



THE STORY SO FAR

Eight Artists / Eight Stories



ANNE STONEHOUSE
with James McDonald

**ARTS
PROJECT
AUSTRALIA**

Published for Arts Project Australia's
40th Anniversary in 2014

© Arts Project Australia Inc 2014

This book is copyright. Apart from any use
as permitted under the Copyright Act 1986,
no part may be reproduced by any process
without prior written permission.

Published by Arts Project Australia Inc

24 High Street Northcote
VIC 3070 Australia
E: info@artsproject.org.au
www.artsproject.org.au

ISBN: xxx-x-xxxxxxx-x-x

Written by Anne Stonehouse
with James McDonald
Edited by Brigitte Norton
Proofed by Anne Stonehouse,
Sue Roff & Sim Luttin
Photography by Penelope Hunt
Designed by Liz Cox, monoprint.com.au
Printed in Australia by Ellikon printers

cover image: [insert info]

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY

LEONARD JOEL
Est 1919

ISBN 978-0-9586659-1-9



9 780958 665919 >

CONTENTS

—

- oo Foreword
- oo Introduction

ARTIST STORIES

- oo Paul Hodges
- oo Miles Howard-Wilks
- oo Adrian Lazzaro
- oo Chris Mason
- oo Jodie Noble
- oo Mark Smith
- oo Cathy Staughton
- oo Georgia Szmerling
- oo Authors Biographies
- oo Acknowledgements

INTRODUCTION

Each of the eight stories that follow is about an accomplished artist. Each artist is unique in their art practice and their present and past life circumstances. Each is, of course, a unique individual. Some are more commercially successful in their art practice than others. Some specialise and excel in one medium, while others explore a variety of mediums and are strong in their use of several. Some have been coming to Arts Project Australia for a much longer time than others. Some require and benefit from direction and support from staff artists at Arts Project, while others need little direction and support.

What they all have in common is a strong commitment to their art that translates into taking it seriously and working hard at it. Making art plays a central role in their lives, and being an artist shapes their identity in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Something else that they have in common is that each artist has an identified intellectual disability that affects their work as artists and their lives in general. The focus of this collection of stories is the artists and their art. The intent is to neither underplay nor highlight the disability, but rather to acknowledge it honestly as one dimension, although not the defining one, of each artist's identity. Their disability contributes to who they are as individuals and as artists. Each of these eight artists has met many challenges and overcome significant obstacles in the past to become the person and the artist they are today. Their achievements as artists are noteworthy on their own. The obstacles they have overcome and continue to overcome deserve admiration and celebration.

These eight artists' stories, and the images of their work, are testimony to their commitment, talent and the role that making art plays in their lives.

The broader aim in writing this collection of eight stories is to document eight examples of genuine inclusion through telling the stories in an honest and straightforward way. In contemporary discussions about the meaning of community, *inclusion* is an overused and at times misused term. Inclusion is about acknowledging and respecting the uniqueness of every individual, and putting into practice a belief that everyone has strengths that they can contribute to the groups they are a part of. Arts Project is a community that enacts inclusion.

Someone once said that respect is an action, not a feeling. Respect and inclusion are about the way we go about our daily lives; the encounters, conversations and relationships we have with others. Put more simply, inclusion is about finding a place for everyone where they feel comfortable and valued, where they can strive to be their best selves, and where they are supported to do so. For these eight artists, and the other artists who attend, Arts Project is such a place.

When we first discussed the idea for this collection of stories, I envisaged that a separate 'story' about Arts Project would be part of it – probably the centrepiece of the collection. However, to do the story of Arts Project justice would take as many pages as the eight artists' stories. Its forty-year history is rich. Its areas of work are far-reaching, its mission visionary and daily life there is colourful, bustling, multi-faceted, very busy and filled with complex issues and decisions.

So, totally resigning myself to not being able to do it justice, I have only included a brief description of the organisation (see following). Hopefully the artists' stories, comments from their key support people about what participating at Arts Project means in their lives, and particularly the perspectives and insights of James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project and staff artists Elyss McCleary and Lyn Young, convey powerfully to readers the 'vibe' of the place. One of the intentions in writing the stories was to convey the warmth, respect and professionalism that characterise relationships with the artists. All staff have high expectations of the artists and work with the artists' wellbeing and best interests as the primary consideration. Every staff member at Arts Project lives the mission and the culture of genuine inclusion.

The opportunity to become more familiar with the organisation was one of the great privileges of working on these stories. Getting to know the artists was another. I would also like to acknowledge James, who offered his time, energy and insightful wisdom. So much of the content of these stories comes from him. He personifies what Arts Project is about – eyes on the prize; the prize being promoting improvement, high standards, promoting success and personal fulfilment in art. James combines all of this with incredible caring, warmth and compassion for the artists, which manifests itself in his interactions and relationships with them. I would also like to acknowledge Sue Roff, Executive Director of Arts Project, for trusting that this project could come to fruition and being so helpful in making that happen. Sim Lutton, Arts Project Gallery Manager and Curator, has been very supportive and patient in answering my many questions and applying her considerable expertise to move the drafts of stories through to a final publication. It was a privilege also to talk with the key support person for most of the artists in this collection. They are listed in the Acknowledgements. I would like to extend my deep appreciation for their openness and willingness to share their stories and my admiration for their strength, optimism and persistence in doing everything they can to contribute to genuinely inclusive communities.

These eight stories are stories of artists and their families and implicitly, stories about Arts Project. They are also about the role that the visual arts can play in people's lives, especially in the lives of people who, given the opportunity, can use art as their most powerful means of communication and most effective way to explore the world. Arts Project is a safe place, but it is not a shelter, not a place where artists are protected from the world outside. One of the most impressive features of the philosophy and practice there is the dedication to finding ways for the artists to create a place for themselves in the broader art world and the broader community.

Most importantly, these are stories about respecting diversity and difference as a starting point for real inclusion. To quote from the 2013 Annual Report (p.13):

... perhaps the most significant achievement of the program is that of enabling people with an intellectual disability to see themselves as having a valued role in society, to be able to point to their work and say 'I am an artist'.

They truly are the stories ‘so far’. One of the exciting things about beginning to get to know the artists and learning more about Arts Project is a sense of anticipation about what the future holds for the organisation as a whole and for each of the artists.

ANNE STONEHOUSE

Anne Stonehouse AM is a writer in the field of early childhood education

About Arts Project Australia

MISSION: To be a centre of excellence that supports artists with intellectual disabilities, promoting their work and advocating for inclusion within contemporary art practice.

Arts Project Australia has always aimed for excellence in the quality of both exhibitions presented and the studio program. Established in 1974 as Arts Project for the Mentally Retarded, the organisation was the first fulltime arts studio in Australia for artists with an intellectual disability. As a leader and innovator in the arts and disability sectors over the past forty years, Arts Project has established a reputation nationally and internationally for its studio philosophy and practice, as well as the outstanding artwork produced. Staff actively promote artists and their work in the broader community, and the artists enjoy exhibition opportunities in a range of local, national and international galleries as well as being represented in many public and private collections. In addition, staff also actively seek opportunities for artists at Arts Project to collaborate with other artists in the broader arts community and to participate in arts-related activities beyond Arts Project.

More than 110 artists work in the studio at the premises in Northcote over the space of a week. The studio functions in a similar way to a tertiary art environment. Each artist works to develop and communicate an original and authentic voice through their art. Staff artists, all of whom are professional artists, provide feedback, technical assistance, critical advice and encouragement. Art is not taught at Arts Project; rather each artist’s creative talent and direction are nurtured with the aim of eliciting works that have personal meaning and style. Artists work in a variety of mediums, including painting, drawing, ceramics, printmaking, puppetry and animation.

The gallery at Arts Project is the venue for a full annual program of changing exhibitions featuring work by artists from Arts Project as well as artists from the broader community.

Staff at Arts Project are highly qualified and experienced. The Board is energetic and committed, and the organisation functions with a strong governance framework. Arts Project Australia has a unique history and approach, and has long been recognised as a best-practice model for its innovative programs and its commitment to providing sustainable programs in an environment dedicated to visual arts practice.





PAUL HODGES

Good work from a good place

Paul Hodges is both a painter and a ceramic artist, inspired by images of dancers, models and romantic works by the Old Masters. ... His work conveys a sense of mysterious and dream-like transcendence of everyday life. Like his paintings, Hodges' ceramic works are often figurative. Gentle in form, the application of soft pastel colours to the works enhances a sense of fluidity and expression.

— PAUL HODGES' CV, ARTS PROJECT WEBSITE

Paul Hodges conveys a sense of peacefulness and gentleness in the way he moves, the way he speaks and his overall demeanour. There is a kind of self-contained serenity about him and an air of quiet confidence. His art is diverse and rich in both subject matter and mediums used. His skill as an artist is obvious.

Information about his life today, his past and his work as an artist, reveals a more complex picture of the person and the artist.

THE ARTIST

Paul comes to Arts Project Australia five days a week and has been attending since 2000. Subject matter for his art varies. Seascapes and blue colour schemes feature often. He creates very interesting figure studies through drawing, preferring the female figure to the male. Paul is also keen on life drawing and is very skilled at it. A particular strength is his skill at capturing human postures and movement.

Pop iconography appears at times in his work. His love of ballet particularly, and dance more generally, and his fascination with choreography are also evident in his work. The piano that Paul painted for the Arts Centre community piano project 'Play Me, I'm Yours' in 2014 was based on the theme of 'The Nutcracker', a theme that he executed very well.

Paul indicates that it is hard sometimes 'trying to think up new things to paint'. He reports that he gets ideas from other artists and sometimes uses pictures from magazines or paintings by famous artists as references for his work. For example, at the time of our conversation he was creating some paintings inspired by Monet's work. He loves the classical artists and mentions Monet as a favourite. He likes to reference and incorporate famous and archetypal work in his own work.



Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Paul agrees with James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project, that landscape painting, especially pastoral scenes, is a new interest. He paints these from memory and interestingly, often resorts to this genre when he seems to be feeling a bit 'down' or lacks motivation. In general, ballet, costumes, popular culture, landscapes and art history sum up Paul's major interests that influence his work.

Paul is a colourist, often breaking backgrounds in his paintings into an array of different colours. James does not see that there have been major changes in Paul's work over the time he has been coming to Arts Project: 'Paul is still interested in what he was interested in ten years ago, although he has expanded the variety of processes he uses – for example he now makes puppets – and he has become more skilled in a range of mediums'. Paul continually builds on and adds to his interests, strengthens his technical proficiency and develops his individual style.

Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project, believes that Paul's strengths lie in his use of colour: 'Paul directs his choice of colours and always ends up with a great colour palette. He knows how to colour mix well. He uses crazy colours – and they work!' She adds that he does wonderful figurative work, and the figures hold a presence in his paintings or drawings. He is very adept at balancing heavy direct lines and finer lines.

Paul says that over the time he has been coming to Arts Project he has learned a lot. He mentions particularly that his colours are different now and he knows more about mixing them. He says he has also learned a lot about creating shapes.

Currently Paul has several streams in his work – digital media, puppet making and painting. He uses both paints and ink, but if left to his own devices prefers ink. He does impressive work with that medium. When asked what he likes to do at Arts Project, Paul says that he 'probably' likes painting best, adding 'I like painting the colours and seeing what turns out. I like painting people – painting the figures and the different expressions on faces. I also like digital art'.

Paul approves of the system at Arts Project where, if an artist wants some variety, on different days there are opportunities to work in different mediums. He indicated that, for example, on the day we were having our conversation he was doing puppet making and was creating a Frank Sinatra puppet!



OPPOSITE

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BELOW

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Paul says he feels happy and relaxed when he is working well, but that he does get a bit upset if things are not going well with his art. He indicates that he finds some things hard to paint – streets, buildings and portraits for example. What he finds challenging about streets, he says, is perspective – in his words, ‘how you make Collins Street appear as though you are looking down it from Spring Street’. In contrast though, he says he finds that ‘oceans and skies are easy to paint’. He also says that he enjoys portraiture, and mentions that he is currently working on a portrait of a singer called Birdie, adding that he is quite a fan of hers.

Paul’s work sells well. According to James, ‘He has quite a profile’. Paul mentioned with considerable pride that he sold 15 paintings at the Melbourne Art Fair in 2012. He asks me several times over the weeks that I visited Arts Project about the book that his story will appear in. He wanted to know if it will be sold in bookshops. His interest in a publication containing his story reminds me of something James said about many of the artists at Arts Project. Being successful, which translates into selling work, is very important to them. In part this is about income, (like all of us they like having money!), but James says it also is about validation, recognition and signs of success in the broader art community beyond Arts Project.

Some of Paul’s work is sold through Third Drawer Down, a ‘design storefront museum and place of trade with a range of curated art and design products’ in Fitzroy in Melbourne. They sell ceramic figures that Paul has made in the past as well as a ‘frameable’ tea towel with his stunning painted portrait of a geisha. The staff there say that the tea towel is one of their best sellers!

Interestingly, when asked about improvements that would make coming to Arts Project better, Paul says that he would like more opportunities to explore a greater variety of kinds of art and more chances to meet other artists. He illustrates the latter point by mentioning that last year Ricky Swallow visited the studio. Paul had the chance to speak with him and create a portrait of him. Paul’s enthusiasm when talking about the encounter with Swallow left no doubt that it was an outstanding experience.

Most of the time Paul works independently but he enjoys collaborating with other creative people both within and outside of Arts Project. James says that what Paul really likes is to be able to sit and spend some time with one of the staff artists and have a good chat about his work, swap some ideas and plan his next suite of work. Paul enjoys all experiences related to art and relishes these opportunities for serious discussion. These encounters usually invigorate and energise Paul and often result in major works in his folio.

The staff artists have learned that what works best with Paul is to catch up with him as soon as the studio session begins, touch base about his plans for the day and offer assistance if it is required. ‘Paul always wants to develop and learn new techniques in order to achieve the outcomes that he has in mind. Because he enjoys so much looking at works by the great masters and his contemporaries, he is eager to capture some of those elements in his own work’.

When asked what he likes about coming to Arts Project, Paul says that the environment is warm and welcoming – ‘they accept you for who you are and they push you to do better. You meet other artists and people are friendly’. He adds, ‘There are a lot of characters. A few of them are calm. I’m always calm’. Paul clearly enjoys having conversations with others and values his relationships with staff at Arts Project. He has made friends among other artists as well.

There is no questioning Paul’s commitment to his art. James says, ‘He tries hard and often in the face of obstacles because of his complex collection of health issues. He gets anxious at times, and the anxiety manifests itself in fatigue. He turns inward and doesn’t apply himself as much as he does when he’s feeling good. If you get him on a good day it’s great. He’s lively and energetic and very productive. At times though, Paul struggles with motivation for a number of different reasons. His dispositions vary from day to day, and he sometimes loses energy and motivation during the day. He gets tired and that leads to not being inspired to work. In spite of having a lot of success, being represented in many exhibitions and producing some excellent work, Paul’s studio practice is variable. He finds it difficult to keep up the momentum’. The benefits of Paul having more continuous and focused one-on-one attention from a staff artist are mentioned several times in the conversation with James.

Elyss confirms James’ perspective: ‘Paul can get tired. Then I’ll encourage him to get his paints and together we mix them. We talk about scale – how large or small he wants the work to be. I ask him if he wants me to print out anything. I try to keep the colours clean and fresh for him. All of the staff artists discuss his ideas with him and support them. We never want to override him, but he sometimes needs our help’.

Elyss’s perception is that Paul is directing his work more now and showing more initiative: ‘I think he sees more opportunities and possibilities now, and they inspire him to think about and articulate what he’d like to do next’.



Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

TOP

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BOTTOM

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



PAUL – 'A LOVELY PERSON'

Paul turned 40 in September 2014. For eight years he has lived in the same supported accommodation with other adults with disabilities. Paul says that it is the best accommodation in the area, singling out the point that art classes are offered there once a week. He has art supplies at home and works on his art there as well as at Arts Project.

Debra Howlett, Paul's half sister, is his main support person, and she rates an immediate first response when Paul is asked who are the most important people in his life. He also mentions his Auntie Bronwyn and James at Arts Project. Debra says that there are gaps in her knowledge about his early life, as she is 20 years older than Paul and had moved out of the family home by the time he was born. She cannot say for sure when his interest in art began or when he was diagnosed with an intellectual disability. It was after his mother died in 2005 that she and Paul became close and started spending more time together.

Paul is insightful and reflective, according to Debra. She says that at times she is astounded at the precision and accuracy of his observations about movies and other things. Elyss echoes Debra's comments as they apply to his art. She describes Paul as 'a very observant artist, who has a great interest in what other artists are making. For that reason I love to talk to him when we meet at an exhibition. He's very good at pinpointing and discussing what he likes about a work'.

When asked to describe Paul, James responds without hesitation, 'He's a lovely person'. He says that Paul is gentle, easy-going and interested in many things. He cites Paul's interest in music, art, pop culture and movies as examples. Elyss says 'Paul is cool!' and adds that he has a dry sense of humour and gets on well with other artists.

Paul is aware of his disabilities and sees himself as different to others. In some ways he is hampered by the degree of self-awareness he possesses. While Paul is aware that he is different to other people and how his disabilities have affected and still affect his life, he is not open to talking about them. In the past they have mostly brought him grief and sadness and affected him negatively.

Over the years he has learned positive and constructive ways of getting along in the world. He has accumulated knowledge and developed skills that enable him in many ways to manage more effectively than might be expected. James says that it is only when conversations are deep and complex that Paul has difficulty. Daily routines such as cooking, shopping, managing money and being on time for commitments challenge Paul, and he regularly requires reminders. Debra says that every year she buys him a diary in the hope that he will take more responsibility. James agrees that remembering things is a challenge for Paul.

Debra confirms that Paul is as calm as he appears to be – 'he doesn't catastrophise!' He is also very sensitive, and, according to Debra, 'doesn't take kindly to harsh words'. She sometimes worries that he will be taken advantage of because he is so eager to please others. She adds, 'It's easy to put words in his mouth'.



OPPOSITE

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BELOW

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



He enjoys company and social interactions, and Debra believes that it is very important for him to spend time with highly functioning people.

In addition to his art, Paul has had a long-term interest in and commitment to ballet. He has taken lessons for four years and goes twice a week to study classical as well as contemporary ballet in a well-established ballet school. Debra believes that he contacted the dance school himself and made arrangements to attend classes. Paul recalls that his interest was kindled when Debra worked as a researcher at the Australian Ballet. He recalls visiting her at work, walking past and observing some of the dancers practising. He remembers being amazed at what they were able to do with their bodies. Paul's delight in participating in his ballet lessons is obvious. He becomes more animated as he talks about the lessons in great detail, describing how demanding they are. He says that everyone there is looked at very carefully and that there is a lot of correcting of posture. He recalls mentioning his interest in dance to his mum when he was around ten years old. According to him, she said it would be too hard. He claims that in fact it is pretty easy!

Debra says that he has a deep interest in the Australian Ballet and asks her many questions. 'He will ring up while I'm preparing dinner with random questions such as "what do they eat between meals?" He obviously thinks about ballet a lot'. He loves looking at books about ballet and hearing Debra's stories about her time at the Australian Ballet.

Debra says that it is clear that Paul would like to be like the dancers he admires so much. He loves not only going to his classes but also performing. Participating in the dance studio performances is a particular highlight.

Paul has combined his love of art and dance in two projects with the Sisters Hayes, who work in costume and set design, painting, animation, film and photography. These projects allowed him to work collaboratively with other artists, which he enjoys. In 2012 they worked together on a project called 'The Great Un-Reveal'. This collaboration resulted in a video based on portraits of Napoleon in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria at the time. The video included Paul, dressed in period costume, performing a dance.

In 2013 their collaboration was part of an exhibition at Arts Project called 'Knowing Me, Knowing You'. Using the painting 'Allegory' by Luca Giordano as a reference, they constructed a theatrical set. Paul and the Sisters Hayes played the roles of the characters in the painting. Paul also choreographed the dance routine and helped the Sisters Hayes learn it. Paul obviously delights in dancing and performing.

In 2010 Paul participated in an exhibition called Portrait Exchange, where he worked with artist Sarah Menelaus. In late 2013 he was one of two artists from Arts Project selected to participate in a project sponsored by Arts Centre Melbourne called 'Play me, I'm yours'. Paul, along with 27 other community groups and individual artists, spent a number of days in the studios at Arts Centre Melbourne, each painting a donated piano. After the launch of the project, these pianos were placed in various public spaces across the Melbourne CBD where passers-by could sit down and

play. Debra says that he loved participating in this project. He particularly liked going into the Arts Centre and interacting with staff and other artists. As mentioned previously, Paul chose to paint his piano on the theme of 'The Nutcracker' ballet. The piano was subsequently donated to a community organisation.

Paul also enjoys going to a variety of kinds of movies and says that he often finds inspiration for his artwork there. Debra says that he particularly enjoys art-house movies and is an astute critic at times. He also enjoys live theatre.

When asked to describe her relationship with Paul currently, Debra responds by saying that he calls her 'Mum' every now and again. James admires Debra's commitment to Paul and the close relationship that they have. He says she is unwavering in her support. Her occasional frustration with Paul – for example his forgetting to tell her things she needs to know – is borne of her love for him and the desire to be 'just a sister' to him. That is not to suggest that she would wish to not have the responsibility that she does, but sometimes it gets in the way of just appreciating him for who he is.

Debra says 'Paul's mother's death has given me the opportunity to know him. I didn't know him before. Being part of his life has brought me into contact with a lot of wonderful people. I volunteer at Arts Project often. It gives me such pleasure to see what he's doing there – both his work and his interactions with others. I never would have dreamed he and I would be living the lives we are living. What has happened and our involvement with Arts Project has taught me to love him more'.

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



RIGHT

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BELOW

Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



THE PAST

According to Debra, Paul had many interesting experiences when he was growing up, thanks to his mother. For example, at one point he appeared as an extra in several television programs. When Paul was in his early twenties he and his mother lived in an ashram for a year, and Paul did art there. Paul's mother 'was an angel', Debra says. 'She led her own life, had her own interests and was a cause-driven person. She wanted Paul to realise his potential. She always built his confidence and was very optimistic about what he was capable of. She was criticised by others for that. She was a great advocate for Paul'. Paul was very close to his mother and her death was very distressing for him.

Paul says that he thinks that he drew a lot, mostly at home, when he was a child, and that his mother encouraged him. Debra does not know where Paul's art ability came from or the details of how he 'found' Arts Project. She knows that when Paul was a young adult, his parents wondered 'where his place in the world would be - where would he go'. Through their search for an answer to that question they found out about Arts Project.

