

**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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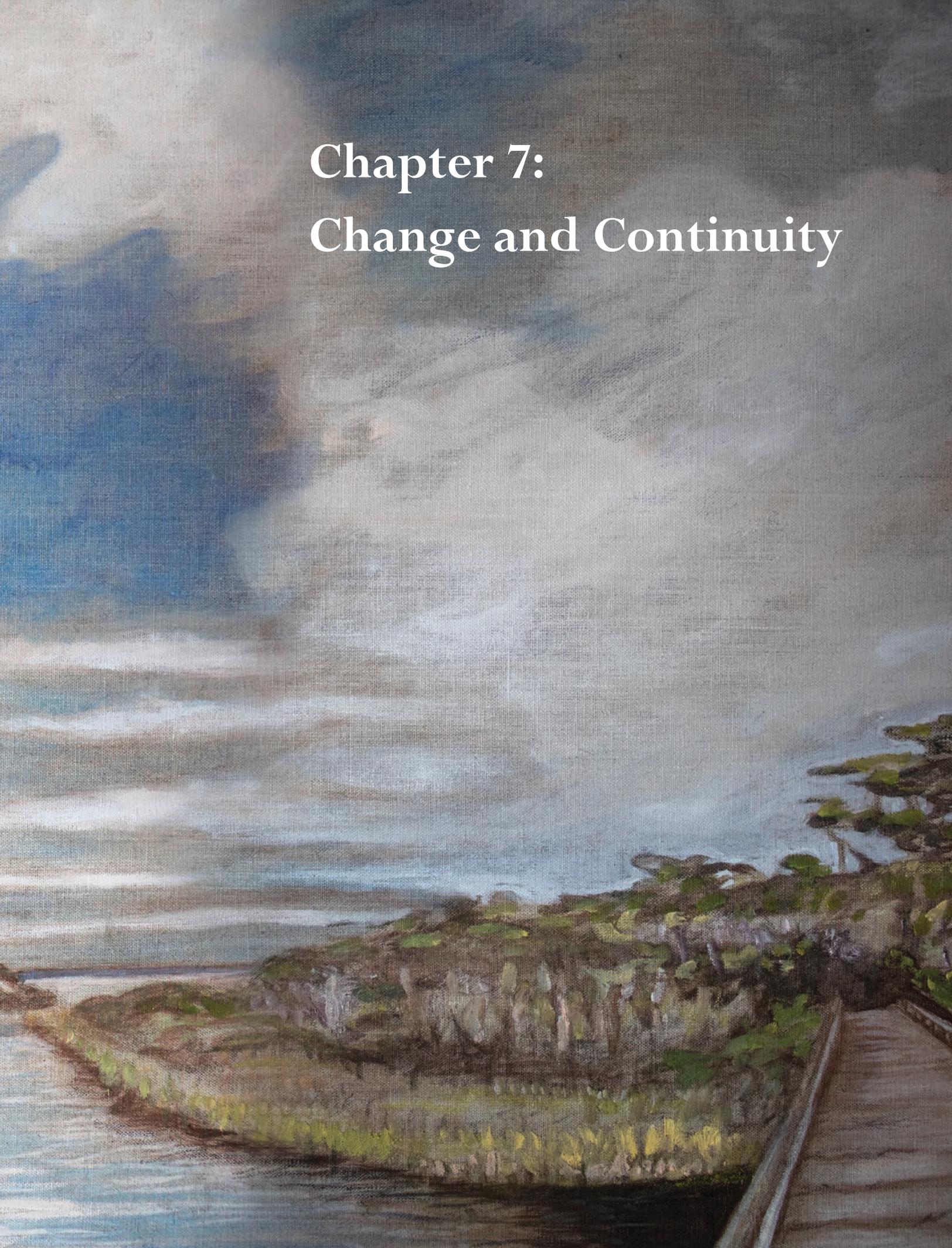
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Chapter 7:  
Change and Continuity

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

We can become aware of change  
and continuity

*Observing change*

*Unknowing, curiosity and inquiry*

*Capture fleeting moments*

*Represent the shifting and dynamic*

*Changing subjectivity and identity*

*Knowledge that is always*

*incomplete, developing, uncertain, complex, changeable and multi-faceted*

*Improvising with the unknown and open to discovery*

*Journeying*

*Changing*

*Becoming*

*Seeds, flowers and growth of life*

*Movingly important*

*Origins*

*Memories*

*Shadowy memories and wondering*

*I revisit memories of Oma from my entire life*

*Put the memory outside myself*

*Receive gifts of memory, sense and imagination*

*I contemplate getting older and what this means to me*

*Accumulated experiences of past, present and future*

*Moments in time are linked*

*Continuity*



## Noticing changes and awareness of continuity in seeing her stories

In keeping with the classic Buddhist paradox, ‘Impermanence is here to stay’, change has been continuously present within this project from conception, and throughout the inquiry.

When used as a verb, the word ‘change’ can mean to make something different, to become different ourselves, or to exchange something for something else (change, n.d.). When used as a noun, the word ‘change’ describes the “act or process through which something becomes different” (change, n.d.). These meanings were reflected in my research narratives, and those of the participants. The word ‘continuity’ describes an “unbroken and consistent existence or operation of something over time” (continuity, n.d.).

In this chapter I describe and illustrate how change and continuity were woven throughout the ‘Seeing her stories’ project. I have intertwined these two threads together because they are paradoxically linked. Continuing presence can give rise to awareness of changes, and by paying attention to things changing, we can become more attuned to links across time, things that flow from one another, things that continue.

The changes over time within this research included changes in methodology, changes in attitude, changes in my approach to art making, changes in the artworks during the painting process, changes in my own and others’ perception of the artworks after they are completed, changes in my approach to writing, and noticing changes in ourselves.

Continuity is represented in the threads of meaning that are contained within the stories about change. These threads of meaning recur throughout the research, interlacing and overlapping with each other. In the stories about change, the themes of presence, embodiment, context, risk and safety remain constant, and the themes of continuity, relationship, connection and co-creation emerge.

