

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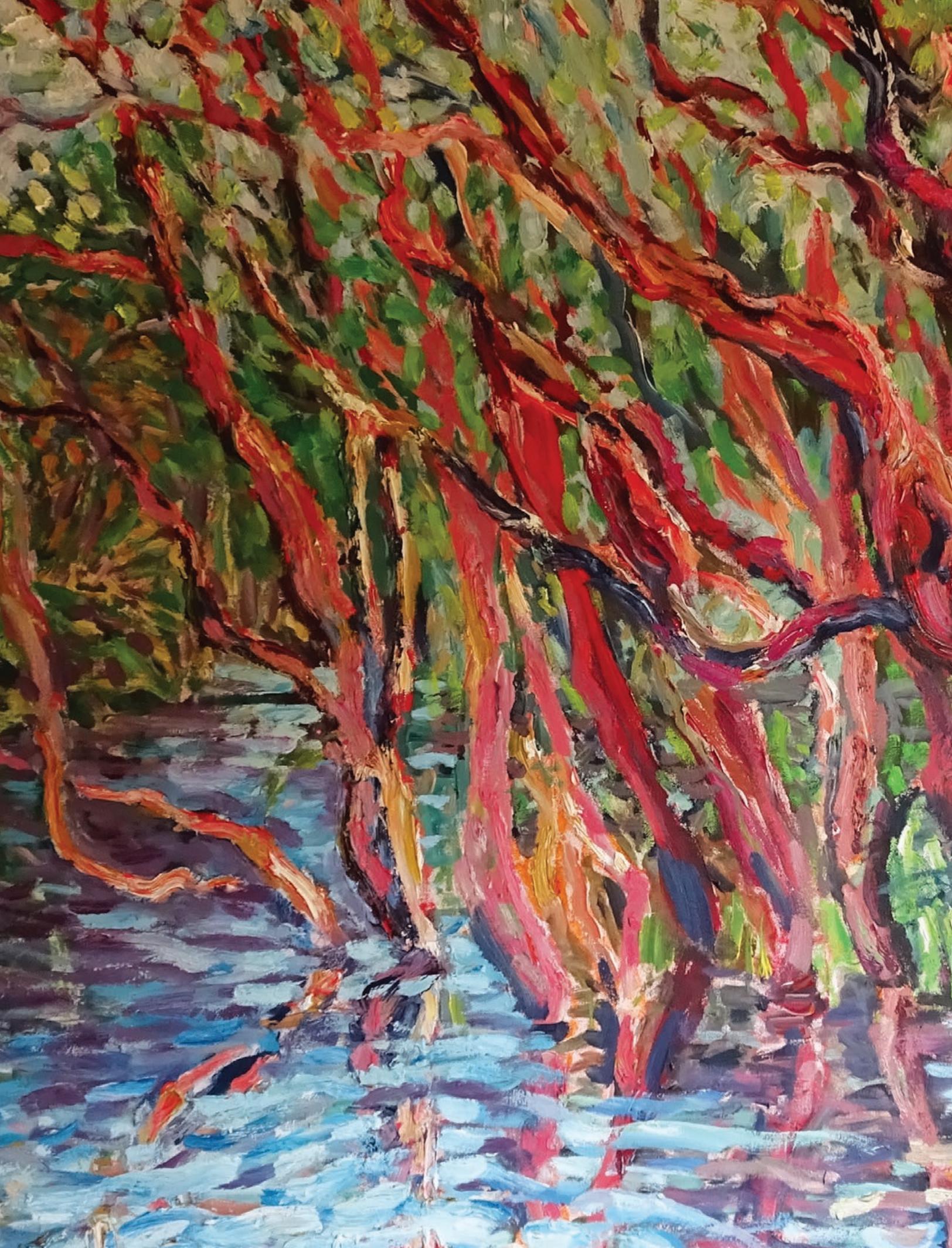
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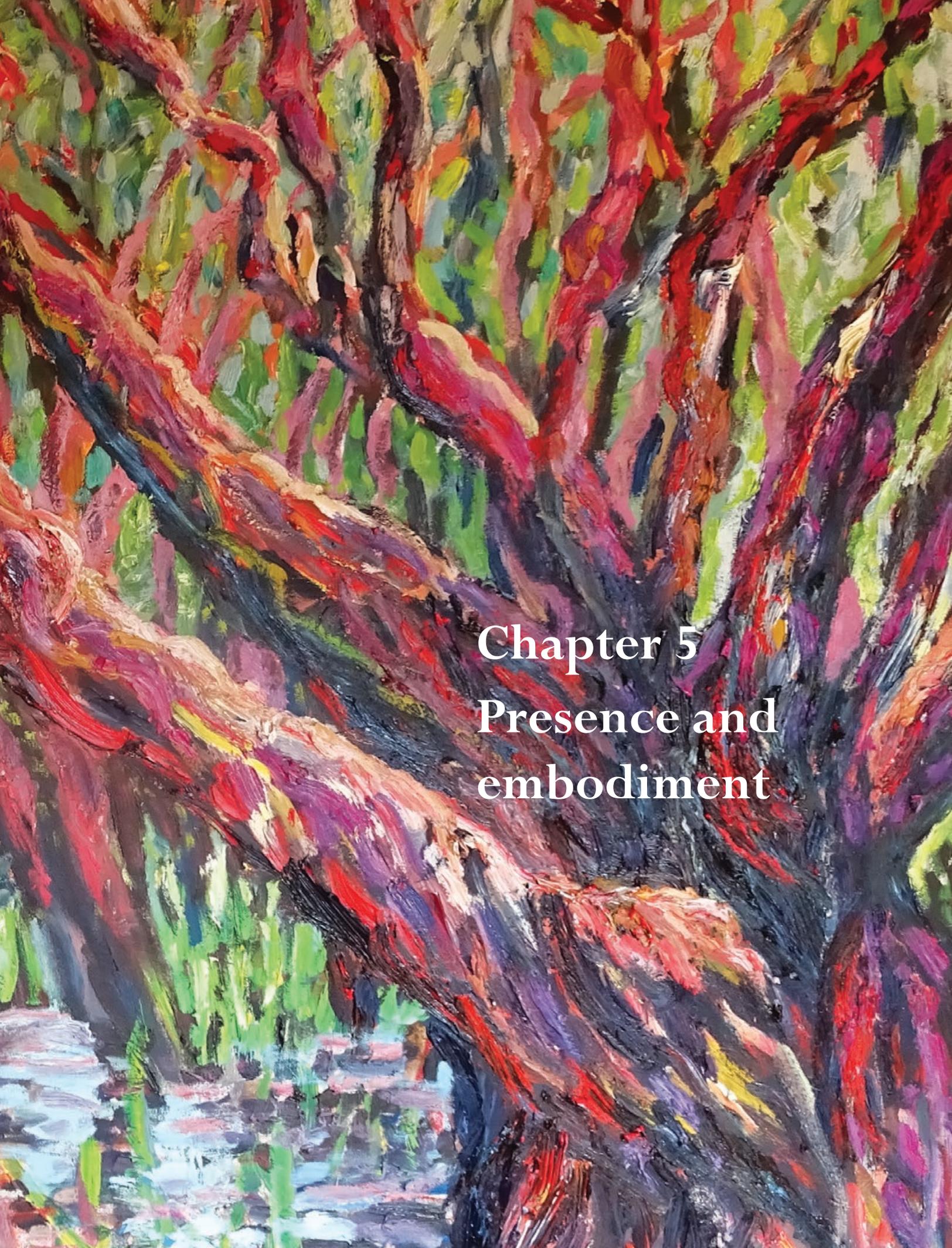
What can happen when a woman's stories are seen?

Findings section

The following five chapters present the findings of this art based inquiry into “Seeing her stories”. The chapter titles reflect the themes that were developed by working with the source material. I begin by discussing “Presence and Embodiment”, focusing on lived experiencing in the moment. From there I move into considering “Context, Risk and Safety”, and how experiences of these are intertwined with the ways in which we see art works. In the next chapter, I look at “Change and Continuity” in our seeing experiences, examining things that occurred over time as ripple effects of our seeing art works. I then present illustrations of “Relationship, Connection and Co-creation” that transpired across the life of this research. After these chapters, I summarise the “Life Enhancing” qualities that were experienced by myself and the participants in the “Seeing her stories” inquiry.

Each chapter begins with artwork, a brief extract from the source material, and a poetic reduction composed using words taken from the stories of this research. In each chapter, I present examples from the source material as well as images of my art work, and weave in discussions with literature, mostly art therapy literature. In each chapter, I consider how my findings draw together, deepen understandings and expand on existing ideas in the field of art therapy. Following the findings chapters, I present an “Implications” chapter in which I look at how my research can inform practice, theory and research in working with the arts for health and wellbeing.



An abstract painting featuring a dense, textured composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes. The color palette is rich and varied, including deep reds, vibrant greens, earthy browns, and dark, almost black tones. The strokes are layered and overlapping, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is one of intense energy and emotional resonance.

Chapter 5
Presence and
embodiment

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

We can have a heightened awareness of our
embodied experience in the present moment,
through which we cultivate presence to ourselves,
others and the material world.

A memory of paddling along has immersed me. Oars break the surface, delving deep and arising, birds soar from the branches above to dip their beaks below and pluck a fish from the murky realm down there and emerge to fly with the little creature up into the tree tops, another domain. The face of the water reflects all of this action in fragments, broken by the rippling that is also a series of wiggling windows into that mysterious world below. We sit in the boat, in the middle of it; co-existing with it and observing it all, depth, mystery, interaction and ever changing, layer upon layer upon layer.

How could I carve up this multi-sensory embodied experience into essences or a map or a theory about knowing? How could I explain this experience to my reader in such a way that they might enter into it and make some meaning that relates to the multi-layered, interactive and changing world of this research?

Only by inviting you in with images and language that evoke the experience, and relying on your abilities to see, read and imagine.

