

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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Figure 6.1 "The trigger". Carla van Laar, 2008.

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

Context makes a difference in our seeing, and this can impact
on our experiences of taking risks and feeling safe.



Chapter 6

Context, risk and safety



At the time that I painted the previous image (figure 6.1), my canvas provided a safe place for me to see and show my terrifying experience of being robbed at gun point on an adventure to experience the New Year's Eve festival in Rio de Janeiro. In hindsight, I was unaware of the level of risk this escapade involved and I placed myself in an unsafe situation that I thankfully came out of physically unharmed. However, this traumatic experience continued to intrude in my thoughts and I was prompted to re-visit the event through painting this picture that I named "The trigger".

In seeing this image I notice the contrast between the relaxed and charming view from a balcony, and the scary confrontation that occurred in the concealed bend in one of Rio's twisting narrow streets. The themes of context, risk and safety are all present in the visual story of this artwork.

On a different adventure I travelled to Monet's garden at Giverny in France. I considered this to be a pilgrimage during which I practised in situ painting in the beautiful artistic garden surrounds of my painting mentors, the impressionists. Here is a picture I made there (figure 6.2), a safe place that I found to sit and observe the garden and sky.

Awareness of space, place and context

Scale and orientation

Expansive landscape

Context – culture and discourse as constructors of power

Shadow side of fitting in

Challenge of dissonance

Trigger

Emotions activate

Intrusive inner vision

Traumatic buried memories surface

Real risk

Fear and safety are knitted together

Pain and suffering are acknowledged

Struggle is honoured

The power of the intrusion lessens

Love, loss and grief

Context, risk and safety in seeing her stories

If our art making and art therapy practice occur in a socially engaged way, there is no distinct division between the personal and the political. Our most personal revelations are given meaning within the context of our social reality. (C. H. Moon, 2002, p. 283)

Catherine Hyland Moon (2002) demonstrates a “discursive perspective” (Carbaugh, Nuciforo, Molina-Markham & van Over, 2011; Lock & Strong, 2012), when she considers the mutual influence of context and art.

The many stories I have already shared, both visual and textual, that were part of the process of inquiry, have a variety of contexts. In my engagement with the source material, I noticed that context was significant in many ways both to myself and the co-inquirers, and contributed to our experiences of risk and safety as part of “Seeing her stories”. This project has occurred within, been impacted by, interacted with, influenced and created a variety of contexts. In keeping with the rest of the emergent themes, context is complex, overlapping, intertwining and changing. The inquiry process, myself, the participants and the findings have experienced, interacted with and occurred within contexts that are spatially, temporally and historically distinctive.

The word “context” can be used to describe any of the “circumstances or facts that surround a particular situation” (context, n.d.). This broad definition highlights that contexts are expansive and can include many, many things. In this inquiry, the contexts that surrounded our stories included landscapes and buildings, culture, philosophy and literature, systems, professions and institutions, relationships, philosophies and spiritual beliefs, as well as values, opportunities, imaginings and metaphoric contexts. This chapter is a limited exploration of the relationship between seeing her stories and the contexts of this research. The complexity and extensiveness of the contexts means that this representation is inevitably incomplete. For each reader it is likely that imagination will extend beyond the details presented here, however my focus is on presenting and discussing the aspects of context that were painted about by me, and spoken about by myself and the participants – the things about contexts that seemed important to us.

The word “risk” can be used either as a noun to describe the perceived chance of injury, loss or danger, or as a verb, to express a way of behaving, as in “to risk it”, meaning to decide on a particular course of action despite being uncertain of the outcome (risk, n.d.). Participants described both perceiving and taking risks as part of their experiences of seeing her stories in this inquiry. At times the participants also spoke about perceiving qualities such as “grief”, “suffering”, “threatening” or “pain”. I have included stories where these feeling states are described, as they evoke a sense of loss or danger that can be associated with risk.

The word “safety” can be used to communicate either the state of being safe, the quality of or device for preventing hurt, injury, danger or risk, or the action of keeping safe (safety, n.d.). Safety can be conceived of as an intersubjective experience mediated by many things, including the life contexts, and the past and present experiences of people. The participants in this inquiry experienced enough safety that any risks they engaged in became opportunities for self-awareness and growth, and the circumstances that enabled this safety are discussed throughout the chapter.

In this inquiry, the experience of “Seeing her stories”, and the ripple effects of this seeing, became contexts in which myself and the co-inquirers shared that at times we felt both risky and safe. Our descriptions included our experiences of being silenced, of suffering and dissonance, of feeling respected, seen and heard, of being challenged and dialoguing, and of co-creating supportive, resonant, subversive, empowering and artistic contexts together.

The meeting place of the encounter between the viewer and the art at times became a space for

being or becoming, an activator of emotions and memories, and an experience of being acknowledged or honoured. Sometimes the seeing experience felt like an intrusion or triggered traumatic inner visions, as in my painting of “The trigger” (figure 6.1), and precipitated the emergence of shadowy thoughts and feelings. Regularly, this meeting enabled processing of life experiences, and this sometimes felt invigorating and empowering. Within these meetings, paradoxes were intimately knitted together as flip sides of the one experience, or the simultaneous presence of seemingly contrary yet parallel themes, including life and death, left and right, great and ugly, known and unknown, pros and cons, light and dark, love and loss, and risk and safety. This chapter explores the art based project and the places it occurred in as contexts that influenced and enabled our sharing of these experiences.

At times, the tension between paradoxes created dilemmas concerned with risk and safety within this project. Weighing up what to make public, what to keep private, when to be cautious and when to speak out proved to be one such dilemma for myself. I considered how, as an author, to remain authentic, human and present by including my voice in this work, how much to honour my life as the context of this project, what to reveal and what to protect, and how this revealing and protecting could benefit the inquiry, myself, the participants and my field of practice. I discuss how the academic contexts I inquired within were at times restricting or enabling for me in conducting my research, making me more aware of values as an inherent aspect of any context.

In the rest of this chapter, I present a brief overview of how the themes of context, risk and safety have been discussed in the art therapy literature



Figure 6.3 "Monastery courtyard". Carla van Laar, 2014.

My sketch of the safe haven provided by a garden in the monastery I was staying in while working in Nepal after devastating earthquakes.

to date. The following sections illustrate how I have navigated my way through the interconnectedness of context, risk and safety as recurring themes in my source material.

My presentation of these themes differs in a number of ways from the norms in art therapy literature, and I discuss these contrasting perspectives throughout the chapter. I begin by considering values as context, and refer to my own and the participants' experiences of context, risk and safety in "Seeing her stories".

I then move to look at risk discourse in art

therapy, and my notions about safe authenticity in this art based project. I explore the idea of co-creating safe contexts for telling risky stories about what we see and then discuss emotions, safety and values in seeing artworks. Finally, I contemplate art as a meeting place and culture maker. The chapter concludes with a story from the research illustrating the integration of context, risk and safety in making and seeing artworks.

Context, risk and safety in art therapy literature

The diverse discussions regarding context in art therapy are similar to the complexities of contexts that overlapped, informed, influenced and were co-created by the experiences of “Seeing her stories” in this inquiry. It is clear that context is multifaceted and layered. Art therapy literature has explored context from perspectives that emphasise various aspects of space, place, time, experiences, norms and values (Betts, 2013; Broderick, 2011; Butryn, 2014; Gilroy, 2008; Herrmann, 2000; Huet, 2011; Huet, 2012; Kalmanowitz et al., 2012; Kerr, 2015; Linnell, 2012; Luzzatto, 1997; Meyer, 2014; McNiff, 2012a; Ndziessi et al., 2013; Patterson et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2008; Salom, 2015; Slayton, 2012; Solomon, 2005; Thamuku & Daniel, 2013). However, when context is discussed it is usually only one or two aspects of context that are considered, commonly either location or life problem (Kerr, 2015; Kalmanowitz, Potash, & Mei, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Reynolds, Lim & Prior, 2008; Thamuku & Daniel, 2013). Culture is emerging as an aspect of context that is of interest to art therapists (Betts, 2013; Butryn, 2014; Herrmann, 2000; McNiff, 2012a; Slayton, 2012).

While some of the art therapy literature explores how context can create containment, non-judgement and provide therapeutic safety, there is also literature that focuses more explicitly on risk and safety in art therapy, and the arts in health more broadly. Throughout this chapter I look at some of this literature that suggests ethical considerations when working in the arts, the risks associated with risk discourse itself, risks and safety of emotional arousal in seeing artwork, and finally, creating a safe distance

by integrating understandings of context, risk and safety in art based practices (Betts, 2013; Broderick, 2011; Butryn, 2014; Fenner, 2010; Fenner & Allen, 2014; Gilroy, 2008; Gwinner, 2016; Herrmann, 2000; Hill, 1945; Huet, 2011; Huet, 2012; Jensen, 2014; Jordon, 2015; Kalmanowitz, Potash, & Mei, 2012; Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016; Kerr, 2015; Lacy, Michaelson & van Laar, 2007; Linnell, 2012; Luzzatto, 1997; Melliar & Brukha, 2010; Meyer, 2014; McNiff, 2012a; Ndziessi et al., 2013; Patterson, Waller, Killaspy, & Crawford, 2015; Regev, Green-Orlovich & Snir, 2015; Reynolds, Lim & Prior, 2008; Salom, 2015; Slayton, 2012; Springham, 2008; Thamuku & Daniel, 2013; Wood, 2000).