In the ‘Seeing her stories’ inquiry, continuity co-exists with change: linking moments in time; connecting past, present and future; passing meanings from our ancestors to us to our descendants; weaving through memories, experiences and imagination; moving through journeys of growing, unfolding and becoming; fertilising, seeding, germinating and blossoming; shaping, forming and crafting our relationships; and spinning threads that contain messages and legacies connecting our histories and our dreams in a shared web of meaning.

Figure 7.2 “Vaughn’s flower”. Carla van Laar, 2014.

I painted this picture in the garden at Giverny on Vaughn’s anniversary in 2014. I went outside early in the morning to sit at the same little table I had sat at the day before. Overnight, a beautiful delicate flower had appeared. I felt like it was a personal message from Vaughn and I contemplated our connection as I painted. When I returned later in the day, the flower had already wilted. It had a short yet beautiful life, like his.

Continuity revealed itself in diverse, complex and layered ways throughout the project. Continuity has been on-goingly present within the core foundational values, trust in creative process and art based methods, the flow of each phase giving birth to the next, prolonged engagement with the subject and

participants over an extended length of time, and a strong sense of history and future – personally, through life memories and transitions; in relationship, through friendship and family; and collectively, through being women.



Figure 7.3 “Nature’s window”. Carla van Laar, 2017.

The branches above the campsite where I painted this picture framed a patch of sky that I could sit and watch as the ever-changing clouds drifted on through.

Changes in people's behaviour, feeling states and physiology are frequently presented in art therapy, and generally in therapeutic literature, as evidence that the therapy is alleviating troubling symptoms and improving well-being (Allan, Barford, Horwood, Stevens & Tanti, 2015; Elkis-Abuhoff, Goldblatt, Gaydos & Convery, 2013; Morgan, Knight, Bagwash & Thompson, 2012; Patterson, Crawford, Ainsworth & Waller, 2011; Pounsett, Parker, Hawtin & Collins, 2006; Springham, Thorne & Brooker, 2014). In art therapy, this would typically involve the making of artwork and the artwork of clients being seen and responded to by the therapist and perhaps other group members. In this chapter, I show how our experiences of change within this research project differ from the dominant art therapy narratives about therapeutic change. In our descriptions, change is something to be observed and experienced, rather than as the necessary and desired end point of a therapeutic process.

Continuity is a theme that is less explored in art therapy literature, however it is touched on in various ways by a few authors. For example Ehresmen (2013) focuses on continuity of memory and describes how engaging in art activities gave rise to greater remembering for people with Alzheimer's disease. Elbrecht and Antcliff (2014) emphasise how the continuity of experiences stored in the body over a lifetime can emerge during clay work, while Pounsett et al. (2006) were interested in how continuity across time in a longitudinal research study enabled the noticing of small changes that occurred slowly over a period of years.

Looking further afield, there are several ways of looking at and making sense of change and continuity that I have found helpful as I reflect on what emerged

in this inquiry. Change and continuity are fundamental features of lived stories, narrative ways of knowing, and narrative therapy (Polkinghorne, 1988; Stern, 2004; White & Epston, 1990). Morgan (2000) summarises the importance and co-existence of change and continuity within narrative perspectives, speaking of "events being linked together over time, that have implications for past, present and future actions" (p. 10).

In this chapter I use paintings created during this research, and excerpts from the narratives, to illustrate change as a persistent presence within this project. I aspire to communicate my changing relationship with change itself as I moved through the unfolding research journey. I present images and vignettes from the process of inquiry that illustrate the thread of continuity. These begin with my own experiences and expand outwards to include my interactions with others and reflections from the research participants. There are patterns of similarity in the experiences of the research participants, as well as distinctive differences in our experiences of continuity and the meanings we attribute to these experiences. While looking at change I examine things that were constantly becoming something else, and in depicting continuity I observe the threads of continuity within processes of changing and becoming.

While showing how change and continuity were enacted, represented and discussed in the "Seeing her stories" project, I also explore how change and continuity have been conceptualised and considered in art therapy literature and from narrative perspectives, and consider how the insights from this inquiry expand on current understandings.



Figure 7.4 “Atmosphere”. Carla van Laar, 2017.

The sky continuously compels me as a fascinating and changing subject. It makes me mindful of the life giving atmosphere of Mother Earth, and of the transient nature of all life.

## Change in inquiry

Early in this inquiry I was committed to a methodological approach that would accommodate change. I expected that change would occur within the methods and question, the context of the research, the findings, the participants and within me. This seemed so obvious to me that I was sometimes confounded by the rigidity of more traditional, fixed research methodologies.

At times, finding ways to examine unrepeatable moments, undefinably complex experiences, intangible qualities, and emergent, fluid, dynamic processes was confusing, disorientating and perplexing. At times, it was creative, transformative, illuminating and generative. Each of these experiences were, of course, in relationship with the context in which they occurred, and also, by their nature, ephemeral and constantly renewed.

In this section, I present two vignettes from my research journal. The first is from the very beginning of my research. The second is some years into the inquiry process. In the first one, I am endeavouring to write a central research question and experiencing the struggle between my desire to conduct an exploratory research project and my feelings of being pressured to find a question before beginning the process:

*The research question is now an obsession, a puzzle I cannot solve! It constantly morphs and changes, eluding clarity, shape shifting and darting around me as I try to catch a glimpse of it by peering awkwardly through the lenses of theories that feel like someone else's prescription glasses.*

*I question the value of trying to form such an inflexible question. How can I make a question about something I do not know yet? Everything I come up with seems to be pre-empting my findings, hypothesising or wanting to prove some assumption. I do not want my research to be like that!*

My persistent concerns about the mismatch between the theoretical approaches of the university context I was working within, and my determination to embark on a research methodology that could accommodate change felt disabling and inhibiting of progress. In a way, this created an absence of movement and flow, a stagnation and stuckness; feelings that perhaps indicated the need for change. This sense of mismatch eventually led to one of the first major changes in the research – the change of context when I withdrew from the university and explored other places to study, eventually finding MIECAT.

