



Unique Practices of Coomaditchie Artists

Keeping culture alive through public art.



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The art work on the cover is a compilation of 3 pieces of art completed with Lorraine and Narelle through a workshop conducted at Coomaditchie in 2011 with a Community Services Class from TAFE and the logo of Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation.



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Snapshot

The purpose of this small qualitative study is to explore the art-making practices and public artworks produced by artists from the Coomaditchie Artist Cooperative, in particular the artists Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas. The Cooperative operates under the banner of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC). CUAC is a community based organisation incorporated since 1993, that provides a range of activities and services with a particular focus on working with vulnerable and excluded people across the Illawarra region.

The study is the result of a partnership between students studying the Diploma in Community Services at Shellharbour TAFE and the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC). It examines the experiences of those who have collaborated during the production of the artworks and those who have commissioned the artworks. The research project highlights the value and meaning of Aboriginal artwork in public spaces completed by CUAC. In particular it explores participatory art making as a tool for engagement and education, and its potential to break down barriers within the community.

During this process, the research team conducted 33 semi-structured interviews in order to gather qualitative in-depth information following the work of Minichiello et al. (1995; 2008). The interviews were conducted with artists, collaborators, participants and people who commissioned the art. The interviews offered a good fit with a participatory action research approach with its emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness. In addition other methods for gathering the data included observations of the artists during the art making process with groups at Coomaditchie, written reflections from student participants and photos of the artwork.

The research shows how the Coomaditchie artists use a unique way of working with participants in collaborative projects. They adapt to the needs of the people they are working with and include their ideas in the planning phase of the work. They encourage others to “tell their stories,” creating individual and collective narratives through the common language of symbols. Lorraine and Narelle are committed to keeping their culture alive, devoting much energy teaching their culture to the Aboriginal children of this area through their art. This results in Aboriginal children identifying with and building a sense of pride and ownership in their culture.

The presence of Aboriginal art in public spaces builds appreciation of Aboriginal culture and heritage in the place where it is installed, helping to

keep East Coast Aboriginal culture alive. It creates a different layer of meaning for non-Aboriginal people, educating them about the Aboriginal significance of an area in an exciting and challenging way.

The study explores the often transformational impact the art-making process has on the relationships, attitudes and understanding between the artists, the Coomaditchie community and the wider community. The result of these transformations is a positive one for everyone, reducing the isolation felt by Aboriginal people within the Coomaditchie community and also reducing racism and prejudice against them.

Aboriginal artworks connect Aboriginal people to their culture and heritage, allowing them to feel welcome. As a result, they are more likely to access the space in which the Aboriginal art is placed.

Art-making is also used as a tool of community engagement and participation. Artworks in a public space can act as conversation starters with members of the public and from here a relationship can grow. A key finding is the way in which Lorraine and Narelle practice their art. They consistently use the principles and practices of community development to involve the local community in joint art projects. The data provides a rich source of material about the contributions their art-making practices make to reconciliation and bridge building within the Illawarra.

The public art-making process builds pride in place and incorporates the stories of local people, creating a sense of identity and belonging. In the refurbishment of a space and enhancing an area with colour and art, the community can create their own cultural stories, which then gives them a sense of connection to their community.

Collaborative art workshops run by the Coomaditchie artists are very therapeutic and non-threatening as participants engage, talk and express their stories while painting, which creates a relaxed atmosphere and can assist in the healing process.

The literature tells us that while difficult to measure, public art adds value to our local communities. Public art defined as artistic works or activities accessible to the public, and its rich contribution to the civic and cultural amenity and identity of each place, can be temporary or permanent in nature and can be located within a public space or private facility that is accessed by the community. Environmental and social integration of artworks have ensured that public spaces are more enjoyable, culturally acceptable and meaningful within the community. Public art celebrates our cultural identity and gives us pride in our public spaces.

Community engagement is another outcome of the creative planning processes and practices of implementing and designing a public art project. Public art produced by Aboriginal artists has the potential to raise awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal history and our culturally diverse society. Communities can interact and engage in telling their stories through community artworks, which then opens a line of conversation and breaks down barriers. Community art nurtures the potential within us all to find a voice and to express it through art.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations relating to the need for sustainable funding options for organisations such as CUAC and continued support by local and state governments in promoting the existence of public art in our communities.

It is clear the art practices of Coomaditchie make a significant contribution to building stronger social networks with the wider community and promoting the rich cultural identity and history of the East Coast Aboriginal communities. More broadly the CUAC artists have been part of a long history of collaborative projects, producing a diverse range of public artworks in the Illawarra and in this regard have made a genuine contribution to reconciliation in this area.

Introduction

About the project

This small qualitative study explores the art practices and public artwork produced by artists from Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC). CUAC is a community based organisation incorporated since 1993, providing a range of activities and services with a particular focus on working with vulnerable and excluded people in the Warrawong/Port Kembla suburbs of Wollongong.

The purpose of this research is to highlight the value of Aboriginal artwork produced by CUAC within the public spaces and organisations within which it is situated. As well, the study has documented their artwork, the stories they tell and how the artworks came about. The study examines the experiences of those who have collaborated during the production of the artworks and those who have commissioned the artworks. The research project is particularly interested in exploring participatory art making as a tool for engagement and education, and its potential to break down barriers within the community.