Connections can be made between the literature and what happened in the “Seeing her stories” inquiry. Reflections about the relationships between contexts, institutional discourses and art therapy practice resonate with the discursive perspective that is embedded in my use of the term “her stories”. Literature that considers context as an active partner in therapy, how the presence of artwork can impact on a context, art in the context of nature, and art based projects as contexts in themselves are also relevant to the findings of this research (Fenner, 2010; Fenner and Allen, 2014; Hill, 1945; Jordon, 2015; Melliar and Brukha, 2010; Slayton, 2012; Wood, 2000).

The ways in which evidence is sought and evaluated is a part of the context in which art therapy is practised and funded. Patterson et al. (2015) examined a randomised controlled trial as a normative culture in research. In response to “the findings of a pragmatic randomised controlled trial testing the addition of group-based art therapy to standard care for people diagnosed with schizophrenia” (p. 28), they critique the implications of this research culture. In

concluding, they say, “the infinite variability of art therapy is a key strength of the approach” (p. 36), and that “a fundamentally different kind of evidence is needed to inform provision to individuals” (p. 36). This kind of fundamental difference requires a cultural shift towards art based inquiry and evidence in art therapy research. The “Seeing her stories” project is a part of this cultural shift.

Some art therapists explore how organisational contexts impact on how art therapy is practiced (Gilroy, 2008), including an acute psychiatric ward (Luzzatto, 1997), Tate Britain (Huet, 2011), public healthcare (Broderick, 2011, Huet, 2012), rural district hospitals (Ndziessi et al., 2013), and a museum (Salom, 2015). These discussions consider the qualities of the institutional culture that can be addressed by or contribute to the introduction of art therapy, such as the “cold climate” (Huet, 2012, p. 25) of a healthcare setting or the “safe holding environment” (Salom, 2015, p. 47) of a museum. As discussed in chapter 1, Gilroy (2008) challenges us to be aware of the values and dominant discourses within allied health settings and how we may inadvertently be recruited into, reinforce or consciously respond to these through our art therapy practices.

As exemplified in the stories from this research, there were institutions in which we experienced our stories as less or more see-able, and less or more seen. For example, the university where I originally enrolled was a context in which I experienced the seeing of my stories as more difficult. In contrast, within the MIECAT Institute and my own studio, I felt seen as a person and also as if my stories, expressed in images and words, were seen in a way that I experienced as validating and powerful. This inquiry, located within an institution that valued

intersubjective and multi-modal ways of knowing enabled me and the participants to come together and explore our interests in ways that facilitated a deep, profound connection with each other. This art based research project and its implications were made possible by the values embedded in my chosen academic context.

Values as context in “Seeing her stories”

Being client centred, using art based practices, and drawing on narrative informed principles are inherent to my professional value system; my philosophical and epistemological context. The values of these practice-based orientations include a humanistic genuine positive regard for the people I work with, a belief in the transformative power of empathic witnessing, being seen and being heard, trust in creative and organic processes, and subverting oppressive power dynamics through making spaces for alternative stories to be shared, respected, celebrated, made public, given voice and acknowledged.

Over the years I have noticed that I can feel disheartened and sometimes incensed when the context of my work does not reflect the values that inform my practices. I have come to recognise these feelings more quickly than I did a decade ago, and I now describe this familiar discomfort as a “paradigm clash”. This paradigm clash occurs when there is a dissonance between my values and the systemic context of my work. This can also occur in various contexts apart from work, including in educational contexts, relationships, spiritual beliefs, and in social and political contexts. The following story illustrates one such experience of dissonance, and was written at

the very start of my research process, at a time when I was still imagining what and how I might research.

Life is in full eclectic bustle outside my local fruit shop in Sydney Rd Brunswick. People hailing from about 140 different nations are coming and going, weaving prams, shopping jeeps and dogs through the colourful palette created by flower stalls and fruit stands.

I am an island of stillness among it all. My hand is poised at the slot at the top of the letter box. I'm holding an envelope addressed to my supervisor. Inside is a letter stating my intention to withdraw and forfeit my scholarship. I am torn. I have invested so much time and energy into this project and it goes against my grain to not finish things. I'm also exhausted and I feel oppressed, misunderstood and stuck. I remind myself of my decision and the reasons for it. I'm doing this research for the learning, not a piece of paper. The past year has been disabling. I still have energy for my research, I tell myself, but not in the context of this institutionalised approach. My resolve renewed, a wave of relief floods over my entire body as I open my fingers and drop the envelope in the mailbox. I have let it go.

A few months later.....

Expanding.....new horizons

A room full of Art Therapists mingle socially in Warren Lett's upstairs loft room in bohemian Brunswick Street Fitzroy, surrounded by shops, cafes, bars and restaurants. The event is an end of year Christmas party for our professional association. The occasion is marked by food, wine, and live music. I catch up with colleagues, some that I have studied with, some that I have taught and some who have taught me and some who I have not yet met. Warren is the Director of MIECAT. I do not know

much about MIECAT although I do know a number of my colleagues have taken up studies there and are engaged and positive about it as a supportive place to study.

I introduce myself to Warren.

"Hi Warren, I'm Carla van Laar, I've been hoping I'd get a chance to meet you in person one of these days!"

He gives me an inquiring and attentive smile, "Well, I'm pleased to meet you".

"I've heard that MIECAT is offering a Professional Doctorate program now", I continue.

"That's right" he says, "That is of interest to you?"

"Yes", I say, "I was enrolled in a PhD but I've withdrawn and I'm looking for somewhere else to take my studies".

"Do you have a research idea?" he asks.

"Yes, it's about sharing women's stories through art".

"Well, I suggest you send me a proposal and then we meet and talk it over", he offers.

To set the scene in terms of this research project, the first part of this story was when I had enrolled at a university to begin my project. The emergent art based approach I could clearly see for myself as an enabling methodology for what I wanted to do and say was important to me. However, the institution I was attempting to study within did not appear to see this as clearly as I could, and I felt they kept imposing their story about what my research should be over my story, instead of listening to me. I eventually made the difficult yet liberating decision to free myself of what I experienced as rigid paradigmatic constraints within an academic institution.

The ideas of the post-structural feminists (Hogan, 1997a; Joyce, 1997; Lupton, 1997) that I engaged with later into the research describe overbearing discourses as holding rigid assumptions and claims of truth and normality. Normality is seen to be the perspective of a white, able bodied, adult, middle class, hetero-sexual male (Joyce, 2012). This perspective constitutes the “real world”, and all other perspectives are perceived as not-normal, other, and delusional or untrue, thus generating alienating dissonance for women and others excluded from the dominant discourse, who might be striving to work towards empowerment within a disempowering context.

Finding places, actual and metaphoric, and ways creative and rigorous, to inquire into my subject, has been an ongoing personal inquiry into the importance of contexts and their values all through this project. My own experiences of context as impactful and significant are mirrored in the stories shared by the co-inquirers.

During the focus group dinner party about three years after my original encounter with Warren, Jane highlighted the importance of context during the conversation. Jane said:

“How I came to be involved in this project... I think my involvement goes back to your Master’s and conversations about finding new ways of thinking, and new ways of writing, and banging our heads up against the establishment when it comes to wanting to do something possibly not as mainstream in academia, but in an academic context. Engaging in the project, for me, has been way back to 1998 when we both started in post-graduate work, and we were talking about the crazy ideas that both of us had, both very different ideas, about what we wanted to do, and the difficulty in fitting that in a box.”

“Yeah, so we had a bit of camaraderie in the early days, and I certainly remember having conversations about... ‘But I wanna do this!’ And having the confidence in what my gut is telling me I want to do, even though I might be having people telling me, saying ‘No, no, you need to do it this way’, or to follow a methodology in a certain way. Having the courage to trust your instincts, through research. Working in a non-conventional way within conventional structures, that is how I really came to engage with your project.”

Jane’s comments highlight the influence of institutions and academic conventions, and the values that they enact, on what can be researched and how we research it. She alludes to the power of dominant discourses, even narratives about “context” itself.

This next extract is taken from a story of imagining conversations as I gaze at the piles of books on my desk. This passage from my research journal describes how the physical context of my workspace held important reminders for me. As I considered the influence of the diverse orientations I had engaged with during this research, and their place within the context of this finished work, I gained a sense of my own place within a community of practice.

“I am back at my desk in the shop window of my studio and have constructed an altar to my project. It consists of the space that has evolved through the course of the project. Art works line the walls with images I have made over the past years. There are also some figurative sculptures along with small statues of angels, and greenery is provided by foliage in a giant bronze vessel that I brought home from India and metamorphosed from a spittoon into a vase.”

The books on my desk are arranged in piles, sorted according to common themes. Gazing at them, I reflect that the size of the piles could be a kind of graph depicting the influence of approaches I have been engaging with in this research.

The biggest pile is ten books tall, with “Art-based Research” (McNiff, 1998) right in the middle.