During a conversation a few years into the research, in a supervision session with my peer inquirer, Belinda, and our supervisor, we reflected on how our projects had changed over the course of time, and referred back to authors who we felt understood and advocated for methods that were accommodating and empathetic to the inevitability of change. In this extract, I am reading a quote from Eisner (1998) aloud to my colleagues during our conversation.

*I read:*

Because the qualitative researcher is devoting substantial time to the study of a situation, and because human situations change, it is often difficult to know if the aims or intentions formulated in advance will remain relevant, interesting or important later on. And because qualitative research typically develops a focus gradually, clarity of aim is not its hallmark at the initial stages of inquiry. (Eisner, 1998, p. 172)

*They are both still listening, so I add my own thoughts,*

*“I feel that the point Belinda and I have both come to simultaneously – and this has happened frequently over the past four years of researching parallel to one another – is that, significantly, conducting this research is about changing US.”*

*I continue to read them another quote I have noted in my journal:*

I submit that, in the conduct of narrative research, the lines between therapy and research blur. The process of answering the researcher's questions changes the answer as participants construct their meaning anew. The process also changes the research question, as together the researcher and respondent create new meanings. (Romanoff, 2001, p. 255)

*Continuing my train of thought, I add, “I found Romanoff's perspective very affirming; he mirrored my concerns regarding looking for fixed meanings or essences of human experience. My interest throughout this whole research has been about how to sensitively observe and represent processes of change. My hunch was that things would*

*change over the course of the research – myself, my research participants, the research itself, and of course, the world.”*

What if our participants’ truths change in the telling of their stories? Because of its reflexive nature, narrative is a powerful vehicle for change. If each time the story is told it changes, then our research product, which may sometimes be based on one iteration, is of necessity ephemeral. (Romanoff, 2001, p. 250)

*“So our research products are like improvisations”, says Belinda, “Snapshots of a moment in time.”*

My relationship with change within the research has shifted from a discordant and isolating place of confusion and struggle, through a period of processing and reflection, to a more resonant place of shared acceptance, acknowledgement, wonder and humour. There is a period of approximately four years between the first and second vignettes about my relationship with change in inquiry. We are therefore possibly observing something of the changes in relationship that can come with time passing, such as familiarity, depth and affection. It is also apparent that the institutional context of my experiencing has changed and that this has contributed to my relationship with change. The value systems of each institution are implied in the dominant discourses, or stories that they tell and listen to about research.

The first story values a well-defined question, in keeping with a traditional objectivist and scientifically orientated approach to knowledge, facts and truth. This story is at odds with my actual experience and the discord between context (the university) and subject (me) contributes to my feelings of discomfort, frustration, hopelessness and struggle.

In the second story, I am reassuring myself by looking to the literature for friends or allies – people who write stories about research that resonate with my own value set and experience. Reminding myself of these alternative stories about research helps me to feel less alone and to start finding words for what my intuition is telling me but I cannot yet articulate fully. This story authenticates a valuing of dialogue, diversity, sharing, discussion, community and narratives, in keeping with postmodern approaches to knowledge, understanding and meaning. This story is a better fit with my own value system and lived experience. I feel acknowledged and companioned by my colleagues in the room with me, and the community of scholars whose work is engaging us. Although I am still puzzled and wondering, there is an ease and appreciation of the inevitability of change, as though change is a moving current, and instead of struggling to swim upstream we are able to go with the flow. This changed relationship with change is part of a story that has been accepting, enabling and empowering for me in conducting this exploratory inquiry.

I am reminded of a note I made in my research journal after listening to Warren Lett’s speech at the launch of his book, *An Inquiry into Making Sense of our Lives* (2011). It reflects an attitude of making a contribution to an ongoing and changing river of knowing. He said something along the lines of: “I do hope that this book is relevant, for a short period of time, and that then, of course, other things will emerge that will become more relevant.”

Throughout this inquiry, I have been fascinated by the practice of carefully observing change. This fascination flowed into my artworks as I painted scenes that were changing before my eyes, like the changing atmosphere of the sky.



Figure 7.5 "Urban atmosphere". Carla van Laar, 2017.



Figure 7.6 "Shifting skies Victoria St".  
Carla van Laar, 2017.

Opposite:  
Figure 7.7 "Brunswick backyard 1".  
Carla van Laar, 2017.  
Figure 7.8 "Brunswick backyard 2".  
Carla van Laar, 2017.







Figure 7.10 “Along the train line”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

### Continuity of engagement with the “Seeing her stories” inquiry

The continuity embedded in conducting this project over the period of nearly a decade is that this length of time has enabled an engagement with people as they, me, and our contexts change. Early in the research I expressed my interest in tracing the ripple effects of seeing women’s stories through art. I imagined that the experience of seeing in the here and now, the sense of presence and being bodily and emotionally moved in the moment of encounter with the image, would be linked with other changes across time, and an awareness of some continuity and meaning (Heidegger, 1996).

Here is an extract from a conversation where continuity was evident when Julie and I started talking about her experience of seeing the road image at the MIECAT exhibition:

*I have had a run on the beach, Julie has slept in, and we’ve both had coffee and breakfast. Before we start to take photos for the portrait, we sit down to talk.*

*“I remember when you started this research”, Julie starts, picking up on the sense of time that I’m contemplating.*

*“Yes – I was just thinking about time – It was five years ago!” I reply... “Actually, I always had a feeling that this project would take mountains of time. The time has allowed for ideas to germinate before blossoming. The seeds that were there in the beginning have taken time to grow and develop, sprout roots and limbs. Like that tree behind the house that you were saying last night how much you love. It reminds me of time.”*

Continuing engagement, focus, exploration, accumulation of experiences and the unfolding of ideas and understandings is something that cannot be rushed, that requires patience and cherishes commitment and continuity.

### **Seeing continuity in my artworks**

The next journal extract is taken from early in my journey of inquiry.