The study is the result of a partnership between students studying the Diploma of Community Services at Shellharbour TAFE and CUAC. The student team are both insider and outsider researchers. They have participated in workshops run by CUAC and so have experience of their art practice and have interviewed a range of people who have collaborated with the artists, participated in workshops or commissioned works of art. The study uncovers some interesting findings about the value and meaning people attribute to the artworks themselves and the experience of collaboration and participation in their production.

About the Coomaditchie Artists

The artists from the Coomaditchie Co-operative are one of the premier Aboriginal artists in the Illawarra region. Their art reflects the colours and stories of their cultural heritage as coastal people. They have completed many outdoor artworks across the Illawarra Region, and have held a number of successful exhibitions.

Their unique approach to the development and practice of art includes many community art cultural development projects, designed to build relationships between people in those participating communities. They have a particular focus on working with vulnerable and excluded people and have for example run projects with people with intellectual disabilities, mental illnesses, drug and alcohol issues, people from local culturally and linguistically diverse communities and people living in severely disadvantaged conditions in the

Warrawong/ Port Kembla areas.

What we found

Through conducting the study, students have gained knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal art and the impacts it has on public life, public spaces, relationships and understanding between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples. The research identifies a range of themes, and these are discussed in the findings section.

Collaborative art processes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can provide a tool to build relationships and bridge gaps. We have also found art can be an effective tool for engaging people in conversation. The artists are successful in teaching people to tell their stories through the language of colour and symbols. People participating in the art-making are able to create something they are proud to display in public which builds pride and belonging in their local area.

The following section outlines the research methodology we used for the study, including the key data gathering tools and research limitations.

Research methodology

Overview

Our research involves the collection of qualitative data from the CUAC artists, collaborators, participants and people who commissioned the artworks. We were interested in gathering their stories and experiences of doing the artwork; the impacts of this experience on the people who participate and collaborate with the artists; and the contribution the artworks make to the public spaces and communities in which they are placed. The methodology provides rich and validated data which can assist to better understand the value and impacts of the art-making practices of CUAC.

Data gathering methods

As part of our research process, we utilised multiple methods for gathering the required qualitative data.

- First we updated the existing inventory of artworks created by Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation. This was done by consulting the artists and comparing information they gave us to the existing inventory. With their guidance we made a selection of the artworks to investigate further.
- Then we completed semi structured interviews with collaborating artists, people who commissioned the art and participants involved in the production of the artworks.
- We investigated the value and meaning of public art through background reading and researching websites in the areas of Aboriginal Art, reconciliation, public art, community art and collaborative art for comparison with the results of the qualitative data from the interviews, questions and observations.
- We completed observations of the artists during the art making process with groups at Coomaditchie.
- We collected reflective accounts from the research team and other student groups after their participation in art-making workshops with CUAC.
- We also collected photos of the artworks completed by CUAC.

Semi Structured Interviews

The research team prepared a list of semi structured questions to gather qualitative in-depth information. Following the recommendations of Minichiello et al. (1995; 2008), semi structured interviews were adopted as they offered a good fit to Participatory Action Research with emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness. Semi structured interviews provide participants with the opportunity to speak freely of their experiences whilst the interviewer actively listens. Individual interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with the consent of the research participants.

During the process 33 individual interviews were conducted with the artists, collaborators, participants and people who commissioned the art. Interviews were on average 30 mins in duration.

Observations and reflective data

We also collected the written reflections of the research team based on our experiences as participants in art making workshops with CUAC in 2011, and other student groups similarly engaged. We also gathered observational data of the artists' art practices by attending a number of sessions during a project held at the Coomaditchie hall.

Quality and validity in the research

In this research project we used various methods to ensure the validity, integrity and reliability of the field work data. We used information sheets and consent forms to ensure the participants understood the process. All information is treated as confidential and to protect anonymity all data has been de-identified. Only the research team has access to the raw data. All written data has been kept in its original form. Interviews and interpretive focus groups were digitally transcribed verbatim. These data management and recording processes enhance the dependability of the research and enable others within the research team to review the findings.

Limitations of the research

Due to the time that had lapsed from when some of the artworks were completed we were unable to locate many people who participated in the process of making the artwork. For the same reason, it was also difficult to locate some of the people who had initiated the commissioned works and been in a position to comment on the differences their presence may have made to the spaces they currently occupy. We had hoped to conduct surveys to gauge responses from the public about the artwork, but this was unable to be achieved in the timeframe available. The relatively small size of the study is another factor in limiting the claims that it can make when attempting to gauge impact in the public arena.

Ethical Considerations

We have been mindful of the history of power imbalances between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians and therefore have endeavoured to ensure the research is conducted in a way, which does not offend or make Aboriginal people feel powerless. Our approach therefore has been to adopt an action research approach, which values the participation of Aboriginal people alongside the researchers, drawing on their 'expert' knowledge and avoiding an outsider "as the expert" research stance.

We ensured that all potential interviewees were given very clear explanations of what the project is about and how their views would be used in the research, maintaining anonymity. We obtained permission to record interviews.

All participants completed and signed a consent form and were asked if they would like a copy of the report. The participants were also informed about the complaints procedure should they have any concerns about the way the interview was conducted.