“Why are you the biggest pile?” I ponder

“We symbolise your passion and belief in this project, the ideas and ways of knowing that you hold dear, and the support you have from your field in conducting your research”.

The sense I had during this imagined conversation with the pile of books was a feeling of “coming home”, a “good fit” and being back “on track”. Returning to my art based foundations felt solid and truthful, like being in the right place at the right time. I now refer to this as a “meeting place”, something that feels very different from the dissonant contexts that I described earlier. I have learned that having this sense of a “meeting place” is how I feel when I am in a context that embodies values that I share.

The socio-cultural context of this project is one in which I was able to access a strong enough sub-culture at MIECAT, in my circle of relationships, and within my community of scholars that has enabled me to create an art based inquiry into “Seeing her stories” that in many ways challenges and subverts dominant cultures and discourses. Through my use of art based inquiry, I respond, like the authors of the books in my biggest pile, to my context

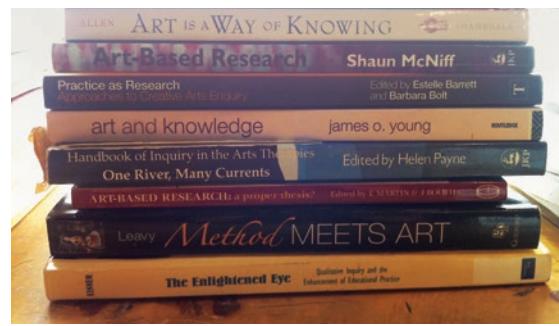


Figure 6.4 The books on my desk, 2014.

by disrupting mainstream academic research methodologies and methods (Grainger, 1999; Hadley, 2013; Liamputpong & Rumbold, 2008; Allen, 1995; McNiff, 1998; Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Young, 2001; Payne, 1993; Leavy, 2009).

Participants’ experiences of context, risk and safety in seeing her stories

In this section I look to some of the ways in which participants described variations on the themes of context, risk and safety in their responses to seeing my artworks. In this next extract from my research narrative, Jan is explaining how she responded to my image of looking out of the car side window (figure 6.5). For her, seeing this image evoked memories from childhood about how she felt being in a particular place. Jan explains how, while she sensed a threatening quality in this image, that she responded by drawing on her memories of safety and made an image of these back to me in response (Figure 6.6).

“That image seemed to me to be a view from a car window. It took me back to times when I was a kid in the back seat of a car, or travelling at night. There is a link in the stories that came to

my mind, of being cocooned, in a car or train, but having no idea where you are at the same time – a combination of being safe and wondering. Evocative of the safe parts of being a child, being safe and looked after.”

“That is the image that you made a response to, is that right?” I ask.

“Yes, that’s right. It was a digital image I made from collaging together about three photos on my computer (Figure 6.6).

In the image I made, the corner is very important, it’s a baby. The actual memory was from when I was five or six, that was evocative memory of being a child. Thinking about it now, I’d like to see that painting of yours again. I have a sense there was a threatening quality in the image, but I went for the flip side in my response. Often when I am moved by a painting it is something disturbing, and I respond to that, but in this I did the flip side, and I quite like that.”

On my receipt of this image (Figure 6.6) from Jan, I was very struck by the fuzzy

background, and how this related to my painting, but also by the little face in the corner, who I wondered about, as if she had entered in to my art work. I also recall looking at the mechanical apparatus of a car interior and feeling a subtle anxiety – were these safety devices or restraints? My feeling in seeing Jan’s image was that safety and risk were both present here.

Other examples of discussions about risk and safety occurred during one on one conversations and during the dinner party focus group. In my interview with Nicola about her experience of seeing the image of the woman on the cliff she articulated how risk and safety were both present within the image for her. “[T]he darker stuff emerged after I lived with the picture for a while. This could be a suicide picture, a woman on the edge, making a choice whether to be alive or not. A woman on the edge of the great or the really ugly and how they are interconnected. About light and dark, and them being the same thing. But it took me to a space where I was able to be in my body without having



Figure 6.5 “Out the side window”.
Carla van Laar,
2008.

had to have faced my demons, a very rare thing, it is hard to be in your body without having faced your demons!"

I ask her what meaning she makes in this.

"Dealing with demons. Looking into dark places that I've been running from all my life. Processing stuff that has been preventing me from being free. Sub-conscious, deeply buried stuff. Doing this has allowed me to be in the same space that prompted the whole cycle... Being free, being in the body. It's actually a loop you see, something you realise, it's achievable. You ask, 'What do I need to do to get there, you realise it is confronting your demons, you do the work and get there, it's a loop. You are back to what started the process."

Although Nicola does not elaborate exactly what she means by "demons", we get the sense that this is a metaphor she is using in a similar way that she uses "dark places", and "deeply buried" to describe inner experiences that are overpowering, scary, threatening or disturbing.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, later, in the group conversation at the focus group dinner party, Nicola elaborated again, using her gestures in combination with words to express and communicate her embodied experience of risk and safety within seeing this image. She started by telling us how originally seeing the image had transported her to a memory of a time when she felt very connected to her embodiment and awareness of the present moment. Then she talked about how her seeing of the image changed later on. She said:

"And so, when I saw that painting, it took me there, and then Carla, beautifully, gave me the picture, and by that time, I'd had a couple of kids, and I was losing the plot. Or just, everything that you hold to be who you are was



Figure 6.6 Jan's response "Safe in the Car", 2008.



Figure 6.7 Nicola at the dinner party, 2010.



Figure 6.8 Guests listening to Nicola, 2010.



Figure 6.9 Julie looking at her portrait at the dinner party, 2010.

really unravelling. I'd stopped working, and then I saw her as, like, this woman on the edge!"

"And for a second, she was a woman who was about to kill herself!"

Although Nicola is talking about feelings so intense that they might prompt a woman to kill herself, as shown in the photographs (figures 6.7 and 6.8) her embodied re-telling of this story is met with a combination of shrieks, laughter, smiles, and empathetically dropped jaws by the women at the table, as though we all relate to her story in our own way. There is something safe in this telling about risky feelings within this particular context. As discussed in the methodology, it was my intention to create a safe space at the focus group dinner party, and this was actively contributed to by all of the co-inquirers through their mutual attention, interest and respect for each other during our conversation.

Nicola's seeing experience, her processing and storying of seeing the image, and the company of the women in the group witnessing this story provide a way to express and share about something that is often taboo, unspoken and silenced, an experience of a young mother contemplating suicide. This sharing in itself contributed to safety in an iterative way by inviting other group members to voice their experiences, even ones that felt emotionally risky.

When Julie described her experience in response to seeing the image of the road to me during our one-to-one meeting, she described how she related the image to what she knows about my life story. She then extrapolated that she relates to these themes within her own experiences that link with risk and safety, such as pain and freedom.

"That painting encapsulated so much, because I know your story about Vaughn's death, that's why I'm so emotional. There was so much darkness in the sky; pain, wispy shadows, but there is so much freedom in the road – strength, journey through the pain, darkness, shadows, that road will lead on to eternity."

Later, at the dinner party, Julie expanded on her experience of seeing the road, and then the portrait I painted of her on the road, for the other guests. Here, she is looking up at the painting on the wall while she describes her paradoxical experience of feeling drawn to and also fearful of the road. Her facial expression conveys something of this puzzling response (figure 6.9)".

She then describes an intense and significant feeling of empathic connection to other women and their collective experiences of being on the road, on their own journeys of strength and pain, joy and fear, risk and safety.

"The painting just absolutely took hold of me. I wanted to be on that road, I was scared of the road, I knew the road, and I didn't know the road. There were all of these wonderful paradoxes running around in my head. I felt very strongly and passionately about how the road for women, is, for me, and for women all over the world, an incredible journey.

For tens of thousands of years, women have been on the road, been on a journey. And that journey has been one of suffering, it's been one of joy, it's been one of triumph, it's been one of burden, it's been one of displacement..."

Julie's story illustrates how, in co-creating space to honour and explore our ongoing, unfolding and organically emerging relationship with the seeing of

particular paintings, the themes of risk and safety as women journeying through life are revealed. Our experiences of risk and safety are included, given voice and embodied expression. In our conversations, we describe the activation of sensations, thoughts, emotions and memories in relation to ourselves, each other, the wider world and a collective of women across time and space. Intra-personal, interpersonal and transpersonal encounters with risk and safety are present, and our narratives illuminate the changing nature of relationship with and within these lived encounters in ways that are safe and risky. We see shifts from tears to laughter, from fear, grief and disturbance to freedom, strength and joy, from silencing and repression to acknowledgement and honouring, from shadows in to light, and from intrusion, memories of trauma and contemplating suicide to processing, moving through, enlivenment and choice.

It is clear, in the accounts from myself and the women in this project, as well as descriptions from other authors, that seeing artworks can give rise to emotions that can feel threatening, disturbing, scary, or risky. However, none of the participants in this project reported feeling harmed by their seeing. Before I consider in more detail how the particular context of this research enabled us to co-create safety for sharing risky stories about what we saw, I look to some art therapy literature for broader discussions regarding the themes of risk and safety, risks associated with risk discourse itself, and my own process of working towards safe authenticity in writing this thesis within an academic context.