– Reflections from my research journal in 2012

Attention to careful observation

Extended amounts of time

Examine and unpack moments

Focused, meditative attention

Spending time with, carefully observing

Presence in the moment

Internal processing

Revealing and entering inner worlds

Appreciation of coming from, and being, women

A spectrum of emotions are experienced

We become enlivened with embodied energy

Being safe, sustained and nurtured

Gentle movement

Wild sensual desire

Warmth and light

The body explores and expresses

Embodied sensory experience

Presence and embodiment in “Seeing her stories”

This chapter presents presence and embodiment as themes that were generated in response to the research question, “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?” I begin with a brief overview of how presence and embodiment have been written about in the literature, and then move into detailed descriptions and discussion of what I found in this inquiry. I illustrate how seeing is a sense activity that makes us aware of the present moment and connects us with our embodied experiencing in the following ways:

Presence is embodied – experiential and multi-modal.

The presence of artwork makes us aware of our embodiment – we “come to our senses”.

Embodied presence in seeing artworks includes and enables intention, imagination and improvisation.

We relate to and communicate our seeing in embodied ways.

Artwork has a presence and embodies meanings that we connect with and through.

Embodied, multi-modal knowing is present in the art-making process.

Artworks can re-embody presence to the material world.

Presence is embodied: Experiential and multi-modal

Without a sense of the body, of sensation and feeling, we lose connection to what is around and within us, to the immediate and present moment of our lives.

(Tufnell and Crickmay, 2004, p. 3)

Presence and embodiment have emerged as recurring threads in the descriptions by myself and the participants in the “Seeing her stories” project. I have grouped these two themes together as they are intimately linked. They are both experienced in the actual moment of seeing the artworks. In this way, they illuminate participants’ lived intersubjective experiencing of sensorial awareness in the here and now.

The word “presence” can be used in a variety of ways to express the state of being present with others or in a place, being in close proximity to another, qualities of appearance or demeanour, or even a divine or supernatural influence that is felt and sensed (presence, n.d.). This fluidity of meanings is reflected in the ways that presence was experienced and described by myself and the participants in this inquiry. My interviews with the research participants revealed that their experiences of “presence” or “being present” were important parts of the whole encounter of “Seeing her stories”. These moments of presence in “Seeing her stories” had ripple-on effects that were linked to changes in awareness, perspectives, thoughts, emotions and actions.

Like the word “presence”, the word “embodiment” can be used in a variety of ways. Embodiment can be the act of embodying; the state of being embodied; the thing in which something is embodied; or something that is embodied (n.d. embodiment). These multiple uses of the term are reflected in art therapy literature. In this chapter, I illustrate and explain some ways in which our awareness of embodiment was expanded during this project, some of the complexity and nuances of embodiment, and why this theme has emerged as important within the findings. Throughout the chapter I show how presence and embodiment are experientially and conceptually intertwined in the seeing of artworks.

Tufnell and Crickmay (2004) highlight the relationship between embodied sensing and present moment awareness when they describe “arriving into the body, into the world, becoming present” (p. 3). They highlight that:

It is through the sensuous world of the body, through our eyes, ears, skin, muscles, and organs that we see, feel and respond to all that happens. The body is the ground from which all our knowing of the world begins. It is within our bodies, in our instinctual and sensory responses, that we discover the changing field of what is happening to us. In the rush and pressure of our everyday lives we easily become numbed, cut off from our bodies. (Tufnell & Crickmay, 2004, p. 3)

Presence, as a therapeutic quality, emerged in humanistic psychology in the 1950s through the emphasis and attention given it by Rogers (1980), Perls (1969), Moustakas (1969, 1986) and others, all of whom emphasise “being” as a core value in therapeutic presence.

Since about 1990, art therapy and therapeutic literature has examined presence from perspectives that emphasise phenomenological presence, therapeutic presence, the presence of imagination and improvisation, and the presence that artworks can exert. These perspectives are referred to and dialogued with throughout this discussion. In this chapter I draw on several of these ways of using the notion of presence as they relate to the threads of meaning that emerged through my handling of the source material in “Seeing her stories”.

Art therapists working within a humanistic framework have written about the importance of

therapeutic presence as a state of “being in the context of relationships with others, with images, and with the world” (B. Moon, 2001, p. 189). These perspectives tend to refer to therapeutic presence as something that the therapist cultivates in her attitudes and intentions towards, and relationships with, clients and their artworks. Rogerian qualities of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence are usually associated with the practice of humanistic therapy, and involve the therapist cultivating skills in openness, non-judgement, receptivity, intention and acceptance.

Geller and Greenberg have researched and written expansively on the topic of therapeutic presence (Geller & Greenberg, 2012; Geller & Porges, 2014; Geller 2013; Geller, Greenberg & Watson, 2010; Geller, 2009; Geller & Greenberg, 2002; Greenberg & Geller, 2001). Geller and Greenberg (2002, 2012) have suggested that therapeutic presence is a necessary foundation for the practice of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence in therapy, as well as a facilitator of relational depth (Geller, 2013) and mediator of feeling safe (Geller & Porges, 2014). Geller and Greenberg (2012) have described how cultivating and practising therapeutic presence involves being mindfully attentive of the here and now, a state of being open, receptive, curious, and having attuned responsiveness in relation to others, while being inwardly connected to our own experiencing, and having a larger sense of spaciousness, perception and awareness. They have also articulated the idea of “presence in the body” that is emphasised in experiential approaches to therapy (Geller & Greenberg, 2012, p. 28).

My personal sense of embodiment includes being aware of having a body and bodily sensations, looking after and enjoying my body through things

like exercise, healthy food, rest and touch, using my body to express and communicate through gesture and movement, interacting with people, animals, space, materials and the environment through direct bodily contact. All of these embodied experiences are woven throughout my experiences in the “Seeing her stories” inquiry. In particular, I describe how, during the act of artmaking, I am particularly aware of my embodiment. I manipulate art materials using my body, receive information through my bodily senses, especially my sense of sight, and make sense of things through my embodied intuition, emotions and thought processes. I also describe how I used my embodied understandings to become more attuned and present to the women whose portraits I painted.

The idea of presence was referred to, described and alluded to by the research participants in a range of ways that do not always signify exactly the same thing, but represent fluid, mutable and inconclusive meanings. Although the meanings vary, they all relate to descriptions of being open and receptive, connected to our embodied experiencing, feeling attuned and responsive, and having a sense of expanded perception in ways that Geller and Grenberg (2012) have linked with the qualities of therapeutic presence. The ideas expressed by Tufnell and Crickmay (2004), in which presence and embodiment are intimately linked, resonate with the meanings that emerged in the “Seeing her stories” inquiry. Although we are always embodied, through our experiences of “Seeing her stories”, we became more aware of and connected to the embodied nature of our being in the present moment.

The examples throughout the rest of this chapter demonstrate the connectedness between presence and embodiment; of presence as embodied and of

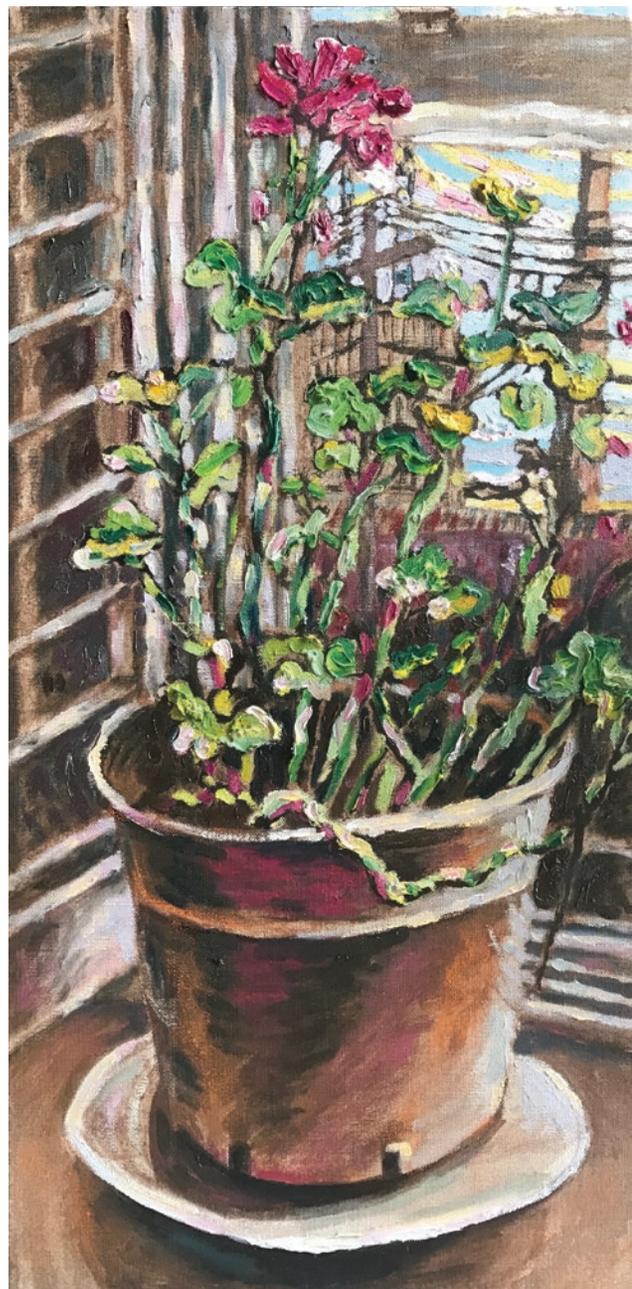


Figure 5.2 “Pot plant in the window”. Carla van Laar, 2017.

This painting about a pot-plant sitting inside on a windowsill, with a view to the outside world beyond, reminds me of the intertwined nature of being present inside our bodies and to what is outside ourselves as well.

embodiment as presence, mutually sculpting and shaping one another (Greenberg & Geller, 2001; Levine, S.K., 2013; Tufnell & Crickmay, 2004).

The presence of artwork makes us aware of our embodiment – we “come to our senses”

In the “Seeing her stories” inquiry, participants – including myself – experienced that paying attention to the artwork before our eyes brought us into greater awareness of the here and now moment.