*23rd October 2006*

*I've begun painting about women. I'm painting about Oma. I drove myself and Henry 2000 kms to visit her. When I look at Oma's face I am reminded how she has*

*always been here through my whole life, and, at the same time I feel like I am looking at a mirror of myself in the future. I have told her this. She said that sometimes her friends have seen a photo of me and said how much I look like her. I love my Oma. I don't mind getting old as much when I remember how much I love Oma.*

Continuity had begun to emerge as a thread of meaning through the overlapping stories of my emergent art making process, a road trip journey of 4000 kilometres, reflections connecting present to childhood and potential future, and the intergenerational bonds between myself and older and younger members of my family. Continuity is the common thread of meaning, tying my stories together.

Here is another journal extract that illuminates the continuous presence of the past and the future within the present moment. In this story I drift in and out of memories from childhood, adolescence, and recent adulthood, as well as gazing forward with my wonderings, rehearsals, planning and dreaming about my near and distant futures, and my own creative process of becoming that has been continuous throughout my life.

Figure 7.11 “Visiting Oma”. Carla van Laar, 2008.



24th July 2007

*I am working on a painting of my dolls. They sit on top of Grandma's suitcase. I received this suitcase when Grandma died. It contained photo albums of my childhood that Grandma had compiled. The suitcase has ancient labels and stickers on it from Grandma's and then Aunty Freya's travels. As I paint I imagine that this picture is a warm up for painting portraits of people.*

*As I paint I remember Cathy, my mum's old doll that was restored for me to have as a four-year-old girl, she has a wig and wears the remnants of nail polish lipstick that I applied as a child.*

*I feel she is the judge amongst them.*

*Tina was made by Oma and my mum knitted her hair. I wasn't happy with the position of her eyes on her head, so my mum removed them and replaced them. She has, ever since, looked dreamy and somewhat comforted. She is the baby.*

*Veronica, I chose and bought with my saved-up pocket money. I was taken with her wistful eyes that continuously glance heavenward. She is the dreamer.*

*Polly I also saved for, she epitomised to me a nostalgic, little house on the prairie girl. She is the innocent playful girl.*

*Verushka, the big mamma, was given to me by a friend of my parents who had two boy children and needed someone to pass on this girl toy to. She is the comforter, in a European mother-like way.*

*Then there is Vivianne, a doll I made myself when I was about 15 years old, she is smaller, and has bright ruby coloured wild hair, dressed in black, a witch. She is mysterious and worldly.*

*I see they are all like me.*

As I re-viewed the doll painting in 2016, and read my musings about the dolls themselves, I was fascinated to realise that doll making has become a favoured activity within my art therapy practice. I have made dolls with the women in Nepal, here in my studio with workshop participants, and in my current job working with young adults experiencing homelessness. We often find that the dolls we make reflect qualitative aspects of ourselves, things that we

Figure 7.12 "My dolls on Grandma's suitcase". Carla van Laar, 2008.





Figure 7.13 “Mouth of the river”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

As I painted this I sat on the bank amongst the grasses and observed the river as it flowed through the sand bank into the ocean.

value, things that connect us with our past, present and future selves. This can help us remember and connect us with parts of ourselves, often parts that have been with us for a long time. This remembering and connecting can provide a comforting sense of self-continuity, as it did for me in painting and seeing this picture.

My imaginings and wonderings as I contemplate my artwork are sometimes like seeds that I am planting, they are in some ways warm ups to actions, and writing about them is like rehearsing my next

steps. At other times, the themes of the images appear to know something that only emerges later into my awareness.

In these cases, seeing my stories was like a pebble dropping into a lake, creating ripple effects that would continue to expand all the way through the research. The idea of seeing stories as seeding, or creating ripple effects is different from notions of clear cause and effect, where we can pre-empt that a particular kind of event will reliably cause a predictable effect.

With “seeding” and “ripple effects” moments in time are linked by continuity as we story our experiencing, in a way that is more in keeping with notions such as “becoming”, rather than “causing”. Continuity may be present in genetic threads, longterm relationships, creative processes, narratives and journeys. Warren (2006) joined the themes of change and continuity in her discussion of flow in art therapy. For her, this is a state of focused motivation and intention, with deep and effortless involvement, that is a spontaneous merging of action and awareness. Together, continuous focus and the constant movement of change create flow.

In the flow of continuity within change, rather than predicting that one event will cause another, there can be a consciousness in the present moment that this present was made possible by what happened in the past. In this continuous present moment we are sometimes dreaming the future into being with our imaginings, and sometimes preparing the way for the as-yet-unimagined and unknown to become possible.

## Responding to the artwork as it changes

Lived experience, including seeing her stories, is multiple. In responding to questions about seeing a particular image, layers of complexity were revealed over time as we explored the flow on of reflections that were seeded by encountering an image, and the dynamic, metamorphosing journeys that we had in our ongoing relationships with visual stories.

A small extract from the dinner party conversation is presented after the coming images that show three different iterations of my painting of Julie. In this example, Julie expresses her changing

emotional responses to seeing the portrait of herself being painted by me. I worked on the painting for over a year, and changed the actual paint on the canvas many times before deciding to stop.

Julie saw the painting in its various stages and incarnations, and she links the changes in the portrait with changes in her emotional responses to it over time. Other participants in the research process join the dialogue and share how they noticed that changes in their perception were linked with seeing changes in the painting over time. Here is an extract from the dinner party narrative:

*Gretel is curious about what it was like for Julie to see the portrait of herself changing as I kept painting into it. She asks,*

*“I’m very interested in your different responses to the painting over time. Could you say a bit more about that?”*

*“Well,” says Julie, “It has changed somewhat.”*

*Jane adds in, “It’s changed, I was actually just looking at that myself tonight.”*

*“Yes,” Julie continues, “So at the first major viewing of it, I was very emotional, wasn’t I? We both were. I just found it to be, almost painful. But in a joyful way if that makes sense. Because I think it did tap into, the very thing that I was just saying, the road for women is one of suffering.*

*And somehow seeing myself on that road, as a symbol of all women, was also confronting – to see myself in a way that I’ve never seen before, I’ve never had a portrait painted of me. Because it’s Carla’s view of me, and it feels incredibly intimate, incredibly moving.*

*And so, and the next time I saw it, I really felt almost annoyed, really, but I kept saying to Carla, ‘But you’re the*



From left: Figure 7.14 Julie's portrait with red dots, 2009; Figure 7.15 Julie's portrait with shadows, 2009; Figure 7.16 Julie's portrait final, 2010.