Paul recalls that it took him a while to adjust and feel comfortable when he began coming to Arts Project, but that it soon began to feel 'natural'. When Paul's mother died, Debra recalls that Arts Project 'was an absolute rock'. 'His world had fallen apart. He was arriving at Arts Project later and later, not producing much work and spending a lot of time sleeping on a couch while he was there. They were just so gentle and good to him. It gave him some stability while his world was changing drastically'.



A GOOD PLACE

Discussion between Arts Project staff and Paul has led to setting a current major goal of supporting him to see himself as an accomplished artist, not just as Arts Project but also in the broader community, through having experiences outside of Arts Project.

James and Paul have worked out a plan where one day each week Paul visits a commercial or public gallery on his own. He takes a journal for sketching and making notes. 'That's his assignment', says James, 'to see art out in the community, learn from it and broaden his perspective about what's possible'. James says that one reason for doing this is that Paul comes to Arts Project five days a week and therefore has limited time to explore art in other ways. The more important reason, however, is for Paul to have experiences that increase his understanding of what it means to be an artist beyond the Arts Project studio and gallery, in the mainstream arts community. The hope is that these experiences will help Paul to incorporate into his sense of self a strong perception of himself as an artist.

James recounts a conversation with Paul earlier in the year when he returned from one of these visits. He had visited the National Gallery of Victoria. Paul told him that he was sitting in front of a painting that he particularly admired (James thinks it was McCubbin's triptych 'The Pioneer') when a group of school children came into the space. Paul was sketching, and some of the children approached to look at his work. According to Paul, they were impressed and asked him if he was an artist! Paul was quite proud to receive this kind of attention. James says that this is exactly the kind of experience he wants Paul to have!

Plans are in place for Paul to have a solo exhibition at Arts Project in 2015, and Paul is taking an active role in selecting the work that will be exhibited. He will also participate in a project with Melbourne Theatre Company that will involve several artists attending rehearsals for the MTC production of 'The Sublime' and making drawings over a period of weeks. Their work will then be displayed at the Arts Centre for the duration of the play's season.

Paul's response to the question 'What does it mean to you to be an artist?' attests to his wish and aim to see himself and to be seen by others as a 'real' artist. He said, 'I guess it's important for other people to recognise that I'm an artist. It is my work. If I say to people in the community that I'm an artist then they will recognise me as one'.

Paul wants to continue to learn new painting techniques. Interestingly, when asked if there is anything he would like to do as an artist that he has not done yet, Paul's response is modest. He mentions doing very large paintings, 'just because they are a challenge'. He then adds 'I wouldn't mind doing images on t-shirts'.

Broader-than-art-related wishes are grander. When asked 'What do you hope to do in your life – places to go, people to meet, things to do?', Paul says that he has always wanted to meet a famous actor. He gets more specific – he would like to meet Natalie Portman (she played the lead in the movie 'Black Swan'). He adds with a smile, 'I have a thing about her'. He would also like to go to Europe.

Debra says that she is 'constantly trying to see if I can make things better. There is always something to be taken care of'. She acknowledges that she gets frustrated with Paul at times, and she knows she should not. She says she just wishes that Paul would 'push himself a bit more', but that perhaps that is unreasonable. Paul says 'I've got to work harder'.



Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Debra also hopes that one day he will live in a residence with like-minded people with similar abilities.

Debra knows that Paul's commitment to his art and to his participation at Arts Project is strong: 'He is considered to be a senior artist at Arts Project and he has a healthy profile in the art community. He has developed his own style and works well in different mediums. He loves it and loves what he's doing. It's his home'.

Debra adds 'I think Paul has an innate talent. I am sure he would have been in the arts even if he had not had a disability'. That interesting and unanswerable question arises again, as it does with all of the artist's stories: What makes us who we are? How do Paul's disabilities contribute to his talent for and commitment to art?

James sums up the challenge for Paul and those who support him in his art and his life: 'Paul craves success. This validation is a real motivator for him to keep making work and to continue progressing his art practice. He wants to be known for his art. With Paul there are some barriers and obstacles. It isn't as simple him just working harder. Good work emerges when he's in a good place within himself. If you think about it, Paul has been an artist in the studio five days a week, forty weeks a year for over a decade now, so while he may have some lean times creatively here and there, he has managed to sustain a full-time art practice with many successes and plaudits for an incredible amount of time, and you have to take your hat off to him for that. The challenge for those working with Paul is to figure out what keeps Paul in a 'good creative place'.



Paul Hodges
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Born: Melbourne, 1974

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Melbourne Art Fair 2014*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Knowing Me, Knowing You, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Play Me I'm Yours, Melbourne Arts Centre, Melbourne
Darebin Art Show, Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, Bundoora
- 2013 *Belle Arti Prize*, Chapman and Bailey Gallery, Melbourne
Darebin Art Show, Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, Bundoora
Supermarket, Craft, Melbourne
Convergence, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Video Doctor, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
World In My Eyes, C3 Gallery, Abbotsford
At the Table, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Classic Albums, Tanks Art Centre, Cairns
Walking the Line, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2012 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
The Great un Reveal, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Halo and the Glory of Art, McGlade Gallery, ACU Sydney
Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Paint It Black, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Classic Albums, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
In the making, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2011 *Movement & Emotion*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Fresh off the press, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Moving Galleries, Flinders Street Station, Melbourne
Halo and the Glory of Art, ACU Gallery, Melbourne
This Sensual World, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
National Gallery of Victoria 150th event, Melbourne
Unfiltered, Penola Visitor Information Centre, Penola, South Australia
Art Through Other's Eyes, Rymill Coonawarra, South Australia
Subterranean, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Fred, Ginger and Other Stories, Delmar Gallery, Ashfield
- 2010 *Plus One*, The Library Art space, North Fitzroy
Human Nature, Alan Lane Community Gallery: Warnambool Art Gallery
ShelfLife, Delmar Gallery, Trinity Grammar School, Summerhill
Portrait Exchange, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Sweet Relief, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Connected10, Melbourne Central, Melbourne
Fully Booked, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Canvas Stock Show, Arts Project Australia
- 2009 *By Hand*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Snapshot, ACGA Gallery, Federation Square, Melbourne

- 2009 *Liberty Victoria Dinner and Voltaire Award*, Windsor Hotel, Melbourne
The Eyes Have It, Dogs Bar, Melbourne
Location Location Location! Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Orange Regional Gallery, Orange
- 2008 *Behind the Scenes*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2008, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW Sydney
Arts Project Australia: Paintings, Prints & Sculptures, A Day on Earth, Brisbane
- 2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
The Dinner Party, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Emu Plains
Connected07, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
- 2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2006, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Connected06, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
Skyscape, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2005 *Leo Cussen with Selected Artists*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
South of the Border, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Sydney Art on Paper Fair*, Byron Kennedy Hall, Sydney
connected05, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Outsider Art Fair, New York, United States. Hosted by Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York, USA
- 2004 *2nd Annual Intuit Show of Folk and Outsider Art*, Chicago, USA
Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne
connected04, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Portraits, Arts Project Gallery, Melbourne
- 2003 *A Sense of Place*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Connected, Goya Galleries, Melbourne
Body Image, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2002 *Chic*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
What about you, Monkey Bum? Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2001 *New Artists' Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2000 *Eleven New Artists*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 1999 *Still Life Group Show*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
- 1998 *Group Show*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

COLLECTIONS

Private Collections





MILES HOWARD-WILKS

'I just remember'

What I like to see in a work is time, effort, and stamina. I admire a commitment to art that acknowledges that good work is going to take time and effort. It's a big thing to commit to the kind of work that Miles does. It also reflects a rare talent.

Miles' art seems to come from deep within. You get the feeling that it's all mapped out. He never gives the impression that he is grappling with his art. Rather it's just a matter of him putting in the time and effort. He does work very hard, but he doesn't struggle. And he just gets better and better. He seems to learn from each painting.

—JAMES MCDONALD, ARTS PROJECT STUDIO MANAGER

Miles Howard-Wilks' rich internal life and his art are fuelled by many diverse interests that he pursues actively with the support of his family – for example trains, marine life (especially sharks), crocodiles and sporting teams (especially Collingwood). Much of his art illustrates these interests.

In the studio Miles focuses completely on his art and is not usually interested in talking. He needs little help and no encouragement. Consequently, James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project Australia, and the staff artists admire Miles' talent and his strong work ethic, respect his commitment to his art and like him as a person, but they do not feel that they know him well.

THE ARTIST

Miles comes to Arts Project three days a week, and has been attending since 2001. His art practice has many streams.

Whatever medium he is using, Miles tends not to use reference material, although he sometimes uses them when he is painting Australian flora and fauna. Most of his creations come from his rich imagination and his deep knowledge of his subjects. He has exceptional observational skills, seems to be able to visualise places from many different vantage points, and is very good at retaining information. When asked the source of his images, Miles says, 'I have always liked to draw things out of my imagination – I just remember'.

Miles has a natural feel for drawing and line work. When he draws, he works to build up what James describes as 'a beautiful fine line'. Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project, particularly admires Miles'



Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



compositional work. She identifies his particular strength as capturing perspective and says that Miles creates ‘amazing compositions not only in his drawings but also in his photographs and digital drawings, and he is a fantastic animator’.

Miles’ paintings often emphasise sky and contain lots of clouds. He creates images of idyllic meadows with beautiful lines and trees that have a pastoral feel to them. James says that Miles often depicts an ideal representation of what he is painting or drawing – rolling hills, meadows, streams, even railway platforms with ads and graffiti. ‘He has a kind of archetypal view of the world. His work is busy and at the same time calm. For example, he might produce a tranquil scene where the star is a crocodile with its mouth open’.

Over time his compositional approach with his painting and drawing has become more ‘straight-ahead’ and linear. He has become more adept at gouache and can now use special techniques in applying paint, such as using a fan brush. The only other change James identifies is that he has moved away from creating a collage effect in his painting. This refers

Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
 acrylic on canvas
 168 x 152 cm

to the way the imagery of Miles' work can have a cut-and-paste feel. By no means a criticism, this effect is extremely interesting and addresses perspective in a really unique way.

Miles' paintings, mostly using gouache, show immaculate and beautiful attention to detail. Usually creating backgrounds first, he often breaks the picture plane up into interesting divisions or areas. The result, rather than being a realistic representation, is a composite of imagery from Miles' observations and imagination that he weaves together in his paintings. According to James, 'These backgrounds, which at first glance may sometimes seem a bit disjointed and made up of unrelated parts, were a bit disparate but worked well. There were typically interesting compositional dynamics at play that caused ambiguity, but Miles links these different environments together very cleverly with, for example, a network of roads or a winding river'. Miles is not manipulating the picture plane as much in his more recent work.

Humour is often evident in Miles' work. An image of a magpie and/or black and white stripes always appear in some way. Miles' inclusion of a magpie or a black and white fish is his idea of his special signature. The obvious inferred rationale is his love of the Collingwood Magpies AFL team, although his mother, Wilks mentions that since he was a child he has always been fascinated by bar codes. She speculates with a smile that perhaps the love of vertical black and white stripes is why Collingwood is his AFL team of choice! Miles also shows great interest in train tracks. Adding that to his fascination with bar codes, perhaps it is parallel lines that attract Miles' attention.

A ceramics artist for a number of years, Miles has recently begun making beautiful ceramic pieces at Arts Project. He also does photography and participates in the digital program. He has a natural aptitude for digital media.

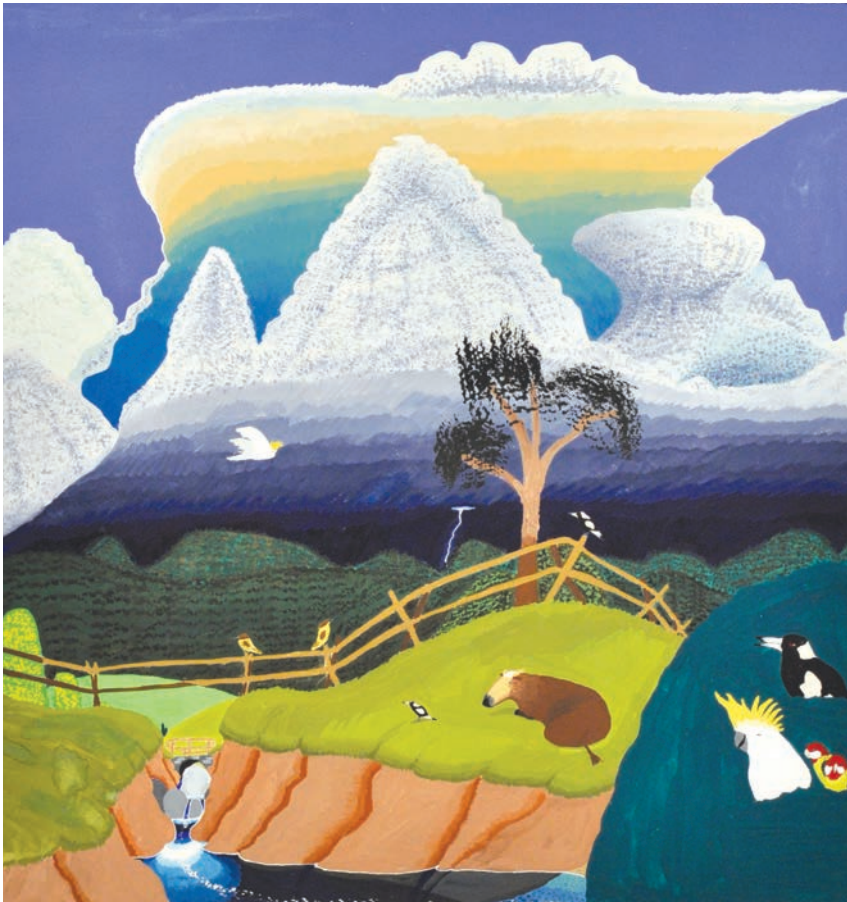
Miles works independently in a quiet, focused, no-nonsense way. He is completely self-motivated and always finishes work, even though it takes a very long time to complete much of the work that he produces. For example, he might finish two paintings a term. However, he seems content to work on his paintings for a very long time.

Elyss comments that she always makes a point of having a chat with Miles each day they are both in the studio. She says that he responds politely without fail and always says hello and goodbye. 'He's a very dedicated artist who wants to get on with his work. We respect that. We try to be aware of what he wants and let him lead the way in interactions with us. Our aim with Miles, as it is with each artist, is to individualise our interactions and relationships according to what they are most comfortable with'.

Having space around him while he works is important to Miles. According to James, he never asks for help – and he does not need it. Unlike many of the other artists, he mixes his colours himself. He may show signs of frustration if he is interrupted, but he does not get frustrated with his work. Miles says that when he is working he feels 'happy and calm'. When asked if he gets frustrated if something is not working, he replies immediately 'No – I just fix it up'.

OPPOSITE
Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm





Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

James says, 'We have very little input into his creative ability. We don't intervene in his work because there is nothing we could add. Our contribution to Miles' development as an artist is simply to give him access to good materials. That's all he needs from us. He does get some tuition with using Adobe and Photoshop, but all that we have to do is show him the capabilities of the tool, and he takes it from there'.

While some of Miles' work reflects more skill and aptitude than other pieces, James says that he has never seen a failure or even a work from Miles that is disappointing. According to James, Miles is exceptional in that regard – there is no other artist at Arts Project like that. 'His work is beautiful'.

As the quote at the beginning of this story attests, Miles combines commitment and hard work with a vivid imagination and a rare talent. He does not struggle. In answer to a question about what is hard for him about creating art, Miles stated quietly and firmly, without a hint of arrogance, 'Nothing's hard. I just do it. I don't need any help'. It seems as though those who know him and experience his practice as an artist agree!

Because he is so quiet, James says it is difficult to say what being an artist means to Miles, but that his passion, commitment and hard work attest to the importance to Miles of creating art. Liz says that identifying

Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
 acrylic on canvas
 168 x 152 cm

as an artist is ‘majorly important, and central to his self-esteem’. She says that he is very proud when a work that he has created is on display. He often photographs what he is working on and uses the photos to give a progress report to his family when he gets home. He loves to explain what he is doing. She adds, ‘Miles’ art gives our family something to be proud of and look forward to’.

Miles says that he likes being an artist ‘just for fun’, and adds as an afterthought that he is ‘happy to be in an exhibition and sell work’.

Miles’ technique has come along in leaps and bounds. He is also much more willing to try new mediums and is increasingly conscious of quality. Miles says that his fine line is neater now and that he likes including a lot of detail. This perhaps can be attributed in part to having access to a range of good quality materials.

Miles is a man of relatively few words. He says that he enjoys trying different things at Arts Project and currently likes painting, photography, animation and ceramics. At the time of our conversation, he mentioned that he was working on a painting of sea life, adding that he likes going to the Melbourne Aquarium to watch the big sea creatures and that he has seen the crocodiles in Darwin.

A MAN WITH MANY INTERESTS

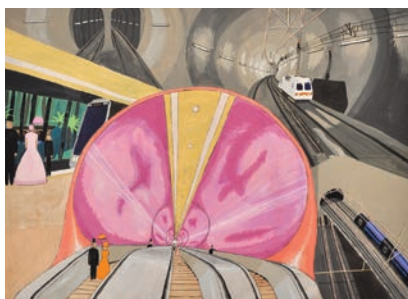
His subjects are the things he is passionate about: sea creatures, especially sharks, trains and their tracks, Australian flora and fauna, lightning, plumbing and cityscapes.

— BIFFA’S BLOG: THE ARTWORK OF MILES HOWARD-WILKS

Miles actively pursues a number of interests. His art is usually an expression of these interests. His mother says that he always has something to do. He has a long-standing fascination with railways and spends a lot of time at home making plans for railway lines. Liz claims that Miles completed (on paper!) the extension of the rail line to South Morang long before the Victorian Government had the idea! He includes stations in his drawn plans and names them. As expected, he is fascinated with model railways and often goes to exhibitions. He has a deep knowledge of railways and trains, including the features of different kinds of railway carriages.

Miles also loves water, whether in the form of rivers, waterfalls, creeks or as it comes out of pipes. He is also fascinated by natural phenomena such as lightning, thunder and cyclones. He is awed by them, but does not fear them. He also enjoys watching fireworks displays.

He follows a number of sporting teams and, as mentioned above, is a passionate Collingwood supporter. Liz speculates that although Collingwood is a favourite, he very sensibly follows a number of codes and teams, so that there is always a win to celebrate! Following particular teams enables Miles to experience a sense of belonging and community – as it does for everyone. There is also a socialising aspect to being a member of that community, and loyalty to a particular team is a good basis for starting a conversation.







Miles enjoys new experiences, especially with his family. They went on a cruise to New Zealand earlier in 2014, which was especially enjoyable for Miles, although there were some stressful times for him as he adjusted to changes in routine.

Miles does not shy away from challenging himself. He is confident and skilled at taking himself off on his own to re-visit favourite places, such as the Melbourne Aquarium, or to explore new places. Even when he was a child, Liz says she knew could not keep him at home. From around the age of three or four he took himself off for walks quite a lot (with his mum following close behind!). These days he goes on a train journey most weekends, often traveling to the end of the line and back again. If he hears of a new train line he will go and investigate it. During term breaks, when he is not coming to Arts Project, he packs a picnic lunch and takes a train to Ballarat or Bendigo for the day.

When he was at school he had a teacher who took the class on bushwalks, and he has loved bushwalking ever since. Sometimes he goes on bushwalks with others and sometimes on his own. These adventures may involve checking out bodies of water or water flowing through pipes. His mother is reasonably confident that Miles would not do anything that was unsafe and very confident that he would never get lost. She adds with a smile, 'You could never lose Miles – he always knows the way home. Miles would be very good at guiding people around Melbourne. Wherever he is, he knows where the river and the train line are'. He often takes his camera with him on his expeditions and takes photographs. He has been known to sit so quietly by a river than an echidna wandered up and he was able to photograph it!

Miles lists his favourite things to do when he is not making art as going on train rides, swimming and going to the Melbourne Aquarium.

LIFE TODAY

Miles, born in 1979, grew up with his mum, dad, brother Duane and sister Amy. He says decisively that his family are the most important people in his life.

The family has recently moved house and have built a bungalow out the back for Miles. His new home is closer to the train line, so Miles can easily walk to the station and take the train to Arts Project, although he has always been an independent train traveller.

Liz, who says that she 'loves him to bits', describes Miles as very reliable and always eager to help and to please. He makes her proud because he always tries hard. She has always encouraged him to 'have a go' and at the same time has been aware of the importance of him having successes. 'It's a bit scary at times, she admits, 'but I try hard not to be afraid for him, and to let him have adventures'.

Over the years there have been very few hassles as a result of Miles' independence, although there was once an issue when someone asked him for money. 'The kind of person Miles is means that he would never do anything to draw attention to himself', Liz says. 'In fact, it's the opposite. He'd be more likely to run away'. There have only been one or two

PREVIOUS
Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BELOW
Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



incidents, one of which involved his mother getting a phone call from the police. Someone had seen Miles leaning over the side of the pier at Mordialloc, had become worried and contacted the police. What he was doing was looking for sharks! This incident reassured his family that the police and the community were looking out for him.

As Miles has got older, the main issue related to his autism is anxiety. He is unable to read other people's body language and therefore is continually anxious about what other people may be about to do. He demonstrates this anxiety in his behaviour, but is unable to talk about it. Miles is improving in his ability to say how he feels without getting angry. His dad Roy has been patiently teaching Miles to understand when people are joking.

Miles has a strong desire to please and to succeed, and consequently wants to avoid situations where he perceives that he might fail. He tends to need a lot of reassurance before attempting new things. He is reassured by routine, although if given a warning he is surprisingly good at varying the routines. Liz offers the example that, if left to his own devices he would have Coco Pops for breakfast every morning!

According to his family, life with Miles means that 'our life is full of wonderful anecdotes'.

THE PAST

Liz worked for many years as a commercial artist. However, Miles did not experience her painting because she used to do it when the children had gone to bed. Miles always had access to art materials at home, but when he was at school he was busy doing other things, for example judo and dancing. He showed no apparent interest in art outside of what he had to do at school. Miles says that he recalls doing art at school and drawing at home.

Miles was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder around the age of four and a half, although his family had concerns about him long before that. At that time professionals were reluctant to label children. He went to kindergarten for three years and had one and one half years of early intervention at Irabina in Bayswater concurrently. His schooling was in special schools. He experienced some sessional integration into mainstream primary and secondary schools but funding for support for full integration was not available. His parents were happy with his schooling.