“I went to the exhibition, and, out of a room full of images, this one resonated, it transported me, like a scent. I was in a zone, and I walked away and thought; what was that about, that connecting, how do I achieve that?”
– Nicola

After the MIECAT exhibition, Nicola spoke about how this image (figure 5.3) leapt out at her, making

her aware of her whole-body experience of seeing in the present moment. When I later visited Nicola, she described her experience of having this painting of a woman on top of a cliff present in her studio space over an extended period of time. Nicola had two young girls then, one who was four and the other just two years old. In Nicola’s verbal description, she linked the themes of presence and embodiment in response to seeing the painting over time.

“It’s changed” she says. “What I saw at your first exhibition, it reminded me of being at Laver’s Hill near Apollo Bay, looking over the ocean, with my guitar on top of the hill, being in my body completely, hearing the birds, smelling the grass. The painting took me to that moment.”



Figure 5.3 “Woman on top of the cliff” – first detail. Carla van Laar, 2008.

Then, after, since then, I have subsequently realised I'm not always in my body. It was like a portal reminding me of that meditative state. Just actually being clear and uncluttered.

And then, when I had it on my walls and lived with it, I saw it as a darker painting. I wrote a song in response, called "Be", about being present, in your body, and looking into dark places. It was connected to conversations I'd had with you, about tackling your demons. The song was a response to the visual and the conversation."

My follow-up conversation with Nicola provides an illustration of ripple effects on the theme of embodiment that first emerged for her in her encounter with the image of the woman on top of the cliff (figure 5.3). In this follow-up conversation, Nicola highlights how much has changed in her life since our earlier conversations. It is fascinating for us to return together to the theme of embodiment as it has evolved and changed over this passage of time.

She starts by explaining that in the time between interviews she has taken up the practice of meditation, and this has been a major change in her experience of both presence and embodiment:

"Since I've started to be a meditator it has changed my experience of being in my body. It used to be art, music, was my way of being in my body and connection with the universe."

Nicola's descriptions of being more "in" her body are strongly linked to her feeling aware and receptive to sensory information, what is occurring in the present moment and her capacity to be more fully attentive, attuned and present for her children. She expresses her conviction that her capacity for

embodied presence is directly linked to the health and well-being of her children and their family.

She describes in more detail what it is like when she feels more "in" her body:

"When I am "in" I am connected, grounded, clear, have access to all my senses. There are no thoughts racing through my head; I can sit calmly without having questions and thoughts going through my head, I am just here. I have access to my full energy system. I literally feel heavier and slowed down. It's like my lens is bigger, hearing sounds, listening to my heart. When I am fully present in my body I have access to my full physical self. I can be more present with you."

Cultivating awareness of presence in the here and now and feeling connected to embodied experiencing share common threads with many ancient wisdom traditions. Art therapists have explored these commonalities, and somatic experiencing approaches are particularly interested in how art based processes can facilitate mindful and regulatory experiencing.

Peter Levine (1997) developed the somatic experiencing approach to therapy, with a particular interest in alleviating the long lasting effects that trauma can have by using body based and present moment awareness methods. This approach was initially radically different from psychological and talking therapy, and is now gaining momentum as a benchmark for practice in responding to trauma. (Levine, P.A., 2012a; Levine, P.A., 2012b; Levine, P.A., 2015; Levine and Kline, 2014; Malchiodi, 2008, 2014; van der Kolk, 2014). Levine's approach is supported by increasingly widespread interest in neurobiological evidence, and embracing of the "bottom up" approach, in which neural structures

are recognised as dynamic and shaped by embodied experience (Doidge, 2008; Doidge, 2016).

P. A. Levine (2015) explains the relationship that somatic experiencing (SE) shares with embodied wisdom traditions and other Western methods that draw from these, saying:

SE shares this focus on internal awareness with traditional methods of meditative movement, such as Yoga, T'ai Chi and Qigong, as well as many forms of seated meditation (Schmalzl et al., 2014). Less well-known Western-grown therapeutic ("Somatic") systems such as the Alexander Technique (Stuart, 2013), the Feldenkrais method (Feldenkrais, 2005), and Continuum (Conrad-Da'oud and Hunt, 2007), also use this general approach. (Levine, P.A., 2015, p. 93)

Gendlin's (1981, 1996) Mind-body Focusing method can be added to this list.

Understanding seeing as a sense activity can assist in understanding how awareness of presence and embodiment emerged as key findings in relationship to what can happen when a woman's stories were seen in this inquiry. P. A. Levine (2015) highlights how seeing is used therapeutically as an orienting sense activity in a somatic experiencing session with a client who starts to experience distressing physical symptoms during a session where he is recounting the events immediately prior to his near-tragic car accident;

Me: (in a calm voice) It's fine, we just went a bit too quickly. Look around the room a bit, tell me three things that you see.

Simon: (focusing on the room, his voice calmer and slower) OK...I see the walls... your picture there... the window... (Levine, P. A., 2015, p. 93)

Levine (2015) is illustrating how drawing attention to visual sensory information about the environment and objects in it, including images, can be a resourcing experience for the seeing person that has immediate embodied effects such as calming and lessening the impact of frightening memories.

This insight resonates with Nicola's descriptions of the links between seeing my painting of the woman on the cliff, the resonance she felt about being reminded what it was like when she feels connected and "in" her body, and the ripple effects she experienced following this awareness by practising meditation and becoming more present with her children. Her reports that by doing this she was able to "rewire" the whole family are in keeping with the interpersonal neurobiological perspectives of Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015), and also with P. A. Levine's (2015) somatic experiencing rationale.

I will provide some examples of how somatic experiencing and art therapy approaches can be easily combined in practice later, in the "Implications" chapter.

Embodied presence in seeing artworks includes and enables intention, imagination and improvisation

Here again is the first artwork of the research.



Figure 5.4 “The road to Coronet Bay”. Carla van Laar, 2008.

Now, here is an extract from my story about a supervision session with Warren Lett. This one is our second meeting, after I have accepted his invitation to go home and paint. I have completed the painting of the road and brought it in, rolled into a tube, to show Warren. He hasn't asked me about my research, but seems interested to see my painting. He is attentive, not rushed, calm, kind, and curious as he suggests that we look at the painting together to begin our session. We are sharing a moment of presence with my painting of the road.

I unroll my canvas and spread it out for him to see.

“What stands out for you about this painting?” he asks.

“Well, I begin, it looks like a long road, I don't know where it's going, but I'm driving the car”.

“Mmmmm”, he nods. “When I look at this I feel as though the elements in the painting are all collaged together, separate parts, not quite fully connected”.

I'm surprised by this comment, and look at my picture differently.

In the short space between looking at the image, sharing my own response, and then hearing Warren's comments, things have changed. Noticing what is there for myself, in the here and now, from moment to moment, paying careful attention, over time, is an example of practising presence. Noticing changes in my here and now experience, over time, and attending to these can open me up to receiving important information in the here and now, directly through heightened awareness and presence to my lived moment to moment experiencing. Intentionally looking at the painting together with Warren, and experiencing his presence with both me and my artwork, amplified my interest in my own seeing in the present moment. His presence influenced how I saw my own artwork in the shared here and now.

Performance artist Marina Abramovic emphasised the power of her own embodied presence in the present moment when she installed herself to sit for 700 hours in the New York Museum of Modern Art in her performance "The Artist is Present" (Abramovic & Biesenbach, 2010). She invited museum goers to sit opposite her during this time, and made the practice of being present with another art form in itself. She said,

It was a big base of my performance art... the idea of here and now ... not something that's happening in the past or the future. It's always happening. It's always now.... Only what matters is the present – Marina Abramovic. (Groves, 2015, para. 12)

Betensky's (2001) influential approach emphasises a phenomenological "return to the things themselves" (p. 121) through the vital act of seeing. For Betensky (2001), learning to suspend her prior judgements

and pre-conceptions about what she should see, and training "my eyes to look with openness and with intention at the art object" (p. 122) are linked to being fully present with the seeing experience in the here and now sensing moment.

This kind of therapeutic presence is in keeping with my description of the initial part of my supervision encounter with Warren, where, in our seeing of my painting together, I am affected by being in his presence, and, in turn, feel supported and enabled by his presentness with me and my here and now dilemmas.

Drawing inspiration from the philosophical works of Husserl (1913/1976) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), and in keeping with the attitude of painter Claude Monet, Betensky (2001) stresses the importance of phenomena and perception. This phenomenological attitude is at the core of her art therapy practice as she asks over and over in various ways, "What do you see?" She also at times offers her own perceptions with the intention of moving away from descriptions of what is seen in the content of artworks, and towards phenomenological descriptions of "structural properties and the relationships among them" (p. 130).

Fenner (2013) also encourages us to take the time to really see what has been made, rather than rely on what we imagine or desire the work to be. Similarly to Betensky (2001), she describes cultivating her capacity for "receptive looking... that requires a kind of stillness, a certain openness, and a preparedness to halt the part of my mind that tries to make sense of things... Let the image impress itself upon me" (Byrne, 2014, p. 220).

Looking again to the story of my meeting with Warren, we share a similar kind of seeing together. In my description of our being present with my artwork together through our visual sensing and attention to our inner responses, we can see Warren doing something that is similar to Betensky's phenomenological seeing. He offers an invitational question to me about my artwork, I comment about the content, and then he offers his perceptions of my artwork's structural properties, which becomes a moment of seeing differently for me.

The exchange between Warren and myself demonstrates how the kind of interpersonal humanistic presence that is often described as therapeutic presence – but does not necessarily occur only in therapy – can be part of enabling a shared intentional phenomenological presence in seeing artwork, in this case, one of my visual stories. This simple dialogue, in subtle and powerful ways, was a significant catalyst for the explorations that were yet to unfold, an enabler of as yet unimagined possibilities, experiences, and knowings. Warren's presence to my image and his description of it changed my own experience of how I saw the image. Being present to that change gave me a sense of curiosity and momentum. Remaining present to my sensations directed energy to the next phase of the project, attending to my felt urge to paint another picture, and imagining what this might be – the image out of the side window.