Risk discourse in art therapy – towards safe authenticity

Jensen (2014) has made a case for the development of ethical guidelines for practitioners working broadly across arts and health. She acknowledges that the field of art therapy is somewhat regulated ethically through the professional organisations, however, many practitioners working in the wider arts and health field are either not members of art therapy associations, or have different considerations than those covered by art therapy ethical codes of conduct.

The principle widely well-known and associated with medical ethics is the mantra, “first, do no harm” (Jensen, 2014, p. 334). However, Jensen provides an overview of Beauchamp and Childress’ (2012) four guiding principles for consideration of ethical issues:

1. Respect for autonomy: enabling individuals to make reasoned informed choices respecting decision-making capacities of autonomous persons;
2. Beneficence: considering balancing of benefits of treatment against the risks and costs;
3. Non maleficence: “Primum non nocere” or do no harm avoiding the causation of harm;
4. Justice: distributing benefits, risks and costs fairly (Jensen, 2014, p. 334).

Jensen (2014) recommends that keeping the “first, do no harm” principle in mind in arts and health projects would include “signing up to a code of conduct” (p. 336), assessment of participants’ compatibility with the project, briefing participants about potential risks, awareness training for facilitators and ongoing supervision or mentoring of the artist facilitator. These are the kinds of risks that, in research projects such as this, are attended

to by ethics proposals and committees. There are other discussions that prompt us to reflect even further on how we conceive of the risks unique to art based experiencing, and the risks of adopting discursive habits that perpetuate unimaginative and disempowering practices.

Springham (2008) focused on a court case in which he had been called as an expert witness. He described the legal process that found an organisation that provided addictions rehabilitation programs had been negligent in the way an art program was conducted, resulting in a participant injuring himself while experiencing a strong reaction to his artwork, by head butting his artwork that was on a concrete floor.

Springham's (2008) opinion was that the facilitator of the art process "had exceeded his competence" (p. 71) in two areas:

1. General psychological: evaluating the claimant's tolerance to unwanted feeling states;
2. Art therapeutic: a specialist assessment of the effect of the art on the participant. (p. 71)

Linnell (2012) revisited Springham's article, and explored "risk discourse in art therapy" (p. 34). She argues that "Springham's paper can be seen as a performance of expert knowledge, rather than simply a description of events" (p. 34), and that this itself poses risks within the field of arts and health. Linnell (2012) invites us to consider the facilitator in a way more in keeping with her tendency towards a narrative therapy informed approach:

I have wondered whether he, as well as his even more unfortunate client, was to some extent an unlucky individual upon whom a wide-spread preoccupation in the world of

psychotherapy with lack, negativity and the confessional mode, combined with stretched resources and inadequate/inconsistent protocols within an agency, rebounded with devastating consequences. (p. 37)

In her discussion, Linnell (2012) posits that Springham "discursively reinforces and performs a set of hierarchical binaries" (p. 37) such as "the expert responsibilised art therapist / the vulnerable and needy client" (p. 37). She sees this tendency as one of the risks associated with risk discourse in art therapy. She reminds us that art therapy has the capacity to subvert disempowering discourses, and urges us to continue taking risks such as mindfully questioning the values that can be imbedded in performing normative narratives of professional expertise in regard to risk management. She suggests that complete risk aversion would be a great loss for art therapy.

The next story illustrates some of the ways in which risk and safety can be themes while writing a thesis in which the author's voice is present. In my research journal, I documented a discussion from a supervision session with Belinda and our guest supervisor. We deliberated about how, in our writing, to be mindful of the risks of self-disclosure, reveal our personal lives as the context in which the research occurred, and find safe ways to include our own voices that would be creative, authentic and, we hoped, engaging.

"So Carla, do you have any dilemmas?" asks our guest supervisor for the session.

"Well, I do have one thing that I'm wondering about...."

They listen attentively, encouraging me to continue.

“You know that I’ve been reading Carolyn Ellis’ ‘The Ethnographic I’ (2004) as a guiding text for writing the exegesis?”

“Yes” they both affirm.

“Well, she does write in a lot of her personal life into her academic texts. She has included material about having an abortion, about her love relationships; really personal things. And she says that it is very important in autoethnographic work to bring the author’s life context into the work, to give the story a context, and to make it authentic and real. So it has got me wondering about just how much of my personal life to put in. Like, I’ve been at this research so long, I’ve changed jobs three times, I’ve moved house four times, I’ve started and ended relationships, then there’s all the artworks, and my personal meanings in making them, you know that one called the trigger, about being robbed by a gunman in Brazil, that triggered a major re-traumatisation for me when it brought some early childhood trauma memories to the surface, and for me it’s been part of my process to deal with all of that too. But my dilemma is, how much do I put in?”

Our guest supervisor sits forward, eyes alert, “Protect, protect, protect” she says adamantly, and then continues, “Some of the personal details I put in my PhD, I wish now that I hadn’t. It really was unnecessary. I put in details that I now wish I had kept private. I’m very protective over students for that reason.”

“I hear what you’re saying,” I reply, “but on the other hand, that is part of the power of autoethnography, to give voice to silenced stories, to empower people by speaking the unspoken or to bring taboo topics from the shadow into the light. It’s also important in the quality of the work, to make it authentic and human and real.”

“Yes, I see your perspective”, she says, “I still advise you to be cautious. Maybe ask yourself, ‘is this really part of the research? Does the research benefit from including this?’”

I sit back and reflect. I scrunch up my brow and move my mouth from left to right as though it is a set of scales to help me weigh up the pros and cons.

“Well”, I start, “I think I know what I might do. I think I will let those things be there but they are not the main themes. I won’t silence them by editing them out, but I won’t let them dominate the text either. Maybe I’ll actually include this conversation to reveal some of my dilemmas in deciding how much personal material to include!”

Here, the supervision session and peer researcher relationship provided a safe context for voicing dilemmas and exchanging ideas. The conversation in this story pre-empted decisions I made about how much personal material I could include in this thesis while feeling safely authentic – for example the decision that I would mention my therapeutic journey that began with painting “The trigger”, without including the details that I wish to keep private.

Co-creating safe contexts for telling risky stories about what we see

I am conscious of the role of my own studio throughout the life of this inquiry. When I began this project I did not have the studio; it is something that has been created and developed along the way. The physical space of the studio could be conceived of as one of the happenings of this inquiry in a very concrete tangible way that actualises the theme of “context”.

My studio is one of the places where I put my values into practice. It has been a place to meet and discuss the seeing of her stories; it has been a place where I have continued to host regular exhibitions of my own art works and create more “Seeing her stories” opportunities. It has been a place where I have worked individually with art therapy clients, had supervision meetings and collaborated with colleagues to run training and workshops. I have written most of this thesis sitting here in this context, with my in situ paintings adorning the walls, my visual prompts of the emergent themes I am exploring, and the full wall window at the front with a sheer white curtain allowing light in but protecting privacy. Sometimes I sit in here writing and open the front door, putting a flag out on the street that says “Art studio open”, and people walking by wander in to have a look at the art and chat about this and that. Towards the end of this project, I camped out in the studio for a week while my house was being painted. Others have thanked me for creating the space here. My heightened awareness of the impact of context during this investigation has had ripple effects that have flowed into my creating a place of my own, my studio, to work in and share with others.

Belinda referred to my studio during the focus group dinner party. At the time, I felt a little self-conscious and embarrassed as Belinda spoke, because of the exuberant compliments she paid me. However, what she expressed highlights the importance of creating contexts to meet and work in that exemplify our values and the kinds of stories we wish to live within. Here she is describing the launch party of my studio and gallery, and the tenth anniversary of our professional organisation.

“It was a beautiful occasion, a fantastic event, it was such a feeling of accomplishment, but also joy and a sense of a new opening, of ‘what’s going to happen in this gallery?’..... I feel like this is such a special place, and I know it’s transformed,.... so many times, for so many purposes... a very special place... shared so wonderfully with people... It’s very intimate, and very precious. And very connecting and interconnecting as well.”

Here is another vignette about a conversation with Jan when she came to visit my studio for a supervision session. In this snippet, she draws attention to the space in which we were meeting.

Jan looks around the space, “This is such an ambiguous space! It’s quite intriguing... Is it a gallery? Is it a studio?... It feels like a space in which to play”.

Wood (2000) makes a case for the importance of art studios to provide a containing context for art therapy that enables absorption. He reviewed the history of studios in art therapy practice from the 1940s onwards, and some of the socio-political context that saw art therapy studios diminish during the 1980s and 1990s. He gave examples of the studios of well-known artists such as Bacon, Bonnard, Turner, Monet, Matisse and Rodin, and suggested that:

[T]he studios of famous artists develop out of their particular personalities and their forms of art-making. The ability to create a space for oneself in which it is possible to become absorbed is valuable because it enables the discovery of those personal rituals that produce the possibility of mental space. (p. 41)

Fenner (2010), in her doctoral thesis “Place, matter and meaning”, found that the contexts of art

therapy are a significant part of the therapeutic encounter. She describes how therapists “relied on material qualities as professional supports” (p. viii) while clients “identified objects and zones which they considered their ‘own’ for the period of therapy” (p. viii). Importantly, Fenner highlights:

[This evidence extends] current understandings of the dynamic nature of the therapy encounter, going beyond traditional theories of the therapeutic relationship, the therapist, client and art work triangle and techniques. This study provides an environmental and global view of the art therapy encounter”.
(p. viii)

My studio became a creative partner in providing a creative context for many parts of the “Seeing her stories” inquiry. As I have come to understand the seeing experience more deeply over time, my art therapy practice in my studio has developed, and I now sometimes use the art works on the walls to evoke a somatic experience with others. I invite them to tune in to the here and now through their visual sensing, to notice what is in the room, including the art works, and to allow their eyes to rest on something that feels like a resource. People often find something in one of the artworks to rest their eyes on, gaze at, and sometimes have an imaginary dialogue with. I find it amazing to hear about these experiences when people then share what it was like for them.