When Miles was around 20 years old, he began attending Churinga, where he tried a variety of jobs. He asked Alison Peake, the artist in residence there, if he could go into the art room. She took Miles under her wing and encouraged him and, according to Liz's blog, 'he has never looked back'. He then took some art classes at TAFE. Liz approached Arts Project when Miles was around 22 years old and he has been attending ever since. When Miles started making art he was doing it virtually 24 hours a day: 'He would draw on anything that lay still long enough'.

Until 2014 Miles enjoyed working in the Churinga art room one day a week. He stopped attending there when he was offered a third day each week at Arts Project, where he could be extended more.

In addition to making sure Miles had easy access to paper and pencils at home, Miles and Liz have always enjoyed occasionally visiting art galleries together. Liz sometimes points out artists' techniques during their visits, and she is delighted when she sees that he has learned from these conversations and taken up her suggestions: 'It gives me great pleasure to see elements in his work of something we've seen together and talked about'.



Miles Howard-Wilks
*Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006*
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

James asserts that Miles is someone who could go far.

His mother's hopes are similar to those of any parent: 'I want him to be happy and to feel sense of achievement that he has done some good things and that he contributes to society'.

When asked what he hopes for as an artist, Miles replies, 'I'm just happy with all the things I'm doing'. Combining that comfortable satisfaction with James' assertion that Miles just gets better with every piece of work he does leads you to think that happiness with what he is doing is quite enough!

Miles' response to the question of what he would like to do in his life that might not relate to his art is predictable: 'I haven't been on the Ghan yet, and I haven't been from Adelaide to Sydney on the Indian Pacific'! Imagine the images of wonderful sunsets, the big skies, the landscapes, the desert colours and the flora and fauna that Miles would store away in his creative mind from those experiences – not to mention the trains and all the tracks – and how they might show up in his art!

Note: More information about Miles' art appears in Biffa's Blog: The artwork of Miles Howard-Wilks.



Miles Howard-Wilks
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

MILES HOWARD-WILKS

Born: Melbourne, 1979

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2004 *Sharks and Everything*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2014 *Melbourne Art Fair 2014*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Animal Magnetism, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2013 *Darebin Art Show 2013*, Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, Melbourne
Annual Gala Exhibition, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Convergence, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
At the Table, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne

2012 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Connected, Federation Square, Melbourne
Walsh Bay Arts Table, The Wharf – Pier 2, Sydney
Melbourne Art Fair 2012, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne

2011 *Annual Gala exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Exhibition #4, Museum of Everything, London
Moving Galleries, Flinders Street Station, Melbourne
Unfiltered, Penola Visitor Information Centre, Penola, South Australia
Colour My World, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2010 *Melbourne Art Fair 2010*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Connected10, Melbourne Central, Melbourne
Fully Booked, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Pacifica, Gallery Impaire, Paris
We Call Them Pirates Out Here: MCA Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Myscape, Trongate & Collins Gallery, Strathclyde University, Glasgow

2009 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Connected 09, Black Box, Melbourne Arts Centre, Melbourne
Location, Location, Location! Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Orange Regional Gallery, Orange

2008 *Behind the Scenes*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2008, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Without Borders: Outsider Art in an Antipodean Context, MUMA, Melbourne
Reaching Out, Waldron Hall, County Court of Victoria, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW Sydney

2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Pearls from Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Penrith Regional Gallery & Lewers Bequest, Sydney
Otherworlds, King Street Gallery on Burton, Sydney
Perspectives, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne

2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Private and Confidential, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Connected 06, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne

- 2005 *Wrapped: Selected Works from the Studio*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Leo Cussen with Selected Artists, Australian Galleries, Melbourne
Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay Collection, National Gallery of Australia
 Travelling exhibition; Tamworth City Gallery, Tamworth NSW; Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand
- 2004 *Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay Collection*, National Gallery of Australia
 Travelling exhibition; Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Art Centre, Gympie NSW; Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide
Melbourne Art Fair 2004, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- 2003 *Personal Mythologies*, Arts Project Gallery, Melbourne
Home Sweet Home: works from the Peter Fay Collection, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
- 2001 *New Artists*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2000 *Eleven New Artists*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Drawings, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

FILM SCREENINGS – “CHOCOLATE LAND”

- 2010 *Myscape*, Trongate & Collins Gallery, Strathclyde University, Glasgow
Picture This Film Festival, Calgary
- 2009 *Here and Away*, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne
Connected09, Black Box, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne
- 2008 *Animagination* Arts Project Australia screening, ACMI, Melbourne

Without Borders, Outsider Art in an Antipodean Context, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne; Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney; *Salon de Refuse*, SH Irvin Gallery, Sydney

FILM SCREENINGS – “THE MOVIE HAS EVERYTHING”

- 2006 “Yartz”, Arts Community Television Inc, Channel 31, January.
- 2005 *Mixed Bag Shorts 2*, 1st Annual Westgarth Film Festival, Melbourne
Connected05, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2004 *Disability Film Festival*, London, United Kingdom

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
 Private Collections





ADRIAN LAZZARO

The power of difference

He's very aware of and open about his disability. Rather than seeing it only as something that limits or holds him back, he views it as a kind of superpower that enables him to see things and know things that others don't. In other words, it enables him to look at the world in a unique way.

He embraces his difference, and owns the idea that he looks at the world in a unique way. I think that's why his art often focuses on people or creatures who are different, not mainstream – zombies, the undead, werewolves.

— JAMES MCDONALD, ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA STUDIO MANAGER

The first thing I notice about Adrian Lazzaro is his smile, which has a hint of cheekiness about it. There is also a sense that he is highly engaged with whatever is happening around him. It is as though he is soaking it all up and frequently finding whatever is going on around him amusing. Conversation with him soon reveals a delightful sense of humour. Upon being introduced to me by James McDonald, the Studio Manager at Arts Project Australia, as he sits down at a table in James' office for our conversation he says to both of us 'It's like "Law and Order"'. The smile never leaves his face as we talk.

Another impression of Adrian that forms early in conversation with him is that he is intellectually curious and therefore interested in and knowledgeable about a broad range of topics. When introduced to me, Adrian was quite taken with the fact that I am American (although I'm Australian as well!). He asked me at the end of our time together where I come from in the States. When I said the Deep South he said, 'They had slavery there didn't they?' When he saw me five days later at an exhibition opening he approached, that smile beaming, and said 'Dallas Cowboys'. I replied, 'Yep, a good football team', to which he replied, as if to correct me, 'Gridiron', and then added 'New England Patriots'.

James says that Adrian is naturally inquisitive and will often take advantage of an accessible staff artist to ask about a topic he wants to know more about. The sources of his intense interests are varied and at times a mystery. In the past, for example, he had an intense curiosity about lady boys, asserting that there are many of them in Thailand. Staff artists at Arts Project admire Adrian's desire to learn about a vast range of topics, and always aim to answer questions accurately and support his curiosity.



Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

James says that Adrian actively searches for connections and double meanings. For example, James expresses surprise that Adrian hasn't turned my surname (Stonehouse) into something like 'brick building' and assumes that it must be because he has not yet registered what my name is.

Adrian has wide-ranging interests, among them pop culture and anything about the United States. He is very aware of 'big-picture' issues in the world, for example prejudice and racism. Slavery, unequal distribution of wealth and skinheads are topics of interest currently. He has a keen interest in politics. James says he seems to just pick up information available around him, including television, movies and books, and he's very aware of current issues. At the time of writing this story, for example, he worries about the current government cutting funding for people with disabilities.

Since he was a young teenager he has particularly enjoyed watching wrestling on television and he knows the names of all the major wrestlers. His mother Aurora Lazzaro says that Adrian spends a lot of time watching a variety of programs on Foxtel, and it is through that activity that he has amassed a great deal of knowledge about the United States. She adds that Adrian 'is magnetised to things that interest him'. His interests inform his art, and he researches his subject matter extensively, especially in 3D and puppetry.

Being at a place like Arts Project is a particularly good match with Adrian's diverse questions and interests. Because it is an art space and the artists are adults, while of course there is a code of conduct about appropriate behaviour that the artists are required to follow, there is no question or topic that is off limits. The artists can enquire about anything, including topics that might not be acceptable to enquire about outside of Arts Project. James claims 'We would never say to an artist "You don't need to know about that"'. Adrian takes full advantage of this freedom. No subject matter is off limits for discussion or for his art!

THE ART AND THE ARTIST

Adrian, who is 29, began coming to Arts Project in 2007 and fitted in straight away. He reports that from the beginning he has liked coming, adding that the staff and other artists are friendly - 'not arrogant and not snobs'.



OPPOSITE
Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BELOW
Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Almost all of Adrian's subject matter for his art arises from his keen interest in popular culture and his unique 'take' on the world around him. Currently and for some time he has been fascinated with the macabre. Zombies and vampires feature often in his work. As indicated in the quote at the beginning of this piece, James believes that Adrian relates to these 'altered' human beings: 'He is attracted to people or creatures who exhibit extreme points of difference'.

At times he delights in appropriating images and converting them into 'altered' beings. A current favourite subject for this interest is Prime Minister Tony Abbott, whom Adrian converts into such creatures as a Nazi zombie. James says with a smile that Adrian 'has a thing' about Tony Abbott, whom he often depicts in unflattering guises. The resident human skeleton in the studio, fondly known as Pasquale, is a favourite of Adrian's, as it is of a number of other artists. He uses Pasquale as a communication device to ask questions about a variety of topics.

His favourite subjects are, according to him, zombies and werewolves. He also mentions Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Scorpion King, but he adds quickly 'I like drawing everything that's a brilliant picture!' Occasionally he depicts animals in his work. When asked what she thinks about his subject matter, Aurora says, 'He does a lot of zombie stuff - I think it's frightening - but it's fine if he needs to do that to express himself. He *can* draw beautiful things though - animals, for example. I prefer those'.

Adrian collects images that appeal to him from magazines and takes photographs of images on television. He assembles scrapbooks or visual diaries of these images at home. The images range from cartoon characters to monsters to actors and models. Sometimes he creates collages of these images and uses them as references for some of his artwork.

Drawing is Adrian's main strength. According to Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project, he has always been a natural drawer. His lines are energetic and dynamic. Elyss says that you can tell an Adrian Lazzaro work straight away. Adrian mostly does line drawings that are loose and very expressive sketches, which James says are beautiful. James says that even in the beginning of Adrian's time at Arts Project, he was 'blown away' by his draftsmanship. He uses paint or felt tip pens to add colour. As he works he often moves away from the original image he referenced and adds original touches, changing the colours, for example. The reference image becomes secondary as Adrian's picture develops its own self-contained narrative.

Often a story emerges as Adrian works, and some of his drawings end up with speech bubbles that create the story. In some ways these works resemble the graphic novel genre, as they include a plot and dialogue, although the style is looser than a graphic novel. Adrian has a sense of humour 'in abundance', which is sometimes reflected in work that pivots on a punch line.

Adrian says that he loves drawing. He believes that his talent comes from his family, mentioning that his brother is an architect. He says that he is happy to explore a variety of mediums, including animation. However, his favourite medium is drawing with pencil and filling in with colour. He says he loves sketching, indicating that he used to like pen and ink but



Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

found them too dirty and messy.

Extremely productive and self motivated, Adrian typically works independently, although he can collaborate with others. Adrian backs up this description with his reply when asked who helps him with his art. He says emphatically, 'I help myself'! He works quickly and is completely focused. He often narrates the process out loud as he works, and enjoys generating conversations with other artists and with staff artists as he works. These conversations typically relate either directly or indirectly to what he is working on. Elyss says 'When you have a discussion with Adrian about his work you learn a lot more about the content'.

Staff artists take care not to interfere with his vision and drive while he is working. Their role with Adrian is usually peripheral, mainly trying to ensure that he has ready access to and is using good quality materials. Because he is so keen, if he has an idea of something he wants to draw, if good materials are not immediately available, he will use whatever is available – any piece of paper or pen lying around. Staff artists also sometimes have to encourage Adrian to complete his work. According to James, 'he is so prolific and full of ideas that at times the next idea comes while he's working and he wants to get going on the new idea'.

He tackles challenges and participates willingly. A recent example is that he participated for around 30 minutes in a portrait sitting that was happening in the studio, something he would not ordinarily spend time doing, simply because he was interested.

James says that he does not think that Adrian sees challenges as challenges: 'You don't have to convince him that something's good for him – he's open to new things. He shows a healthy balance of contentment and satisfaction with his drawing and openness to new mediums'. Elyss confirms this confidence by saying that 'Adrian's strength is that he is not

Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



afraid of using any medium. He just gets in there and uses them, often mixing them up in the same work – texta, gouache, paint’.

Because he is so motivated and productive, the staff artists only introduce new mediums to Adrian if they relate to his drawing. He has recently become adept at making three-dimensional models. Adrian welcomes the technical support and tuition. Elyss says that the staff artists try not to interfere with Adrian’s work too much. They support him through having conversations with him about what he is doing and offering as many materials as possible. She says with admiration, ‘He can make any material work’.

Adrian says that he feels good when he’s drawing, both excited and calm. Challenges don’t bother him – ‘when things don’t work out I don’t cry. I don’t get upset’. His positive approach to life and his art is backed up by his claim that nothing is hard about doing art.

Aurora says that his art is important to him because he can see that it is something he can do easily – ‘It’s not hard like a lot of other things are for him. He does it naturally’. She added that she has always pushed him to try new things, such as music and swimming. ‘These he finds hard, but art is what he can do within himself. His art gives him self-esteem and self-confidence. It’s central to his life. If someone asks him what he does, he says “I do art at Arts Project Australia.” He definitely sees himself as an artist.’

Aurora says, ‘I think that from the beginning, and still, his inspiration comes from within’. This inspiration from within is backed up by James’ comments about Adrian’s self-motivation and dedication to his work. Adrian also corroborates this view. When I ask where he gets his ideas, he responds ‘From myself’. Inspiration from within, combined with his interest in and ability to connect with people and his deep curiosity about many things, fuel his creativity and productivity.

THE PERSON WHO IS THE ARTIST

The first thing Adrian mentioned when asked what he likes about coming to Arts Project, somewhat surprisingly given his commitment to his work, is 'going next door to the coffee shop and getting coffee'. The significance of this unexpected response became clear in a later conversation with his mother. She said that Adrian often finds new social situations and interacting with unfamiliar people stressful. Without knowing what Adrian had said, she offered as an example that for a very long time he would not go to the coffee shop next door when he was at Arts Project because he felt uncomfortable interacting with the staff there. He has overcome that discomfort now and, as he indicated, enjoys the social aspect of leaving the building, visiting to the coffee shop and having the contact and conversation with the staff in the cafe.

Aurora describes Adrian as mostly happy, content and social when he feels comfortable in the environment. James says that Adrian is 'pretty unflappable. There have been only a couple of times when his anxiety has bubbled over. He's very social and very interested in people. He wants to know who the staff are. He's a good conversationalist who asks a lot of questions'.

His mother also describes him as strong willed, as 'definitely having a mind of his own'. She adds that if he is introduced to something new he may not be interested at first. She says he does listen, if for example she tells him that a particular behaviour is inappropriate.

Aurora constantly gently encourages Adrian to be more independent. She wants him to be more aware of what he can do. Participating in Arts Project is a major way of being independent. Aurora says that her religious beliefs have been the foundation for the way she has raised Adrian: 'My main principle has been to teach him that you don't harm anyone, and if anyone tries to harm you, you walk away. If there is a problem with someone making you feel uncomfortable, you walk away



Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

and you let someone else know'. She adds that fortunately there have been hardly any incidents where Adrian has felt threatened.

When asked about the important people in his life, Adrian says with no hesitation 'My family'. He lives with his parents, a situation that he describes as good, adding in a matter-of-fact way as an explanation that he is not able to look after himself. Aurora says that Adrian is particularly conscious of the contrast between his life and that of his two brothers, who are married and have children: 'He knows that he's only responsible for himself'.

Adrian spends a lot of time with his extended family. Aurora says her grandchildren adore Adrian, and the feeling is mutual. 'If two-year-old Oscar asks me for a biscuit, which he does frequently, he'll always add "And one for Adrian"'. She says that moments like that are precious. Adrian spends a lot of quality time with nieces and nephews.

Family outings and activities such as bowling with friends are sources of pleasure. Adrian enjoys going to 'all kinds of movies', often with his mum. He enjoys many different types of music and often spends quiet time in his room listening to music. He enjoys heavy metal particularly – Metallica is a favourite. James recalls Adrian's discovery of the song 'I Don't like Mondays', which featured for some time in discussions.

Aurora sums up her feelings about Adrian by saying, 'I'm very honoured to have him as a son. He is very loving. He does listen to me, and I'm humbled that he does. He brings joy and happiness to our lives. He makes us laugh. We're blessed to have him. If I had to have a son with a disability I couldn't ask for more'.

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Adrian drew at home from an early age, but Aurora says that because she was busy she noticed it but did not really think much about it or take it seriously. Rather, she thought of it as just a hobby, something for him to do.



LEFT
Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



RIGHT
Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Adrian did art throughout his schooling, but his real interest and talent became obvious around age 15, when he attended Ascot Vale Special School for three years. He then went to TAFE, where he did an art course as well. His case manager from Yooralla helped to assemble a portfolio of Adrian's work and brought it to Arts Project, after which he began attending.

Aurora says that it took her a very long time – until Adrian was around 14 or 15 years old – to accept that he has a disability. She says that having two sons older than Adrian meant that she knew that something 'wasn't right' from when he was a baby. When Adrian was 11 months old he had measles and was put in hospital. At that time doctors told the family that Adrian had a disability, but the diagnosis was broad – developmental delay. From that time a therapist came into the home and he had an aide when he went to kindergarten.

From a very young age Adrian had a squint and his head often shook from side to side (these behaviours still occur). Aurora said that although she asked frequently about the squinting and head shaking, no explanation was given.

When Adrian was 14 he had a cyst in his throat and in preparation for an operation on the cyst had an MRI. As a result of the MRI he was diagnosed with an abnormality of the cerebellum. Aurora recalls feeling a great sense of relief. 'When they told me about the disability, from then on I knew it wasn't my fault. I didn't have to blame myself any more'.

Getting through the educational system was a major challenge for Adrian and his mother. She wanted him to go to a mainstream school. Because the family is Catholic, her preference was for him to go to a Catholic school. This was not possible, so he moved through the state system with assistance from an aide. Aurora says that she was not as worried about what he achieved academically as she was about his general wellbeing. Adrian has always learned much more from listening than through reading, and he expresses himself more effectively verbally and through his art than through writing. From childhood on, Adrian has communicated well verbally.

When Adrian finished his TAFE course Aurora decided that he would benefit from being in a work environment. Initially he worked in a sheltered workshop three days a week packing boxes. Gradually time in this job was cut back and he currently comes to Arts Project four days a week and packs boxes one day a week. Aurora wants him to have a 'real job' along with doing his art. Although Aurora and James agree that Adrian would prefer not to pack boxes at all and come to Arts Project five days a week instead, this combination gives him variety and contributes to a feeling of him taking on some responsibility for himself.

In addition to Arts Project, key sources of support for Adrian and Aurora have been a wonderful case manager and other support that she and Adrian had through Yooralla. Aurora said, 'Support helped us get over the many hurdles we faced when Adrian was growing up. I did have to learn to speak my mind as a parent. That has been positive and I'm proud of that'.



Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm





OPPOSITE LEFT
Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

OPPOSITE RIGHT
Adrian Lazzaro
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

THE FUTURE

When asked about the role that art plays in Adrian's life, James said, 'It gives Adrian an outlet for his vivid and wild imagination. The studio provides a platform from which Adrian is able to address subjects that, in a non-art environment, might be less palatable. But in this environment these interests are nurtured and allowed to breathe, resulting in idiosyncratic, focussed and highly authentic work. The subjects he's drawn to have characteristics that he has – a kind of unusual fit in the world. He's interested in sub-cultures, in people who are on the fringes of mainstream society. He seems to feel an affinity for anti-heroes and other marginalised characters. But quite clearly for Adrian different doesn't mean not as good'.

Aurora summed up her hopes for Adrian's future: 'What I want for him is for him to continue to be happy doing things that inspire him. Art is one of those things'.

Adrian is deeply committed to his art, highly self-motivated, clear about what he wants to do and well supported. All signs are positive. His depictions are powerful, and creating them gives him pleasure. He brings joy to others. His creativity, complexity and self-awareness are reflected in Adrian's enthusiastic response to a question I asked about things he would like to do in his life – places he would like to go, people he would like to meet, things he would like to do. His response was that he'd like to be more independent, adding that when he was younger he wanted to be a policeman and a scientist. 'I'd like to be a scientist like Dr Frankenstein. He did good things and bad things'. He added, 'I'd like to invent a time machine and go back in time. I'd like to go back to Germany and get rid of Hitler. I'd like to go to the future and see what it would be like if everyone died'.

A more achievable goal is that he would like to visit a film studio to see how movies are made.

When asked what he loves most about being an artist, Adrian replies without hesitation that 'sometimes you can get really famous being an artist. I would like to be famous'. He adds as an afterthought. 'But I wouldn't like it if people take too many pictures'.

ADRIAN LAZZARO

Born: Melbourne, 1985

EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Melbourne Art Fair 2014*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Turning the Page, Gallery 101, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
- 2013 *Darebin Art Show*, Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, Bundoora
Annual Gala Exhibition, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Supermarket, Craft, Melbourne
Convergence, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Video Doctor, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
At the Table, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Walking the Line, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2012 *My Puppet, My Secret Self*, The Substation, Newport
The Great un Reveal, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Halo and the Glory of Art, McGlade Gallery, ACU Sydney
2012 National Works on Paper, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery
Melbourne Art Fair 2012, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Paint It Black, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Classic Albums, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Shift Step Stir, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2011 *Moving Galleries*, Flinders Street Station, Melbourne
- Halo and the Glory of Art*, ACU Gallery, Melbourne
This Sensual World, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Unfiltered, Penola Visitor Information Centre, Penola, South Australia
Fred, Ginger and Other Stories, Delmar Gallery, Ashfield
Colour My World, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2010 *Belle Arti – Chapman and Bailey Acquisitive 2010 Art Award*, Metro Arts, Brisbane
Human Nature, Alan Lane Community Gallery: Warnambool Art Gallery
Portrait Exchange, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Australiana, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Fully Booked, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Linden Postcard Show, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne
- 2009 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Revealing the Human, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Pictures of You, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2008 *Annual Gala Show*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Wild Things, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne

- Connected 08*, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne
Short Stories, Tall Tales and the Way They Wore Them, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Anthony Romagnano and Recent works from the Studio, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Yours, Mine and Ours: 50 Years of ABC TV, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest
Melbourne Art Fair 2006, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Connected 06, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
- 2005 *Wrapped: Selected Works from the Studio*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Leo Cussen with Selected Artists, Australian Galleries, Collingwood
Double Take, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2004 *Christmas Survey*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne



CHRIS MASON

Taking it further than we hoped

Chris has made it as an artist. ... He knows what he wants to do. He's found a place, he's totally focused and he has a purpose. It has been and still is challenging at times – it's still hard work. It's not as stressful as it was though, and that's because of Arts Project. It has been an amazing journey. ... It's a privilege to be Chris's mum'.