Nicola described how her original seeing of my painting facilitated her imagining and producing a song in response.

Nicola looks as though, as she's talking, she's just realised something vital.

"Then, through thought, and creative process, the action of song writing, I clarified my thoughts through the process. What was sub-conscious was sculpted into something for others, solidifying what my thoughts were. Then I could live it."

Here are the lyrics from Nicola's song, "Be".

*"... so wipe those eyes
there are choices to come
you can't be standing freely
till you've seen what has been done*

*So wipe those eyes
there are choices to come
when you ask the questions
there'll be thunder to come... "*

She looks at me intensely and continues,

"And these images in the song came from the painting and the canvas..."

I'd been cooking it around in me for months, festering it, and then this song just came to me and I wrote it."

McNiff (1992) invites us to centralise imagination in our art therapy values, language and methods. He demonstrates and advocates for present moment practices such as active imagination, dialoguing with images, and using artistic expressions in responding to images as poetic and imaginative ways of engaging with artworks. Like Linnell (2010), Moreno (1947) and Tamboukou (2011), he is interested in narratives and practices that occur in the moment and to the moment, incomplete plots and flexible meanings.

Catherine Hyland Moon (2002) has likewise promoted the use of our imaginative, poetic and aesthetic sensibilities as ways of dialoguing with clients

in art therapy by creating our own art in response to witnessing theirs. Fish (2013) similarly recounts her process of imaginative dialogues with her painting depicting a close up of her own eye, and writes a passage from the voice of the image. Lanham (1998) has been another supporter of “attending to the image through imagination” (p. 54). He reports experiencing “fascination... It has me in its spell... fantasies... I dream about it.” (p. 51).

Hogan (2013a) describes her explorations into inner experiencing and non-psychological territory through collaborations with visual anthropologist, Sarah Pink. They share interests in spatial places that are not limited to the externally traversable, but also interiorities like “emotion, reverie and imagination” (p. 67). Hogan (2013a) links our interior experiences of memory and imagination with how we navigate and move through places and space. She suggests, “If we are interested in what it is to be human, then we should not overlook interior narrative and visions of the past and future” (p. 68).

Hogan’s ideas share some resonance with Nicola’s verbal mapping of the relationships between remaining present with her inner imaginative experiencing, the memories and questions evoked by the image, her creative responding, and the “scaffolding” this creates providing a structure that she can move within in as she becomes more present with her interactions in the more external world of her relationships and life.

McNiff’s (1992) endorsement for creating a therapy of the imagination has inspired and influenced numerous art therapy practitioners, including myself. Lanham (1998) likewise supports an imaginative approach in “attending to art” (p. 48), to “reflect”

and “look where we are pointed” (p. 54) in making art in responding to art, as Nicola did, to explore our relationship with images through our own imaginations in the present moment. Seeing artworks can prompt the making of further artwork, as it did with Nicola, when we are present to imagination as part of seeing experiences. Being present with our imaginations in seeing is part of being present with our whole embodied experiencing (Tufnell and Crickmay, 2004). This can be attended to through present moment invitational questioning such as “What is happening in your imagination right now, as you see this image? Can you imagine making something in response?”

This next small extract from the beginning of the focus group dinner party illustrates a process of becoming present together through our shared attention and experiencing of improvised flute playing while sitting surrounded by images from the “Seeing her stories” project.

The atmosphere is chatty, with me rushing around gathering food, the guests talking and Nicola’s CD ‘Colours’ providing a soundtrack for the gathering, as it provided a soundtrack for my process of painting her throughout the research process.

Once we are all seated and I have welcomed everyone and thanked them for taking the time to be here, travelling distances and coming even in the midst of life events, Belinda accepts my invitation to bring us into the present with her flute.



Figure 5.5 Belinda brings us into presence with her flute, 2010.

It's a moment that we take to become still.



Figure 5.6 Dinner party guests looking around the space while Belinda plays, 2010.

As the final notes fade we take a few deep breaths.

In this illustration, the flute playing assists us to become still after a busy day, to be present in the here and now experiencing moment, and to gather our collective focused attention towards the conversation we are about to engage in – our exploration of the question, “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?” There is a sense of honouring and appreciating each other, the present time and space, and the work we have come together to be part of.

Betensky (2001) stresses the importance of understanding that our seeing experiences are not isolated from our multi-modal sensing; they are holistic experiences. She says “When our eyes see and our ears hear, it is not a function of the eyes or ears

alone; it is the whole body that is conscious of what the eye sees and what the ear hears in the visible/sonorous world” (p. 122). Likewise, she acknowledges emotion as an animator of intentionality, and in our expressions of intentionality. Perhaps, when we were present to this introduction of the evening we attended to the whole collective and also to the meanings that this forming had for us, separately and together.

The pre-intentional phase is a vague state experienced as some pressure generated from an impression, ever so slight, of an unidentified object in the field of vision. The vagueness becomes intentional in the second phase, where it connects with the identified object. It turns meta-intentional in the third phase, when the object is fully perceived and felt as part of one’s existence. (Betensky, 2001, p. 123)

Belinda’s call to presence, with her improvised flute playing during the dinner party, reflects our collaborative movement to something very much in keeping with Betensky’s ideas about movement towards intentionality.

The practice of preparing for and facilitating a sense of being present in the moment has been explored by Geller and Greenburg (2002, 2012). In their research into therapeutic presence, Geller and Greenberg (2002, 2012) developed a working model that includes three emergent domains. These are,

preparing the ground for presence, referring to the pre-session and general life preparation for therapeutic presence. The second domain describes the process of presence, the processes or activities the person is engaged in when being therapeutically present. The third domain

reflects the actual in-session experience of presence. (Geller & Greenberg, 2002, p. 71)

They have highlighted that cultivating presence in our everyday lives is necessary for practicing presence in therapy, and mention that engaging with art is one of the ways of experiencing presence (Greenberg & Geller, 2001).

In looking back to what occurred in the “Seeing her stories” project, and using the lens of presence through which to view the source material, it is possible to see ways in which we prepared the ground for, engaged in the process of, and experienced presence as part of our seeing experiences. Creating time and space, becoming still through Belinda’s flute playing, and coming together to eat, were all part of preparing the ground. In our project, the seeing of her stories was the process we engaged in that facilitated our experiences of presence, in various constellations of seeing during art making, seeing at exhibitions or online, and seeing together. In these encounters, the therapeutic intention of being open to other and attuned to our inner experiencing while “being with and for the client” (Greenberg & Geller, 2001, p. 161) is extended to the ways in which we are with the artworks through our seeing, perhaps ways of being with and for the artwork as well as with each other.

Drawing from my source material, I have suggested that embodied presence in seeing artworks includes and enables intention, imagination and improvisation. I continue to illustrate some of the ways in which this occurred in the following section, and discuss how these qualities of embodied presence in seeing artworks flow through into the ways that we communicate with each other about our seeing in embodied ways.

We relate to and communicate our seeing in embodied ways

“Small dances of gesturing hands and nodding heads are improvised as the women engage in naturally choreographing the shared space” – noted while watching the dinner party video, from my research journal, 2012.

As the inquirer, I noticed the nuances of embodied communication that developed between myself and the participants, and between them with each other. There were times when they used their body gestures in describing their seeing of my artworks, as though their bodies had become inhabited by the image. At other times, we discussed the artworks themselves as embodying particular qualities or energies.

Nicola’s reflections show that her initial encounter with one particular image connected her with a memory of feeling more aware of her embodied presence in the moment. Later, the painting’s presence in her home studio seemed to mirror some challenging self-reflection she was internally processing, an awareness of becoming more present for her children. Seeing the image eventually became linked with the emergence of a song she composed about staying present with important life questions, “Be”, and more connection with a value system that flows into her work. It is clear that Nicola has felt affected by seeing my story in this image, and it has become her story as well as mine.

In re-viewing and reflecting on the artistic exchange between Nicola and myself, I notice that I never felt that Nicola’s responses to my visual stories were in any way an interpretation or judgement about me. She clearly had her own relationship with the artwork. In her description, we can see my art interacting with Nicola’s art. The image and the song

are in artistic and imaginative relationship with each other, in the kind of “ongoing process of creation” that McNiff (1992, p. 66) suggests. He says,

[W]e were meditating on images and allowing them to speak to us. We trusted the images and followed their lead. They expressed the nature of the work. (McNiff, 1992, p. 69)

In looking back to my findings and reflecting on the presence of imagination in seeing her stories, I am drawn to Nicola’s descriptions as examples of dynamic change in seeing with imagination, from one present moment to another. Nicola’s account also provides an illustration of responding to artwork poetically, as McNiff has suggested, through art. She refers to the interactivity between her seeing of my painting, our conversations together and stories that we both read and engaged with, and her song writing.

Although the exchange between Nicola and myself was inter-modal, it resonates with McNiff’s (1992) assertion that “When images interpret one another, every aspect of art therapy is engaged in an ongoing process of creation. Interpretation is revised as compassionate feeling, sensitive perception, and expression of emotions” (p. 66).

Levine, S.K.’s (2013) observations speak to Nicola’s story. He builds on the notion of poetic description and responding in his use of the word “poiesis”. He conceives of art-making as “poietic” acts that are creative, imaginative, and part of our continuous embodied processes of making, responding and becoming, not merely as presentational or reducible self-expression. He says:

[W]e understand who we are through what we do and what we make. Poiesis implies that we shape ourselves by shaping the world. We do not

express a pre-existing and substantial self but form the self continuously through our poietic acts. (Levine, S.K., 2013, p. 23)

Nicola expresses a sensibility to the idea of poiesis when she describes making her art as a way of observing her inner experiencing, and directly links this to realisations about how to work with others in the world.

“Once you’ve observed it, it can become a framework. When you are not conscious of it you can’t live by it. It’s like scaffolding. They are little realisations, different for everyone. Song, community, wherever you work, being in quiet authentic places, you can use them as a tool for working with others.”