Installations in carefully chosen spaces were part of the “Seeing her stories” project. The

first significant installation was the public art exhibition in the MIECAT space. The second was the installation of artworks and the dinner party in my studio that was created for the focus group.

Fenner and Allen (2014) have highlighted how:

relationship between experience of place and a sense of belonging is understood as critical to healthy community building … [and] the arts offer a unique means of drawing people together in place. (p. 186)

Fenner and Allen’s (2014) weaving together of choosing an appropriate space, and then an art installation itself becoming a meeting place resonate with what occurred in my project. Similarly, descriptions by Fenner and Allen (2014), of participants’ interactions becoming part of the organic choreography of the installation, resonate with my observations of the interactions at the “Seeing her stories” dinner party event as I described in discussing embodiment.

The sense of place the installation created had both material and ephemeral aspects. The ephemeral aspects included the sounds of conversation in the telling of stories, music, dance, the acts of negotiating changes in the placement of the objects and the presence of the delegates as they interacted with and around the form over the two days.
(Fenner & Allen, 2014, p. 185-186)



Figure 6.10 My studio, 2018.



Figure 6.11 My studio and art works as creative partners, 2009.



Figure 6.12 My studio and art works as creative partners, 2014.



Figure 6.13 My studio and art works as creative partners, 2016.

Although my project emphasised participants' seeing experiences rather than their participation in making or arranging, many of the elements of engaging in a shared experience of encounter within the context of an art installation overlap with this description. Engaging in this way, together, the art installation became a context for meeting, sharing, personal meaning making, contemplation and creating a sense of being connected, even if for a short time, in a supportive community of women. In this way, the "Seeing her stories" project became a context in itself, and a meeting place for the women to share stories.

In looking at these examples from the literature, as well as what happened during the "Seeing her stories" inquiry, we can broaden our perspectives about the relationships between seeing experiences and contexts even further. We can see that artworks, art based projects and contexts can be partners in co-creating spaces for people to meet and interact, and that when these places resonate with our values they can enable our stories to be seen and shared in ways that are safe and connecting.

Engaging with these discussions has prompted me to look again at what emerged in the "Seeing her stories" project.



Figure 6.14 My studio and art works as creative partners, 2017.



Figure 6.15 My studio and art works as creative partners, 2018a.



Figure 6.16 My studio and art works as creative partners, 2018b.

In reflecting on the qualities that appear to have contributed to “safe seeing”, I look again to my source material: my own experiences and the accounts from the women in their own words.

I notice the presence of invitations. The original exhibition was an event that people were invited to attend. During the event I invited those present to notice what happened for them in their seeing experiences. Participation in the ongoing inquiry was an invitation and the women self-selected to become and remain involved. All of the women who became involved already knew me and there was existing trust between us. In addition, they were a group of relatively well, robust and resilient women who would not be considered particularly vulnerable. I tried to give enough information so that they could make an informed choice about what participation might involve, and to honour that their contribution was important. In Linda’s story that I share at the end of this chapter, she mentions that my invitation for her to join me in painting at Thurra River felt like “a

golden opportunity”, and that although she felt nervous about accepting, she anticipated that there would be something worthwhile about taking up the offer. Having known me for years and observed me painting in nature helped her to feel safe enough to accept the invitation.

In research, as in life, extending invitations held some risk for myself, quite possibly the risk of rejection. It is a delicate place of vulnerability to extend an invitation, knowing that it might not be taken up. The invitation is like an expression of wanting to become closer and more intimate, very real interpersonal risks. Both extending and accepting invitations are a sensitive dance, made safer when there are conditions of warmth, respect, trust, knowing, interest, connection and relationship. The invitation also leaves room for personal autonomy, and enables space for individuals to make their own choice about whether they feel safe enough to take up the offer, even when it poses some personal challenges, as it did for Linda.



Figure 6.17 People meeting in the studio to see my “her stories” together, 2014.

Contexts played a part in creating a safe space for the seeing of her stories in this project. The gallery spaces at MIECAT and my studio provided contained environments that people entered by their own choice. While this choice to attend does not preclude risk, the people who attended were there because they wanted to be. The project would have been very different if, for example, I had held the exhibition in the dining room at a women's prison or on a psychiatric in-patient ward, where the women's seeing of my stories would have been involuntary. MIECAT and my studio were also places where I felt safe enough to show my stories and reveal aspects of myself through the artwork. I certainly would not have felt that way if I was showing the paintings in the context of the university where I originally enrolled, where my hints at taboo subject matter were judged as indicators that I might indeed be a "risky" individual, revealing institutional attitudes like those mentioned by Linnell (2012).

Sharing our risky experiences seems to have played a part in enabling us to experience them safely. Finding a relationship or a community of support with whom we could share was important. At both the dinner party, and also painting with Linda, conditions of non-judgement and appreciation were cultivated and this seems to have helped enable safety. Linda mentioned that my suggestions, and sharing of techniques that I find helpful myself in the painting process, were made "gently", supporting her when she felt stuck. Likewise, at the dinner party, sharing space, eating together, honouring each other by listening with focused attention, and leaving time between speaking and responding, as well as emotional relating and mirroring, all contributed to a sense of sharing in

each other's experiences, and participating together in life's ups and downs.

Considering these elements of safety and how they were created within the project, leads me to reflect back to the notions of how my project design was particularly accessible to the mostly white middle class and educated women who became the research companions, and who this might have excluded. From an ethics and safety perspective, the invitational method, the context and my relationship with the participants did enable them to self-select. I maintain that these combined factors, while perhaps limiting access to a more diverse group, also helped to ensure that the people who decided to participate were those who felt safe enough to do so.

Another notable feature of the group of participants is that we were brought together by our interests, a context of shared values, rather than by the context of a problematised life experience.

My overall sense is that engaging in these safe risks of seeing artwork together was at times challenging, but that, rather than being harmful risks, they were experienced as challenges, and meeting the challenges in a safe way, by choice, in a contained environment in supportive company, was ultimately empowering. As Linda's story at the end of this chapter reveals, this empowerment has ripple effects that flow on into our lives in other contexts.

I will now look to ideas about how seeing artworks can evoke strong emotions. I consider how safe ways of tuning in to these responses, rather than risk adverse avoidance of them, can help us to connect with things that are important.

Emotions, safety and values in seeing artworks

Perspectives on the role of emotion in therapeutic and art based contexts offer some insights, and in combination with the findings of this inquiry can contribute further ideas. As Springham's (2008) example shows, sometimes a strong powerful emotional response can move us to cause harm, either to ourselves or others. In looking at the examples mentioned by the participants in this inquiry, I wondered whether the "safe risks" that they describe could be seen as fitting within a "window of tolerance", a broadly disseminated psychological idea based on the "Yerkes-Dodson law" (Hanoch & Vitouch, 2004, p. 428).

The so-called window of tolerance represents the degree to which people can remain receptive to new input and learn from therapy. Therefore, therapy should focus on helping clients stay within the top boundary of the window of tolerance. This perspective is consistent with the Yerkes-Dodson learning curve and the need for moderate arousal. From a neurotransmitter perspective, this accesses the NMDA glutamate receptors and the alpha2A NE receptors, thus facilitating neuroplasticity. The window of tolerance serves as a range that must expand through incremental exposure, always exceeding what clients think may be possible. (Arden, 2015, p. 171)

As I looked more deeply into the research underpinning the idea of the window of tolerance I learned that this idea is based on Yerkes and Dodson's original studies involving mice. They used the level

of light as a measure of difficulty and the power of an electric shock as a measure of stimulus to make correlations between "the relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit formation" (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908, p. 459). The data they collected were used to develop the idea of the inverted U, which has been used to suggest that moderate arousal – rather than low or high arousal is the optimum condition for learning.

I wondered about the participants in the "Seeing her stories" inquiry, who experienced emotional arousal in their seeing, that was at times quite strong and moving, and how their experience appeared to lie within the window of tolerance. I also became interested in how the strong emotional responses to seeing the artworks and sharing about this seemed connected to personal insights, new knowings and the participants' values. These wonderings led me to consider the elements that helped create safety even when emotions were strong as I have outlined above.