— BERNIE BEDFORD

The order of the conversations I had with artists, their main support person and James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project Australia, varied from story to story depending on availability. With most of the stories the order did not seem to matter much, and each conversation complemented and enriched the others.

My first conversation for this story was with Bernie Bedford, Chris Mason's mum, at their home in a southeastern suburb of Melbourne, over lunch and a cup of tea. As it turned out I was glad I spoke to Bernie first, because what she shared helped me to see Chris's life and his work, and most importantly the person he is, in context before I met him.

We sat outside, in a lush garden filled with thriving plants. When I commented that someone in the family must be a skilled and committed gardener, Bernie said, 'Gardening has always been important to me – it takes my mind off worrying about Chris'. Interestingly, although raising Chris has presented significant challenges, the conversation revealed that both she and Chris are very happy with his life now.

THE ARTIST AND HIS ART

Chris is a talented figurative artist, someone who, according to James, 'likes to do very literal interpretations, with great detail, of things he's interested in'. He has a multidisciplinary practice as an artist. In addition to being a 'beautiful drawer', according to Elyss, a staff artist at Arts Project, he is a very skilled ceramicist. His ceramics, like his drawings, reflect impressive attention to detail. Elyss admires that Chris always seems to have a clear idea in the beginning of how he wants his work to be and he always works to the end. 'He thinks about every nook and cranny. He has great dedication to his subject matter'.

Snakes and other animals, a long-standing interest, are the subject matter for some of Chris's art. When asked about the origins of this



Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



interest, Chris says he remembers as a child ‘looking at two large pythons in a cabinet at the old Melbourne Museum, where the entrance was. I also remember going to the zoo when I was a little kid’. As a young man he went to Thailand with his family, where he saw a reticulated python. He worked for six years to create a version of that python, whose name, interestingly, is Michelle! Chris made a frame out of chicken wire and paper and covered it meticulously with individually cut and painted scales. In early 2014 Chris was thrilled that his python, which is displayed in the County Court in Melbourne, appeared in the television program ‘Fat Tony & Co’. Chris is very proud of this, and has a photo of the snake as it appeared in the television show on his phone. Chris continues to make very lifelike snakes. He has begun using real snakeskin in his work, secured through a contact by an Arts Project staff member with a staff member at the Melbourne Zoo.

When asked about his love of snakes Chris says that he likes them but is afraid of poisonous snakes. In response to a question about whether he still makes snakes he replies ‘Absolutely!’

Some years ago he also began making ceramic sculptures of pregnant women and women whose bodies might be called ‘Rubenesque’ or ‘fuller-figured’! That interest continues today. Chris uses various terms for these ‘ladies’, sometime calling them ‘1/12 ladies’ (because of their precise proportions), ‘fats girls’ but most commonly ‘fat ladies’. Bernie says she has no idea where this interest came from – it has just always been there! When asked about the origins of the fascination with ‘fat ladies’, Chris mentioned the names of two women he knew when he was a child. James thinks that Chris has a fascination with skin and flesh, and this accounts in part not only for the focus on ‘fat ladies’ but also for his interest in snakes.

According to James, the fat ladies dominate his art at the moment, although Chris oscillates between snakes and fat ladies. He sources images of women from the Internet and publications. In general, the bigger and more voluptuous the women are, the more interested he is in using them as reference material. However, he aims in his work for specific dimensions that he views as perfect proportions. He views these dimensions, which result in the figures being almost as tall as they are wide, as archetypal.

Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm





He is drawn to flesh, so he uses images of naked or nearly naked women as inspirations. The tactile aspect is what appeals to Chris. Sometimes when he is working he may invite others to look at the image he is working from, but James says that he never has the feeling that there is a sexual or inappropriate dimension to his interest: 'It's a very serious pursuit for Chris'. The interest in voluptuous bodies extends occasionally to creating animals in ceramics as well. Although Chris has had exposure to many different media, working in ceramics has long been a favourite.

A third very different focus in subject matter, in addition to the snakes and 'fat ladies', is creating intricate amazingly detailed models of houses and their gardens. He has also taken up mould making and casting. James says that Chris has considerable architectural talent.

Chris says that 'other people's work gives me ideas'. James agrees that Chris is sometimes influenced directly by others. The intricate model of a blue house that he constructed, for example, was inspired by a blue house located near Arts Project that a fellow artist had an obsessive interest in. Chris singles out the larger-than-life sculptures of incredibly detailed human figures created by Ron Mueck as favourites. He became quite animated talking about works by Mueck that he has seen.

Chris mostly works quietly and alone. His intensity and personality do not lend themselves well to collaborating, although he does work with others at times. He can also work effectively side by side with others and they can learn from each other. This tendency to work alone has not prevented him from developing some friendships with other artists at Arts Project.

He may ask a staff artist what they think if they are walking past, but he rarely asks for advice. The main way the staff artists support Chris is by being accessible and encouraging him gently to try new things. He is a good judge of his progress and a sound critic of his work. According to James, he knows when he can do better. He can be fairly self critical, and he gets frustrated when things are not working. 'If we feel he has become overly obsessed or "stuck", we will try to persuade him to put aside what he's working on and try something else, but we only need to do that occasionally'.

Elyss says that Chris has his own way of working and is very independent. She mentions that occasionally the noise level in the studio bothers him and he asks for the music to be turned down or for other artists be a bit quieter. 'Often all he wants from us is to just have a conversation with him about his work, but not necessarily to give direct advice. We might ask him if he's ready to start something new, remind him of some work he has done in the past, go online and help him do some research related to his work or help him organise his desk'.

When asked who helps him with his art, Chris replies 'I mainly help myself'. James backs this claim, saying that Chris is completely self motivated, almost to the point of being driven from within. James and Bernie worry at times about Chris becoming overly tired and 'burning out' because of exhaustion. However, each time they share their concerns with each other, they reach the conclusion that although it is obvious at times that Chris is very tired, if he is not getting sick from being exhausted and seems content, they should let him continue.

ABOVE
Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

OPPOSITE
Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



LEFT
Chris Mason
*Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006*
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

OPPOSITE
Chris Mason
*Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006*
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Late last year Chris expressed concern that he was losing his drawing skills because of his intense focus on ceramic sculptures, and James agreed with him. Together they devised a timetable to make sure that Chris draws regularly, and James pushes him to draw if he has neglected drawing for a while. As a result, he is building up a collection of 'fat ladies' in pastels. His early drawings are very naïve, but his drawing work is becoming more and more sophisticated. James says he has great technical prowess currently and has progressed significantly: 'He just gets more and more skilled. He wants to represent things as realistically as possible and is continually refining his techniques'.

Chris spends a lot of time at home working on his art. He has a compact, very well organised and incredibly tidy workspace in the back of the garage at home. At the time of my visit to his home, the space was filled with supplies, a half-completed life-sized snake, pictures of 'fat ladies' to be used as models for his sculptures, an almost-completed intricately detailed model of a home and garden (the blue house) and many plastic containers carefully labelled and neatly stacked.

Chris's intensive level of working on his art at home is the exception rather than the norm among artists who come to Arts Project, according to James:

Many of our artists don't make work at home. Some go to other programs and do different things there. Some artists compartmentalise – they do certain things at Arts Project and other things – art or other activities – when they're not at Arts Project. Chris is different. He just works non-stop at home on the same things he works on at Arts Project. He brings in a lot of the work he does at home and it becomes part of his working stock here. It's authentic work, work that he does as a sole arts practitioner. It's clearly his own work.



Bernie is confident that if Chris did not have autism he would still be an artist. 'Working on his art means so much to Chris – it's his whole life. He's a very dedicated artist. He tells people he's an artist – that's what he is'.

Chris states with great certainty 'I'm really interested in art work'. When asked about new areas he is pursuing, he says 'I like doing all kinds of artwork. I've started doing more drawing – it's different to sculptures'. He also mentions a number of other mediums – ceramics, dry pastels and paint. In response to a question about what he loves most about being an artist, Chris says that he likes colours, and adds that 'Taupe is like a metallic grey brown'. According to him, he particularly likes drawing with soft Rembrandt pencils.

James says that 'Chris's art defines him. All his interests – and there are a number – come together through his art'.

LIFE NOW

Chris, age 37, lives with his mother and stepfather and the family cat Ramsey, Chris is very attached to Ramsey, describing him as 'a sook.' He has two rooms at home – a study and a bedroom – in addition to his workspace in the garage. Like his workspace, his living space is very orderly and neat. He displays samples of his work – a snake and a sculpture of a very Rubenesque version of the Gemini twins sitting on a bench drinking Coca Cola. A large painting that he created of the Roulettes (RAAF aerobatic display team) on the wall reflects his love of planes. Chris has always been interested in trains, planes (particularly jets), automobiles and diesel engines and knows a lot about them. His television and computer are close at hand. Bernie indicates that Chris likes his own company and space and spends a lot of time either in his workspace or these two rooms.

Chris is interested in a variety of topics. The weather fascinates him, and he collects information by watching the news on television. Chris says that he also enjoys watching 'Home and Away'. He spends time with his family and joins his mum and stepdad on family outings and holidays, which he enjoys. On alternate weekends he visits his dad, who went to art school as a young man, and he and Chris still practise art together. He plays bowls on Saturdays and enjoys bike riding, which he does on his own. He indicates that he spends time lifting weights and working out on a bike trainer. He often visits an art supply shop nearby to purchase supplies and is a frequent customer at the local Bunnings. Taking into account the amount of time he spends on his art at home and at Arts Project (four days a week), he has a very busy life.

Chris is surrounded by a strong network of people who care deeply for him. When he was eight years old Chris and Bernie began participating in a scheme where they were matched with a family who would have Chris one weekend a month. Bernie says that Steve and Robyn Morris and their family, with whom Chris and Bernie were matched, have become close friends. The two families go on holidays together and the Morris family took Chris to the United States in 2013. Disneyland and the San Diego Zoo were highlights, and Chris singles out seeing the snakes at the zoo

Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

(predictably!) and the Space Mountain ride at Disneyland as particularly memorable experiences.

Chris makes his way to and from Arts Project by taking two buses and a train. Throughout his life Bernie has encouraged Chris to be independent. She says she has always allowed him to take reasonable risks in order to live a somewhat independent life. She adds that Chris does need help with everyday living, although he can shop on his own, cook and clean and knows how use the washing machine. At one point Chris wanted to move out of the family home, but Bernie says that he is happy living with them.

Chris is very skilled at maths. He will ask about your birth date and immediately tell you how old you are. Bernie says that he is also good with money and making change. James says that Chris has a very good memory for names and dates. Chris expresses himself very well in writing. About his writing James says, 'His writing often sounds like what he would like to say if he could express himself verbally more effectively. He writes as he speaks, but you get the idea it's what he would say if he could. You can hear Chris in what he writes'. His notes about the 'Blue House' are evidence of Chris's ability to express himself in writing.

He establishes relationships independently as well as enjoying those that come through his family life and participation at Arts Project. For example he has made friends with a staff member at the local Bunnings who is also an artist. They share ideas about their art and sometimes collaborate on projects. Bernie says that people like Chris because he is friendly and polite. Elyss confirms this when she says 'Everybody likes Chris. He's very social at Arts Project and has some good friends there'.

Bernie describes Chris currently as having 'heaps of confidence'. During the time he has attended Arts Project, he has become much calmer, and she continues to be amazed at how focused he is. She agrees with James that he does get frustrated if he cannot work out how to do something, and occasionally he has to be reminded to take a step back. At times he takes others' comments personally and gets upset. She said that he used to cry a lot but does not now, because he is happy!

She sees Arts Project as a very 'friendly, approachable, wonderful organisation, where Chris can pursue what he is interested in'. She says with great pride and pleasure, 'He works hard there. He loves it. The first time I saw what he had painted there I felt really emotional - he's found his place'.

Chris's social skills were evident in my conversation with him. In spite of the fact that he was distracted by the worn cord of his ear buds and seemed eager to finish the conversation and return to what he was working on, his demeanour was very gentle and friendly and he was very polite, thanking us when the conversation was finished, apologising for forgetting our names and asking us to remind him what they were.





Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
 Park dream 2006
 acrylic on canvas
 168 x 152 cm

THE PAST

Bernie knew very early in Chris's life that something was wrong. She recalls that he crawled and walked at an earlier age than many babies, but that even as a toddler he did not babble and make sounds. She took him to various specialists and doctors, but no one thought he needed to be looked at more closely.

He attended a community kindergarten at age four but Bernie says that he did not fit in. She recalls feeling quite alone, being the only person who was certain that there was something not right with Chris.

A friend who was a speech pathologist tested Chris and, as a result, indicated that she thought he had autism. Bernie's initial reaction, according to her, was 'Bullshit!' but over time she came to accept the possibility.

Chris did not fit in at primary school, and he cried a lot. A friend suggested that Bernie take Chris, age six, to a school for children with autism, where he was assessed when he started attending. Bernie recalls being told that he would never read and write, and that she should not expect to have grandchildren. When she shared this information with me, Bernie added, 'Sadly, you do tend to believe what professionals tell you because you're not experienced'.

Classes were small at the school he attended and Chris received a lot of one-to-one attention. He eventually began to read and write and learned to swim as well. Bernie says that Chris still sees a friend that he made while attending that school. Chris continued his education at schools for children with autism. Both he and Bernie felt much less alone from the time Chris began attending special schools.

Chris recalls that as a child he liked drawing things, and remembers doing art when he was in kindergarten and school: 'When I was in kindergarten we did painting, working with icy pole sticks and corrugated cardboard'.

Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Bernie says that Chris has always been able to draw and loved drawing: 'Even when he was three or four he would just pick up a pen and draw. He was mad on trains and aeroplanes, so he'd just get a scrap of paper and draw them. He's always had beautiful handwriting too'. She claims that she 'didn't really do an awful lot to encourage him. I just bought him nice pencils and paper'.

His talent and interest were recognised and encouraged by his teachers. They would reward him with permission to draw when he listened and applied himself to tasks that he resisted doing because he did not enjoy them. When he was around fifteen, he won second prize in a local Council pavement art competition.

Chris left school when he was 20 and started a pre-employment course at TAFE. While he was at TAFE he did a ceramics course. A clay model of a female torso, well proportioned and graceful, that he created as part of that course is testament to his early ability. He experienced bullying at TAFE so Bernie withdrew him. As a result of that experience Chris had to have therapy. His speech deteriorated and Bernie says he was 'bobbing' a lot. It was a major setback. At that point Bernie was at her 'wit's end' and rang Autism Victoria for help. They appointed a case manager for Chris, and it was through that person that they learned about Arts Project. She said that when they visited Arts Project to have a look Chris was not impressed. She asked him to try it for one day a week for a couple of weeks, promising that if after that time he still did not want to go she would allow him to stop attending. Chris, demonstrating his memory for dates, says that he began coming to Arts Project on July 14 1997.

Bernie describes the way she has raised Chris as 'tough love'. She says she has always taught Chris that he needs to be tough:

I've made myself not 'mollycoddle' him because he has autism. I've always said to him that having a disability doesn't give you the right to be rude. I made sure he learned manners, how to behave, how to be polite and what not to do in public. I talk to him still about not drawing attention to himself. In part this is because when he gets anxious, he shows more symptoms. Sometimes I have to tell him not to be so autistic!

Chris knows he has autism. I've always been open and honest with him about it and what it means for his life. He has always known, for example, that he won't be able to drive a car. He's mostly pretty accepting. His reaction is often to say something like 'Oh well, it's not the end of the world'.

'Tough love' is also about the fact that life has not been easy: 'Raising him was a bit of trial and error, figuring it out as we went, and it's still a bit like that. It was hard work and frustrating, and at times I would say, "I can't do this anymore", but you carry on, don't you'.

WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD

James says, with a great deal of respect and admiration for Chris' talent and without conveying any frustration, that Chris typically has to be convinced that something new in the practice of art is worth trying, because he has so much going on and so much that he wants to keep doing:

We have to sell anything that is new to him. A good example is photography. We feel so strongly that he can take photography somewhere if he'll just apply himself, but we have to work to get him to keep going with it. We feel confident that once he owns it he will see the possibilities and then he'll take it further than we hoped.

He'll either find photography or he won't – it's up to him. If he isn't interested after we've tried and tried, we'll give up. Right now we're asking him to make art with photography rather than just taking happy snaps. We are asking him to photograph images that appeal to him. There's so much potential – he could do some very interesting things with photography. In the end though, there's the possibility that photography might not satisfy him creatively because the tactile nature of working is what he enjoys.

James says that currently Chris is exploring very seriously making smaller scale figurines. The figurines are not all nudes, and include carnival women dressed extravagantly and sitting on chairs that he has made. He is drawing with soft pastels more than in the past.

When asked what her hopes for Chris are, Bernie says immediately that she hopes he will continue to participate at Arts Project for a long time. She hopes that one day Chris may be able to live independently, but she is ambivalent about whether or not that will be possible. At first she says she doubts that he can live independently, but then adds

LEFT
Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

OPPOSITE
Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



resolutely, 'But he could with help'. She would also like to see him in a good stable relationship.

Bernie says with great satisfaction, 'Chris has made it as an artist. I don't have to worry about him. He knows what he wants to do. He's found a place, he's totally focused and he has a purpose. It has been, and still is, challenging at times – it's still hard work. It's not as stressful as it was though, and that's because of Art Project. It has been an amazing journey. Look who I've met and what I've learned. It's opened a lot of doors. It's a privilege to be Chris's mum'.

When asked what would make coming to Arts Project even better, Chris was very definite and very specific – he would like to do taxidermy! This interest has no doubt been nurtured by the presence of a very lifelike 'taxidermied' fox in the studio at Arts Project for some time and his interactions with a staff artist who does taxidermy. Chris has seen a few pieces of her work.

James is interested to hear that Chris mentioned taxidermy as a new interest to pursue. He acknowledges that in many ways taxidermy would be a logical next step for Chris, following his long-term interest in making very realistic snakes, but he is not sure at this point how to help him pursue this interest because of the complexities of learning taxidermy. However, he adds optimistically and again with great respect, 'Never underestimate Chris's persistence when he's interested in something. Who knows where his interests will take him in the future!'







BLUE HOUSE

By Chris Mason

I started my big house from balsa wood. I coated it with estapol gloss. I painted it blue Hawaii scheme. Especially the inside as well. I painted the floor boards with blue acrylic estapol gloss. I did the roof from corrugated cardboard. Especially the funnel stacks and t.v ariels from brass tube and thin piano wire. I made the land from wood, m.d.f, cardboard, plaster bandage, plaster mache, real tree branches, clusters, grass, earth, soil turf and clump foliage. I made coconut palms from armature wire, paper and epoxy putty. I made the windows from clear plastic card. All the snakes and people from oven bake clay.

Same with the chainsaw and axe out the front and back. The other chainsaw out the back is balsa wood and epoxy putty. It has very old fashion tools in the garage and some blue density Styrofoam I made up from balsa wood as well as. The benches are from balsa, same with tool box and packets of coke too. Hammock out the back is from leather strips and nylon fabric. It'll be At 584 Arnhem Highway, Humpty Doo, Northern Territory. Dad gave me two cars for it. One out the front is a 1960's Nissan skyline. It's painted metallic blue. In a garage is a 1936 Cadillac. It's a green one. Both of them are definitely the right scale for that house.

It has fireplaces in that house, a games room, two bedrooms, a bathroom a shower and laundry. A lounge room on the front right hand side with a passage way down towards the other end of that house. A kitchen on the opposite side of bathroom and laundry. Studies room right next door to the family room. Studies is also opposite the kitchen. A toilet right next door to bathroom and laundry. Another toilet down below. Underneath that house is a store room. I also made a chimney stack out the back of that house. Which means it has a fire place in the kitchen too with meals. A taxidermist lived there. I definitely need to sell that house. It also has some mango trees with couple different kinds of gum trees also. Out the back are lemon gums. A hammock is tied up on to both the coconut palms.



Chris Mason
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

A dead tree is out the back too, with ivy growing on it. The husband and wife painted up their house like that when they bought it. The son helped them do that job too. Very friendly people indeed. It's not a unit or anything. It's just an old house in its blue Hawaii livery. The driveway is sloped down towards the garage. Statues of nude fat girls sitting on a seat together in the backyard. The bins are stored under the staircase. A compost bin is on the other side. The father made those nude statues. He sat them on that concrete seat. He bought it. Not the figures. He made a mould of them and cast them in concrete before he painted them. They were originally done in water base clay. That's how the father made them to put in their backyard of their blue house. A wood fire barbecue is out the back too, with another driveway on the other side of that house. The dad did both those figures in pieces first, then he joined up their parts of their bodies. A hose out the front and back.

A garden shed is out the front, which is joined on to the front veranda. A broom, spade and a pot plant are stored in that little garden shed, with a shelf in it too. Their letter box is a blue estapol gloss too. The sign at the front says private property, keep off. That's why it has a security fence and gate. It has security gates on the other side of that house too. Especially a blue fence and gates out the front too. They're corrugated like the security gates joined on to that house. So unwelcomed people don't get in to their backyard of their house and pinch stuff that's not theirs. It has blue wall paper of sea life in their house and blue carpet in there too.