Later, when I watch the video of the focus group dinner party, I notice how the presence of food in the dinner party images adds to an awareness of embodiment, as we heartily ladle food on to our plates and eat together while discussing our experiences. It seems to me that attending to our embodiment through the shared act of eating nourishing food together is connected with my intention towards the research participants, and that the social tradition of sitting around a table together helped to stimulate discussion and relating among the women.

As I continued to watch the dinner party video my attention was drawn by the embodied interactions of the women as they moved in the space, towards each other, away from each other, gesturing, mirroring and responding to each other’s posture, emotion, energy and pace.

This small observation partially illustrates how the presence of improvisation was part of what

Figure 5.7
Guests serving
food at the
dinner party
focus group,
2010.



happened when we entered a shared space with the intention of sharing our experiences of seeing her stories together. As a here-and-now practice in which we respond to the present moment in planned ways, improvisation has been linked in arts therapy literature with spontaneity, creativity and health. Perhaps the most influential advocate for improvisation is psychodrama founder, Jacob Moreno (1947). A Morenian perspective values creative improvisation, and our capacity to respond appropriately to new situations, or our capacity to respond uniquely to existing situations, as indicators of wellness.

Improvisation can be seen throughout the “Seeing her stories” inquiry, as illustrated by my story of feeling encouraged by Warren to improvise into my research process, and the improvised conversations and gesturing at the dinner party.

Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) offer their description of what occurs in embodied motion while working with a group of people who are viewing each other’s artwork. They write:

Looking at each person’s My Space image supports the recognition of social loaning of imagery through the mimicking and

mirroring of each other’s actions, gesturing intentions, and symbols is a relational exchange. Within the arts psychotherapy clinic or art studio, in therapy groups or individual work, such repeated sharing experiences support the building of connected and empathic responses across a diverse group of people. (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015, p. 66)

More examples of embodied relational exchanges such as those described by Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) continued throughout the dinner party, and the women started to spontaneously move their bodies in relation to the artworks as well as each other. As the discussion continued throughout the evening, and the women became more relaxed and engaged, something captivating started to happen. We were all obviously intrigued to hear about each other’s experiences of seeing the stories in my art work, as evidenced by the attentive looks towards each speaker, and the questions we began to ask each other.

As we answered each other’s questions, we became more and more animated and gestural in our descriptions. It was as though in the process of seeing the stories that we had received the images into our own bodies and now retold our experiences by embodying the feelings developed through immersion with the images.

Here is an image of Nicola recounting her relationship with the image of the woman on top of the cliff.

“She looked like she could be a woman on the edge”, Nicola says as she raises her arms and gestures, mirroring the woman in the image.

Something has happened here, where, in the process of seeing, Nicola has engaged with the image in such a way that, in this moment, we could say that the image is inhabiting her body, or that through her embodied recounting, that she is inhabiting the image.

Freya spoke about her response to seeing my stories at the online “Seeing her stories” exhibition, and other times she has seen my artworks over the entire course of my life from childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, motherhood and on-going through my 30s and 40s. Here is the extract from my write-up of watching the dinner party video. Julie has been talking about her experience of the road image and Freya is prompted to respond, gesturing as she does.

Julie, I too find something magnetic about the road, I always have. You know, you see pictures and paintings with roads in them, and I’ve travelled literally down many roads, and to me, I’m always wondering, “What’s there?” But this one”, she gestures to the painting of Julie, “looks like it’s nice up there, and this one,” she gestures to the original road, the first painting in the series, “and that one, something’s going to be just over there.” she looks back to me, “I remember, there was a series you did Carla, and there were lots of road pictures,



Figure 5.8 Nicola embodying the painting of the woman on top of the cliff, 2010.



Figure 5.9 Freya embodying the fork in the road with her hands, 2010.



Figure 5.10 Me mirroring Freya making a fork in the road with my hands, 2010.

and there was one that had two ways you could go,” she makes a fork in the road with her hands.

Similarly to Nicola, and even though the image she is mentioning is not physically in the room, it becomes present as Freya makes this embodied gesture to evoke the image into the here and now space. Again, it is as though she has entered the image in her seeing of it, and likewise it has inhabited her body to emerge as this gesture.

“I read a lot into that. And identify with it.”

There is a pensive pause. “Yeah”, I reflect, “I know the image that you are talking about, it’s pathways, there is one about these pathways where I run around, I was running around that park every morning. There is a part where the paths just split,” I’m mirroring Aunty Freya’s hand gestures with my own as I describe the shape of the pathways, “like that. And it was also at the time when I was trying to figure out whether to get divorced. And it was just like this.” I gesture again.

“This is what I mean,” says Aunty Freya, “When I come down and look at your paintings, and I know what is happening in your life. I knew exactly what that was about, that painting. You never said anything, but I always knew that.”

The significance of this exchange that we share through words and body gestures is profound. The layers of embodiment that this example illustrates are multiple, complex and enduring across time and space. The exchange between Aunty Freya and myself at the dinner party is a prime example of how embodied gestural mirroring, and the receptive seeing of this, is a relational exchange such as that described by Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015). The process of working with my source material in this inquiry through arts based, visual and creative methods revealed that relationship was a significant part of what can happen when a woman’s stories are seen, and that this was experienced as life enhancing by participants. These findings, which are the subject of a later chapter, are very much in keeping with the emphasis that Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) place on valuing embodied

things that happen between people when they see artworks and relate together.

My earlier descriptions of maintaining prolonged moment to moment attention and connection to Nicola through painting her portrait sit well with Betensky’s (2001) notions of intentionality in seeing, as I experienced a deepening of connection with Nicola. So do Nicola’s descriptions of living with my painting, where it becomes part of her creative environment and expressions. Both Nicola’s and Aunty Freya’s embodied and emotion-full gesturing as they speak of my paintings illustrate how the images have been perceived and felt by them, to the point where they improvise movements in communicating about the images; the images have become part of their embodied existence.

Artwork has a presence and embodies meanings that we connect with and through

The image of the woman on top of the cliff might illustrate the presence of stillness within the giant rock face and the presence of movement in the clouds. The figure of the woman stands between stillness and movement, present in the moment (figure 5.11”).

Levine, S.K. (2013) agrees with McNiff (2014) about the effect that the artwork can exert. He explains that, “We call this the ‘aesthetic response’ that the work produces in us, the way it ‘touches’ or ‘moves’ us. This is the ‘effective reality’ of the work, the impact that it has upon us” (Levine, S.K., 2013, p. 23).

Nicola describes her ongoing and changing relationship with my painting, which is made possible because of its continued presence in her studio. Byrne (2014), similarly articulates how the ongoing physical presence of artwork is significant for her. It is “a deeply consistent presence that enables it on occasion to become a vessel for the exploration and containment of questions of existence” (Byrne, 2014, p. 220). Her words resonate with Nicola’s descriptions of how the image of the woman on the cliff embodied her personal journey and questions of existence at differing points in time. Nicola’s contemplations about her responses to seeing the artwork were explorations, and it seemed that the presence of the image provided a containing focus for her ongoing explorations about things that matter.

Reflecting back to the story of the embodied exchange between Freya and myself, I would like to unpack some of the many layers that I mentioned earlier. At the time that I painted the image Freya is referring to, it was 2001 and I was 29. I was having an experience of not feeling fully “in” my life, in a similar way that Nicola described not feeling “in” her body at times. It felt strangely surreal as though I was not quite living in reality, living a life that did not seem to be mine. I was married and had a young seven-year old son, and had already experienced the loss of my first-born son Vaughn, to whom I was completely devoted – the most tragic loss of my life. My daily fitness and mental health routine was to take a run around one of the local parks each morning. I recall my internal state of feeling not quite

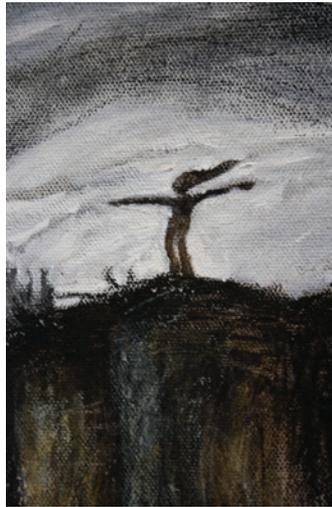


Figure 5.11
“Woman on top of the cliff”
– second detail.
Carla van Laar, 2008.



Figure 5.12
“Fork in the path”.
Carla van Laar, 2005.

The original painting
that Freya referred to.



Figure 5.13
“Freya’s road”.
Freya O’Brien, 2008

right, and my growing sense that my marriage could be over. I would carry these feelings with me in my body as I ran around the park. Each morning I would contemplate a particular fork in the pathway and wonder what it would be like to go this way or that way, knowing that I needed each morning to make a choice. The pathway became significant for me as it environmentally embodied my internal world.

The picture of the pathway became internalised for me, and an image, or a story, that I intuitively chose to explore further through the medium of paint. The image had remained so present in my visual memory, that I could embody it through the gestures I make with brushes and paint on my canvas. This image was so familiar and etched in my inner vision that I did not use any source material other than my memory of my daily embodied encounters with this fork in the path. Through the process of embodied gesture and mark making, the image made its way on to the canvas and an art object was produced that could be audienceed and seen by others – one of whom was Freya. She remembers it so clearly that it is alive in the gestures she makes with her body years later and the image re-enters the shared space of the here and now.

I respond by immediately knowing the exact image she is referring to, and by mirroring her hand gestures with my own. Here we are in a mirrored embodied exchange that includes a shared understanding or knowing that has been evoked by this image. We use the embodied gesture, rather than words,

to communicate exactly what was sensed, “It was just like this”.

We are sharing something that we now know about each other. I know something I did not know before. I now know that as part of our shared history, Aunty Freya sees my images as a way of knowing me. I feel very moved by this understanding, a sense that I am important enough to her that she is interested in my world. I also know that she relates to this experience, of choosing which path to take, that she has been there in different but similar ways herself. In this moment of embodied exchange I know all of this instantly, in a kinaesthetic, experiential kind of knowing. In knowing this, I myself am moved and jolted into a momentous sensation of connection with Freya in this here and now moment, and I become aware of my experience of being seen and known in part through my visual stories. Being seen and known like this stirs my emotions and my automatic response system as I am moved to wonderment and tears well in my eyes through this embodied exchange. I feel closer to Freya than I have before. In the coming years, I sometimes phone her to talk things over when I am facing difficult decisions because I know that she has had her own hard decisions to make, and I know she is interested in me and cares about me. These are the ripple effects of this particular embodied exchange.