Hanoch and Vitouch (2004), argue that arousal is not uni-dimensional, and that having more information is not necessarily preferable to having less information, depending on the situation and task at hand – hence the title of their article "When less is more". What I found particularly relevant was their reference to an example that used seeing experiments as evidence for a different way of conceptualising the relationship between emotional arousal and the task at hand:

In contrast to what would be expected from a generalization of the YDL, it was found that being in a highly emotionally aroused state led to an enhancement in participants' performance. That is, the fastest responses of all

were responses to the feared stimuli by fearful participants. (Hanoch & Vitouch, 2004, p. 443)

Hanoch and Vitouch (2004) propose an idea that they call “arousal-congruent performance” (p. 443). This means that when the emotions we experience are related to the task at hand, we can actually perform better.

Within their relational neuroscience perspective, Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) conceive of the encounter between artworks and beholders as an empathic and inter-subjective relationship. Importantly, they offer a multi-layered and contextualised overall view of what can happen in our seeing of art works:

Automatic emotional response to artworks, as well as aesthetic judgment, are involved in these dynamic experiences. Such an evaluation requires the contribution of explicit cognitive appraisal, holistic grouping of the individual’s values, knowledge, personal taste, interest in the artwork, prior knowledge, familiarity, and prosocial intent. These processing levels of aesthetic experience are tightly bound, yet not interchangeable. When the experience is enhanced by empathy, it is more likely to be accepted as positive, rewarding, and beautiful. (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015, pp. 386-387)

They speak about beholders of artworks experiencing empathy towards the image and how empathising enables beholders to emotionally feel and physically embody the qualities they perceive in art, as Nicola did at the dinner party. The presence of empathy is connected with feelings related to safety when experiencing strong emotional responses to visual art.

“Art as therapy” philosophers, de Botton and Armstrong (2013) describe one of the functions of art as being “self-understanding” (p. 44). Their description seems to suggest that we can actually experience the artwork as extending empathy towards ourselves. This is one of the ways that art can act, as described by attendees at the dinner party, as if the art work actually grabbed them. De Botton and Armstrong (2013) write, “from time to time, we encounter works of art that seem to latch on to something we have felt but never recognised clearly before” (p. 44). Just as Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015) emphasise that we can empathise with and mirror art, de Botton and Armstrong (2013) highlight that art can empathise with, and mirror ourselves back to, us.

Looking at Twombly’s painting assists us in a crucial thought: “The part of me that wonders about important questions and then gets confused has not had enough recognition. I have not taken proper care of it. But now I see this part of myself reflected in the mirror of art; now I can make more of it”. (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 47)

They explain that this kind of experience of feeling mirrored by art can be affirming, remind us of what is important to us, help us communicate it to others, feel understood and develop friendships.

We can look back to what actually happened for the inquirers in the “Seeing her stories” project, and perhaps build on the ideas of Hanoch and Vitouch (2004), Hass-Cohen and Findlay (2015), and de Botton and Armstrong (2013). These ideas together might suggest that when we view images we are drawn to see things that evoke our emotions, and that we can empathise with art and feel that it

mirrors us back to ourselves. I would like to assert that this is what happened for Nicola and others in this inquiry. “Seeing her stories” together and in safe contexts evoked strong emotions in ways that were challenging but empowering; they helped us see what is important, and pointed us towards our values.

Seeing her stories in context: Meeting places and culture making

The contexts that I paint in have become more and more important to me during the course of this inquiry. My current artworks are all responses to the environment – sometimes in city spaces and sometimes in the country, bush, desert or coast. When I paint in natural landscapes, or focus on the living organic forms of plants and atmosphere in urban settings, I am tuning in to the stories of mother earth. My eyes and my whole body drink in her stories. My hands and my whole body make my visual story in response, connecting me and my environment in the creative life energy of the universe (McNiff 2016).

When I showed one series of artworks at the exhibition that I titled, “Meeting Places” in 2014, I wrote a statement that read:

“Art is the place where I connect with myself, converse with my environment, and the place where I meet you.”

My statement was expressing how art itself can be conceived of as a context, a place for meeting and exchange. This is certainly part of what happened when my stories were seen by myself and others during this inquiry.

The following pages contain photographs of some of the meeting places that I painted, *in situ*, “plein air”, and from life. My commitment to this practice

of painting in context has deepened over time and become a source of wonderment and nourishment. I consider this practice to be a way for me to really “meet” a place, by spending time in it and with it. Creating an image in this slow way is in counter culture to the consumerist orientation of “doing” a place on a holiday, as in “We did Paris, Rome and London”, and collecting trophy snapshots as evidence. Meeting places in this way reflects my valuing of being present, connected and in relationship with my context.

Jordan’s (2015) focus on nature and therapy has interested me in relation to the importance of painting in living environments and the profound effects this has on my sense of connection, intactness, resource-fullness and wellness. Importantly, Jordan (2015) stresses a relative model of health:

[A] subjective, dynamic and unfolding process of health is placed in a relational framework within a natural environment, mental health can be located in a systemic interactional process, situating a relationship with the natural world as central to mental health. (p. 13)

In unpacking the range of processes that can be engaged in natural environments, Jordan (2015) mentions walking and talking, wilderness trips, mindfulness, focusing engagement with the senses, embodied process, relationship with the natural space, engagement with natural materials, and ritual. I can relate to all of these when I reflect on my painting experiences over the years while camping at Thurra River. Linda’s story “The tree painting”, that I share at the end of this chapter, illustrates the interweaving of these, and illustrates how awareness of the relationship between context and well-being, and deepening



Figure 6.18 "After the dinner party", Carla van Laar, 2014.

An art work I painted in response to the traces of a happy gathering in the studio.

connection with the organic and living world and other people through painting, has become part of what can happen when a woman's stories are seen.

I consider my process of painting to be a practice through which I enact my values, and my artworks to be stories that perform these values. My artworks are stories that provide an alternative to dominant discourses, responding and contributing to my context about things that are important to me. Through my artwork, my stories act in concert with the stories of countless others who care about creating safe places for subverted and subversive stories to be seen and heard, and I am part of culture making.

Recently, my interest in painting flowers in interiors has re-emerged in my art practice, in parallel with streetscapes in my local urban village that show patches of sky and the backs of historical buildings that will soon be lost from view due to a building boom in high rise apartments (figures 6.32 and 6.33).

While I was set up in the local supermarket car park painting "Farewell patch of blue, Albert St", a

workman from the building site wandered over to look and chat. When I told him of my interest in painting transient aspects of the landscape that would soon be obscured by the high-rise, particularly this patch of sky, his response was "You should paint the crane". Perhaps this vignette illustrates our different ways of seeing the same landscape, and our different cultural relationships with the same geographical place.

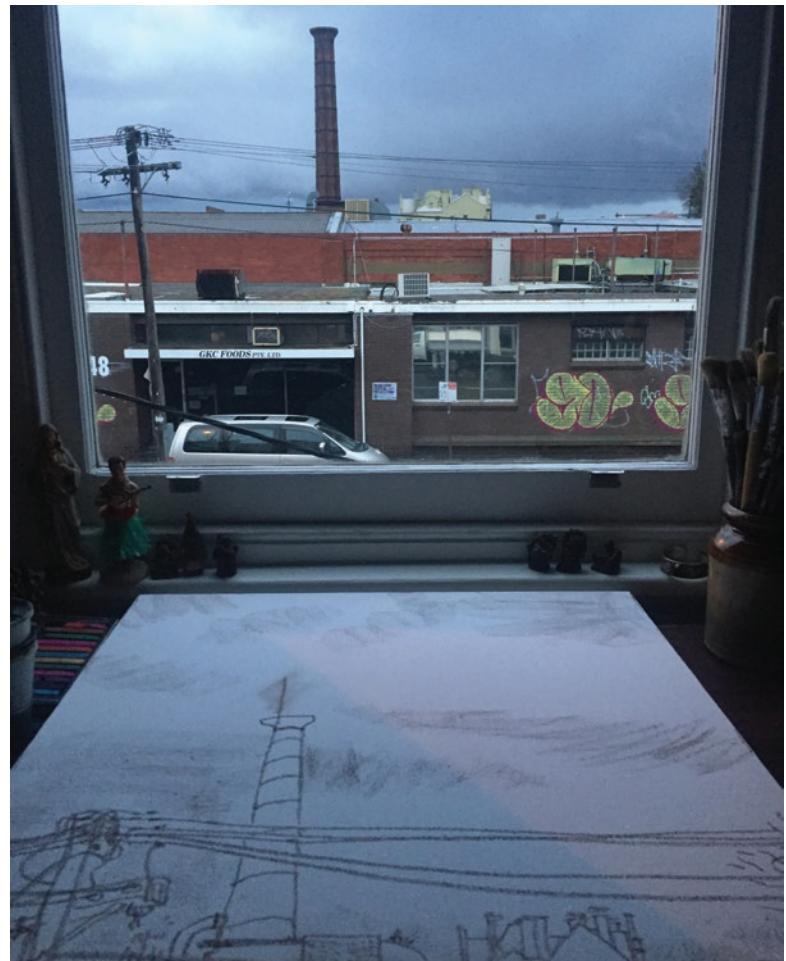
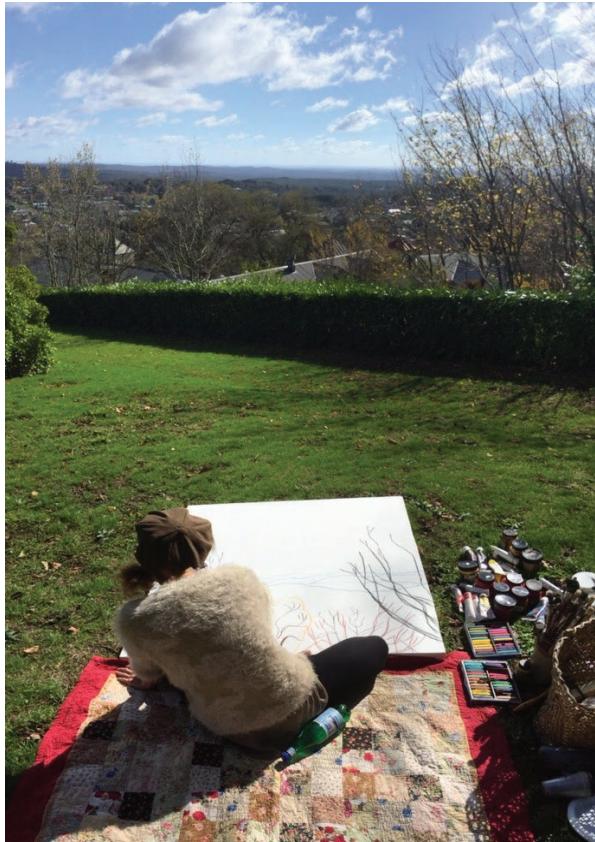
Synchronously, an exhibition featuring artworks by three women famous for their flower paintings, Georgia O'Keefe, Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington-Smith, was showing at a local gallery and I visited it to see the works. Afterwards, while reading the essays in the exhibition catalogue, I was fascinated to read about the attitudes and discourses of the Australian art world during the 1920s and 1930s when these women artists were painting:

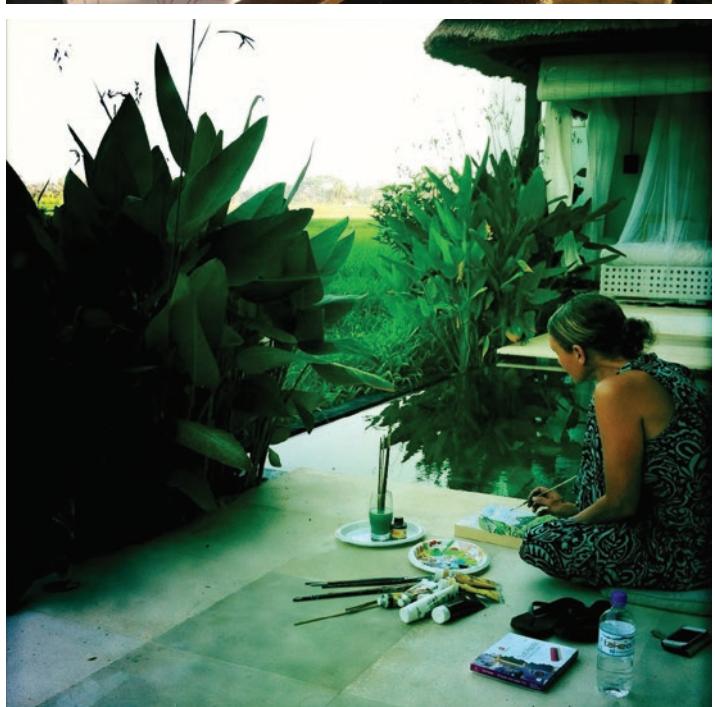
Noble images of masculine labour and sun-drenched idylls of the so-called Heidelberg School or "Australian impressionists" resounded,



Figure 6.19 Painting one of her stories, 2016.

Painting in the environment on a sand dune in Croajingolong National Park an hour hike from our campground.





Facing page: top left to bottom left, then top right to bottom right:
Figure 6.20 Painting flowers in my bedroom, 2017; Figure 6.21
Painting at Tower Hill, 2016; Figure 6.22 Painting the view from
my bedroom window, 2017; Figure 6.23 Painting at Wombat Hill,
2016; Figure 6.24 Painting Wild Dog Dam, 2016; Figure 6.25
Painting in Breeze St, 2017.

Above: top left to bottom left, then top right to bottom right:
Figure 6.26 Painting under the bridge at Thurra River, 2016;
Figure 6.27 Painting in the supermarket carpark, 2017;
Figure 6.28 Painting at Point Hicks, 2016; Figure 6.29 Painting in
Sydney Road, 2017; Figure 6.30 Painting at Corindi Beach, 2011;
Figure 6.31 Painting the rice fields in Ubud, 2016.



Figure 6.32 "Roses with gum leaves". Carla van Laar, 2017.



Figure 6.33 "Farewell patch of blue, Albert St". Carla van Laar, 2017.

while the still life, an essentially domestic genre, was firmly entrenched in its customary low position under history, religious, portrait and landscape painting. That flower painting, in particular, was stereotypically a feminine subject further diminished its esteem. Preston's contemporary, the reactionary artist Lionel Lindsay, regarded such art as the "apotheosis of Useless Beauty". It was just this sort of condescension that led the art historian Norman Bryson to associate the persistent downgrading of the still life with the historical oppression of women. (Harding, 2016, p. 17)

As a woman who paints flowers, I resonate with O'Keefe, Preston and Cossington-Smith's art making practices, and their persistence in "painting spirited depictions of their private visual domains and looking into ways of picturing imagery specific to the local culture" (Harding, 2016, p. 18) despite the dominant context of disdain towards their subject matter. As women painting our stories, we contribute to subverting the dominance of "male gazes" that are imbedded in cultural attitudes such as those described in the quote above.

By focusing on my own and the participants' descriptions of their lived experiencing, I challenge therapeutic practices such as those that Linnell (2012) describes as having "the authority of normative psychological practice and of psychoanalysis" (p. 37). By utilising my own embodiment as a sensing, seeing and creating woman to author stories by applying paint on canvas, I subvert traditions of women as objects of the male gaze in art history that still permeate popular culture (Berger, 1972; Butrym, 2014). My artworks can be seen as stories of a female

gaze, and part of a growing discourse that values multiple and diverse perspectives. For me, art as a way of meeting places is a way of contributing to a counter culture of "meeting" rather than consuming. In this way, art can be a practice that is also a context maker, and art makers can be thought of as "cultural intermediaries" (Swan, 2010, p. 220).

Creating safe and artful environments can be part of transformative processes, and contexts can be considered an active partner in the "therapeutic bricolage" (Swan, 2010, p. 220). This perspective includes understandings of the mutual influences that art works and contexts have on each other, and the intersubjective experiencing that occurs between people, artworks and their environments.

As an early champion of art therapy in English hospitals, Hill (1945) agreed with Florence Nightingale's assertion that the presence of artworks in hospital settings has a positive influence on healing (Hill, 1945).

Philosophers de Botton and Armstrong (2013) share this view, however they also emphasise and problematise institutional practices of the art industry and how viewers are conditioned to engage with art:

[This conditioning] lies in the way that art is taught, sold and presented by the art establishment. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, our relationship with art has been weakened by a profound institutional reluctance to address the questions of what art is for (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 4).

They suggest that when we engage in therapeutic seeing, art can assist us with tasks such as remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-

understanding, growth and appreciation (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013). They muse that therapeutic seeing might be assisted by art institutions if, rather than grouping artworks by periods of history or geography, galleries were curated by themes of human experience, such as “Tenderness” (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 94). These ideas can be adapted for how we see art in other, less formal contexts.

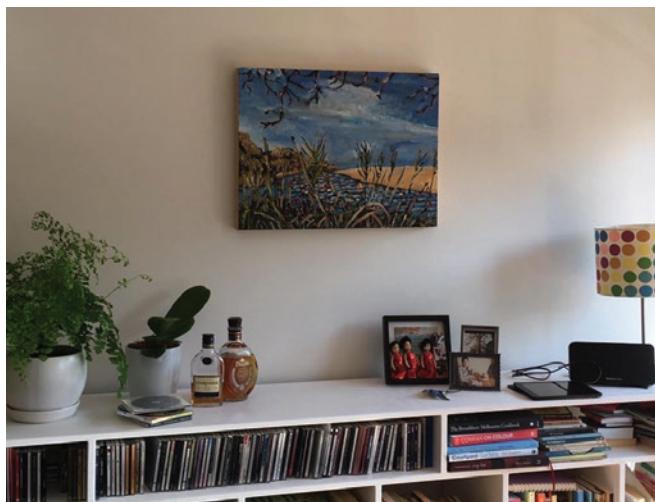
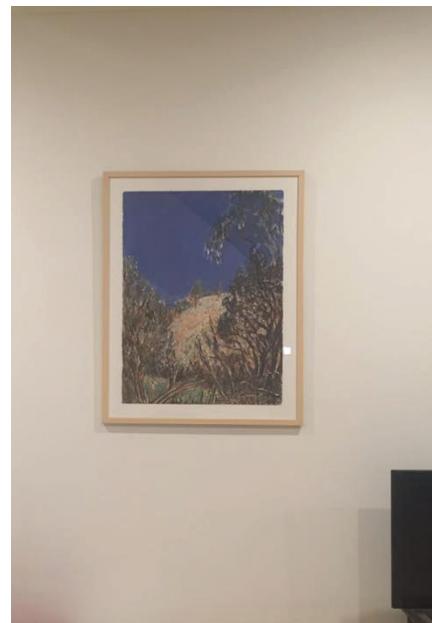
Art therapists Melliar and Brühka (2010) share their story of a particular image made in an art therapy group, and how the image came to have a presence in other settings and be seen outside of therapy. They encourage:

thinking about the physical image in an art therapy context as an embodied subject that becomes known in the world rather than an object originating from and belonging solely to the artist’s internal world. (Melliar & Brühka, 2010, p. 5)

The role of the artwork itself is part of what fascinates me. I reflect on my own “*in situ*” painting practice, in which I use my awareness of somatic experiencing to notice what my eye is drawn to. This is usually something of interest, challenge, curiosity, pleasure, strength or other engaging experience. The resulting images convey something of my experience of being in the place, and viewers have described my paintings as communicating the energy of the place itself. Other people who are familiar with the place in which I paint have been particularly moved by the artworks, and take them home. At times, people have become attracted and attached to an artwork of mine even when the subject is a place they do not personally know. Some of the reasons they have

shared include that they love the ocean, or that the painting evokes the feelings of place where they would like to be.