CHRIS MASON

Born: Melbourne, 1976

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Michelle*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2002 *The Chris Mason Show*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Into the Vault and Out of the Box*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Turning the Page, Gallery 101, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
Renegades: Outsider Art, The Arts Centre Gold Coast, Surfers Paradise
Knowing Me, Knowing You, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2013 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Manningham Victorian Ceramic Art Award, Manningham Art Gallery, Melbourne
Repeat. Restate... Reiterate, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Renegades: Outsider Art, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns
Outsiderism, Fleisher Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia, USA
World In My Eyes, C3 Gallery, Melbourne
2012 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2012, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
In the making, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2011 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
A Gang of Big Women, High Street Shopfront, Westgarth, Melbourne

Movement & Emotion, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Observance, Moving Galleries, Flinders Street Station, Melbourne
Unfiltered, Penola Visitor Information Centre, Penola, South Australia
Erotica, James Makin Gallery, Collingwood, Melbourne

- 2010 *Portrait Exchange*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2010, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Pacifica, Gallery Impaire, Paris, France
The Agents, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne
Best in Show, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2009 *By Hand*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Off the Edge: Ceramics Triennale, Chrissie Cotter Gallery, Sydney
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection, Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
2008 *Wild Things*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, University of New South Wales, Sydney
Reaching Out: An Arts Project Australia exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, The County Court of Victoria, Melbourne
Arts Project Australia: Paintings, Prints & Sculptures, A Day on Earth, Brisbane
2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

- Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Sydney
Connected 07, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
- 2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2006, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Connected 06, The Atrium, Fed Square, Melbourne
- 2005 *Leo Cussen with Selected Artists*, Australian Galleries, Collingwood
Sydney Art on Paper Fair, Byron Kennedy Hall, Sydney
Outsider Art Fair, New York, USA
Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay Collection, National Gallery of Australia Travelling exhibition; Tamworth City Gallery, Tamworth NSW; Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand
- 2004 *2nd Annual Intuit Show of Folk and Outsider Art*, Chicago, United States, hosted by the Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
Melbourne Art Fair, Melbourne
Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay Collection, National Gallery of Australia Travelling exhibition; Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Art Centre, Gympie NSW; Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide SA
- 2003 *A Sense of Place*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Home Sweet Home: works from the Peter Fay Collection, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
- 2002 *Life Stories*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

- Melbourne Contemporary Art Fair*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- 2000 *ArtFair 2000*, Royal Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne
Stretched, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Five Artists From Arts Project Australia, Australian Galleries Works on Paper, Sydney
Melbourne Contemporary Art Fair 2000, Royal Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne
- 1999 Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne
Six Artists from Arts Project Australia, Australian Galleries Works on Paper, Sydney
The Inner View, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Profile, Manningham City Gallery, Melbourne
- 1998 *Transport*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Off the Wall, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia
 State Library of Victoria
 Stuart Purves Collection
 Private Collections

AWARDS

- 2012 People's Choice Award, Moving Galleries, *Observerance* exhibition, Melbourne





JODIE NOBLE

In the zone – again

Jodie had established a reputation as an artist before the accident. Her name was known and her work was in a number of external exhibitions. She was a 'big name' at Arts Project. The accident caused not only her personal life but also her art career to come to a standstill. ... She's making good progress now, but there's a long way go. She's got herself back into the zone now. Her last folio was strong. There's a lot of work in it, including some standout pieces'.

— JAMES MCDONALD, ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA STUDIO MANAGER

The day I met Jodie Noble for the first time to talk with her about her story, she came across as a confident, friendly and articulate person. Her sense of humour was evident, especially in her comments and questions for James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project Australia, who was working nearby as we had our conversation. She drew him into the conversation at several points. Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project, says that this is an accurate impression. She describes Jodie as someone you can have a laugh with and someone with a lot of spirit and passion.

Dan Silk, a professional carer who has known Jodie for around 15 years, also confirmed my initial impression when I asked him to describe her. He said that she is 'fun, outgoing, someone who makes people feel at ease, confident when she's not worried, has a great sense of humour, and is very loveable and affectionate'. He qualified his description of her as confident by commenting, 'I've only seen her lack confidence in relation to walking'. He then added, 'Someone needs to turn that around'.

James is succinct in his description of Jodie, saying that she is likeable, interested in other people and what they are doing, and complex.

THE ARTIST

Jodie, age 33, has been coming to Arts Project for 13 years. She currently comes two days a week, but in the past (before her accident) came five days a week.

Jodie works in a range of mediums. She does ceramics, often creating busts, and printmaking. She has had a lot of success with drawing and painting, which dominate her art practice currently. She is skilled at using acrylics, soft pastels, watercolours and gouache.



Jodie Noble
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Jodie adopts an expressive loose approach in her work and enjoys drawing portraits and figures. James says that currently 'portraits are where she shines'. Elyss agrees with James that Jodie's current strengths lie in her portraits of people. She often portrays ensembles of people. Her work with figures frequently involves interesting and clever composition, for example with figures leaning in from the edges of the work.

When asked what she enjoys doing at Arts Project, Jodie's response concurs with staff artists' impressions. She mentions ceramics, painting and drawing, adding that she likes making portraits of people and of animals and that she enjoys working with pastels, gouache and watercolours.

Jodie has a body of work that pays homage to van Gogh, one of her favourite artists, in part because she likes the colour palette that he used.

Subject matter that attracts her interest is what inspires her and dictates what she does. She is especially fond of geishas and exotic objects.

James says that if Jodie arrives in the morning with an idea for a drawing or painting, then it is likely to be successful. On the other hand, when she does not have an idea of what she wants to do and has to rely on suggestions from staff artists, the result is not as likely to be successful.

Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
 acrylic on canvas
 168 x 152 cm

James describes Jodie as analytical and perceptive about her work: 'She's as skilled at talking about her work as she is at doing it. She applies her natural critical eye to her own work and that of others. She is consistently accurate at highlighting areas that need more work'.

Jodie appreciates receiving a lot of affirmation and positive reinforcement about her art and often seeks support. She needs to know that she is doing well in order to keep going. However, James says that while the staff artists want to support and encourage her, they try to avoid giving her too much advice because they do not want to overly influence her work.

Jodie works most effectively as an intuitive artist. Some of her most successful efforts, according to James, are those that are executed really quickly. He cites a portrait of Lindy Judge that Jodie created about four years ago. She completed in five minutes: 'It was on recycled paper, and it was beautiful. Every brushstroke was perfect. We all celebrated that moment'.

Jodie's best work results when she adopts a quick fresh approach and every pure mark is visible. Elyss describes it as 'a really beautiful gestural way of painting with a great sense of colour'. Not wanting to interfere with her natural mark making, staff artists restrict their interventions when Jodie is working. James says, 'Her best work is when she 'just does it - just makes marks. It appears that working quickly enables her to work with freedom, without feeling any pressure. However, unfortunately that is not the way she wants to work much of the time. She does like to plan her work, which means that she often does not work quickly or intuitively'. Elyss makes a similar observation about the two different approaches: 'She may worry her way through something, but it works better if she just goes for it'.

James qualifies his comments: 'I'm not saying that the work that Jodie makes in this more methodical way is never successful. Jodie does a lot of great work that is the result of planning, time and sustained engagement in the process, but my favourite work is when she seems to capture the moment quickly and directly'.

James elaborates on the challenge for Jodie and the staff artists: 'Of course the motivation to work spontaneously and intuitively has to come from Jodie. It would only make her anxious if we encouraged or pushed her to not plan and to work quickly'.

Currently Jodie is moving toward working more independently and asking less frequently than she has in the past for support and advice while she works. This pleasing trend can be attributed in part to her wearing headphones as she works. The headphones also help her to focus, which reduces her anxiety.

According to James, Jodie is an artist who is keen to learn - to know how things are done and to constantly improve: 'She will ask you to show her how to use materials in certain ways. For example, recently she wanted to learn how to do shading properly. She worked very hard at it. She seeks technical advice and continually requests information that will help her make her work more successful'.

OPPOSITE
Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BELOW
Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm





When asked how she feels when she is working on her art, Jodie reflects for a moment and then says with confidence, 'Happy and calm'. She adds that if she does not like something about her work, it makes her anxious. 'I have to go for a coffee or a walk, get a drink of water and then talk to staff about it'. She admits that it is hard for her to avoid getting anxious. As an example, she mentions the challenges of getting shapes and lines right when drawing, and adds, 'It really depends on the day and my mood. On a good day it's all easy!'

Elyss sees evidence that Jodie is becoming increasingly confident: 'She's pretty good at letting us know what she needs. She talks with us [staff artists] about colour mixing, and it's important to her to get the colour right. Even when she isn't working from a reference, she knows exactly what colour she wants. We involve Jodie in the process of mixing. She's doing more things independently now and is clear about what she wants'.

Jodie says with considerable enthusiasm that she loves everything about coming to Arts Project – because she loves art. She does not have room where she lives to practise her art, so all of her art making occurs at Arts Project. She appreciates the flexibility and choices she has in the studio. She also clearly enjoys the social aspect of participating as well, and values her relationships with both staff and other artists. 'All the staff are nice. They're good when you're upset and they understand what you're saying. They encourage me and they are good at giving advice about materials. They make suggestions but don't make you take them up'. Jodie mentioned several artists who are her friends, but added that she sees them only at Arts Project. Elyss says that Jodie clearly enjoys the social aspect of coming to Arts Project.

Everyone at Arts Project is aware of the vast difference between Jodie's good and not-so-good days. At times she brings anxieties from her life into the studio, for example, if she has had a falling out with a friend. On some days working as an artist makes her anxious. Everyone, including Jodie, has to try to manage this anxiety. According to James, the reason she stopped coming to Arts Project for a period after her accident was because she was not having any good days. Now she has many more good days than she had after her accident. James says that on those good days, 'it is an absolute pleasure to have her here'.

LIFE IN THE PAST

Jodie's past life experiences impact directly on her current life and her art.

Much of the information about Jodie's past was provided by Dan, who describes his relationship with Jodie as similar to that of an extended family member, friend or even an older brother. He came into Jodie's life and the lives of her two adopted brothers, Cam and Tim, around 15 years ago as a professional carer.

Jodie was adopted, probably before she was six months old. Cam was adopted into the same family about two years later and Tim approximately two years after that. All three have an intellectual disability, but when and how the diagnosis came about is not known. Jodie also has cerebral palsy. Dan reports that he has seen photos of Jodie when she was a young child

Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



wearing callipers on both legs, and that when he first knew her, when she was around 18 years old, she wore a calliper on one leg.

Dan began working with Jodie, Cam and Tim, by his estimation, around fifty hours a week. Although he saw Jodie less frequently when she moved out of the family home, he still sees her occasionally. At the time of finalising this story, Dan is working closely with Cam (age 31) and Tim (age 30) in the family home and has been designated as their legal guardian. This arrangement became necessary when Barb, their adoptive mother, died somewhat unexpectedly earlier this year.

When asked what she recalls about being interested in art or making art when she was a child, Jodie remembers doing art in primary school. She recalls a particular teacher who offered a lot of craft activities and remembers particularly 'cutting up a lot of pictures'.

Dan says that Jodie always had an aide working with her in the mainstream schools she attended. He speculates that she was probably offered a lot of art and craft experiences as an alternative to taking other subjects that were viewed as being too hard for her. In other words, art and craft were offered because they were thought to be 'easy'. He remembers that she spent a lot of time doing art and craft at school and at home. Dan says that when Jodie left school at the end of Year 11, regrettably she hadn't really completed up to Year 11.

He recalls that Jodie loved being in shows while she was at school, particularly enjoying the costumes and singing. He says that she has always been good at singing.

Jodie recalls her mother creating art herself and talking with her about art, both when she was a child and as an adult. She said her mother gave her advice about what colours to use and how to make certain shapes. She mentions that both her brothers are artists, so, as she says, 'it's in the family'. Jodie recalls doing art in high school, but she says 'No one commented on how good I was'.





She said that her mother believed that she could be a good artist. Because of this belief she found out about Arts Project and made the decision for Jodie to participate. Jodie started coming to Arts Project five days a week when she finished high school. Dan says that the three children were always drawing and colouring in – that their mother Barb encouraged it. He says that Barb encouraged all three of them to come to Arts Project. Part of the reason was that she did not want them to end up in a sheltered workshop.

In February 2011 Jodie had a bad fall from her bed at night. No one heard her calls for help until morning. She had broken her hip.

She was in a rehabilitation centre for an extended time after her accident. After sufficient physical recovery from her accident, Jodie returned to Arts Project. However, after coming for a period of time she had to have a year away from Arts Project because she was not coping. She recalls being very anxious when she returned to Arts Project. James says that her time at Arts Project after the accident was not productive for her. It seems in retrospect that at that time she needed more from her life than Arts Project could offer, and therefore it was not a good time for her to return.

Because it was hoped by everyone that one day she could return to Arts Project, an agreement was made that during the time that she was not coming the organisation would still represent her and keep her work in their collection.

As the quote at the beginning of this story indicates, the accident caused or at least marked a major break in Jodie's progress as an artist. Before the accident she had been well established in her art practice. Her work was very successful and much sought after. James says that the accident seemed somehow to trigger or unleash a number of powerful and devastating emotional issues for Jodie. In his view, everything in her life was affected.

During the year away from Arts Project, Jodie went to Northern Support Services five days a week. She studied hairdressing and took other courses. After a year she returned to Arts Project one day a week and then increased that to two days a week, which is the current arrangement.

Jodie recalls that she missed Arts Project very much during that time, but she is clear that for her own health she could not be there.

Life in the family home became increasingly restrictive for Jodie. Their mother placed substantial limits on what Jodie, Cam and Tim were allowed to do. Jodie made the decision to move out of the family home after having the accident in the hope of gaining some much-wanted increased freedom of choice and independence. James says that the staff at Arts Project were very optimistic about positive effects of the move to the share house: 'We thought it would be the making of her, as she'd always aspired to live more independently and out of the family home. However, it required a lot of adjustment and raised many challenges for Jodie. I think she has settled into it now. She has had to do a lot of maturing over the last few years'.

PREVIOUS LEFT
Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

PREVIOUS RIGHT
Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



After she returned to Arts Project it took a very long time for Jodie to regain her confidence as an artist. She had become much more critical of her work. She was impatient and easily frustrated if what she was doing was not working. She now has more stamina. James says that, as would happen to anyone who had such a sustained time out of the studio and who was not working in an ongoing way, Jodie lost not only skills but also confidence. However, neither Jodie nor the staff at Arts Project were expecting the extent of the deterioration of skills that occurred and everyone was shocked. Since her return after the one-year break, Jodie has been cooperative, listens to both advice about her art and occasional necessary reminders about the purposes of coming to the studio and is making good progress.

After the accident and rehabilitation, Jodie lost confidence in walking and that lack of confidence continues. She uses a walking frame and often asks for help to move around.

LIFE NOW

Jodie has lived for two years in a share house with four other people. She says she has a good friend who lives there – ‘we stir each other up and play tricks’. However, she is not satisfied with the arrangements and says that the five of them do not get along very well a lot of the time.

In addition to her two days a week at Arts Project, she continues to go to Northern Support Services one day a week, where she has literacy and numeracy tuition, is learning computer skills and takes a cooking class.

When asked about interests other than art, Jodie said that she enjoys needlework and knitting, adding that she is a good knitter. At this point in the conversation she turned to James, who was working at his desk in the same room, and said with a smile, ‘Hey James, we should do knitting at Arts Project.’ She mentions that she enjoys jigsaw puzzles. Dan mentioned that she sings in a choir.

She likes going out for lunch and going to pubs and coffee shops.

When asked about people she is closest to, she mentions her brothers, Dan and her grandfather, who is 88 and lives in a nursing home. Dan agrees that she and her grandfather have a close relationship. She has only seen her adoptive father only once in many years. She has a good relationship with an uncle, and there is a support worker with whom she has contact. There are also family friends that she sees occasionally.

Jodie seems to have coped with her mother’s death, perhaps in part because they had not had much contact with each other since Jodie moved away from the family home. Dan said that Jodie wrote a eulogy for her mother and that staff at her share house took her to the cemetery to deliver it.

Jodie sees her brothers at Arts Project on both the days she attends, and she expressed a strong desire to see them more frequently. Dan says that this should be possible now. They are currently working out a plan for contact outside Arts Project that works for Jodie, Cam and Tim.

Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



THE FUTURE

When asked what she hopes to learn or do as an artist in the future, Jodie listed several items: complete an art course that would give her more skills, learn to paint in oils, learn how to shade and to use different grades of pencils successfully, paint on board ('just because I've never tried it'), paint on canvas with watercolours and learn to do tapestry and embroidery – an impressive list of goals for any artist!

At this point in the conversation, she turned again toward James, who was busy nearby working on his computer, and said in a loud voice, clearly for his benefit 'And I'd like to be able to do my knitting here!'. Apparently it is not allowed.

When asked about things she would like to do in her life that are not about her art, her list is more practical and reflects interests of many women her age: visit a friend who lives in Hawthorn, go to a disco and a theatre show, see a Robbie Williams concert and attend a John Farnham concert!

So what might the future hold for Jodie the artist?

James says that she is doing really well at the moment. Most days she is lively and energetic. He reflects, 'She really went backwards after the accident. She lost confidence in her abilities. Once she was a fiercely independent, strong person. She didn't misinterpret what others said. After she broke her hip and had a long stint in rehab she became very dependent on staff here. The accident took a big toll on her. What we're trying to do now is build that confidence back up. She's making good progress now, but there's a long way to go. She's got herself back into the zone now. Her last folio was strong. There's a lot of work in it, including some standout pieces'.

James says that eventually Jodie may come to Arts Project more than two days a week, but that right now it works for her to have a greater variety of things to do rather than focusing too much on art. She needs the variety in her life that going to Northern Support Services as well as Arts Project offers.

James sees evidence that Jodie is increasingly interested in what it means to be an artist, and she cares very much about being known as one. She enjoys attending exhibition openings and likes to be acknowledged for her work through sales and in other ways. In spite of thinking that the balance of creating art and engaging in other pursuits is just right for Jodie currently, James says she definitely sees herself as an artist and identifies it as a career, a vocation. About her identity, Jodie says, 'I know I'm an artist – I like colourful things!' She continues: My favourite colour is purple. My bedroom is purple. But I don't use purple in my work. Only if it suits the picture. If it's subtle and light purple then I would use it'. She asked if her story could be printed with purple in the background, and then with a smile, said she would like her name and photo on the cover of the book of stories.

Looking at a beautiful brightly coloured painting of a geisha on the wall, she told me, 'I painted that picture a long time ago. My style got better than that'. James says that hopefully one day Jodie will get back to where she was before the accident – and go even further.

OPPOSITE
Jodie Nobel
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

JODIE NOBEL

Born: Melbourne, 1981

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 *Jodie Noble*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2011 *Jodie Noble Solo*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Melbourne Art Fair 2014*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Turning the Page, Gallery 101, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
Renegades: Outsider Art, The Arts Centre Gold Coast, Surfers Paradise, QLD
2013 *By Women*, Of Women, Queen Victoria Women's Centre, Melbourne
Video Doctor, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Renegades: Outsider Art, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns QLD
At the Table, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Classic Albums, Tanks Art Centre, Cairns, QLD
2012 *Classic Albums*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
In the making, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2011 *CBD Installation*, Melbourne
Annual Gala Exhibition, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Movement & Emotion, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Art Through Other's Eyes, Rymill Coonawarra, South Australia
Subterranean, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

- Colour My World*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2010 *Human Nature*, Alan Lane Community Gallery: Warrnambool Art Gallery
Third Dimension, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Portrait Exchange, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2010, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
High Views, Northern Exposure 10, Tantrum, Melbourne
Fully Booked, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Canvas Stock Exhibition, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2009 *Revealing the Human*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Snapshot, ACGA Gallery, Federation Square, Melbourne
Connected 09, Black Box, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne
Pictures of You, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Here and Away: Northern Exposure 09, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne
Off the Edge: Ceramics Triennale, Chrissie Cotter Gallery, Sydney
The Eyes Have It, Dogs Bar, St Kilda, Melbourne
Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
2008 *Behind the Scenes*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2008, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Short Stories, Tall Tales and the Way They Wore Them, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

- Out There*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW Sydney
- Without Borders: Outsider Art in an Antipodean Context*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne
- 2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- The Dinner Party*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Sydney
- Connected07*, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
- 2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Yours, Mine and Ours: 50 Years of ABC TV*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest
- Melbourne Art Fair 2006*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- Connected 06*, The Atrium, Fed Square, Melbourne
- 2005 *Wrapped: Selected Works from the Studio*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Leo Cussen with Selected Artists*, Australian Galleries, Collingwood, Melbourne
- Double Take*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Artists' Books*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- connected05*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Moving Colours*, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne

- Materiality*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2004 *Melbourne Art Fair 2004*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- Printed Matter*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Canvas*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- connected04*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Exchange*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Portraits*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Christmas Survey*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Studio Artists Selection*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2003 *A Sense of Place*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2002 *Chic*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Annual Eclectic Bonanza – 2002 Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2001 *Life Stories*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Christmas Show 2001*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

FILM SCREENING – “THE DAY WE GOT LOST”

- 2008 *Animagination*, ACMI Cinema, Melbourne
- 2009 *Location Location Location!* Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

COLLECTIONS

Private Collections



MARK SMITH

Artist in transition

MY STORY

'In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world'. (Jesus)

My name is Mark Smith. I've been attending Activate Church for 3 years. From my youth I was a common young lad. One day I woke in intensive care after being in a coma for 4 days; I had turned 19. I had been in a serious car crash (so I was told) only 80m down the road from my house; this was many years ago. I was in a wheelchair for 1½ years and a neurologist told me that I'd never walk again. I had an acquired brain injury (ABI), a shattered pelvis and jaw, and was paralysed down the left side of my face. I see double vision and am longsighted in one eye and shortsighted in the other. I'm right-handed but due to having tremors I have to struggle to write left-handed. I also have many, many more short-term and long-lasting major life-changing injuries. I was drink driving. I used to be ashamed to say this, but it is through God and re-re-re-reading and listening to His truthful Words, living my life the way He designed it, that has given me understanding to live regret free, past and present. I love God. I love my life.

— MARK SMITH

Mark Smith wrote the statement above for his church newsletter in 2013. It sums up in his words the accident that altered his life drastically and continues to shape his life. The accident and its aftermath strengthened his religious beliefs, increased the importance of art in his life and brought him to Arts Project Australia.

Mark is very honest, reflective and insightful about his life and his situation. He shares his story openly and generously, a reflection of both his strength and his desire that his life will benefit others. He approaches his life and his art as part of a higher cause – to serve God's purpose. At the same time he likes to find the funny side of life.

His life centres on his religious faith, which, until recently, has been his sole motivation for producing art. His art was devoted for seven years to creating illustrations for a book that depicts, according to Mark, 'life in general'.

Mark, now age 38, began coming to Arts Project in 2003. Until he completed the book in early 2014, he worked both at home and during his time at Arts Project on this very large project. He was not interested



Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



in working on anything other than illustrations for the book. Over approximately seven years he created a collection of large pieces that resemble collages, each containing a Bible verse or other text with meaning that resonated with him. He decorated each piece with an array of materials including glitter, fabric, coloured paper, cardboard, wool, glitter and recycled materials such as window sun shades and plastic as well as acrylic and oil paints. These creations were photographed for the book. The book has been made using an online book making website, with the help of Charlie Sofo and staff at Arts Project. It is being launched later in 2014 at an exhibition of Mark's work, titled 'Words are...'