Later, Freya sent me a photo of her own road artwork in response.

In seeing this image of Freya’s story, I relate to the image of the road, I feel a sense of shared

understanding, about being women on the road of life, and sharing parts of our worlds that are, at times, dark, and, at other times, beautiful.

In looking at the exchange between Freya and myself, where we gesture to communicate the image of the forked pathway to each other, I use the words, “It was just like this”. The artwork, and the gesture, embody to Freya the way it is. In this way, the art invites embodiment, and the resulting gesture can be thought of as an artwork. What we understand when we see it, is what it embodies. The art work embodies meaning, and we connect with each other through this shared experience of knowing something together through seeing the art.

The idea of artwork embodying meaning prompts me to wonder “Where does this meaning come from, and how does the art embody the meaning?”. I return to the process of making artwork in order to understand this more fully.

Embodied, multi-modal knowing is present in the art-making process

I have squeezed small blobs of shiny paint onto my makeshift palette, a paper plate. The smell of them is intoxicating as it mingles with the scent of the eucalypts and ocean air.

The sea wind rustles the leaves in the gum trees above me and the wispy grasses shimmer in response, the little pink flower nods her head, the waves applaud by roaring into the shore, my body is fully alive and present, my senses alert and heightened.

I'm looking carefully at the colours in the foliage, mixing paint with my brush and dabbing samples onto the leaves in front of me to check the colour match. I take deep breaths as I soothe my rising anxiety about representing this bush scene sensitively.

My eye moves across the scene, from dark shadow at the base of the stem, to bright highlight at the tip of the leaf, around the curve of petal, up the rise of a shaft of grass, into the depth of the tube at the centre of the flower, and out again to the rough skin of the log in front of it. The motion of my eye, the gesture of my hand across the canvas, the layering of pigment as I work from one area to another, seeing a tiny spot of blue grey in a shadow and the same colour used to tone down a highlight that is jumping forward too much, the hot pink of the flower hidden in the base of a stalk, I'm working around the scene, it's a dance, it's a flow.

I am moved in this moment. A welling sensation starts deep in my uterus, stirring my stomach, a pulsing in my heart, a hot rush in my chest, water in my eyes and a feeling of opening at the top of my skull.

I look back to my painting and load my brush with a dense mixture of phthalo blue, alizarin crimson and burnt umber, and accentuate some shadows in my painting, to create just enough definition, darkness, weight and depth.

This story illustrates my heightened awareness of sensory information in the present moment, body movements and internal awareness, including feelings in my internal





female organs, as well as my attunement to the qualities of my delicate subject, the flower.

Here (figures 5.15, 5.16 and 5.17) are some more examples of painting from life. The texture of the thickly applied paint is evidence of my embodied sensing within the environment and my responding through movement, gesture and manipulation of materials.

The construct of embodiment has been written about variously in the art therapy literature. Byrne (2014) describes her interest in her embodied experiencing during both the making of artwork, and being with it after completion. Elbrecht and Antcliff (2014) focus on the embodied experience of interacting with art materials, and the therapeutic qualities of kinaesthetic touch and interaction. Art therapists working with an interpersonal neurobiological approach, such as Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015), highlight the many ways in which creative activity necessitates embodied and relational motion. Others, like McNiff (2014) and Gilroy (1996) urge us to pay attention to the image itself, seeking to understand more about the physical presence that the artwork itself possesses, the traces of embodied movement that it evidences, and the effects these can exert upon us. Art therapists such as Grainger (1996) and Lynne Ellis (2007) have emphasised artistic expressions as gestural languages capable of re-embodiment socio-cultural ideas that have become dis-embodied and dis-empowering to the uniqueness and specificity of embodied experiencing. Recently, art therapists including Davis (2015) have become captivated by the integration of present

moment awareness and embodiment-focused practices that draw on mindfulness, focusing and somatic experiencing. In a similar vein, McNiff (2015, 2016) draws parallels between ancient Eastern wisdom traditions and the embodiment of creative energy in art making.

In re-viewing my source material, I see traces of touch and sensation as precursors to sensory and cognitive awarenesses. I am reminded of the motor impulses, kinaesthetic efforts, and movements required to begin painting.

When I decide to start painting, the first thing I do is look around. In this activity, I am consciously engaging in seeing my own stories. I see my surroundings intentionally, noticing where my attention is drawn, what I enjoy looking at, or am interested in looking at longer and more deeply. This is like a motor impulse happening in my eyes, and if I follow where my eyes are drawn, I become aware of my somatic reactions to what I see, as well as the effect on my emotions and imagination. All of these responses to what I see are part of my stories of seeing.

In setting up to paint, I engage in many gross and fine motor movements gathering my materials, canvas, paints, brushes, and arranging them in the space in relation to what I wish to see and paint. In squeezing paint out of the tube, I exert kinaesthetic pressure with the whole of my hand, creating a pressing sensation against the ball of my thumb. As I load paint on to my brush, I observe the colour, consistency and texture of my paint, in combination with small or large rhythmic rotations of my wrist as I mix the paint



Figure 5.16 "Henry's canopy". Carla van Laar, 2011.

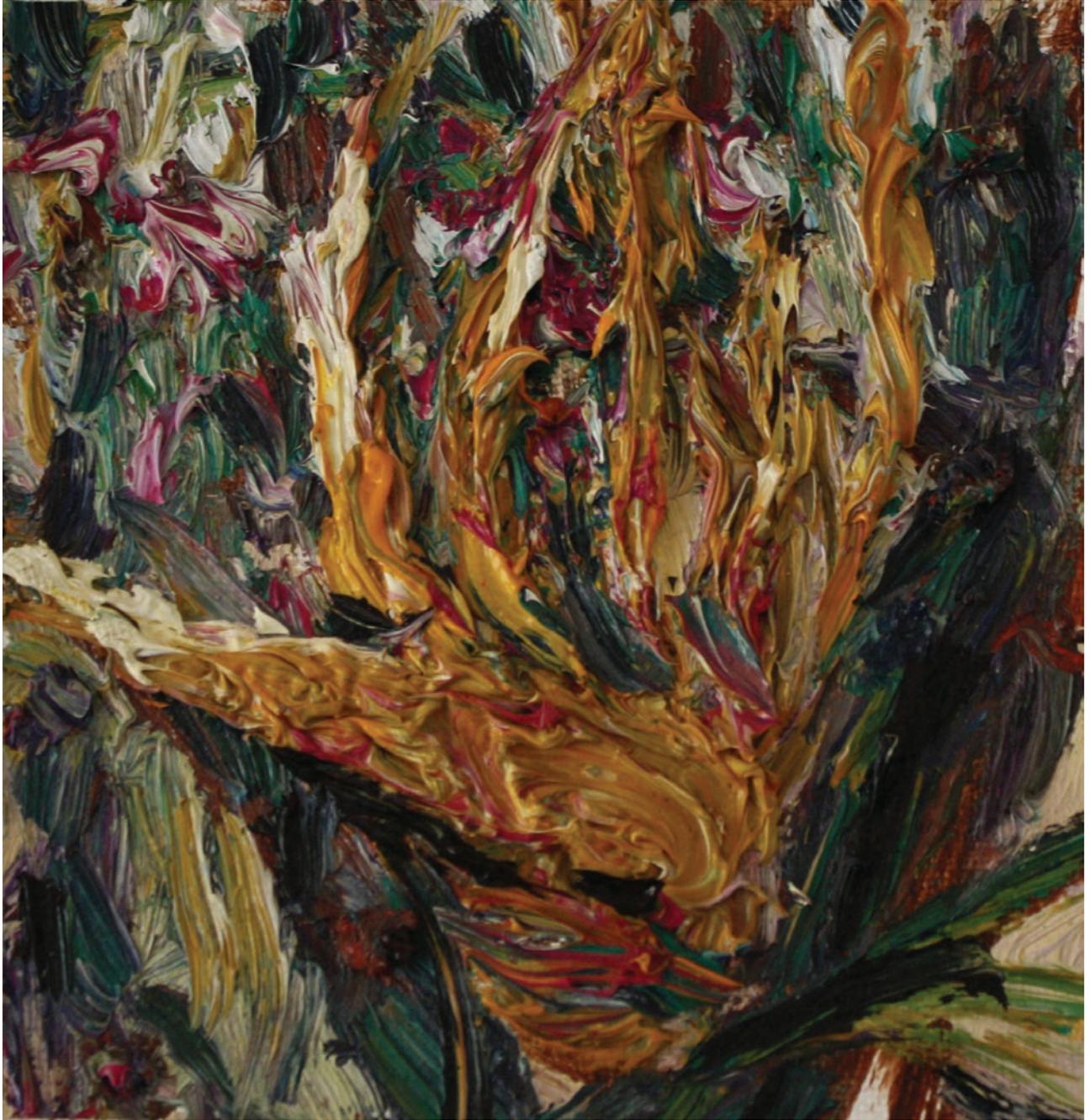


Figure 5.17 "Bird of paradise". Carla van Laar, 2012.

to a pleasing visual hue and tactile feel. I know that I am in a slightly heightened state, aroused about making the first painterly contact with the canvas.

As I hold the brush and urge the paint onto the canvas, a satisfying connection occurs through my hand and arm as I feel the resistance of the surface and push into it with my brush and the slippery fluid medium. I continue drinking in the scene before me with my whole body, responding to my environment and the marks I am creating before me, through the movement of my muscles, thoughts and sensations. This is a very soothing activity, I know that my agitation is subsiding, I enter a feeling of calm and connection. My attention is focused in the here and now, with awareness of my surroundings, my place within them; my embodied relationship with all that I am seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, touching and moving. The resulting artworks visually tell my stories of seeing. My stories are inevitably influenced by my physicality and the facts that I am a white, middleclass woman painter, a mother, and living in a 21st Century developed country. Nevertheless, because I am a woman, these stories are “her stories” about what I see and how I respond to my seeing.