Recently, I have been offering my friends the opportunity to come to the studio and choose an artwork to take home for a couple of months. I have been delighted to receive photographs from them of my stories in their home contexts, and messages about how the presence of the artwork brings quality to their lives. While the messages are brief, their joy and appreciation is clear. Seeing photographs of my artworks in other people’s spaces shows the mutual influence of the context and the artwork; the artworks are seen differently in the various spaces, and the settings are transformed by their presence. Here are some examples from posts on social media:



From top left to bottom left, then top right to bottom right:

Figure 6.34 "Wild Dog Creek after the rain" at Alice's, 2017.

"Art sitting some beautiful art work. Don't know how I'm going to say goodbye to this one"

Figure 6.35 "Tower Hill" at Angus's, 2017.

"Our new Tower Hill painting! Pride of place with a special meaning for us all. Love you lots. Xxx"

Figure 6.36 "Point Hicks" at Colleen's, 2017.

"So happy to have this beautiful painting in our home."

Figure 6.37 Artworks installed at Camilla's work place, 2017.

"Your pictures have done wonders for our offices on Collins St! We are so grateful to be art sitting these beauties."

Figure 6.38 "Summer at Wild Dog" at Gretel's, 2017.

"The beautiful art work in my house. Love it."

Figure 6.39 "Backyard pot plants" at Anne's, 2017.

"Carla van Laar this is truly a joy in our room! What a pleasure to art sit!!!! A huge thank you!!!!"

Figure 6.40 "Bridge to Thurra" at Peter and Marilyn's, 2019.

"... this beautiful painting – a scene of Thurra River from the bridge – for Marilyn's birthday. Thanks so much Carla for enabling us to have such a precious reminder of our special place."



Integrating context, risk and safety in making and seeing artworks

The final story that I will share in this section links back to my methodology, the “organic” structure that underpins my inquiry, and how values become embodied interactions in context and practice. I asked Linda to write something about the “Looking through the tree painting” that she fell in love with, bought and took home, and also about painting together in nature. Here are Linda’s own words:

“The tree painting

I bought this painting to celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary, a rather moderate weekend away in a rented friend’s beach house. When I went to Carla’s exhibition with my two young adult children, all three of us were drawn to the tree painting.

My husband David and I have very different tastes. Early in our relationship we rarely agreed on images or artwork, and as we both live in our home we did not buy anything unless we both liked it. Therefore I felt it a bit of a risk buying an image that I liked, but felt supported when my children revealed they also liked the tree painting. I have also become much more of a risk taker in the second half of my life. The painting is now equally loved by David.

We have placed the tree painting in the most focal part of our home extension. As you enter our front door you cast your eye down the hallway, the glass doors at the back draw your eye into the garden, straight past the tree painting. This painting has a very different view from far away, the colours blend and morph. As you come further into our home you come closer to this painting, as you walk towards the back door and garden you get a very close up view of the highly-textured painting and the colors separate.

The two main branches, I feel is a metaphor of our relationship. Both of us sprouting and growing from the solid trunk of our long-standing relationship, but both strong lead branches. The trunk has to be very strong to hold the weight of these diverse people, sometimes in opposite directions but always with our common foundation.

I like the idea that you can look beyond the tree to the light and sky behind reminding us that anything is possible and the world beyond our tree is big and exciting. Lift your eyes to the heavens and horizon, see a bigger picture, don’t be stuck where you are now. We have windows on the eastern side of our renovation, up high with only sky view, to catch the dawn light.

One year while holidaying at Thurra, Carla invited me to paint with her. I was very nervous, but determined not to let this golden opportunity go by. This was my first painting as an adult. I was very pleased with the result. I took a photograph of the work in situ so one could see what I was looking at and the painting.

My own small painting is on my wall at work with the photo of it in situ next to it and a large sign that I made that says "Take a minute everyday". This provides me with a visual reminder to breathe, take a minute, refresh, focus my mind and be present. This gives me the energy I need to sustain my very active work life, which involves giving out to others. This painting brings a little of the outdoors to me daily. Reminds me to be a risk taker, show courage, believe in myself, I know that I can do it if I want to."



Figure 6.41 "Looking through the tree", 2013.

Linda's story weaves together the themes of context, risk and safety. The natural environment is life restoring for Linda, and seeing artwork of nature in different contexts such as her home and workplace helps her to connect to this life energy. The risks she describes include choosing a painting to share before consulting her husband, and taking up my offer to paint together. In seeing the artworks she is reminded of her capacity to take safe risks such as these, and the rewards that they can bring, such as courage and self-belief.

In a chapter we wrote together about creating a country retreat for city girls who had been subjected to sexual abuse, my colleagues Reina Michaelson, Julie Lacy, and I tell the story of one particular art based response where the themes of context, risk and safety were likewise woven together in creative ways (Lacy et al., 2007).

We highlight attention to being aware of risks and creating safety from physical, environmental and interpersonal perspectives, and how we did this with the group of girls in the healing retreat setting. We refer to the safe physical distance from everyday city life by driving out to the country house together, and also the safe therapeutic distance created through the use of art based modalities:

The opening activity invited the girls to make totems about safety. This offered an opportunity to explore and create a protected environment for the rest of the weekend. We started by going for a walk through the grounds of the retreat, finding out how far it extended, and physicalizing the concept of safe boundaries by discovering the exact perimeters of the property. We walked through the long grass,

discussing how to keep safe from snakes by making lots of noise, and how to keep safe from being lost by always staying together. We collected natural materials such as rocks, sticks, and grasses. Everyone was invited to find a place out-of-doors, close to the house, and to each use what she had found to create a totem as a guardian of the house for the weekend. Some of the girls worked together, and some worked individually. (Lacy et al., 2007 p. 288)

Looking back to the content of this passage, I can see that an awareness of the inter-relationship between context, risk and safety is an inherent part of the way we were working. Reviewing how context, risk and safety emerged in the "Seeing her stories" project as important and interwoven themes, I feel once again moved to emotion, with a rush in my chest and wet eyes. I know what this means. This means that the particular contexts in which I work, paint and connect with others, and finding creative ways to support risk taking in such a way that learning and personal growth are possible, are important to me. They are part of what I value, how I work, and I am happy to see them here in this inquiry, being honoured and given their place.

The visual and textual stories, and dialogue with the literature, in this chapter have illustrated and explored the intertwining themes of context, risk and safety in "Seeing her stories". I have considered how contexts perform values that can inhibit or enable diverse stories to be seen. I have provided examples of how participants in this inquiry experienced variations on the themes of context, risk and safety in their seeing of my artworks. I have explored the necessity for art therapists to be mindful of the risks in adopting

institutionalised language and practices that perform values that are undermining to the safe seeing of diverse stories. I have reflected on how, in the “Seeing her stories” project, we co-created safe contexts for sharing together about what we saw in the artworks and how we were affected by our seeing. In particular, I emphasised invitations and choices as part of creating safe seeing. We have seen the presence of risk and safety within various contexts, and our continuing yet changing relationship to this presence as a ripple-on effect from the experience of seeing, that, at times, evokes our emotions and points us towards things that are consistently meaningful and important to us, which can connect us to our values.

The various perspectives about the relationships between contexts and seeing experiences in art therapy, and the threads of meaning that were teased out during the “Seeing her stories” inquiry, have implications when viewed together. What we can see here, is that the contexts of our seeing include our personal life histories, the institutions we engage with, the culture of societies that we live and work in, and the histories of our art making practices. Being mindful of these multiple influences broadens the ways in which we can consciously create contexts that support ourselves and others to safely share stories through art, enabling art to be a meeting place, and contributing to the making of cultural contexts that are increasingly consistent with our values.

I will, in the following chapter, explore the next emergent themes that flow from here: change and continuity.



Figure 6.42 "Brunswick backstreet". Carla van Laar, 2017.

This painting is a story about my connection with the living world. In my urban environment, sometimes the sky is the only organic shape that I can see. I lament over spaces that will soon be lost from view. My artworks tell the story of my changing urban context and my continuing relationship with it.