Having completed the book, titled *Alive*, he is currently in transition with his art. While he is not moving away from using art as a medium to communicate his faith in an overt literal way, he is enthusiastic about learning to use mediums that are new to him, increasing his skills, extending the range of subject matter that is the focus of his art and exploring a variety of ways to communicate more subtle nuanced expressions of his religious beliefs.

LIFE BEFORE THE ACCIDENT

When asked about what he recalls about his life as a child, Mark says that he was active in many sports, including basketball, gymnastics and footy. He was also involved in Cubs, Scouts and Venturers.

Some of Mark's fondest childhood memories are spending school holidays at his family's beach house at Apollo Bay. He recalls that 'the house was very big and there were often lots of cousins there. I remember spending lots of time fishing off the rocks. There was plenty of good food around. It was really good. I love the sea'.

After completing secondary schooling, he enrolled in a media arts course at TAFE but quit after six months. He says he does not know why he dropped out. He was unemployed for a year and then worked as a cabinetmaker before the accident.

Mark says he was interested in art as a child and was friendly with an art teacher at school who offered some encouragement, but he did not take it up. He says that although he was always interested in art, he did not have many opportunities to develop those interests. 'I spent a lot of time not knowing what to do with my life'.

Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



AFTER THE ACCIDENT

As is obvious from Mark's account, the accident was devastating in its impact on his life. After the accident he went through a very bad time for a long time and was deeply depressed.

He was told he would never walk again. Initially he concentrated on learning to use a wheelchair and learning to walk. It took him 1½ years to learn to walk well enough to no longer need the wheelchair. During that time, he says, his focus was on surviving and adjusting, not so much on art.

I wasn't particularly religious before having the accident. My faith developed as a result of the accident. I was in a wheelchair. I could barely feed myself. I shook a lot and had lost my sense of balance. I couldn't see any life options. But I survived and because I survived I thought God must have a reason for my survival. Just the fact that I got through made me look towards a God. I spent a lot of time praying by myself.

When I started working on the book I didn't want any distractions so I stayed home and worked on it and watched TV. I started watching Christian television while working on my art, maybe around seven hours a day.

Watching Christian TV and listening to the preachers helped me to see what faith first and spirituality could mean. I found books with teachings by preachers and I could see how I could apply their teachings to my life, which I found to be the best way forward.

Watching TV and reading books also gave me ideas of messages that I wanted to communicate through my artwork.

At that time I didn't share my religious faith with anyone. Then one day I was on my way to buy art materials and I heard music coming from a building I passed. I went inside. A rock band was accompanying a preacher. I liked what I heard and started going. I got baptised a year after I started going and went every Sunday for three years.

ABOVE
Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

OPPOSITE
Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

During his struggle to come to terms with his illness, Mark participated in seminars for preachers. He says he was also attracted to the Steiner education philosophy and so did a teaching course part-time over three years. He moved to Byron Bay and lived there for 11 months, 'just to prove to myself that I could do it'.

Someone at the Disability Employment Agency told him about Arts Project, and in 2003 he began coming one or two days a week. For the past two years he has come four days a week.

THE ARTIST – A WORK IN PROGRESS

Since finishing his book, Mark has been busy developing a portfolio of work using various mediums at Arts Project.

James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project, and the other staff artists recognise Mark's 'great raw talent', and are encouraging him to extend his focus and interest in his art beyond fairly literal interpretations of religious stories. They want him to see that although his art is an effective way of communicating his faith and religious commitment, it can also serve other purposes and convey other messages. James says that Mark sometimes struggles to embrace that advice, but that there is progress. When Mark read this comment from James, his response was 'I DO know that'.

Mark continues to do text-based work, using text not only from the Bible but also from the work of writers and preachers from around the world, as well as proverbs. He also uses Sanskrit and incorporates all of these into his 3D animation work.

Mark is exploring puppet making, ceramics, painting, digital imaging, photography, printmaking and 3D animation. One of his major projects has been an animated film starring Pasquale, the resident skeleton at Arts Project! He has made internal organs for Pascal out of panty hose and other materials! He particularly enjoys making puppets, 3D animation and photography. He says that he has to use a tripod or lean against something to take photographs because of the tremor in his hands, and adds with a smile 'I have to be quick'.

According to Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project, Mark is enjoying experimenting with different mediums and with scale. James says that with this focus on mediums, 'Mark is now finding out that he is an artist. He has a great imagination and is very good at taking an idea and exploring it to the limit'. Mark's reaction to this comment was, once again, 'I know that I'm an artist'. Exploring new mediums that require learning technical and process skills, such as Photoshop, photography and print making creates a situation where it is natural for staff artists to work closely with Mark and to interact with and influence him as they teach.

At the time of writing this story, Mark is working with an artist, Charlie Sofo, at Gertrude Contemporary in Fitzroy once a fortnight. They get on well, and this collaboration is another move to expand themes as well as mediums.

The staff artists are firm in their intent to push Mark to explore a variety of mediums. When he wants to focus on a religious theme they encourage





him to think about communicating the messages and stories in less literal ways than in the past. James says that at times Mark's intense desire to convey a religious message is at odds with the potential artistic merit of his work. Mark agrees with James' assessment that he's cooperating mostly with expanding his subject matter, but at times resists changing. James says 'We understand that he's had more than seven years of doing art a different way – and he has enjoyed it. We definitely don't want to destroy the enjoyment factor!'

Mark is definitely a 'mixed media person', as the illustrations for his book confirm. He is being encouraged to focus on developing his skills at pure drawing and painting. He is improving in his ability to make sound judgments about scale and to decide when a piece of work is finished and to stop. He is also learning more about colour mixing and refining his aesthetic sense in a general way. James was quite pleased to hear Mark say recently that 'it is important not to always move into chopping work up or adding something'! Elyss confirms Mark's comments when she says that 'one of the ways we support Mark is to remind him at times that he can stick to a single medium, that he doesn't always have to use multiple media and run the risk of overworking his art'.

Mark works fairly independently, but the staff artists do like to check in frequently with him in order to encourage him and find out how best to assist. According to Elyss, Mark is very particular and likes to discuss his interests.

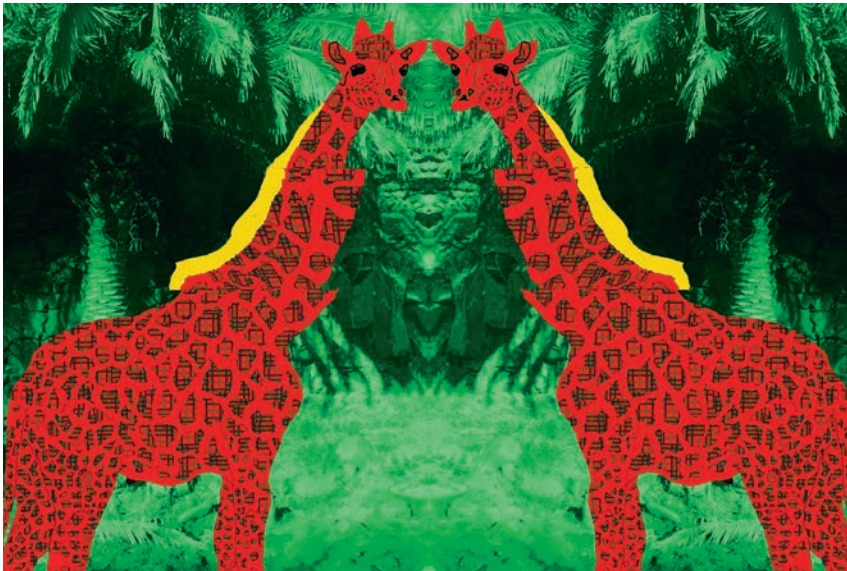
Staff artists do have to just say no to Mark sometimes, and he has adjusted to that. James comments that 'he's definitely an ideas man, and sometimes we can see that his ideas are clearly not going to be able to be executed. It may be because the idea is too big for the capacity of the studio, budget constraints or simply logistics. Sometimes his ideas are beyond what he can do on his own, and we just don't have the capacity to make them a reality. At times we have robust discussions!'

Part of the reason for monitoring Mark's work closely is to take advantage of every opportunity to reinforce new ways of approaching his art. 'He still goes for the narrative, the story. If the content isn't overtly religious content then it often has a kind of New Age, sunrise, celebrating nature focus. That's fine sometimes, but we want him to branch out. It is a struggle at times to get him to move beyond art as means of expressing his religious faith. We're respectful but increasingly blunt'. Mark agrees.

Mark is now doing life drawing and bringing the skills he is developing into both ceramics and drawing. A visit to an exhibition of sculpture and ceramics by Stephen Benwell at Heide Museum of Modern Art in 2012 made a powerful impression on Mark. James said that Mark was excited by seeing that all artwork does not have to be fine and precise. He can apply that learning to both his ceramics and drawing. Mark has to concentrate hard when he draws. He can see increasingly that there is something beautiful in his gestural mark making.

Mark claims that he does not get frustrated when he is working because, as he says, 'there's really no point'. He adds 'Frustration takes energy'. James backs this up by saying that Mark is very patient.

Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Mark reflects that for a long time he stuck to himself and did not mix much with the other artists at Arts Project, in part because he was doing his own work. Now he is friendlier with other artists. He says he has accepted that everyone is different, with their own strengths and weaknesses, and accepts that some artists at Arts Project are more challenging to communicate with than others. He says that 'Mostly I put my head down and do my work. Others come up to me and start conversations. I wait for others to bring up topics and start a conversation'. He then mentions three other artists that he has a good relationship with.

Mark now participates more actively in the studio program and takes advantage of opportunities. He is interested in the work of others and more connected with both staff and other artists in the studio. When told that James had commented that he is very kind and good at helping other artists, Mark seemed pleased and responded 'Fair comment'. James says that Mark has become a lot more social and involved in the life and work of the studio since completing the illustrations for his book.

James comments that Mark is really starting to embrace the idea of himself as an artist. Mark has recently begun to explore landscape and portraiture. 'He is beginning to work in a more refined way and he is much more open than he was.'

LIFE CURRENTLY

Mark lives on his own in Belgrave, in the Dandenongs, outside of Melbourne. He has support in the form of someone who comes in to clean once a fortnight and take him grocery shopping and a gardener who comes regularly.

His family is spread out geographically. He sees his mum once every five to six weeks and his dad once a month.

He is fiercely independent. He can write very slowly with his left hand, and his disability prevents him from using a computer.

He gets around on a recliner bicycle. He rides to the Belgrave Station, takes the train and rides the bike again to Arts Project, a trip that takes around 1½ hours each way. Mark says that the length of the trip gives him time to plan what he is going to do at Arts Project and to reflect on what he has done at the end of the day. Increasingly now he walks to and from the train station at both ends of the journey. He has a cross trainer at home, which he uses a lot, along with riding his bike, to build strength in his legs.

He reads a lot – mostly non-fiction – and continues to enjoy reading the work of international preachers. Occasionally Mark is invited to speak to school groups about his life. He says he enjoys that and takes along some of the illustrations from his book. Even though he comes to Arts Project four days a week, he still does art at home as well.

MARK'S LIKELY FUTURE

Mark accepts that the accident is part of who he is as a person and an artist: 'I wouldn't be the person I am today if hadn't had the accident'. He also identifies his religious beliefs as central to who he is. He believes that it is important not to set limits on what he can achieve. 'It's important to set goals. They may not be achievable but the point is to aim for them. 'My life is about continually learning and improving' he says. He believes that he can be an example to others, a teacher through the way he lives his life. He credits the affirmation he gets from others for his motivation: 'I get a lot of approval from others in my daily life and that makes me keep trying to improve and see results'.



Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

When asked what he hopes to do in his life, Mark says with no hesitation, 'My main goal is to walk without a crutch. I can do it a bit now, but the brain injury affects my balance'.

Mark is positive and optimistic about the future. 'I feel fortunate because of the simple fact that I am alive – and I've achieved more than I expected in overcoming my injuries. I feel young and free – so many things are possible'.

His sense of humour comes to the fore when he responds to the question 'What would make coming to Arts Project even better?' by responding 'If Bunnings was next door and I lived across the road.'

James hopes for Mark that as he rehabilitates further he will broaden his art techniques, refine the considerable skills that he has and embrace subject matter in addition to his faith and religion. He hopes that in time when Mark addresses religious themes and ideas in his work he will bring more sophistication and subtlety to it. James says that he often says to Mark, 'This is your chance to show us what you've got'.

Until recently Mark's artistic expression focused mainly on completing his book. He is in transition now. Mark says, 'Now that my book is complete, I'm comfortable with and open to experimenting with different mediums and happy to move in the direction of doing less message-based work'.

Mark's religious faith will no doubt continue to be central to his life. How will he express that religious faith, both in his life generally and in his art? To what extent will religious themes continue to dominate his art? What mediums and content will he embrace? What new themes will he want to communicate through his considerable talent?

James is clear about the medium-term aim with Mark: 'It isn't that we want him to move away from expressing his religious faith and beliefs. What we see is that Mark brings more diversity and creativity to his art when he is expressing thematic interests other than his religious faith. We want him to develop his art practice to become more sophisticated in his methods and for him to be more experimental. In the past it seems that when his intention is to express something about his religious beliefs he focuses more on the message than on the expression of the message'.

Mark says that 'Arts Project gives me direction. I am free to do whatever I want – to express myself. There is guidance but no one tells me what to do. It's amazing to come here. I feel really good about it. I can work through my ideas and life issues through my art. Also, through my work I can spread a positive message'. Mark has a sense of endeavour and amazing stamina. He is embracing the art world and seeing opportunities. His openness, honesty and courage suggest that he will continue to grow in both artistic ability and as a person.



Mark Smith
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

MARK SMITH

Born: Melbourne, 1976

EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Animal Magnetism*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2013 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Convergence, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
BSG Small Works Art Prize, Brunswick Street Gallery, Fitzroy
World In My Eyes, C3 Gallery, Abbotsford, Melbourne
Classic Albums, Tanks Art Centre, Cairns, QLD
- 2012 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
My Puppet, My Secret Self, The Substation, Newport
Classic Albums, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2011 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2010 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2009 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2008 *Annual Gala Show*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne





CATHY STAUGHTON

What makes us who we are?

What strikes you immediately when you see Cathy and when you see her work is the boldness and colour – both the person and the art command attention.

— JAMES MCDONALD, ARTS PROJECT STUDIO MANAGER

Cathy has such a strong presence and personality. She loves social interaction. I would describe her as assertive, resilient, eccentric and driven.

— JANE CROSSKILL, CATHY'S CHILDHOOD TEACHER AND FRIEND

Cathy Staughton is a prolific and accomplished artist. Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project Australia, notes several features of Cathy's art: her distinctive style, the focus on everyday culture and life in some work and the creation of her own world in other work, the 'divine' bright colours she uses, the way she draws eyes, the fact that she often includes a figure of herself in her work and her incredible sense of pattern and line. The variety of content – robots, religious themes, Luna Park, family and friends, pets and domestic scenes – impresses as much as her methods.

Cathy is lively, energetic, animated and engaged. She communicates powerfully in many ways – through her art, through technology, verbally, occasionally through signing and through her commanding presence.

A flamboyant dresser, she adores clothes and hats that glitter and shine. According to Bev Staughton, her mother, she has always had very particular tastes and often adds new colourful and imposing clothes and hats to her wardrobe from her many visits to op shops. Bev adds that one of the great things about op shops is that the people who staff them are typically very kind and accepting of a range of people and their eccentricities.

Perhaps to a greater extent than is true of many other people, Cathy the artist and Cathy the person are totally inter-connected.

THE ARTIST AND HER ART

John Albrecht, in the Foreword for the catalogue for Cathy's 2013 retrospective exhibition, writes that '... the first thing that stands out for me is her compelling and often poignant capturing of moments' (p.5). In the same publication Catherine Easton comments that 'Cathy's work has an intensity that is unforgettable. Her bold, humorous, sometimes



Cathy Staughton
*Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream* 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



confronting and often autobiographical images transport us to other worlds, places and times' (p.7). Bold, intense, humorous, confronting, autobiographical and reflective of an extraordinary imagination are terms that are used often to describe Cathy's work.

Catherine Bell notes Cathy's 'use of vivid colours, the range of subjects in her work from 'startled cats with statically charged fur and exaggerated talons to primordial figures, part dragon, part gargoyle''riotous roller coaster rides, madcap adventures to graveyards for "tomb gardening", ghost busting haunted houses' and 'violent and traumatic narratives of death and destruction' (p.8). In contrast, in other work she depicts pleasurable routines such as 'a cosy breakfast of honey on toast and a hot cup of tea with her mother' (p.8).

Cathy's work is never subtle. According to James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project, perhaps in part because of her auditory and visual limitations, many of her works are 'loud statements of opinion that reflect a distinct "good-bad dichotomy"'. Interestingly, she often employs disguise, sometimes disguising herself. For example, many of her images of the entrance to Luna Park feature her face cleverly merged into the façade.

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Particular themes and content are enduring in Cathy's work, as are some aspects of her style. As well, there have been changes in emphasis over time. Cathy's work in the mid-to-late-1990s was both autobiographical and reflected a deep interest in death and dying. She often portrayed herself and others in graveyards interacting with angels, demons and the deceased. Bev comments, 'Death and dying just seemed to capture her imagination. She would use the Internet to find where family members were buried and insist on making visits. So we went to a number of different cemeteries all over the place to spend time at the gravesides of newly discovered relations, where she would lay flowers and take photos. She was very interested in the monuments'.

During this time many of her works contained text-filled frames or margins in which the work was named, dated and detailed.

James comments further: 'Her work during this time was dense with visual and text-based information, reflecting Cathy's seamless travel between inner and outer worlds. The work is a testament to the economy of pure line, intuitive use of flat colour and a canny ability to distort and abstract the picture plane just enough to accommodate the tale she has to tell'.

Around this time computers and robots began to appear in her work. Typically they were embellished with her 'vivid and idiosyncratic imagination'. Cathy gave them feelings, personalities and opinions. Sometimes they were her servants, at other times her 'children' and always her allies. At times the depictions are dramatic and sombre, at other times humorous.

Cathy often combined angels and robots, sometimes presenting angels as robots or robots as angels. She represents people at times as androids or at least 'half man, half machine'. In this way she combined two areas of great interest – the supernatural and technology.

Technology gave Cathy life-changing new ways of communicating. The Internet, Facebook, online chat rooms, YouTube and image-sharing capabilities inform her work. Cathy continues to be intensely interested in technology and motivated to master it, and she displays incredible skills and knowledge.

Cathy's more contemporary work shows her continuing interest in invisible and imaginary worlds, but there seems to be less interest in the macabre. According to James, she seems to 'have swapped the Old Testament for the New, and has painted the Stations of the Cross, portraits of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the infant Jesus and the Last Supper, often painting herself into these images. We can only speculate why, but it is clear that attention to these subjects is the ultimate tick of approval from the artist, in the sense that these are the things that she cares about, knows well and wants us to acknowledge'.

Her more recent work also features family, friends and studio colleagues. Ghosts and demons are not longer prevalent. She often depicts serene daily life but with eccentric twists.

Current work also includes many portraits. James comments:

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Generally speaking, I am struck by the complexity and subtlety of the portraiture. There is something in the way that Cathy captures facial expression in the moment that I find extraordinarily considered and varied. There is little repetition in this aspect of her work, as if she has known and spent time with every sitter. ... It seems to suggest that at one level or another she's had long conversations with her subjects. Her portraits exude personality and create engagement with the viewer, which is no mean feat for any artist, regardless of standing.

It is interesting to speculate about reasons for the change of emphasis in Cathy's art and the role that technology, especially social media, has played. Has it opened up new possibilities for Cathy for relationships, interactions and communication and have those changes impacted on her art practice?

James comments on how Cathy works: She works in a very deliberate manner. She usually begins with the dominant figure or object that she considers to be the subject and works on the background last. She works quite broadly to begin with, laying down the foundation with large areas of flat colour and then, after the painting has dried or the pastel work has been fixed, she returns to the picture to add variations of tone, line and general detail to finish it off to completion.

Setting herself up for work involves placing her laptop, smartphone and iPad around her. Although she works mainly on her own, the shared moments with staff artists are an integral part of Cathy's process: 'As I work alongside her, she will engage me in conversation, in part verbal, and also using signing, drawing, writing, smartphone, laptop and computer tablet to convey what she has to tell me'.





Cathy has definite ideas about how she wants to work. She always sits in the same place. She is very particular about her materials, according to Elyss: 'She directs us – she lets us know when the paint is thick enough and when it is right colour. The process she uses is quite methodical. She may apply two or three layers of paint. That's how she gets the vibrancy.'

In late 2013 Cathy was one of two artists from Arts Project selected to participate in a project sponsored by Arts Centre Melbourne called 'Play me, I'm yours'. Along with 27 other community groups and individual artists, she spent a number of days in the studios at Arts Centre Melbourne, each person painting a donated piano. After the launch of the project, these pianos were placed in various public spaces across the Melbourne CBD where passers-by could sit down and play. Elyss said that Cathy used the same technique of layering several coats on the piano that she uses in her painting.

In the past Cathy has shown considerable talent as a ceramicist. Although she has actively resisted any recent attempts to encourage her to take up ceramics again, those who encourage her art are hopeful that her interest in creating ceramics will return.

Cathy has many friends at Arts Project. She is very helpful in the studio, and according to Elyss, keeps an eye on everyone. Elyss says that Cathy will often look at other artists' work with interest and give them the thumbs-up. 'She really knows the studio and will sometimes give me directions about where to put things away! Cathy is very intelligent, outspoken and independent. It's important to touch base with her and keep the conversation going because she is so self-sufficient'.

Cathy has exhibited in over 90 exhibitions in Australia and overseas, including the major retrospective at Arts Project Australia in 2013.