In my own experiences of painting, I often engage in emotional connection with my subjects through my embodied motions, both gross motor movements of my entire body, and fine motor movements of my hands and face.

During the process of painting a portrait of Julie, I wrote about using my own embodiment to enter more fully in to an attunement with Julie’s facial expression as I attempted to make marks that would evoke the qualities of her for those viewing the finished artwork:

I tried to look more carefully at the photo of Julie and to work around her face adding tiny bits of light and shadow, and to keep the colour warm as the painting has quite cool hues. I also tried to tune in to her expression more fully; to feel it in my own face and emotions as I painted, to really feel the joyous, girlish wildness of Julie’s face as the sea breeze swept her hair up and waved it around her head.

In this situation, I am taking my sense of Julie’s expression into my own face so that I can feel it, and use this felt knowledge to help me depict it more empathically in paint (figure 5.24).



Figure 5.18 Embodiment in painting from life 1, 2016.



Figure 5.19 Embodiment in painting from life 2, 2016.



Figure 5.20 Embodiment in painting from life 3, 2016.

Ellis (2007) looks to phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty's influence, "in which subjectivity is theorised as embodied, contextual and located in language (whether visual, verbal or gestural)" (p. 60). Like Elbrecht and Antcliff (2014), Ellis (2007) places great importance on the language of touch in art-making:

Art media are extensions of our embodied subjectivities. The images that emerge unconsciously through the hardness, fluidity, malleability, or softness of the art materials do not express inner representations of sexual drives; they are in themselves experiences of sexuality. In the same way, touching is not an external expression of an inner feeling of intimacy; touching is that intimacy. (p. 65)

Ellis appears to be saying that the art image itself embodies the lived experience of sexuality and intimacy. This emphasis on embodied intimacy is in keeping with the experiences I describe about my physical sensations during painting in my stories about painting the little flower, in setting up to paint, and in taking Julie's expression into my own face.

The creative dialogue between Nicola and myself continued as I painted this image of her (figure 5.25). I would listen to Nicola's recorded music and study the photographs I had taken of her playing and singing as a way of attending to and staying present with my experience and appreciation of her. For me, our shared history, friendship and trust are all present in this dynamic and are reflected in the quality of the material that we shared throughout the project.

Through the process of remaining present, giving focused attention and careful observation to painting Nicola, my appreciation of her grew and deepened. I came to see more of what I honour in her gestures, grace, creativity and energy. I felt a sense of valuing the subtle qualities that she expresses, and being present with these qualities as a connecting energy between Nicola and myself. The qualities of this kind of connecting presence remind me of the presence used artistically by Marina Abramovich in "The artist is present". In my case, by remaining present with shaping and seeing my image of Nicola in the artwork, I actually feel as though I am attending to Nicola herself.



Figure 5.21 Embodiment in painting from life 4, 2016.



Figure 5.22 Embodiment in painting from life 5, 2016.



Figure 5.23 Embodiment in painting from life 6, 2016.



Figure 5.24 “Julie’s portrait” – second detail. Carla van Laar, 2010.

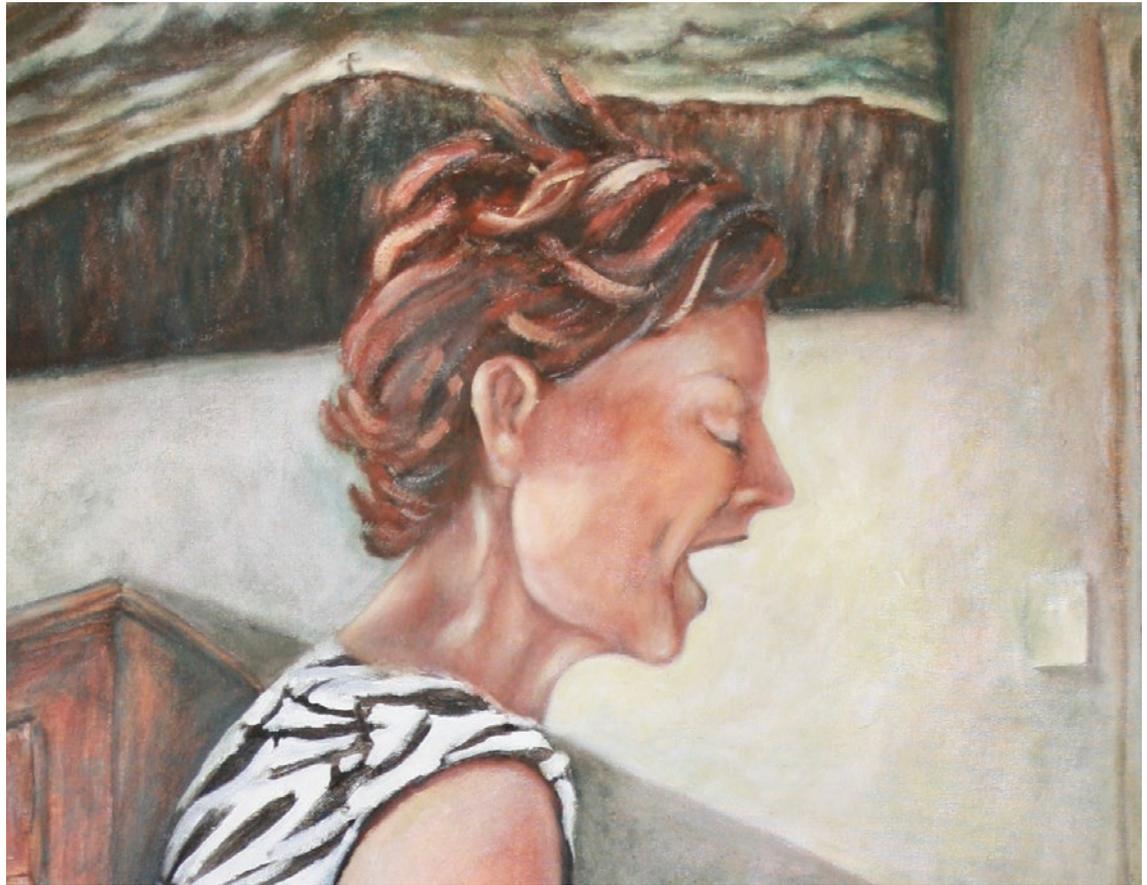


Figure 5.25 “Nicola sings a response” – second detail. Carla van Laar, 2010.

Within this research project, the findings that have emerged through the intersubjective and shared seeing of her stories, confirm that it is possible to come to know things through direct embodied encounter, rather than abstracted theoretical lenses, as Grainger (1996), Ellis (2007) and Byrne (2014) suggest. We can see evidence that the artworks themselves embody qualities and meanings that have effects on us, in keeping with McNiff (2014) and Levine’s (2013) assertions. I suggest that the effects that artworks have on us are linked with the embodied and multi-modal knowing that is present in the art-making process.

Artworks can re-embody presence to the material world

As I have described, the major shift in my art practice occurred when I moved from attending to my subject matter via photos of moments, into painting directly from life, in the continued physical presence of my subjects for the entire time it took to paint each picture. This prolonging of moments into extended periods staying with and experiencing the subjects of my artwork directly through my embodied senses has deepened my experience of presence throughout the project and this continues to become more and more a part of my art based and professional practices.

Even when I evoke the memory of painting to write about it, I experience bodily sensations in my internal organs, particularly my heart, armpits and womb. They are sensual feelings, arousing, and quite sexual in their magnetic pull towards physical contact, touch and movement. They make me aware, again, of my female embodiment, a creative urge, like the urge to procreate.

Byrne (2014) similarly offers her own experiencing while making artwork as an example of what Betensky (2001) might have described as the unity of the body saying “My experience of making art in the studio engages all of my senses” (Byrne, 2014, p. 220).

Byrne’s (2014) reflections resonate with my own descriptions of becoming more aware of my internal body, sensations and sensory information during the somatic act of painting and observing my artwork and surroundings.

The stillness of contemplation allowed me to be aware of my breath and in that moment the white markings in the work could have been lungs, offering breath or even breathing on my behalf. (Byrne, 2014, p. 223)

Gilroy (1996) has challenged art therapists with the statement, “Very few art therapists have considered the role and the function of the image in their research” (p. 58).

Grainger (1996) and Ellis (2007) have explored the role of artworks as embodiments of experiencing, qualities, ideas and information. They share a common concern with the socio-cultural shaping of normative ideas and the impact of these on our embodied experiencing.

Grainger (1996) raises concerns about what he calls the “disembodiment” and “abstraction” (p. 137) of social ideas. For Grainger, cultural ideas often become abstracted from human experiencing and can serve the purpose of alienating people from their own lived bodily experiencing and the first hand somatic information that is available to us. He paints a grim picture of this, saying:

[T]he action of presenting an image has itself changed. What used to be something that we ourselves could do in order to communicate with others is now something done to us... In such a world, imagined possibility and actual embodied reality never encounter each other. In artistic terms, it is a world of kitch, representations that stop short of the values of real life, preferring to offer a fantasised pseudo-truthfulness. (p. 139)

Grainger (1996) sees the arts as vital remedies for the abstraction of social norms, theories and ideas, a means of re-embodiment of our understandings of what “society is actually like” (p. 140). He says, “the exchange of persons in artistic space, which is the direct expression of our bodily experience, puts organs and skills, feelings and ideas back into people and people back into the world” (p. 140). Using embodied experience as source material for creating artwork, as I did in painting Julie, has implications when looked at from the perspectives discussed by Grainger (1996), in which the roles and functions of artworks are understood as conveying or addressing socio-cultural normative ideas.