Below: Figure 7.17 Julie encounters the portrait, 2009.



*artist, I don't care what it ends up like, it's your work', There was a big black shape in the middle of the road which was a shadow, which seemed so harsh I hated it.*

*"Then the next time, I cried again! Because it was different again and I felt a different experience".*

Julie is referring here to changes I made in my approach to painting her. These changes included my movement from selecting photos for source material, arranging the composition to tell some kind of a story about Julie, choosing colours that seemed to reflect something of her, blotting out elements of the artwork, focusing on the areas of light and dark, and eventually taking her expression into my own face and body, and attempting to paint her energy.

Julie's reflections about her responses to the painting during these different phases make me wonder if there is something about the changes in my attunement with her that resonated and deepened her experience of seeing the portrait of herself as it changed with my approach. It seemed that as I changed the way I was seeing her, that I eventually communicated something through the artwork that she described as "very moving" in a way that was different from the earlier viewings, and that connected her to powerful emotions, enabling them to surface in the moment of her seeing the image.

In this way, my change of approach, the changes in the artwork, and the changes Julie experienced were all intertwined, relational and interconnected.

There has not been much attention within art therapy literature to the inter-relationship between change and continuity in seeing experiences. Henzell (2006) is one of few writers who offers an alternative perspective on change and continuity in working through art with marginalised people in psychiatric

institutions. For him, it was not so important to look for changes in the participants, but to offer them a changed experience. He valued providing opportunities for people to express themselves as they are, to be witnessed and seen, focusing on the therapeutic goal of appreciating the uniqueness of a person, over time. His descriptions resonate with the changes experienced by Julie as I changed the way I painted her, and the way that she was seen and storied by me. When she was seen in a way that she did not relate to, she was annoyed. When I changed my way of seeing her, she was deeply moved.

## **Changes in what we see in the artwork**

During the research participants sometimes described how, even when an artwork was finished and it was no longer changing, what they saw when they looked at it could change. One example of this relates to the image I painted about looking out of the side window of my car while driving. This extract is from my journal and describes an interaction I had with my son Henry who was twelve at the time. Henry and I were relaxed after eating dinner and found ourselves contemplating together with the image. In this story I am an intrigued mother, engaged in my art making process yet fascinated about what my child sees, and we share this moment together.

Years later, I read this scene back to Henry when he was nineteen. I asked him where he felt this would fit best, as an example of relationship, connection or change. He listened, pondered, and told me, "Change". For him, the most significant part of seeing this artwork was enjoying noticing how what we see can change.



Figure 7.18 “Out the side window”. Carla van Laar, 2008.

*Henry and I are lying on the couch in our apartment living room that doubles as my studio. I have my work in progress taped to the wall. It is another painting about the drive to Coronet Bay, this time looking out the side window. The trees beside the road are blurred by our motion along the road. I've been fascinated by wanting to observe the sense of movement. The shapes are abstract, the marks gestural.*

*The streetlights are casting shadows through the venetian blinds on the windows. The shadows fall on the painting, creating more curious shapes. We are having fun looking at it and seeing what we can see in the marks and shadows. Henry tells me what he can see:*

*“There is a buck-toothed, two eyed monster, it is winking! Can you see it?”*

*“No”, I say, “Where is it?”*

*“Turn your head sideways.” He replies.*

*I obligingly tilt my head and exclaim, “Now I can see a crocodile!”*

*He angles his head sideways too and is delighted! “Yes, a crocodile! It looks like it is crossed with a mini car!”*

*“And look”, I say, “There is a rooster too! But where is the buck toothed, two eyed monster?!”*

*Henry says “I look in the gaps between what you’ve done. Can you see the dog?”*

*“Oh yes! A dog!”*

*“The dog is cool”, says Henry.*

*“I can see an angel now”, I add.*

*“And a bear too”, adds Henry. “Let’s change the blind to get some new shadows”, he suggests, and jumps up to adjust the blinds.*

*He comes back to the couch and we lie there for a while before he says, “Mum”.*

*“Yes Henry”.*

*“I can see a toucan! Can you see it?”*

*“I can”*



Figure 7.19 “Shapes between the leaves”. Carla van Laar, 2012.

*We lie there gazing at the toucan for a while and then go to bed.*

*In the morning we have breakfast and see the painting again.*

*Henry says, “This morning it looks so different to when it had shadows and things all over it. It’s changed. The only thing I can see this morning is the crocodile”.*

Henry’s way of seeing the image is quite different from my usual way. When I am painting the image I would ensure that there is plenty of light, whereas relaxing with Henry we allow the light to change and shift, creating shadows that alter what we can see in the image.

He also points out that instead of looking at the marks that have been made, he looks at the shapes in

between the lines, and he invites me to do the same, to see the image differently. This changes how I see the image too. This particular exchange pre-empted a fascination of mine that would emerge later as a change in my approach to painting, an intrigue with the shapes and spaces “in between”, an aesthetic foreshadowing of the emergent threads: connection and relationship.

In our story, Henry does not speak of the light changing or his perception changing – he speaks at the end of the story of the image itself changing, as though the image has a life and a will of its own in what it reveals to him.

He is perhaps echoing in his child’s way a similar idea to Romanoff’s (2001) idea that I referred to in supervision with Belinda, that in the telling of a story, it will change. Similarly, answers to the question “What do you see?” can change. Seeing changes, even when the same individual is seeing the same image. For the person doing the seeing, their experience is that the image itself has changed, even though no marks have been added or paint applied. Another example of how seeing an artwork can change is illustrated by Nicola’s words:

*“So, what I saw initially in that painting is different to what I saw after having lived with that painting”.*

Nicola conceives of the image “changing” in a different way from Henry. She talks about it being like a mirror that reflects her internal state, and suggests that she projects herself into the image.