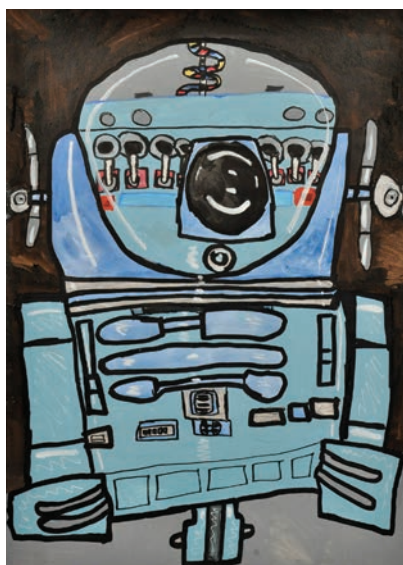
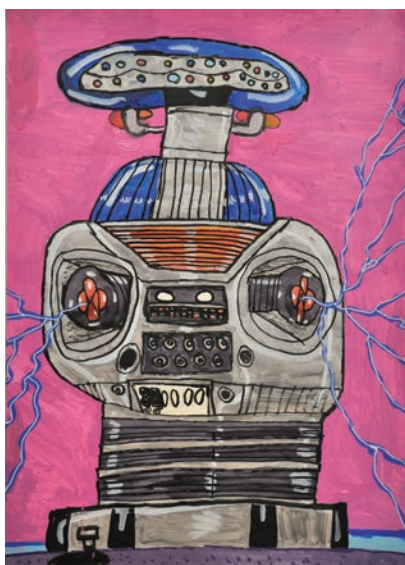
LIFE TODAY

Cathy lives on her own and fairly independently in a unit in a supported community. According to Catherine Bell, her home is full of what Cathy loves: 'carefully arranged collections of robots, crucifixes, stuffed animals, hats, totems of bejewelled bangles, a medieval chess set, framed family photographs', a range of technology – 'shelves brimming with gadgets and dinky souvenirs from her overseas travels' (p.8). She loves collecting unusual objects and creatures and her flat is cluttered with countless objects that are important to her.

She spends every third weekend and school holidays with her parents in Melbourne. Several times a year she travels independently up to their holiday home in Queensland to spend time with her family.

Cathy's intense interest in technology and her exceptional skills in using it continue. She seems to have a gift in figuring out how to get maximum use out of all of her electronic devices. She is a prolific communicator with friends and family using Facebook and texting. She owns three or four iPads and always has the latest version of the iPhone. Those who know Cathy well acknowledge that technology provides her with a crucial social and communication outlet.

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



LEFT
Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

RIGHT
Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

Catherine Bell recalls her first meeting with Cathy. She introduced Catherine and a robot on her worktable to each other ‘and proceeded to communicate in beeps and buzzing etc.’. Catherine also recalls Cathy’s shock when she saw Catherine’s mobile phone, which was not the latest model. ‘Her rejection was short-lived and she began evangelising the Apple brand and passionately tried to convert me to an upgrade’. Other people who know Cathy report similar experiences of her berating them because of the relative age and lack of sophistication of their technology and urging them to upgrade!

Catherine concurs with others about the profound impact of technology on Cathy’s life and art: ‘Technology liberates, promotes, comforts and connects her with community, so it makes sense that it dominates her subject matter’. (p.10)

In her spare time Cathy enjoys going to shopping centres. By all accounts she is well known to staff in Dick Smith Electronics and the Telstra shops near where she lives.

Her four days a week at Arts Project Australia are her main social outlet. Many people in her daily life struggle to communicate with her using sign language. Her mother says without qualification that Arts Project Australia has transformed Cathy’s life. ‘Cathy’s social life is her family and Arts Project Australia’. Her participation is another major contributor to Cathy’s sense of agency and independence in her life. At Arts Project she is free to express herself and is completely ‘accepted for what she can achieve on her own terms’ (Arts Project 2013 Annual Report).

Cathy’s fondness for robots continues. Bev believes that they have been and are an antidote for the loneliness and isolation caused by Cathy’s dual disability (hearing and vision).

Cathy communicates verbally at times and often by signing. To communicate face-to-face she relies on mostly on gestures, formal signs, fingerspelling and graphic communication (writing and drawing).

As mentioned above, her communication skills using technology – emails, Skype, Facebook, text messaging for example – and her prolific use of these means to communicate are legendary!

Bev describes Cathy as ‘savvy – she’s a survivor: ‘If she gets lost or is going to be late, she contacts me. She knows how money works, is very good at saving for future purchases and understands the idea of layby very well’.

Her mother reports that Cathy worries now about her parents’ mortality and who she will be close to when they are no longer here.

CATHY’S PAST

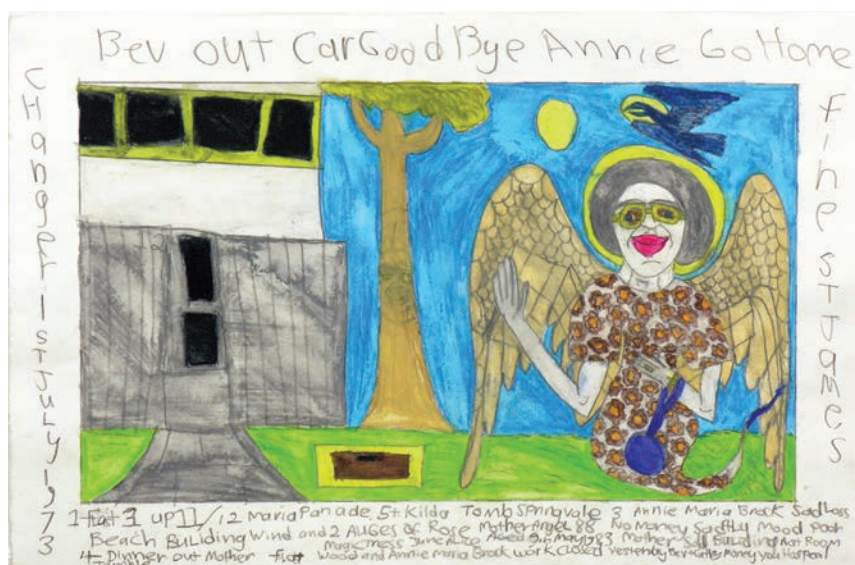
Born 1968, Cathy grew up in a loving family in St Kilda, a colourful, bustling iconic bayside area of Melbourne. Her family was embedded firmly in the community through involvement in local government and business. From windows in her home she could see Luna Park and the Palais Theatre. These places became important to Cathy from an early age. She has an ongoing relationship and a strong connection with Luna Park, where Cathy’s commissioned work is displayed. Over the years her art has featured many versions of its façade. From all accounts there is a great deal of mutual affection between Cathy and the staff at Luna Park.

Cathy has been profoundly deaf and severely vision impaired since birth, the effects of rubella during her mother’s pregnancy. Because of these disabilities, Cathy’s verbal communication is very limited, although people who know her well can understand her. She also has glaucoma, resulting in total blindness in one eye and limited vision in the other. Predictably, living in this world creates stress, anxiety and frustration from unsuccessful attempts to communicate and be understood.

Cathy was fitted with hearing aids at around nine months of age. She learned to sit and then stand around the age of three years.



Cathy Staughton
*Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream* 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

She began attending Monnington, an early intervention service for deaf children and their families, at the age of three. The staff there encouraged Cathy to use graphic communication, a combination of drawing, using photographs and writing to communicate. Her early education involved intensive one-to-one support.

Jane Crosskill, who taught Cathy at Monnington when she was between the ages of four and eight, recalls Cathy as highly motivated, very curious about the world and eager to learn about it.

Her family encouraged her to draw at home. Consequently, from an early age drawing served as a crucial means of communicating for Cathy. Often, when she returned home from school, she would spend the afternoon in her aunt's art shop next door to her parents' hardware store. Materials were provided and Cathy would spend the afternoon happily painting and drawing her experiences.

James speculates that probably from an early age 'Cathy was swiftly developing a style that allowed her a clear, quick and direct way of conveying her thoughts, emotions and dream world, all complemented by her vivid and colourful imagination'.

Often she created comic strips that reflected daily life, for example 'Bev and Cathy in the car', 'Bev and Cathy at the corner shop', Bev and Cathy asking for ice cream' and 'Bev and Cathy eating ice cream'.

As James says, "... drawing became not only a means of capturing her view of life, but living it ...for Cathy, drawing was not only a way of capturing the world beyond herself, but of negotiating life a little closer to home'. Bev says, 'Drawing was how we communicated - it still is'.

She attended Carronbank School for Deaf Blind Children until she was 21, except for the period when she was 12-16 years when she attended Moorabbin Special School.

After Bev heard about Arts Project Australia in 1996 and Cathy began attending, it became obvious that Cathy's participation there enriched

TOP

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BOTTOM

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

her life tremendously. Her family found accommodation for her nearby to make her participation easier.

Although Cathy had always used drawing as a means of communication and her teachers admired her work, it wasn't until she started attending Arts Project that she was recognised as an artist.

CATHY'S STORY IS HER MOTHER'S STORY

Throughout her life Cathy has had strong support and encouragement, especially from her mother Bev. Acceptance of who Cathy is and determination for her to have the most fulfilling life possible characterise Bev's accounts of Cathy's life:

When she was born it was suggested that we not bring Cathy home – that we place her in an institution. We learned that that's what happened with many children like Cathy. It was never an option with us. I had great support – especially from my husband John and my parents. Their attitude always was that we should just do what was needed and try as best as we could to treat her like any child. My father always said 'He can who thinks he can' about life in general, and he applied that positive approach to Cathy as well.

When she was a young baby she lay in a curled-up position all the time. We had to teach her to sit up, then to walk, talk, use the toilet and later to use money and many other things. We just kept moving on to the next thing.

Bev says that in hindsight she realises that, perhaps intentionally, after Cathy was born the doctors told her one thing at a time about Cathy's condition. She says that, for example, they did not tell her that she was deaf for a long time. Bev says 'That was a good thing – if I'd known everything at once I couldn't have coped'.

Bev has always had a strong belief in not over-protecting Cathy. She has deliberately avoided worrying about what others think. 'But in fact' she says, 'mostly people are kind, and they do try to understand'.

What she says about how she has raised Cathy reflects courage, pragmatism, persistence and acceptance:

I've always wanted her to be her own person. I want her to be confident herself and to be as independent as she can be. I've always tried, especially since she's been an adult, to not intervene unless it's absolutely necessary when Cathy is interacting with people out in community. Sometimes it's necessary, when people don't understand her or misinterpret her behaviour, but generally she manages.

Mostly people are very understanding. We have to encourage people not to be frightened. If we don't make an effort to have people with disabilities out in the community, then they will never be accepted.

For a time during Cathy's childhood, the family operated a restaurant and function centre. Cathy and a friend from Monnington helped serve at functions. Bev says that Cathy was a 'pretty assertive waiter'. If someone



left food on their plate Cathy would demand that they finish before she would remove the plate. Bev recalls someone from a service club that held functions at their restaurant asking ‘Do we have to have them?’ Bev said she replied in no uncertain terms, ‘Yes, we do’. It is clear that for all of Cathy’s life Bev has acted on her strong commitment to creating inclusive communities, where people with disabilities are active members.

Bev says that she wishes she could have enriched Cathy’s life more. She says that Cathy would have liked to have a partner, to be able to drive a car, to live in the community independently.

Jane comments on Cathy’s family life: She has never been marginalised but rather always included in family gatherings. Throughout her life she has been actively encouraged to show initiative and to be independent.

Her mother’s advocacy has been relentless. Bev persists in every way, including communication, by using the full range of ways that Cathy communicates and always giving Cathy time to reply.

Bev has always had high expectations of Cathy, and that’s why she copes so well. Cathy has always been encouraged and supported to manage things for herself, where possible, and is very self-motivated.

SUMMING UP CATHY

Several quotes from James sum up Cathy as a person and an artist:

Cathy is a living embodiment of her work. A wonderful and engaging woman who dresses in the vivid colour schemes that adorn her canvases, she has woven her kind, caring and quirky nature into the fabric of the space she has worked in for so many years, often painting portraits of her friends, colleagues and staff at Arts Project, and recording all special events through photography, Facebook updates, drawings and paintings. With a love for dressing up, whether it be donning bunny ears and handing out chocolate eggs at Easter or arriving at the studio dressed for International Pirate Day and then painting a self-portrait in costume (including the eye patch) – she is a charismatic woman who enjoys her work, and those who inhabit her world.

Possibly, for Cathy, given her auditory and visual limitations, subtlety is of little value. ... One suspects that this loud statement of opinion in her work and the descriptive and detailed titles are a way to get our attention.

She shows her heart (and her mood) in her art. Cathy’s paintings and drawings act as a barometer for her happiness, her sadness, her dreams and desires. Coupled with her ability to produce paintings swiftly, she is able to reflect these emotions almost as quickly through her artwork as she can via her beloved Internet, which is where they appear as soon as they are completed, thanks to Facebook!

Her enthusiasm for the subjects she depicts comes from a fondness, affection, belief and confidence in who she is, where she has come from and where she is heading.

Even today, as has been the case for the majority of Cathy's artistic life, the unknown sensory limits of Cathy's life belie the riotous interior world that she experiences and shares with others through her work. The degree of silence and darkness she experiences by way of her hearing and visual impairments cannot be known by anyone other than Cathy herself, and yet the vivid colour and movement of the world she creates is open to any and all who wish to step into it.

Cathy's sense of identity, outstanding talent, strong personality and uniqueness as a human being prompt a question that can be asked about all of us – What makes us who we are? Is it her genetic makeup, family history (her mother's sister is an artist, and the well-known artist John Brack was her mother's cousin), her disabilities, the encouragement at home and in early childhood settings and school, the drive to communicate, the experiences she has had out in the community, the opportunities afforded by technology, the support and learning at Arts Project – and something that is in essence simply a unique gift or talent? We cannot know the answer, but it's pretty likely that the answer is – all of the above!

Given her history, Cathy will continue to develop and learn, staying strong and expressing her zest for life in her art in ever more interesting and engaging ways.

REFERENCES:

Arts Project Australia 2013 Annual Report

Cathy Staughton's Wondrous Imaginarium, The Leonard Joel series, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 2013.

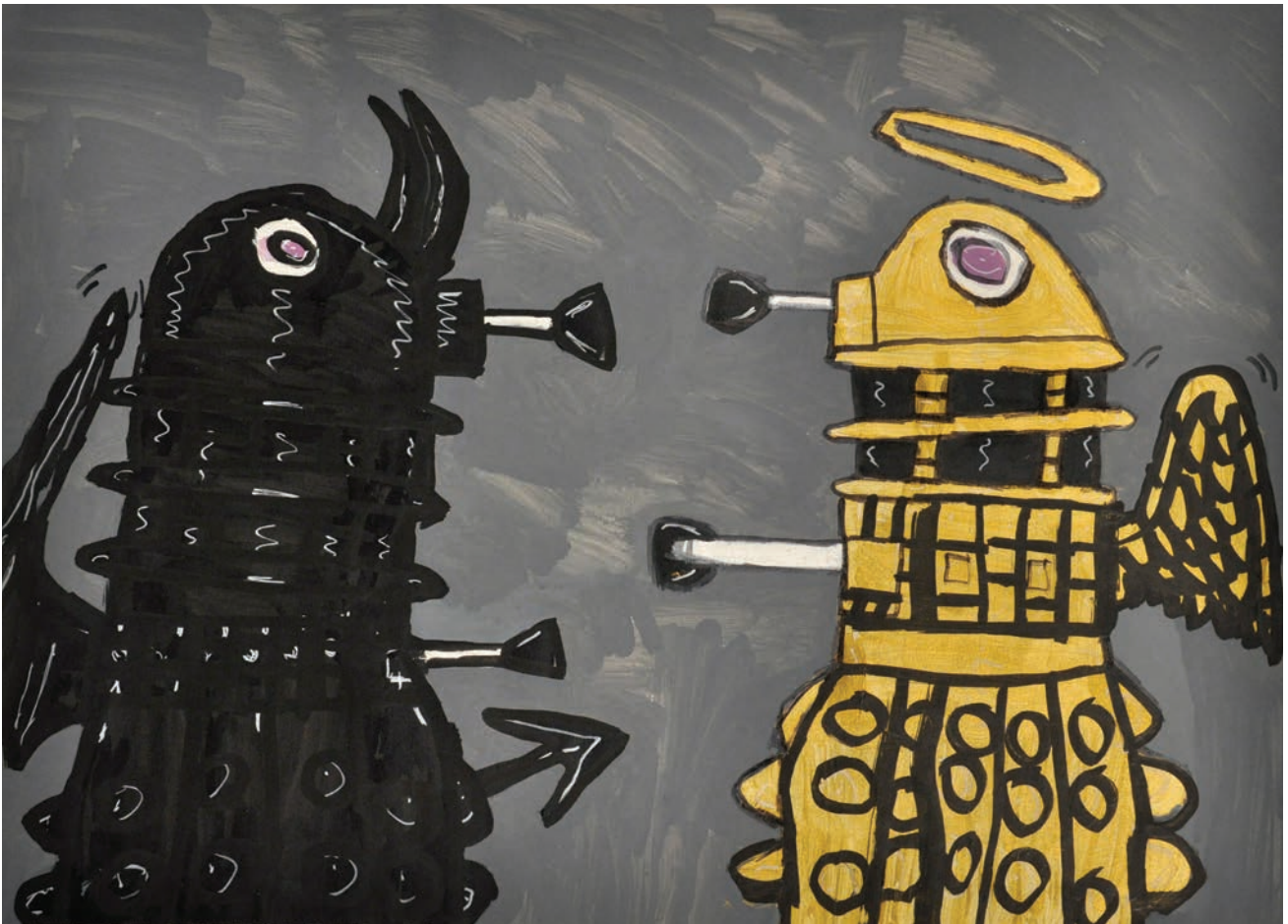
RIGHT

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

FOLLOWING

Cathy Staughton
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm





CATHY STAUGHTON

Born: Melbourne, 1968

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 *Cathy Staughton's Wondrous Imaginarium*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
2010 *Cathy Staughton Solo*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
2002 *Cathy Staughton*, MADMusée, Liège, Belgium
2000 *Good Dream – Bad Dream*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
1998 *Danse Macabre*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Melbourne Art Fair*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Knowing Me, Knowing You, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Renegades: Outsider Art, The Arts Centre Gold Coast, Surfers Paradise, QLD
Brewed in Belgium: The Collection of MADmusée, Intuit: The Centre for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago
2013 *Video Doctor*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
By Women, Of Women, Queen Victoria Women's Centre, Melbourne
Renegades: Outsider Art, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns QLD
At the Table, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
2012 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
The Great un Reveal, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Halo and the Glory of Art, McGlade Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2012, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne

- Error and Judgement*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Paint It Black, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Shift Step Stir, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
In the making, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2011 *Movement & Emotion*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Exhibition #4, Museum of Everything, London
Moving Galleries, Flinders Street Station, Melbourne
Halo and the Glory of Art, ACU Gallery, Melbourne
This Sensual World, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
National Gallery of Victoria 150th event, Melbourne
Fred, Ginger and Other Stories, Delmar Gallery, Ashfield
Colour My World, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
2010 *Portrait Exchange*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Melbourne Art Fair 2010, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
Australiana, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Fully Booked, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
2009 *Pictures of You*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
Here and Away, Northern Exposure 09, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne
Location Location Location!, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

- Portrait Show 09*, Brunswick Street Gallery, Melbourne
- Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection*, Orange Regional Gallery, NSW
- 2008 *Melbourne Art Fair 2008*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- Connected08*, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne
- Detour*, Northern Exposure 08, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne
- Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW Sydney
- Reaching Out*, Waldron Hall, County Court of Victoria, Melbourne
- Out There*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Arts Project Australia: Paintings, Prints & Sculptures*, A Day on Earth, Brisbane
- 2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Penrith
- Connected07*, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
- Perspectives*, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne
- 2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Yours, Mine and Ours: 50 Years of ABC TV*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest
- Private and Confidential*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Melbourne Art Fair 2006*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- Connected 06*, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne
- Skyscape*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2005 *Leo Cussen with Selected Artists*, Australian Galleries, Collingwood, Melbourne
- South of the Border*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Artists' Books*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Sydney Art on Paper Fair*, Byron Kennedy Hall, Sydney
- Connected05*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Moving Colours*, Northcote Town Hall, Melbourne
- From Australia with Art*, Une sardine collée au mur, Geneva, Switzerland
- S,M,L,XL*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 2004 *Connected04*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Figures Humaines*, Galerie du MAD, Liège, Belgium
- 2003 *A Sense of Place*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- Connected*, Goya Galleries, Melbourne
- 2002 *La Croix*, Art en Marge, Brussels, Belgium
- Melbourne Contemporary Art Fair*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne
- 2001 *Canvas*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 1999 *La Femme*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- The Inner View*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
- 1998 *The Headlands Project*, bus/tram shelter display, Next Wave Festival, Melbourne
- Luna Park and the Art of Mass Delirium*, MOMA at Heide, Melbourne

- 1997 *Magic Dream*, Short cuts animated video
 Animated film project, Short Cuts, Arts
 Project Australia
La Beauté et Le Diable, MADMusée, Liège,
 Belgium
Prints and Artists Books, Arts Project Australia
 Gallery, Melbourne
- 1996 *The Maze*, Fringe Festival, St. Kilda foreshore,
 Melbourne
Word, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne
ACAF 5 Handmade, Arts Project Australia
 Gallery, Melbourne
- 1995 *Wavelink group exhibition*, Oakleigh Town Hall,
 Melbourne
- 1992 *Angels and Garden Spirits*, The Artists' Garden,
 Melbourne
- 1991 *Spirit of Christmas*, The Artists' Garden,
 Melbourne
- 1990 *Group exhibition*, Caulfield Town Hall,
 Melbourne

PRIZES

- 1990 *1st Prize*, Chadstone Community Art Show
 1989 *Finalist*, Australia Post Design competition

COLLECTIONS

MADMusée, Liège, Belgium
 STOARC, University of Sydney
 Private collections





GEORGIA SZMERLING

A beautiful evolution

Art is a way for Georgia to express her inner world and the world around her. It offers her a place and identity, and Arts Project is central to her life.

— NITA JAWARY, GEORGIA'S MOTHER

She has developed enormously as an artist. It's quite beautiful to see her evolution.

— JAMES MCDONALD, ARTS PROJECT STUDIO MANAGER

Interviewer: Can you think of anything that would make coming to Arts Project better for you? Georgia: I don't think so.

Georgia Szmerling has a special connection with Arts Project Australia, one that reassures her mother Nita Jawary that her grandparents are watching over her daughter lovingly when she is working there. Georgia's grandparents, Sala and Yiddel Szmerling, immigrated to Australia after World War II. They established the Magnet Shoe Company in the same building that now houses Arts Project.

Georgia, born in 1979, has been coming to Arts Project since she was 14 years old. A teacher's aide who was working with her at school recognised her potential as an artist and organised for her to come to Arts Project one day a week. After completing her education she began attending four days a week, which she still does.

A warm, friendly, outgoing person with a gentle manner, Georgia communicates with confidence and clarity in conversation. Keen for her story to be told, or at least to talk about her work and her life, she asks me every time she sees me after we meet if I would like to talk to her some more.