What Grainger (1996) is saying resonates with the conundrum created by advertising, for example. Ready-made images proliferate in our lived environment, suggesting particular ways that our bodies, homes, holidays, food, attire, relationships, culture, customs and values should be. These “kitch” representations do not necessarily resonate with our own lived bodily experience, but have such power that they often impact on individuals and we are left feeling that we are somehow wrong, incomplete or different. His assertion is that we can restore our embodied experiencing through the arts and make a return to knowing things as they are. He urges us as arts therapists to be aware of our own contribution to social understandings and pay attention to the ideas we engage in our practice, lest we “become preoccupied with social forces at the expense of the people who produce them” (p. 140). He is concerned that we look to the art itself as embodying the way things are.

The following image of my painting, “Wild apples” (figure 5.26), could be seen as embodying the “traces”, as Sarah Pink (2013, p. 186) might put it, of the intimacy I experience during painting while remaining present with my subject through my sense of sight, and responding through gesture and touch to move my art materials around the paper in response.

My artworks themselves provide visual evidence of increasing improvisation and spontaneity in the quality of my art making over the years I have been engaged in this inquiry, and in the time that has passed since Warren’s initial comment about my painting of the road. McNiff (2014) highlights that “When perceiving artistic experience there is a sense that artworks transmit expression and meaning through their various physical qualities” (McNiff, 2014, p. 255).

My painting of native grasses (figure 5.27) embodies, through its physical qualities, traces of my spontaneous gesturing as I apply paint in response to the warm, natural environment, the sounds and smells of soft wind rustling and native birds calling; the movement of the grasses and sky are talking to me as though they have something to say. When I see this painting, I see all this as evidence of my capacity for embodied creativity and spontaneity.



Figure 5.26 "Wild apples". Carla van Laar, 2014.



Figure 5.27 "Thurra River grasses". Carla van Laar, 2016.



Figure 5.28 Painting Uluru, 2014.

I return to my ongoing art practice for examples of how, through being present with the living world through my sense of sight and my whole body, that I too felt myself to be in dialogue with the ancient wisdom of mother earth herself. It is not uncommon in traditional cultures for the Earth to be thought of as our mother. From this perspective, some of my art making practices could be thought of as ways that I have engaged in seeing the stories of Mother Earth herself – her stories. This photo (figure 5.28) illustrates one such moment as

I sit in the red sand, painting for hours in the desert heart of Australia.

Abram (2010) draws our attention to what occurs when we move within a natural environment, perceiving through our senses the world outside ourselves, how it presents itself in changing ways depending on our physical relationship with and place within it. He says;

Depth implicates the whole of our animal body (this carnal density of muscles and skin and breath), situating us physically within the animate landscape. Whenever

we notice that some aspects of the perceived world are closer and more accessible to us than others, whenever we acknowledge that some phenomena are crisply visible while others are concealed from view, we affirm our bodily location in the midst of those phenomena. (Abram, 2010, p. 84)

This kind of seeing, depthful, sensory and present perceiving of our place within a dynamic environment is, for Abram, a magically life-enhancing activity connecting him with feelings of realness, freedom, openness and agency.

In looking to examples of present day engagement with ancient wisdom traditions through somatic experiencing, focusing, mindfulness and the embodied sense of sight, I am simultaneously looking back on my art making practice during the recent years in which I have continued to paint, and seeing my stories, as I have described. My artistic practice that has emerged over the years, of painting in situ, from life, in nature, can be seen as an integration of the embodied, mindful, ancient wisdom-inspired approaches I have introduced here. I am, in a somatic experiencing way, tuning in to my environment and the things outside myself that interest, draw my attention and calm me. Simultaneously, I enter a state of focused and mindful attention as I become open to my seeing sense and receptive to my subject. As I receive sensory information into my body, I become aware and attuned to my internal state, focusing on my felt sense and responding to both my external environment and what I am experiencing in this direct encounter. The lived intertwining of these is expressed in my visual colour selection, gestural mixing and mark-making on canvas. Like Abram (1996, 2010), by going out,

seeing the stories in the world outside myself, feeling my place within the natural world and cosmos, I also go in, and calm my inner world. This is a deeply enlivening and connecting, embodied practice of relational and art based presence, and a significantly important part of seeing her stories. My resulting artworks re-embody presence to the material world.

Many of the experiences that occurred organically in our explorations of “Seeing her stories” have been valued and discussed by various authors working within a range of philosophical and therapeutic approaches.

Elbrecht and Antcliff (2014) describe art as embodied therapy whose “sensory experiences include touch, movement, visual and sound” (p. 19). Although they focus on work with clay, and, in particular clay field work, which is a sensorimotor process for working with clients experiencing the effects of trauma, I can relate much of what they say to my own lived experience of seeing her stories during art making with paint. These authors refer to the “triune brain model” which differentiates between instinctual, emotional and cognitive neurobiological processing (Cozolino 2006; Maclean 1985). The “bottom up” approach utilises sensorimotor activities as a way of activating and transforming emotional material, in contrast with the “top down” approach of talking therapy. Like Betensky (2001), Elbrecht and Antcliff (2014) remind us of the importance of tactile and kinaesthetic present moment experiencing during engagement with art materials. The contention is that by attending to the embodied, tactile, sensory and kinaesthetic nature of working with materials it is possible to facilitate phases of self-regulation including stabilisation and safety, trauma processing, integration and consolidation. They are especially interested in

“haptic perception” (p. 22), in which information from the hands in direct contact and movement are ways of perceiving and knowing.

Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) pay particular attention to the embodied motions that occur during art making, such as those that I have described above, also including kneading clay, drawing gestures and rhythmic movements. They refer to research “suggesting that motor system pathways facilitate and strengthen beneficial links between movement, emotion, cognition, and social interaction” (p. 57). Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) offer a detailed interpersonal neurobiological perspective on creative embodiment in art therapy. For them, motion is at the core of both art activity and neurological function, and they highlight the necessity of movement in neurological development. They also refer to the triune brain model, however they take pains to emphasise that these levels are all part of the central nervous system, which is interdependent and integrated with the peripheral nervous system and the motor system, and that these systems co-inform and co-create each other.

Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) write about the embodied movements and interactions between people that occur during the making and viewing of artworks. They use examples and research to build a case for the inherent therapeutic qualities of arts engagement (Baizer, 2014; Ratey, 2008; Kalat, 2012; Sapolsky, 2004). They contend that the interactions that people engage in not only in art making, but in viewing artworks together, can initiate movements including startle and self-protective responses, stimulate realisations of fear, reward or pleasure, relief, laughter and a continuation of social life (Baizer, 2014; Ratey, 2008; Kalat, 2012; Sapolsky, 2004).

Importantly, they assert that:

Understanding the neurobiology of motion affirms ATR-N (art therapy relational-neuroscience) principles and has the added advantage of relieving art therapists from any polarized discussion on art versus therapy. (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015, p. 62).

The “Seeing her stories” research project has enabled me to experience many moments of remaining present with the processes and products of inquiry. Undertaking the research has required my ongoing attention and presence in many different ways. After the dinner party focus group, I watched and re-watched the video recording of the event numerous times, remaining present to what I heard and saw. Although I initially felt unsure about what had emerged as findings through this shared conversation, as I remained present with what had been shared by the participants, I began to be more aware of threads that were woven through the conversation and embodied communication, in a way that felt like an “illumination” (Moustakas, 1990). I wrote this short piece about remaining attentive and present to what had occurred at the dinner party:

In re-viewing the tapes over and over, and listening carefully to every word, watching the body language of the co-researchers in the shared space, the exchange of ideas, the symbols, the meanings and the stories... I realise that Jane’s words as she hugs me after the dinner party were right. “It is, already, all here”.

It was by cultivating my own capacity to remain present with and attentive to the source material that I have become more aware of what is already here. As shown in the examples throughout this chapter, I have found that part of what can happen when a

woman's stories are seen, was that we became more aware of presence and embodiment in ways that were energising, creating movement and connection. Our awareness of presence and embodiment facilitated appreciation, honouring, and focus, and was illuminating.

Davis (2015) writes about "mindful art therapy" and highlights the importance of present moment and embodied awareness in a mindful approach. Like Rappaport (2009), Davis (2015) emphasises paying attention to inner sensations as well as emotional states through mindful practices, and using creative materials to express, explore and respond to these, telling our stories through art. She says:

As we surrender to what's there with openness and without judgement, we can begin to see things more clearly, just as they are. Sometimes we only need to acknowledge something, and without denying our anguish or sorrow, we can meet it mindfully and give voice to it through art. (p. 47)

Abram (2010), from his eco-philosophical viewpoint, emphasises coming to our senses, including our embodied seeing, as a life-giving activity. He draws on ancient wisdom traditions such as indigenous cultures for whom relationship with the material world is deeply embedded in health, spirituality and meaning:

While persons brought up within literate culture speak often about the natural world, indigenous, oral peoples sometimes speak directly to that world, acknowledging certain animals, plants, and even landforms as expressive subjects with whom they might find themselves in conversation (Abram, 2010, p. 10)

This chapter has illustrated and discussed ways in which processes and experiences of presence and embodiment can co-occur naturally in art based projects such as this one. In looking to the art therapy literature and ideas from somatic experiencing and eco-philosophy, we can see therapeutic and phenomenological presence, intentionality, improvisation, imagination, embodied experiencing, the presence of embodied wisdom traditions and the embodied presence of artworks, all co-occurring organically within what happened in "Seeing her stories" during this inquiry.

I have shown how, in "Seeing her stories", we can have a heightened awareness of our embodied experience in the present moment, through which we cultivate presence to ourselves, each other, and the material world. These kinds of happenings have been conceptualised by therapists, social scientists and philosophers as significant, life-enhancing and important for health, development, well-being, meaning-making and culture. Importantly, these processes have revealed themselves as being intimately embedded in the art based practices within this inquiry, occurring in the absence of psychological, psychiatric or psychotherapeutic theorising or hypothesising. Presence and embodiment have emerged as qualities indigenous to the art based methods we used in exploring what can happen when a woman's stories are seen.

The vital relationship between seeing and environment, that has been touched on in this chapter, leads me to the next emergent threads that revealed themselves over and over in numerous ways throughout the "Seeing her stories" project: context, risk and safety.