Being aware of the changes in how we are seeing and relating to the same image at different points in time can contribute to noticing our changed perceptions, reflecting on these and gaining insights into our own processes of becoming.

Nicola offered this reflective comment about values that change. Here she uses an image from the environment. She speaks of change as natural and the changing experience of encountering an artwork as a revitalising experience:

*“It’s interesting how it changed. And that’s why you have a great painting, because you never tire of looking at it, it’s like the ocean, it’s ever changing. To me that’s the measure of a beautiful piece of art, it can constantly be renewed.”*

Henry and Nicola describe change differently from most art therapy literature. The kinds of changes art therapists report include subjective, behavioural and physiological aspects such as enhanced self-esteem, mastery and autonomy, increasing connection with others, decreasing distress, more interaction with the therapist, space and materials, increased expressions of positive affect and reduced expressions of negative affect, engagement with other people, identifying and expressing feelings, and levels of oxytocin that might be increased through looking together at art works. (Allan, Barford, Horwood, Stevens & Tanti, 2015; Elkis-Abuhoff, Goldblatt, Gaydos & Convery, 2013; Morgan, Knight, Bagwash & Thompson, 2012; Patterson, Crawford, Ainsworth & Waller, 2011; Pounsett, Parker, Hawtin & Collins, 2006; Springham, Thorne & Brooker, 2014). The emphasis is on welcome and desirable changes that occur in participants during their engagement in art therapy. For Henry and Nicola, noticing how their seeing of the artwork changed over time was a source of curiosity and renewal, and the focus was more specifically on their relationship with the artworks.

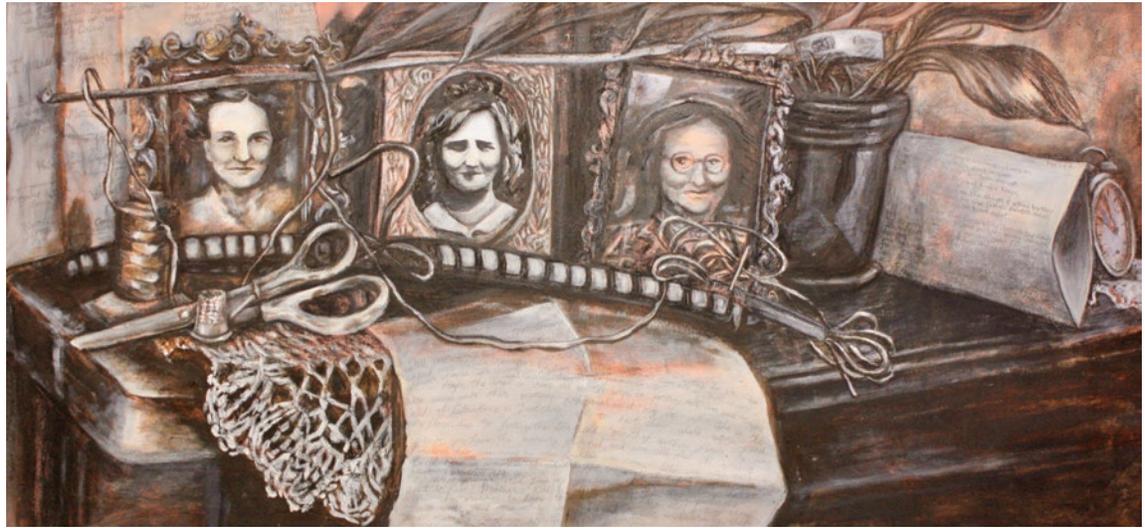


Figure 7.20 “Laura May”. Carla van Laar, 2009.

### **Painting Laura May: Finding continuity in seeing intergenerational her-stories**

When my Aunty Meg saw the exhibition at MIECAT, she was inspired and asked me if I would paint a picture about Laura May – her grandmother and my great-grandmother. As described in the story about painting Laura May that I included in the ‘Methods’ chapter, this request was unexpected. However the open research design allowed for an exploration of this process that included, among other things, a long drive to visit Aunty Meg at her house, research into Laura May’s life, and a collaboration in relation to the artwork that was eventually produced. The artwork has a strong theme of life course continuity – as it represents Laura May across three time periods of her life. It is also about intergenerational continuity, as it refers to the place of handwork in the lives of women across four generations of our family.

Travelling to Aunty Meg’s house by car was another long road trip journey with my son Henry. The creative process of painting this picture included preparing for the long drive, travelling the vast distances of 2,500 kilometres between our home and Aunty Meg’s, spending time with my Aunty Meg going through her collection of family documents and photos, coming home to Melbourne, setting up a still life with the photos of Laura May and some evocative objects, painting the picture and journaling about my experience while painting and seeing the objects in the image, my memories and the stories in these as well the image itself.

I was completely unprepared for what would happen as I engaged in this creative exploration. The journal extract (in the ‘Methods’ chapter) that I wrote about painting Laura May tells the story of how I became deeply immersed in an experience of connecting and reconnecting with my female ancestors. As time passed on and my inquiry continued to cycle, this phase of the research became a significant marker that flowed on as my interest in intergenerational self-understanding,



relationships and transformation has continued to grow, first in my own life, and with a ripple on into my therapeutic practice, as I explain more in the implications chapter.

## **Our own her-stories as a continuation of collective women's stories across time**

The iterative process of creating the Laura May painting had an impact on myself as an artist and researcher. It produced, in me, a profound sense of connection and continuity across time with other generations of women in my family.

Julie experienced a similar sense of connection and continuity, not with her own family, but with the broader community of women across time and place. She explained that in seeing the image of the road, she felt a sense of connection with the collective journeys of women, and being a part of this continuum of experiencing across tens of thousands of years.