Data analysis

We analysed the data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research team read the data set individually. We read looking for themes and metaphors and we recorded these findings in notebooks. The research team then came together and compared readings of the data and agreed on a set of themes and coding protocol (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). We then returned to the data and coded the transcripts.

Interpretive Focus Group

After the interviews and observations were complete, an interpretive focus group was conducted between the artists from CUAC and the TAFE research team to discuss research findings.

This meeting assisted us in identifying and clarifying the themes uncovered by the research and allowed us to broaden and deepen our analysis and assist in the direction of the final report. This meeting also identified any areas of the research that needed to be strengthened.

Literature Review

In this section we review the literature on public art and Indigenous public art- making. We also explore literature on community art and participatory based art practice and finally we consider what the literature tells us about the contributions of art-making processes to addressing issues of health and well being, reconciliation and social change.

Contributions and impacts of public art

Public art is a broad church and can cover many art forms. The literature defines public art in a range of ways. Some of these forms include free standing structures and sculptures; art on a surface like murals and walls; art integrated into the design of a place, industrial art with an operational function such as seating or paving; artwork designed to recognise history or culture, commemorate a person or past event such as a memorial; interactive artwork that responds to public or environmental issues and multimedia displayed as digital imager, film, video, photography or projection art. Public art can also be of a temporary nature, such as a seasonal program or using materials that are intended to last for a short time. It can also include performance art, music, dance or exhibition; cultural artworks created by Indigenous artists and community art created with the involvement of community members or groups.

Hall (2003) describes public art as a dynamic endeavour that attempts to contribute to the life of a place and the people who live there:

Public art is increasingly reinventing itself as a dominant aspect of urban landscapes. It promotes aesthetic surroundings and contributes to the lives of people and places with symbolic meanings...when defining public art we look at the actual impact of its presence on the day to day living of each community. It can be measured by ways of promoting cultural identity, social networks and gives a feeling of connectedness between communities which encourages conversation and spaces that are pleasant to inhabit (Hall 2003: 175).

A reading of the literature suggests the meaning of public art and its value is difficult to define and measure. While the value of public art is difficult to measure quantitatively there is evidence from qualitative based research suggesting that public art has value, making a significant contribution to community life and public spaces.

Many authors agree that one of the impacts of public art is that it gives people an association to place. Decker (2011) discusses ways in which people develop a relationship with public art allowing viewers to re-think and re-invent

themselves and their surroundings. Works of public art can embody the character and identity of the community.

Another contribution identified by Post (2011) is that public art reinforces memory, history and culture. Public art can both educate the community and commemorate past stories by depicting events and history through a piece of art. Public art presents the views of the artists to a broad audience, presumably a whole community, by doing this:

Art becomes a forum for discourse over essential cultural activities and what they represent (Post 2011:45)

Community engagement is another important contribution discussed in the literature. Beer (2010) suggests artwork designed for public places involves local residents meeting together and forming temporary associations that did not exist prior to the project. Beer (2010) examined how the Richgate Art project in British Columbia was constructed in collaboration and consultation with this community. This project recognised and acknowledged that the community could contribute to lasting and positive change in an urban environment. Community engagement with the city's residents and officials creates a sense of belonging and opens up lines of communication.

The role of public art as a vehicle of communication is well examined in the literature. It can be used as a tool by communities to promote dialogue and contribute to the definition and character of a place. Richardson (2010) claims public art encourages social interaction and collaboration. Art is used as the basis for conversation within the group, encouraging discussions about their social environment and promoting understanding about their world and themselves.

The literature also discusses the role public art can play in contributing to social change. Public art can bridge public life and personal histories and in the process transform negative community attitudes about race and other specific groups in the community such as people with mental health issues and people with disabilities. Hall (2001) citing Hall and Robertson claim art projects have the potential to include the most vulnerable people in communities:

Art can be a stimulus for alienated people and can serve as the first step in the ladder towards their full potential in society (Hall 2003:176).

On a broader scale art contributes to the local economy, it can bring tourists and contribute to the growth and attractiveness of an area. When public art is commissioned/ contracted it generates employment making a financial

injection into the community. While commissioned art work provides employment for the artists, evaluations of public art projects suggests the long-term development of creative economies can bring about substantial economic outputs and employment (Beer 2010; Gray & Talve 2009; Malone 2007).

An evaluation of public art in Queensland identified that public art generated 476 contracts over a period of eighteen months. However contracts are in the main short term, the fees can often be lower than expected, and some artists may be contributing to plans only and not the finished product. This study demonstrated the potential flow on effect of public art projects in generating diverse employment outcomes, in this case for artists, fabricators, installers, curators and project managers (Gray & Talve 2009).

Another key area explored in the literature and directly related to our study is the contributions participatory public art practice can make to enhancing the social connections and democracy of local communities. This is now discussed.