THE ART AND THE ARTIST

James McDonald, Studio Manager at Arts Project, has known Georgia since he began working there in 2007. His first comment when asked to talk about Georgia as an artist is that she has developed tremendously and is a very different artist now when compared to the artist she was when he first knew her. He is not sure if the change has occurred mainly because of her own maturing and development as an artist or because of the influence



Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

of the staff artists who have worked with her and the tuition provided. He adds, 'It's probably a combination of both'.

When he first knew her, Georgia was painting on canvas and producing abstract, colourful, repetitive, delicate, pattern-based work with lots of dots and flowers. More recently she has begun to work more from reference material, which has broadened her subject matter considerably. This expansion of subject matter continues. Strong links are evident between her current and previous work as she still uses line and repeated motifs and patterns. Her work is characterised by a lot of detail. She now creates figurative work such as landscapes, still lifes and seascapes, many of which still include patterns. She does quite beautiful intricate work using gouache and ink with nib pens on rag paper, whereas formerly she used only acrylic-based paint pens (similar to marker pens).

Georgia has recently started using soft pastels and is reinventing and extending her work again. In the past she worked in a very controlled way. The mediums she uses now allow her to work more quickly and loosely; however, she still exercises considerable control. This control is evident in the way she resists overworking. Her expanded subject matter, use of new mediums, and looser style prompts James to say 'She has developed enormously as an artist. It's quite beautiful to see her evolution'.

Elyss McCleary, a staff artist at Arts Project, comments on Georgia's 'beautiful patterning and colour. She works intensely on her chosen subject, highlighting colour and line work'.

Georgia also enjoys ceramics and printmaking, in which she is experimenting with using dry point markers. These new mediums enable her to try different processes. Georgia is somewhat unusual. Most artists tend to transfer an identifiable style across different mediums; however Georgia's work typically does not reflect this tendency. James says, 'It's as though she views a new medium as an opportunity to do something different. However, she has a unique approach and style, particularly with painting. You can definitely tell when it's a painting by Georgia'.

Georgia participates in after-hours life drawing at Arts Project and relishes the opportunity to draw the human figure from life. Georgia also enjoys the social aspect of these sessions, as it is chance for staff and artists alike to participate in a shared pursuit. James says, 'We enjoy what Georgia brings to these sessions. Her approach and process are so unique,

often taking her work beyond the subject of the life model who is posing. Georgia's figures are drawn with immediacy and a fresh gestural line. Georgia will then place the figure into a background of idyllic landscapes or desert islands with palm trees – imagery and themes that are reflective of her general studio practice and her passions as an artist'.

Georgia is currently exploring photography for the first time. The hope is that she will use her photographs as reference materials for her painting and drawing, in addition to pursuing photography as a medium on its own.

When asked what she likes to do at Arts Project, Georgia lists photography, drawing, painting and ceramics. She mentions that she particularly likes life drawing and drawing animals, adding that she has a cat called Lester. She says that she is currently enjoying learning to create landscapes and paint the sea. She agrees that she likes to work on several things at once, and illustrates this point by saying that she is currently working on ceramics, a print, a pastel and photography.

Georgia is very conscientious and works quietly and consistently. Elyss says that at times staff artists encourage her to talk about her work in order to learn more about her process. She is interested in other artists' work but typically has her own ideas. She is keen to gain new skills and improve those that she has. She asks questions, often clearly in order to learn more, and at times because she wants approval for her work. She does not take her place at Arts Project for granted and asks for regular reassurance that she can continue to participate. She enjoys talking through new ideas.

She shows increasing confidence in herself as an artist. When staff artists see evidence of Georgia's lack of confidence in her art, they make suggestions and always explain the reasons. They give advice and suggestions always with the aim of encouraging Georgia to learn to trust her own judgment and instincts. James indicates that the staff artists have to be cautious, as it would be very easy to be too directive with Georgia because she seeks praise and obviously has a strong desire to be successful. He says, 'It's a challenge to toe that fine line between giving lots of encouragement and not overly influencing her. Our main aim is to encourage her to believe that her work is valid and good'.

Nita sees definite progress in Georgia's trust in her own instincts as an artist. She says that if she makes a suggestion when Georgia is working on her art at home, Georgia will often reply, 'I'm the artist! I know what I'm doing!'

Georgia is patient and relatively easy-going and accepting when her efforts are not successful. James says she is good at saying 'I don't think this is working' or realising that there must be a better way to achieve a desired outcome. 'All in all, she has a fairly well developed sense of her own art practice'.

Staff artists often assist Georgia, as they do many of the artists, to prepare the materials she uses, such as mixing paints and selecting brushes. Help is required, particularly with gouache, which can be difficult to mix. Georgia uses a varied palette, sometimes vibrant,

BELOW
Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

OPPOSITE
Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm









sometimes subdued, although her soft gouache work has a lot of pastel tones. Georgia has specific ideas about what she wants to achieve, for example with colours, and will consult with staff artists to achieve her goal.

Lyn Young, a staff artist at Arts Project who knows Georgia well, indicates that Georgia gets a lot of subject matter from the reference library. She is creating a lot of landscapes currently. When asked about how she assists Georgia, Lyn says, 'We might talk about what she would like to do and find a reference, or we'll look at her folio to see if there is work to be finished. She still asks for our opinion, but more often now has her own idea of what she will do. She just needs a bit of validation'.

For a time and until very recently Georgia preferred to use materials that do not create mess. She is now becoming much more comfortable using new mediums that may be a bit messy, such as acrylics and soft pastels, and she uses them with joy and enthusiasm. This is an important step for Georgia. Staff artists encourage her to embrace these new mediums and give a lot of praise when she pushes herself beyond what she is comfortable with. James says with admiration that Georgia deserves a lot of credit for striving to meet this personal challenge.

Most of the time Georgia seems fairly relaxed and comfortable as she works. She has friends at Arts Project and has become increasingly sociable and outgoing. In response to a question about how she feels when she is working on her art, she replies with no hesitation 'Good and happy inside and relaxed'. She sums up her experience at Arts Project by saying that she likes James and the other staff and that 'it's a friendly environment and everyone is very kind and gentle. I feel comfortable here. I enjoy making things'.

Georgia admits that she becomes quite unhappy if things go wrong and adds 'But I don't have a tantrum'. After prompting from James, she explains, 'I just sit for a minute and breathe'.

In part because Georgia has been coming to Arts Project for a long time, James believes that there is a strong imperative for staff artists to respect that she has practised as an artist for many years. 'She has a massive body of work behind her. It's not for us to decide for her that she needs to do this or that. She needs the support of the studio environment and the staff artists, but it is important for us not to push too many of our own ideas'.

He continues: 'It's tricky with Georgia because she is relatively quiet. She works conscientiously, and her work involves lots of repeated patterns, so it's tempting to wonder if the repetition – the appearance of doing the same thing over and over – means she is bored. We have to remind ourselves that many established artists base their art considerably on repetition. She may be consolidating, or it may be that the repetition is the most effective way for her to communicate her ideas and what she's trying to do'.

James, Nita and Georgia agree that Georgia definitely identifies as an artist. When asked how she responds if someone asks her who she is, she says without hesitation, 'I say I'm an artist at Arts Project'.

FAMILY INFLUENCES

Entering Georgia's and her mother's home offers at least a partial answer to questions about the origins of Georgia's talent and interest in art. Although Nita says that she sees herself as a writer more than an artist, the walls in her home are filled with paintings that she has created – mostly abstract landscape paintings in soft delicate colours. Many pieces of Georgia's work are also displayed.

When Georgia was very young, around 16 months old, Nita showed her how to use crayons, and from that time Georgia wanted to draw and was fascinated by using crayons. Georgia has always had a strong seemingly innate sense of colour. Nita said that, for example, when she took Georgia with her to purchase fabric, even as a child Georgia would select fabric that demonstrated a gift for choosing colours. However, Nita did not identify until Georgia was older that she had considerable talent in art. 'I just knew that I liked what she did' she says. Nita recalls a large drawing that Georgia made on a wall in their home when she was around ten years old: 'It was wonderful. A female figure, it had a strong, simple and fluid line that would have challenged any Picasso. I was sorry we had to leave it behind when we moved. I still regret that it didn't even occur to me to photograph it'.

It is Nita's view that Georgia's talent is innate – that she has always had a special gift as an artist. Nita did not paint when Georgia was young, as she didn't have time, so she does not think that she influenced Georgia's talent and interest in art directly. However, she did make up stories with Georgia and illustrate them for her as they went along. Georgia says she recalls her mother painting when she was younger and cites that as influencing her.

There is clearly a strong heritage of creativity in Georgia's family, and creative people surrounded her as she grew up. Georgia's theory about the origins of her talent for and interest in art is that 'it's probably in my genes'! Georgia's great grandmother on her mother's side, after whom she is named, was very talented at crocheting. She never used a pattern but would crochet elaborate outfits that were exquisite. Georgia's great aunt Sue also had creative flare. She would venture out to the finest dress shops in Melbourne, examine the garments she liked, return home and not only create them but also make jewellery to match. Nita's mother was another creative influence on Georgia. She had never painted before, but after her husband died she discovered some leftover house paints in the garage and began making paintings with them until she had filled all her walls!

Although there were always art materials at home, Georgia did not pursue art in a systematic way until she began coming to Arts Project. Nita wishes that she had offered Georgia the opportunity for specialised lessons when she was young, and suspects she would have done well with them.

Georgia recalls liking art as a child, but she says she only became an artist after she left school. She says that some teachers at school did encourage her, but she found the structured classes at school very challenging. 'There was too much written work and I didn't always understand it. I like it better here at Arts Project because they know how to work with people with disabilities. There's not so much writing here – it's more fun'.

PREVIOUS
Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



Georgia received some support for her art in secondary school, including the arrangement to take a day off each week to attend Arts Project. Nita agrees that Georgia's art blossomed when she began coming to Arts Project. 'There are very few places that show such respect. They didn't treat her art as an assembly line product or replicable commodity. They respected her preferences and requests. The atmosphere at Arts Project is wonderful. It's very supportive. It's great that artists run it – people who respect that artists can go through different stages'.

THE PERSON

Nita, whose quiet gentle manner is similar to Georgia's, describes Georgia as 'extremely kind, good-hearted, generous and always willing to try new things'. She adds, 'Everybody loves her'. Elyss says that 'Georgia is a lovely person to be around. She makes everyone calm. She is considerate and very understanding of everyone'.

Georgia lives with her mother currently. They have a close relationship and share a love of art, music, travel and of course, Lester the cat! They enjoy going to musicals together and visiting art galleries. Going to art galleries, Georgia says, gives her new ideas for her own work.

At the time this story was being finalised, Nita and Georgia had recently been to see the musical 'The King And I'. Nita reports that Georgia was overawed by the set, which framed the stage with huge, red, bejewelled cardboard elephants. Georgia mentioned to Nita several times that she would like to make elephants like those in ceramics, and that she would decorate them with her own dotting technique that she formerly used in her floral paintings.

Georgia clearly values her relationships with a range of people. When asked who are the important people in her life, she lists her mum, her dad, friends, her brother and sister, the cat, James and other staff at Arts Project, neighbours, her health practitioners and her two-year-old nephew – testament to the strength of her many connections with others!

She has a number of interests outside of Arts Project. She is pleased that she lives near the beach, where she likes to go for walks. She enjoys going out for coffee and seeing a movie occasionally, although she says she is not 'what you would call a movie buff'.

Georgia is a creative cook and is particularly skilled at baking. Nita says that she does not follow recipes, and is usually very successful without them. When asked, Georgia agrees that she is a good cook, and identifies her specialties, in addition to baking, as including chicken soup, roasts, lasagne and vegetable mornay!

According to Nita, Georgia has always been very musical and loves to sing. In addition to going to musicals, Georgia loves singing along with YouTube clips. She enjoys both doing and watching dancing, especially ballet.

Around five years ago Georgia began attending the Penguin Club, where she learns about and practises public speaking. She dictates her speeches

TOP
Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

BOTTOM
Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm

to her mother and then delivers them to the group. The length of her speeches is increasing (from three minutes to five), and she is very vocal in discussions, offering opinions on a range of subjects.

Georgia has a strong social conscience. Her most recent speech at the Penguin Club was on the need for people to help those who are less fortunate. She also volunteers weekly at a kindergarten and an opportunity shop.

Georgia seems to have a lot of ideas, interests and plans that contribute to a rich fulfilling life. James agrees that she is often very motivated to be involved at Arts Project and out in the community. At times however, her energy flags and she struggles.

THE PAST

Georgia is the middle child of three. When Nita told doctors she believed something had gone wrong at Georgia's birth, they ignored her. Georgia was not diagnosed with an intellectual disability until she was around nine years old.

One consequence of this relatively late diagnosis was that as a child Georgia was expected to do what any other child did. 'Because there was no diagnosis, I just saw her as Georgia, as her own person, not as a child with a disability. I believe that was a good thing. It opened up her world and raised the bar. On the other hand, she missed out on support that may have helped her'.

When Georgia was around nine years old Nita took all three children to an appointment with the family doctor. Although the appointment was for one of Georgia's siblings, the doctor could see that Georgia had symptoms that led him to suspect that she had been deprived of oxygen at birth. As a result of his observation and further tests, they secured a diagnosis and support became available.

Initially Georgia attended a mainstream primary school. Nita reports that Georgia did not receive any special help at school. The advice, year after year, was for her to repeat the year. Following up on a recommendation, Nita enrolled Georgia in a school for children with disabilities. Nita said the experience was awful for Georgia. Not only did she lose the connections she had at her previous school, she also learned inappropriate behaviours from other children. She was moved to another special school in the hope that it would be better. She learned important life skills there, where the atmosphere was more respectful. However, Georgia still mimicked inappropriate behaviours. At age twelve, Georgia began attending Malvern Girls High School, where she found a very welcoming and caring environment. The school principal at the time was particularly enlightened and Georgia thrived. Other girls really liked her, and she helped to look after others. Unfortunately she was there barely a year when the school was closed and amalgamated with another school. Fortunately for Georgia, her special teacher, Barry Jones, came with her to her new school. Nita says that she and Georgia owe him a lot, in part because he organised for Georgia to attend Arts Project one day a week.

Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
 acrylic on canvas
 168 x 152 cm



Georgia says that she enjoyed school ‘a little bit’ but found it very difficult because there was so much written work. She adds, ‘Here there’s more talking and that’s better’.

When Georgia finished secondary school she did a life skills course at TAFE.

Nita says that she has always wanted to help Georgia find a place in world – socially and economically. ‘I wanted her to be able to look after herself. It’s no different to what every parent wants for their child’.

Nita reflects on the challenges of being a parent of a child with an intellectual disability: ‘People often look critically at the way you handle a child with an intellectual disability. Some people tell you that you do too much, and it’s your own fault if you’re tired. Or they say you don’t do enough. You are constantly judged. I remember when Georgia first started kindergarten she refused to put on shoes. We would argue every morning. One very rainy day I gave in and let her wear thongs. I received a very terse note from the kindergarten teacher. The clear message was “what sort of mother are you?” You almost get the feeling at times that people blame you for the disability’.

THE FUTURE

Georgia is clear and specific about her goals with her art. She mentions that she wants to do more painting on canvas and more work in ceramics. She would like to learn more about printmaking, photography and drawing. Nita would like to see Georgia become comfortable using any medium available to her. She would also like for Georgia to spend time with her creating art together, and to have an exhibition together someday.

Georgia demonstrates her enthusiasm for life in her response to a question about what she would like to do in the future, apart from her art. She replies immediately that she would love to travel to New Zealand to see the beautiful scenery and all the sheep. She also would like to go to

Tasmania to visit the gallery in Hobart. She would like to take a V-line train and go to a country town. She adds that she would like to learn ballroom dancing.

Both Elyss and Lyn spoke excitedly about very recent developments in Georgia's work. Elyss says that they have been encouraging Georgia to 'go bigger'. 'She is now standing at the easel, using larger pieces of paper and making big bold colourful pastel drawings. She's working faster more energetically. It's wonderful to see!' Lyn is thrilled with Georgia's move toward a much bolder approach, producing what Lyn describes as 'lively loose pastel work'. 'It seemed when she got up and started working at the easel, she was up and away! It was extraordinary. Much of her current work combines rubbed and blended colours and bold marks of colour. One great thing about it is that Georgia is really pleased with herself and her work. It's truly inspirational to see the energy with which she has taken up soft pastels. She seems delighted and wants people to come and look.'

When asked about hopes and predictions for Georgia's future as an artist, James comments once more that particularly the reference material she uses and her subject matter have changed over the past few years. She has moved from creating abstract organic forms to more literal ones that can be read as figurative work. She still sometimes uses a linear repetitive approach but now employs subjects from the real world. She explores animals, landscapes, still life and life drawing. In contrast to the past, Georgia is now open to a much wider range of influences. James expresses his hopes for Georgia as an artist:

What I hope is that she will continue to broaden the variety of mediums that she is comfortable with and learn new skills. I would hope that she might sell more work and feature in more external exhibitions.

All in all, I think Georgia is pretty comfortable with her place in the world as a person and as an artist. She is developing at a rate all her own and there's no need to speed that up.

By all accounts, Georgia is progressing and experimenting with new directions. As Lyn says, 'It will be so interesting to see where she takes her art!'

Georgia Szmerling
Blue Angel, Luna
Park dream 2006
acrylic on canvas
168 x 152 cm



GEORGIA SZMERLING

Born: Melbourne, 1979

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2005 *Georgia Szmerling*, Lupa, Melbourne

EXHIBITIONS

2014 *Melbourne Art Fair 2014*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne

Renegades: Outsider Art, Moree Plains Gallery, Moree, NSW

Animal Magnetism, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Renegades: Outsider Art, The Arts Centre Gold Coast, Surfers Paradise, QLD

2013 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Supermarket, Craft, Melbourne

Convergence, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

By Women, Of Women, Queen Victoria Women's Centre, Melbourne

Renegades: Outsider Art, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns QLD

Classic Albums, Tanks Art Centre, Cairns, QLD

Walking the Line, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2012 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Classic Albums, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

BSG Works on paper prize, Brunswick Street Gallery, Melbourne

2011 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Fresh off the press, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

National Gallery of Victoria 150th event, Melbourne

2010 *Annual Gala Exhibition*, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne

Sweet Relief, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Australiana, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Fully Booked, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2009 *Art for Food*, Federation Square, Melbourne
Snapshot, ACGA Gallery, Federation Square, Melbourne

2008 *Melbourne Art Fair 2008*, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne

Pearls of Arts Project Australia: The Stuart Purves Collection, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, NSW Sydney

Reaching Out, Waldron Hall, County Court of Victoria, Melbourne

Stretch, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2007 *Studio Days*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Pearls of Arts Project Australia: Stuart Purves Collection, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest

Connected07, The Atrium, Federation Square, Melbourne

2006 *In Everyone's Company*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Connected 06, The Atrium, Fed Square, Melbourne
Makers Mark, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2005 *Wrapped: Selected Works from the Studio*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Leo Cussen with Selected Artists, Australian Galleries, Collingwood

Connected05, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

2004 *Connected04*, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

Christmas Survey, Arts Project Australia Gallery, Melbourne

COLLECTIONS

Private Collections

ANNE STONEHOUSE

Anne is a consultant, writer and speaker about topics related to young children and good practice in early learning settings. She was formerly an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Monash University and Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University). She has published many books, articles and other resources for educators and parents. Her work is recognised internationally through the use of her publications and invitations to speak at conferences and consult.

Her main professional interests are the nature of good quality curriculum for babies and toddlers and family-educator relationships in early learning settings.

She was a member of the writing team in the Charles-Sturt-University-based consortium that developed the national Early Years Learning Framework. She has been, and is currently engaged in a number of projects related to the national and Victorian Frameworks.

Anne writes regularly for Early Childhood Australia and other organisations on a variety of issues related to good quality practice in early childhood educator and care settings.

In recognition of her contribution to children and children's services, Anne was appointed a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia in 1999.

JAMES MCDONALD

James is the Studio Manager at Arts Project Australia. With seven years' experience working in a number of roles across Arts Project, James has amassed a significant depth and breadth of knowledge of the practices of the 115 artists that work within this vibrant and creative space. Over his years of association with Arts Project, James has curated a number of exhibitions, and recently been a contributing catalogue essayist for *Cathy Staughton's Wondrous Imaginarium*.

Having graduated in 2006 from RMIT with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Drawing), James continues to be involved in many facets of the organisation, sits on the Exhibitions and Collections Committee and was a panellist for the *Revealing the Human Symposium* in 2008.

James also maintains a figurative painting practice, with his subject matter often drawing heavily from his experience at Arts Project Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The opportunity to present *The Stories So Far* was made possible with the support and cooperation of many individuals and organisations.

Our primary thanks go to the artists who are the focus of these stories who contributed in different ways. Some of them by participating in conversations where they shared their perspectives on their lives and their art practice. We are deeply grateful for what they shared in words and most importantly, for their commitment to their art.

Our thanks also go to the contributions of those close to the artists, who added so much valuable information and richness to the stories: their willingness to contribute and their openness and honesty are appreciated very much. Thank you to: Debra Howlett, Paul Hodge's sister; Liz Wilks, Miles' Howard-Wilks mother; Nita Jawary, Georgia Szmerling's mother; Aurora Lazzaro, Adrian Lazzaro's mother; Bernie Mason, Chris Mason's mother; Dan Silk, Jodie Noble's friend; and Bev Staughton, Cathy Staughton's mother.

Thanks also to Jane Crosskill, Cathy Staughton's friend and teacher when she was a child, who contributed to the initial thinking about the concept for this publication, offered information about Cathy and participated in several conversations with artists and support persons.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Arts Victoria, Amelia Eliza Holland Trust, Gandel Philanthropy, Inner North Community Foundation - Terry Brian Kenny Fund, John T Reid Charitable Trust, the Kimberley Foundation, William Angliss (Victoria) Charitable Trust, William Buckland Foundation, Copyright Cultural Fund, Bed Bath N Table, Art Guide Australia, Kaboodle, Leeuwin Estate and Robinson Architecture for their support of Arts Project Australia.

Arts Project Australia is also supported by the State Government of Victoria through the Department of Human Services (DHS) and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE); and by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS).

We also thank designer Liz Cox for her support and publication design.

In addition, we would like to thank the many private donors who contribute to the success of Arts Project Australia.

We thank Anne Stonehouse AM for her dedication to bringing the artist's stories to life. Thanks also to James McDonald for his input into each of the eight artist stories, as well as Elyss McCleary, Lynnette Young and staff artists at Arts Project, who took time from their busy work lives to share invaluable insights about the artists.

Finally, thank you to all Arts Project Australia board, staff and volunteers involved in various aspects of this project, and in particular to Sue Roff, Sim Luttin and Frances Wilkinson.