*Julie started to get teary, connecting into what had been touched within her in encountering the image of the road. As the tears came she wondered aloud where they were coming from. She asked herself if the emotions were coming from memories of spending time here at Coronet Bay, or some grief she was feeling, she wondered if she was connecting into her feelings of loss about the death of her baby sister when she was a child. She searched through these ideas before exclaiming,*

*“No! I know what it is! It’s connected into what women have had to suffer, through tens of thousands of years of women’s loss, loss of children through death, loss through illness, abduction, slavery. This feels like a memory for me, it could be a genetic memory, a past life, a soul thing. This feeling is also about sustaining, staying on the road of freedom, moving forward, taking the precious child who is still there. It’s not a personal pain, it’s a collective pain that I’m experiencing.”*

The ways that Julie and I describe our experiences of seeing these paintings show us having an expanded sense of connection with other women across time in ways that could be described as transpersonal. These experiences are bigger than our own lived stories, and make us feel as though our own stories are part of a bigger story, the story of women as a collective that includes us. This collective story has a history that we are (in part) conscious of, a present that we are part of, and a future that we are helping to create.

## **Self-continuity in seeing her stories**

The ways that we describe and reflect on experiences of seeing her stories in this inquiry sometimes show us feeling transported in time, and sometimes show us connecting changes in our seeing with changes in our lives. Both of these ways of experiencing seeing relate to the idea of self-continuity.

During a conversation with Jan while she was visiting my studio, I asked her to tell me about her experience of seeing the painting about looking out of the car window. She spoke about feeling transported through time as part of this experiencing.

*“The encounter with that image was strong. When I first saw them all together the monotone and sepia was evocative of time past. Rather than being invited into something recent, I was sent back in time, like looking at old family photos.”*

The event that Jan describes bears a relationship to my experiences while painting the images of Oma and Laura May, being transported into memories from childhood that have been somewhere outside of awareness for some time. This remembering evokes a sense of connection with our own life phases, our accumulated experiences, where we have come from, our consistency of becoming, time passing and unfolding in our continuing life story.

During the dinner party focus group, Nicola expressed her sense of continuity of experiencing when I asked her if she could sing the song “Be” that she had written years before in response to the painting of the woman on the cliff. She talks about remembering that she recorded the original song when she wrote it, but that she has misplaced that first recording. She says,

*“I will find it, it is somewhere – we’ve been through so many different houses – and I will record it for you, now that it’s started to come back.”*

*Nicola explains, “They all hide inside me somewhere. And strangely enough, on my album there is a song called ‘Be’, but a totally different one though.”*

*“Yeah, so this song must have influenced that.”*

Her final statement here, “So this song must have influenced that”, echoes the sense of continuity as a flow on, a ripple effect and a process of becoming, and is perhaps an example of the human need for continuity within our meaning making narratives. In this case, the flow included her engagement with seeing my image, relating to it over time, writing a song in response to it, and then later, another song by the same name. Our creative processes overlap with and mirror each other in their employment of emergence, intuition, mystery and organic unfolding as examples of continuity.

Polkinghorne (1988) considers our storying and narratives as “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (p. 1). He implies the importance of continuity as inherent to our narrative meaning making, because when we engage in these activities, we organise our “human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). Stern (2004) elaborates on how even within present moment experiencing micro-narratives are at play. He suggests that when we become alert to a present moment occurring this is because it holds a story-line of significance or novelty. Stern (2004) describes how we weave together the micro-narratives of present moments to create the stories of our lives, and that in any moment of present experience it is possible to create not only the present, but also to re-create our storied past. The accounts from participants in this research project demonstrate how in seeing her stories, we engaged in processes of organising our lived experiencing into macro narratives and micro narratives through which we became aware of aspects of our transpersonal continuity and our self-continuity.

During the dinner party conversation, Jan shared her insights about the consequences of seeing my artwork. She was not talking about seeing the actual image, but about becoming aware of a pattern in the way she tends to “see” life. As Jan mentions, this awareness emerged as a flow-on after seeing the image of looking out of the car window, and is connected to her original seeing:

*“From a personal inquiry perspective it has allowed me to shift a pattern. I wasn’t aware of that at the time, it’s in reflecting now that I’m aware that I can see more optimistically – the glass is half full!”*

Jan’s comment illustrates a continuity of story in which change is also embedded. Like Jan, the stories we shared of our experiences of continuity in seeing her stories illustrate the making of narrative connections between past, present and future moments that are moving and meaningful. These meaningful narratives provide us with coherency that is helpful as we adapt to continuous changes in our internal and external worlds.

The idea of self-continuity – “a sense of connection between one’s past and one’s present (Parfit, 1971; Vignoles, 2011)”, (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge & Arndt, 2015, p. 52) has been described as “positively related to psychological well-being (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001), psychological equanimity (Landau, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2008), and even physical health (Anderzén & Arnetz, 1999)”, (Sedikides et al., 2015, p. 52). Researchers fascinated with self-continuity have focused their attention on nostalgia, linking nostalgic experiencing with psychological health, optimism, memory, affect, drive and creativity (Cheung et al., 2013; Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides

& Juhl, 2013; Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, Arndt, Hepper & Zhou, 2015; van Tilburg, Sedikides & Wildschut, 2015). The accounts from myself and participants in this inquiry support the idea that seeing art works can be a way of evoking nostalgic experiencing and nurturing self-continuity.

Conceiving of art works as stories, as I have done in this inquiry, and listening carefully to the accounts of seeing her stories experiences from the participants, enables an intersubjective perspective of what can happen when a woman’s stories are seen. Participants have reported experiencing strong and moving present moment experiences in seeing the artworks, and the feeling of “being met” by the image, in ways that are resonant with Stern’s (2004) descriptions of “intersubjective consciousness” (p. 125) that can occur when two or more people share a present moment. The stories shared by participants in this inquiry illustrate how, in reflecting together on their remembered seeing experiences, we co-created new intersubjective present moments, changed our relationships with the past, and storied new possibilities for the future.

Rather than emphasising observable or measurable changes, the stories told by myself and the participants recount our experiences of changes in our relationship with change, changes in processes of making, perception of and feeling responses to artworks, noticing how we encounter changes in the artwork itself, noticing how reflecting on our seeing experiences can change perspectives in our broader life, and being aware of changes in ourselves. These lived stories of change are resonant with being mindfully accepting of and present with change, in contrast to seeking, pursuing or intentionally facilitating change.