Community art/cultural development and participatory public art processes

Another dimension of public art practice identified in the literature is that of participatory or community art practice. Although a consensus on the definition of community art is difficult to find in the literature, this type of public art is known to be a shared form of art that allows participants to “feel one with others in a meaningful, rich, productive way” (Fromm 1955, cited by Lowe 2000:360). It is a joint project, which seeks to involve community members, especially the vulnerable, disenfranchised, and those without voice (Bertram 2008). It is experiential and inclusive. With community art, professional artists work with others in grassroots settings to create art in the public interest (Lowe 2001). It developed out of the activism of the 1960s and was intended to popularize art, returning it to the people. It also transforms communities from being atomistic to communitarian (Lowe 2000; 2001).

Community art projects use a sense of fun and enjoyment to stimulate creative interests and encourage participants to challenge themselves (Ruane 2007; Lowe 2001). In using “fun”, they are often able to attract a high level of effective engagement.

Fun in my estimation is the most underrated word in the English language. To have fun, you have to relax, you have to open up, you have to take a risk, you have to expose yourself and know who you really are, so those are all very deep, involved things.....if an experience can be designed or if you're fortunate enough to have

an experience with your neighbours in community work that's fun, then it really is very positive, your memories of it positive, and the (art) as a symbol becomes very positive (Lowe 2001:457).

Participatory art projects are used to give the unheard a voice, an opportunity to express the concerns of their community. For example, photovoice and video diaries are being used to express the concern of teenage pregnancy in an Aboriginal community (Fuery et. al. 2009), and a mural on a public wall is being used to express concerns about violence in a neighbourhood (Bertram 2008). Visual arts are traditionally within the realm of Aboriginal culture, so it is natural to use this form of art to engage Aboriginal people in expressing their concerns (Matthews 2009). It is important that the vulnerable, the disadvantaged and those who have the concern, are those who are allowed to express it in public art, using symbolism from their culture (Geiger Stephens 2006; Hadland and Stickley 2010; Chung and Ortiz 2011). In a particular study, the "pottery, weaving and Nahuatl song" from Latino culture were represented to encourage ownership of the project (Lowe 2000).

The literature suggests that often these participatory public art projects are carried out in areas of traditionally low-socio economic background where a gentrification process and a "pushing out" of undesirables is under way (Matthews 2009; Bertram 2008). Often the participants wish to educate others about the issues in their community, both to raise awareness to prevent harm and to plead for greater empathy and understanding from outside, and also to reclaim identity and space (Matthews 2009). The strengthening of the identity of these marginalised people is very important (Ruane 2007).

The contributions that participatory public art makes to community building are many. Participants grow in relationship with each other – neighbours and families strengthen their ties, and new friendships are formed (Lowe 2000; Lowe 2001; Ruane 2007; Hadland and Stickley 2010). Isolation and disconnection is reduced, resulting in a sense of belonging and community (Lowe 2000). Racial and age barriers are overcome, and new understandings and openness are developed which increases tolerance, even to things which may have previously been seen to be anti-social, for example graffiti (Lowe 2000; Scher 2007). At the end of the project it is common for participants to feel a sense of community (Hadland and Stickley 2010) because they have been engaged, heard and included (Ruane 2007).

Participants in the projects often have not done any art before and find the new skills they learn to be rewarding, which often leads to a "letting go" of old negative habits, for example drug taking (Lowe 2000). Participants' self-esteem is increased with a sense of achievement and involvement in

something worthwhile (Lowe 2000; Hadland and Stickley 2010; Chung and Ortiz 2011). Participants feel heard and valued (Lowe 2001).

The freedom for participants to express issues in a community art project encourages ownership of the community problems, which leads to social action, which can lead to change (Fuery 2009; Bertram 2008). These types of projects can support the voices of more marginalised people in the community, enabling a sense of agency, and resulting in the empowerment of people to do something in their community for themselves, and to advocate for change for others (Fuery 2009). This makes it harder for governments to ignore social issues, for example single mums fighting for their right to education and fighting against government cutbacks (Scher 2007; Bertram 2008).

This expressing of issues also gives people the opportunity to discuss things in a way that they may not be able to in counselling or a group session (Fuery 2009). This can invite others in the community into the discussion which increases awareness of the issues, resulting in an increase in empathy for the marginalised and helping to create a more unified and peaceful world (Kekou 2011; Scher 2007).

The literature strongly supports the relationship between community art / participatory art practice and community-building endeavours. This resonates with the findings from our small study as well, suggesting the creative art process can be a powerful tool for addressing social alienation and connecting people across the divides of language, culture and race. The next section explores what the literature reveals about the impacts of art-making and public art production for Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal art-making- capacity building through arts and reconciliation

A good deal of literature deals with the capacity of art-making within Aboriginal communities to contribute to the well-being and resilience of Aboriginal people. Building capacity in Aboriginal communities contributes to the community's sense of self and self-determination, which can lead to empowerment of Aboriginal people. Community art and cultural practice can be important ingredients for promoting community participation and empowerment. Research commissioned by the University of Technology (UTS) found that revitalisation, maintenance, education and respect are the foundation for self-determination, and that these can be the products of community cultural development activities. It found for instance that individuals upon seeing their artwork displayed, felt increased self-esteem, and a connection to their culture. The authors also found that community cultural development practices can lead to more cohesive and empowered

communities:

Community Cultural Development (CCD) practices are not a universal tool for empowerment or change, but this mostly structured and planned approach is very useful in engaging with people because it creates relationships built on positive aspects of people's lives, rather than on negative aspects such as crisis or the lack of opportunities and options (McEwen and Flowers 2004 :10).

