle discursive nuances. The process of writing has been one of learning along the way, and I realise as I finish writing even this one paragraph, that I know more than I did when I started writing it.

My art making practice co-existed with my writing during this thesis production phase of the inquiry. I found myself back in the city, and I adapted my art making practice to paint from life and study the living world in my day to day urban environment. In these artworks (figures 4.114 – 4.134) the methods I repeatedly engaged with begin with being inspired by the familiar, dialoguing with my surroundings, appreciating the beauty of the here and now moment and attending to what is present through painting, in

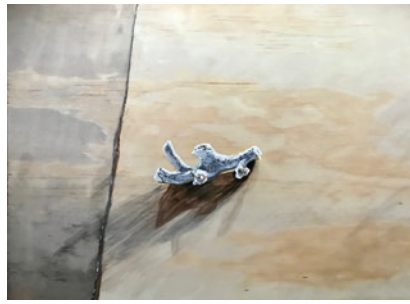


Figure 4.137 "Mentawai moments 3". Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.138 "Mentawai moments 4". Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.139 "Mentawai moments 5". Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 4.144
"Over the Inlet"
Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 4.140 “Mentawai moments 6”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.141 “Invy calling”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.142 “Home time”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.143 “In the flow”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

what I experienced as a meditative and connecting process. On exhibiting the resulting artworks in my studio, and other spaces that I describe in the final chapter, opportunities were once again created for seeing my stories together with others, and through this I established the “art sitting project” to enable my stories to be seen in other people’s own environments. The art sitting project involved posting photos of my artworks online and inviting friends to come and collect an artwork to borrow for a time. They were invited to take the artwork home or to their workplace, and then post photos online of the artwork hanging in their chosen environment, along with comments about what it was like to have the artwork in their space. This activity was not part of generating the themes of this research, but an iterative way of engaging in art based dialogue with others as I wrote.

During this phase of the inquiry, I was working on consolidating the text of the chapters, focusing

on word reduction, clarification and structure, working and reworking the now very familiar content, considering the implications of my findings, and immersed in my research on a day-to-day basis. In my choice of art materials, I was drawn to using more classical painting materials, thick timber stretchers, textured linen, wooden boards, the vibrant colours of rich oil paint, and the differing textures of mixed media including ink, house paint and charcoal. The choice of more refined art materials reflected my current work of refining the written thesis. The subject matter of the artworks painted during this process reflects daily intimacy and acquaintance with my immediate surroundings, and the interaction between the constructed, domestic and organic worlds of urban living (figures 4.114 – 4.134). Simultaneously, I had regular escapes to remote and coastal environments to restore my equilibrium through connection with the organic, spacious, living world (figures 4.135 – 4.147). The foci



Figure 4.144 “Over the Inlet”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.145 “Inlet dreaming”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 4.146 “Banksia nut”. Carla van Laar, 2019.

Figure 4.147 “Bridge to Thurra”. Carla van Laar, 2019.

in my artworks, of the contrast and relationship between constructed and living surroundings, is resonant with the stage of consolidating how to present the organic process of the inquiry within an acceptable doctoral framework.

The paintings here appear, to me, to represent the completing of a cycle, a journey of inquiry that I have been on for quite a long time that began with the painting of the road. In these artworks I see my story, and have a sense of “coming home”.

The following chapters provide a detailed account of the approximations to meaning that form the findings of this inquiry into what can happen when a woman’s stories are seen. The threads of meaning that were teased out during the activities I have described in this methods section form the themes of the coming chapters.

In the next chapter I start with the themes that occur in the actual moment of seeing her stories: *presence and embodiment*. I then explore how *context*

has an influence on our seeing experiences, and the impact this can have on *risk and safety* in seeing her stories. From there, I move on to exploring ripple effects that flow on from the initial seeing her stories experiences, first our heightened awarenesses of *change and continuity*, and then the meanings we make about *relationship, connection and co-creation* through our seeing her stories together. Following on from these chapters, I present the ways in which, for myself and the participants, our seeing her stories experiences, and the ripple effects of seeing, were *life enhancing* for us, followed by a synthesis and *implications* for the field of art therapy.