Figure 7.22  
"Lily in the courtyard 2".  
Carla van Laar, 2014.

Figure 7.23  
"Lily in the courtyard 1".  
Carla van Laar, 2014.



7.24 "Urban courtyard". Carla van Laar, 2013.

## Change in me

Change has occurred in myself. As I have been creating this research, it has likewise been creating me. Some of the major changes are my heightened awareness, appreciation of and relationship with the threads of meaning that were revealed by working with the source material: seeing her stories, presence, embodiment, context, risk and safety, change, continuity, relationships, connection, co-creation and life enhancement. My awareness and valuing of these threads has had a flow-on effect in my personal and professional life. I treasure and work to cultivate the capacity to bring these qualities into my relationships, art making and art therapy practice.

Later in the research I changed my way of exploring continuity. Rather than by focusing on symbolic objects, I would practise continuity in a similar way to artists like Claude Monet and Margaret Olley, who would return time after time to simple and familiar subject matter in their home environments (Spate, 2013). My urban courtyard became a source of aesthetic and contextual continuity as I painted and repainted stories that I saw daily within my own living space.

My practice of continuing to return and paint in the familiar intimate space of my urban courtyard was a calming and restorative activity. As I nurtured the flowers in my pot plants, dwelled on them with my eyes, and described them in the movements I made with the materials in my hands, I felt nurtured by their presence in return. These artworks (figures 7.22 – 7.28) are reminiscent of my research process at the time – one of returning over and over to the source material, and my growing intimacy with the contents of this inquiry.





7.26 "Nathan's flowers".  
Carla van Laar, 2013.

7.27 "Nasturtiums on the fence".  
Carla van Laar, 2013.



7.28 "Potted blossom".  
Carla van Laar, 2013.

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

Later in the inquiry I practiced continuity in art making while holidaying on a tiny islet in the Indonesian Mentawai Islands. Each day I chose one small organic object found while exploring the shore, placed it on the timber floor of the beach hut, and painted it, observing the changing shadows and light. The sense of time that was evoked in these simple studies prompted me to name this series “Mentawai moments”.

Significantly, the meaning of this project continues to evolve and change, and I expect this will continue after I have completed it and submitted it.

Accommodating change was my intention in choosing a research question that is open ended and can be revisited at different points in time, a question that did indeed develop focus gradually, was unimagined in the beginning, and emerged through creative, spontaneous, intuitive and improvised processes:

“What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?”

Given that change is inherent to growth, problem-solving, learning and therapy, this thread of meaning is significant as a contribution to understanding and valuing the seeing of a woman’s stories through art.

Some of the changes that revealed themselves as significant are explored in the following chapters that delve into relationship, connection and co-creation.

## **“Seeing her stories” and looking further afield: Expanding perspectives on change and continuity in art therapy**

As I have already noted, there are some significant differences between the emergent descriptions of change and continuity in “Seeing her stories”, and the prevalent stories of change and continuity in art therapy literature.

The stories I have shared in this chapter introduce some experiences of change that seem to emerge almost paradoxically from being present and staying with something, allowing it simply to be.

Change occurred within the research as the process of inquiry grew organically. Early on the context of the research changed. The question changed, from obscurity towards gaining more clarity and focus. The methods changed as I learned from each phase what the next stage would be, and as the source material I gathered informed the methods for exploration. My artwork changed as I explored different subject matter, art materials and moved into painting from life in direct encounter with my subjects. My relationship with the source material changed as I worked with it in different ways, through art making, conversations, watching video, writing the narrative, clustering to develop themes, and mapping and writing up these chapters.

This chapter has illuminated how the research participants described their experiences of change in the relational exchanges documented throughout this research project. They spoke of changes such as remembering, responding, perceiving, relating, becoming inspired, shifting patterns, realising, gaining awareness, having insights, transforming emotions, reflecting, making meaning and creating each other. They described their experiences of engaging in this inquiry using words that evoke change, including movement, flowing, transforming, shifting, dynamic, fluid, metamorphosing, unfolding and journey.

In this chapter I have shown how continuity happened throughout this art based research project while exploring the question, “What can happen when a woman’s stories are seen?”

Continuity in this project included continuity of attention, engagement and relationship, continuity of creative processes, continuity as a theme of symbolic subject matter, continuity of arts based practice over time, and continuity of connection with personal, familial and collective life histories. These themes are inclusive of personal, trans-generational and transpersonal experiences of continuity.

In addition to these, I am adding that over the course of this research project I have developed a strong sense of contributing to the flow of ideas about art in therapy, health and community contexts, a continuity of knowing. Here is what I wrote in my research journal to describe this sense:

*The magnitude of human experiencing and knowing is humbling at times, and at times, overwhelming. Along with my students, the experience of learning often highlights how little I know. Within the enormous ocean of knowledge, this project is my contribution.*

The ways in which change and continuity emerged and have been illustrated and described within this project suggest that experiences of seeing her stories can heighten awareness of changes in experiencing. These might be awarenesses of the transience of our emotions, maybe like a call to action for making changes in our lives, and can also evoke a sense of continuity within change. Sometimes we become aware of the lasting impact of traumas, sometimes the reassurance of being connected to lineage, and sometimes we are reminded of our values that weave like threads through our lives, connecting us with others in changing yet continuous webs of meaning.

These awarenesses and values lead me to the threads of meaning to be explored in the coming chapter, ‘Relationship, connection and co-creation’.







Page 254, top down:

Figure 7.30 “Mentawai moments 2”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 7.31 “Mentawai moments 1”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Page 255, top down:

Figure 7.32 “Mentawai moments 3”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Figure 7.33 “Mentawai moments 4”. Carla van Laar, 2018.

Above:

Figure 7.34 “Mentawai moments 5”. Carla van Laar, 2018.



Figure 7.35 "Contemplating the ocean. Point Hicks". Carla van Laar, 2016.