Art projects are used to reach particular social outcomes, such as building social capital within communities. Facilitating community members' participation and including disenfranchised members of the community is often the deliberate intention of art making projects aimed at improving quality of life and reducing inequalities (Green et al 2008).

The literature also refers to the role of Aboriginal art-making as an act of reconciliation. Malone (2007) explains that the inclusion of Aboriginal narratives depicted through Aboriginal public artworks provides a point of contact for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in urban areas and can act as a bridge for creating mutual understanding. For Aboriginal people it allows them to see their culture reflected in a public space. For non Aboriginal people it can help create an understanding of Aboriginal cultural traditions. It can also help progress the healing process towards reconciliation. Malone also claims that:

artwork can contribute to the re-Aboriginalisation of place, and although not landrights in itself, can be a meaningful re-territorialisation (Malone 2007:159).

This 're-territorialisation' can forge the process of Aboriginal cultural renewal and contribute to the whole communities' sense of self by acknowledging prior occupation of Aboriginal cultures. Further by not being subjected to convoluted land rights and cultural heritage associations, public art offers a possibility for groups wanting to remake their mark on the land (Malone 2007).

The findings from our research project suggest that an increased understanding of Aboriginal culture and their issues is evident, for those who interacted with the CUAC artists through the process of making art, either in the public arena or within particular community settings. It demonstrates that public art has the potential to shape the way we see our surroundings and can be a means for Aboriginal people to make their mark on the urban landscape (Bicego 2011). The final section in our literature review explores the relationship between art making and healing.

Art making as therapy and healing

There is strong evidence to support the connection between art- making used as a therapeutic tool and the healing process. Art therapy supports the use of images to explore emotions, thoughts and memories. The literature presents compelling evidence that art, culture, and healing are linked (Archibald, 2010):

As the creative force passes through your inner world, it carries images and feelings that are uncompleted, unfinished, misunderstood, not experienced, or denied. By spontaneously painting, the healing happens, not because of what you do with the image or meaning but because of the powerful cleansing energy of creativity (Wallingford 2009:36).

Archibald (2010) discusses the important role traditional practices within Aboriginal communities, such as painting can play in redressing the impacts of trauma caused through the dispossession of land and culture. Archibald citing Wesley argues that:

Historic trauma is rooted in the long inventory of losses experienced by Aboriginal people under colonization from the loss of lands, resources, and political autonomy to the undermining of culture, traditions, languages, and spirituality. These losses are experienced across time and generations it is not surprising, then, to find that the restoration of language, culture, and spiritual traditions has a positive influence on mental health (Archibald, 2010:2).

She explores the ways that arts activities can facilitate symbolic communication, bringing more depth and cultural relevance to the healing process:

The recovery of tradition itself may be viewed as healing, both at individual and collective levels. Hence, efforts to restore language, religious and communal practices have been understood by contemporary Aboriginal peoples as fundamentally acts of healing. For most Aboriginal peoples, traditional subsistence activities (e.g. hunting) have been deeply integrated with religious and spiritual beliefs as well as with networks of family and community relationships (Archibald 2010:2).

The literature also suggests that participation in art making processes can assist many groups in the community to deal with issues of loss and trauma. Stock (2012) explores the ways that art therapy assists children to recover from the trauma of domestic violence and loss. Through engaging in art-making children can rebuild the parent child relationship, which can assist in reducing behavioural problems in traumatised children (Stock, 2012).

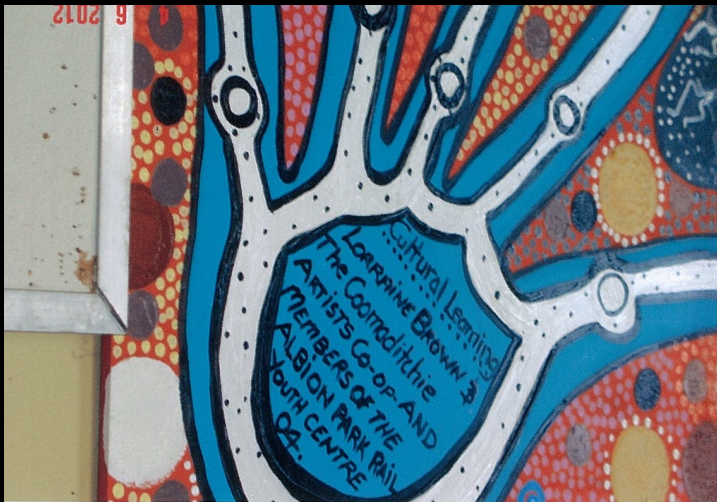
Singh (2001) discusses how Stronach-Buschel researched the use of art as a tool for therapy and its benefits. They concluded for example that art therapy gives children the opportunity to communicate feelings, thoughts and memories in a way they are unable to express in words, giving them a way to make sense of how they are feeling, and participate in their own recovery. Art therapy aids in the resolving of emotional conflict, releasing anxieties, promoting learning and communication skills, and enhancing personal growth.

The literature shows art-making can be a way of facilitating communication. Research from the American Counselling Association shows the colours people use when producing art works give an indication of the way they are feeling, allowing counsellors to assist them even when they are unable to show or communicate in more conventional ways:

People interact with colours in different ways, what is most important to psychological well-being is a balance of colour (Withrow 2004:3).

The literature also examines the benefits of art making for people with dementia who experience loss of speech, memory, and other cognitive functions. People with dementia can become isolated due to their condition, and art-making can be used as a tool for socialisation providing people the opportunity to tell the story of their life and share it with others (Stallings 2010). The literature shows that art as a tool for therapy is used successfully to treat a broad range of issues. The use of art in the healing process is found to be less confronting than traditional therapies, in that it can facilitate the expression of difficult emotions and enhance the recovery process (Stallings 2010; Withrow 2004).

In summary the literature re-enforces our findings that public art can contribute to not only the aesthetic value of our local environment but the quality of relationships and connections in our communities. In particular, participatory art making practices can be a powerful tool for community engagement and participation and can be used in communities to reduce isolation and disconnection. Public art has the power to generate awareness of history and culture and provide a means for disenfranchised groups and communities to re-make and 're-territorialise' the meaning of our shared spaces. The art making process is a tool for healing and reconciliation, allowing people to express their emotions and strengthen relationships.





Findings

In this section we discuss participants' perspectives and personal experiences of working with the artists from Coomaditchie. The findings are also based on the reflections of the artists Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas. We begin by discussing a common theme that emerges from our conversations with research participants, namely, the unique way of working that characterises Coomaditchie's art-making practices. Then we discuss the importance of art as a tool for engaging with young Aboriginal people, building pride in their Aboriginal culture and heritage, thereby improving their self-esteem and sense of identity. Next, we discuss how Aboriginal art in public places builds a sense of appreciation of Aboriginal history and cultural heritage. As a result Aboriginal people feel that they have been a part of shaping a public space, ensuring their culture, their stories and their communities are honoured. Then we discuss the capacity of art-making to build relationships across communities. Through art-making, relationships between the Coomaditchie community and the broader community are transformed. Their unique collaborative art practices break down racism and stereotypical attitudes about Aboriginal people. Following this we discuss the way in which Aboriginal artworks play a role in increasing Aboriginal access to services and organisations. Next we discuss the way in which art-making engages and builds relationships within communities, creating a sense of belonging among those who participate or engage with the art. Public art and the public art-making processes helps build pride in place, incorporating stories of local people in their local area and enhancing the public places where they are located. Finally we explore how Aboriginal art is used as therapy, enabling people to talk or express difficult experiences.

Coomaditchie's unique approach to art production

The Coomaditchie artists work with many different community groups, including different cultural groups, schools, community organisations and government agencies across the Illawarra. These relationships occur through commissioned public art pieces, collaborative projects with other local artists or workshops with community groups.

Our research shows that the artists at Coomaditchie have a unique approach to their art-making practices. Firstly, they work collaboratively with many different people, using storytelling to facilitate and structure the production of art and sharing Aboriginal symbols and meaning through the process. They are able to adapt their art practices to respond to the needs of particular groups they are working with and through these processes people develop confidence in their creative abilities and engage with their own culture and stories.

Collaboration is an important and unique feature of the way the artists at Coomaditchie work. Their art is based on working with other people to shape and influence the art work. An artist who has commissioned work with Lorraine and Narelle over a long period of time describes their skill this way:

Lorraine and Narelle are very generous, include their kids in design process or anyone around.....it's a real skill, because some artists can't collaborate, it's not in their make-up, it's a very special skill... Lorraine is really.....very open to idea of collaboration, it's a big thing for them. Collaboration is what they do, it's all intrinsic...they do it in their strides, it's a really important skill.

Lorraine also describes the process of collaboration that is such an important part of the way they work:

A different technique....we met [name] through someone yeah that's why [name] said 'let's go over the project together we said yeah ok ,he liked our artwork and we liked his tiles and that's where we collaborated and put the two together and came up with what we had...and it was a new art form in Wollongong, no one had used before...We looked at the colour scheme of the area we looked at the history of the area and we decided to get a full piece of the harbour [name] showed us an old picture of the harbour now that's something we had never seen before....we said 'well good [name] ...let's have that as the centre piece'.

Just as Lorraine and Narelle tell their Dreaming stories through their art work, community members are encouraged to tell their own stories through the art they develop with the Coomaditchie artists. The artists have a warm, welcoming and patient approach when working with people and are able to make a connection no matter what their age or ethnicity.

Lorraine and Narelle share their Aboriginal culture, symbols and meanings with people they work with. In opening up this line of conversation about Aboriginal symbols and culture, participants are very interested in hearing and learning from Lorraine and Narelle about the meaning and stories of each symbol and the relationship it has in their story telling. They encourage the participants to use the symbols in telling their own stories of their cultures in creating their art.

Lorraine describes her unique way of working with symbols to get people to tell their stories:

We want to know what they think ...they can tell their stories but they don't need a piece of paper to do it they can do it with a brush ...they can

*do it with symbols that's what we want people to understand. Aboriginal people never wrote the history of this country, white man did and through us we wrote it through art and through our stories we passed it down ...
...the art is really important to us because it tells our stories....See the symbols, see the story and have some understanding through it.*

Another unique feature of Coomaditchie's approach to art-making is their ability to adapt their art practices to working with a variety of people, adjusting their working styles to suit whoever they are working with to allow everyone to participate in the process. Here they describe how they adapted their practice when working with a group of young people with intellectual disabilities:

We learnt to set up a few different tables, because some don't like paint on their hands some of them liked reading. So what we did instead of just workshops we set up crayons, some textas with Aboriginal designed drawings. We had the panels going for the ones that wanted to paint. We had magazines for the ones that liked cutting things out of magazines.

The Coomaditchie artists speak about the importance of bright colours being used in their artworks as they were raised as East Coast people and colour is a significant part of their life and Dreaming stories.

Colour is very important. It is what we identify with it also brings out our nature as a family because we had a very good upbringing and our parents were very protective of us we did a lot of things together as a family. Our colours attract the kids and brings conversations....the colour. Bright colours...knocked the socks off them.

Furthermore the artists speak of the uniqueness of the bright colours in their art and how it is distinctive to the art of East Coast people:

They say that's not traditional Aboriginal colours and I say I ain't traditional. I am Aboriginal but I am not traditional. I am an East Coast person. I am not a desert person and I identify my colours with what I live by.

The CUAC artists recall one of the first times their artwork was displayed in the public arena at the Wollongong art gallery in 1993. The artists were commissioned to complete 18 panels for the World Indigenous People's Conference. The panels were hung on the outside wall. The artists reflect on the public's reaction on this memorable day:

We weren't central desert artists.....when we hung them it just stopped traffic because of the colour that came off the walls.....it was like it just

stopped traffic. Traffic stopped everywhere and then he come out..he got [Art Gallery Curator] a real shock and we sat out on that wall looking at them and we said. We told you. We knew it would knock the socks off them.

Lorraine and Narelle share their knowledge and skills, encouraging people to tell their stories and express their culture through art and develop more confidence in their own creative abilities through the process. Here Lorraine describes how she encourages children and facilitates their participation in the art process:

Don't rush your work, do your first coat cause a lot of people think that you draw all your design on at once and paint it bit by bit....doesn't go like that you gotta do your back ground colours first, let them dry, come back then you put some more on in stages like that. That's what we more or less had to tell them, they all had all their culture in their head already and what they had to do...it's just teaching them how to do it.

Commonly, ordinary community members who have no previous experience with painting are surprised at the skill that Lorraine and Narelle are able to draw from them. As one participant describes:

I didn't have much idea of what to do but Lorraine helped a lot with the ideas to start the artwork-it was collaboration. This gave me more confidence in my own abilities. Before today I had never painted before!

In the following section we see the valuable contribution the art-making process makes in teaching young Aboriginal people their cultural heritage and the importance of keeping this Aboriginal identity alive.

Teaching young Aboriginal people about their cultural heritage

A consistent theme in the research is that art is a way of linking children and young people to their Aboriginal culture and heritage. A key objective of Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation is to raise the self-esteem, pride, motivation and dignity of Aboriginal people through culturally appropriate programs that strengthen Aboriginal identity and culture and encourage self determination. Accordingly, the artists at Coomaditchie are committed to the cultural education of Aboriginal children and young people. They are committed to the belief that artwork is a way of teaching children and young people about their culture and heritage, and that passing it on is a way of keeping Aboriginal cultural heritage alive. Lorraine describes it this way:

We are making a statement but on a calmer side, but it's still murals as voice because it is getting people to learn and understand our culture and realise that the artwork is still very important and why we want to pass it

on to the kids and keep it going because we nearly lost it on the East Coast and we need to pick it up and keep it going otherwise our culture is gone if we don't keep those things going.

The artists at Coomaditchie work a lot with schools throughout the region. Here Lorraine describes how through art, local Aboriginal kids are able to connect to and understand their Aboriginal culture and heritage. Furthermore, children and young people are more likely to respond to art as it engages them with Dreaming stories in a more effective way than the written word:

Kids connect to art, they love to do art, they understand through art, the totem of the area shows if you don't look after nature it dies...Doing the Dreaming stories of the area it helps the kids to learn the Dreaming stories of this particular area.

Working with visuals, such as puppets, to tell the Dreaming stories, especially the Dreaming stories of this area engages children and young people and creates a space in which they are more open to understand and learn:

To act some of our Dreaming stories with kindergarten kids, with puppets we told the birth of the butterflies and then we did the artwork with them.

At one centre being built in an area with a large Aboriginal population, local Aboriginal artwork was commissioned to hang on the wall of the centre. Lorraine and Narelle were selected from a short list of local Aboriginal artists. The artwork they created had local Aboriginal significance which helps to teach Aboriginal children who come to the centre about the significance of this area for their culture. Here a worker from this centre discusses the impact of the artwork:

...particularly the [Aboriginal] children are asking about the artwork and what it means....it gives the kids more of an understanding of the land the clinic was built on, and what the land was all about before any houses were there.....that's been the biggest feedback from families is that it [the Centre] has more of a connection to land.

The impact that art has on Aboriginal children and young people who had not known previously that they were Aboriginal or did not identify themselves as being Aboriginal, is significant. One of the hosts of one of the artworks describes the impact of the cultural connection through art this way:

It had a huge impact, because as I said earlier, some of the young people involved didn't identify as being Aboriginal, but once the project finished, they identified as being Aboriginal. It was like a light bulb just flicked on, and I think they really enjoyed learning about the culture and its

meaning, and through doing something that they loved, which was art...learning what some of the symbols meant...it was just good by the end of it they actually said, 'I am Aboriginal'.

This experience has a significant impact on the kids who attend this after school program. It gives them the opportunity to learn about their culture and heritage through the art-making process. The young people did not identify as being Aboriginal and through the process of making art with Lorraine and Narelle they learn about all the symbols and their meanings, they learn about their culture and are actively engaged through something they love, art.

The artists themselves identify the importance of education for children and young people, not just education in general, but cultural education and connection that occurs through the art-making process:

You want to see what they know about their culture as well, and do they know, cause some of them don't even know what the serpent was, so we had to talk to them about that as well...It gives them a bit of proud, you know a bit of proudness in themselves, 'cause once its finished and they know it's their artwork and we see the kids reactions.... See the kids' faces, kids were ecstatic, proud of their work...learning bit by bit of their culture and skill in painting...understand the Aboriginal values to give to our kids.

These experiences reveal how artwork and the art-making processes educate and link children and young people to their culture and heritage while providing a sense of pride that comes with it. Having the Aboriginal artists there to teach the values, symbols and their meaning to children and young people participating in the art-making has an impact - the young people can feel pride in their Aboriginal identity and culture. In the following section we explore how Aboriginal artworks help build a sense of appreciation across the community that raises awareness of Aboriginal culture and history.

Affirming and building appreciation of Aboriginal culture across the community

Aboriginal art in public places builds a sense of appreciation of Aboriginal culture and heritage and makes a strong statement about the continuing presence of Aboriginal people in the communities in which the art is placed. Through art that is colourful and vibrant the community is attracted to engage with the art and through this engagement is exposed to Aboriginal history, culture and Dreaming stories. In addition Aboriginal people feel that they have been a part of shaping a public space and building awareness about their culture and communities.

Public art completed by the artists from Coomaditchie depicts the Dreaming

stories of East Coast Aboriginal people. In our research the artists describe the significance of their art in documenting Aboriginal culture, heritage and history:

What we want people to understand, Aboriginal people never wrote the history of this country white man did and through us we wrote it through art and through our stories. We passed it down through generations to generations. So when a lot of people say to me that didn't happen I say 'well your people documented it and we didn't' and ...the art is really important to us because it tells our stories ...Lot of people think we have died out on the East Coast especially since we got the first impact... we think we have captured it very well now, we have brought it back in our own way still telling the stories of the past that generations, that our old fellas told...Stories how things were created. Its coming back, its coming back in our art and dance and everything ... puts more truth to the stories ... Terra Nullius.. Land with no one... and that is why there is not black history, it wasn't written, see.

Here we see just how strongly the artists view the importance of their work. It tells their story, their history, is connected to an ancient past, to 'the old fellas', and is crucial to future generations.

Many of the public artworks completed by CUAC tell the story of place through the eyes and experiences of Aboriginal people. Lorraine describes one of her designs this way:

Each design tells a certain thing about that area ... So you know what I mean, you've got the bird life; it's an area of rivers and streams... We've put the thing up at the end because it was becoming a youth centre, ...We put the birds, the goannas...All the different cultures...The hand symbolising all the cultures that are going to be using that centre and we did the tree at the front because it's symbolizing the red flame tree, the Illawarra flame and the stack. Because it's a steelworks area, we're a steelworks town. The dolphins at the front with the ribbons symbolize the coastal area that we live in and the ribbon that's joined in the centre, we call that the Ribbon of Life. So we also put it between the dolphins' beaks so it's like a bow at the front.

Art can be a powerful tool for re-claiming and re-framing our collective history. The Wollongong Fountain (Gurungaty Water Place) for example, marks the location of a subterranean freshwater spring. It is named after the Gurungaty, an underground serpent which appears at fresh water springs and was one of the creators of the land:

It is a great story. About 100 years ago, the water underneath the Town Hall used to be a big horse trough that had natural water coming up. That's why that site is so important because the natural spring water underneath was there long before we were.

The Coomaditchie artists contribute to community spaces and in so doing contribute to building an understanding within the broader community about Aboriginal culture and history. For example, the artists express the importance of nature and their Dreaming stories in creating the artwork Blue Dreaming. This artwork is situated on the wall at LeVendi's café at Belmore Basin in Wollongong. It celebrates the culture of the coastal Aboriginal people in eastern Australia embedding the idea: my food, my culture, my Dreaming. The area around Belmore Basin is historically significant to the Aboriginal people of the region and now as then, is a meeting place for the whole community. Lorraine speaks about her intentions in creating this artwork that links people to our Aboriginal heritage and helps regain aspects of East Coast Aboriginal culture which may have been lost:

Dreaming stories of mermaids.....part of the flannel flower...native things are dying...built around the Dreaming stories from the area so it's like the creation of things...so we thought we'd put all the bits and pieces of our stories in there and we put in the shells because of our heritage of eastern coast people...certain bush foods, we did Dreaming stories, we did our heritage along here...some of the areas of our coast....really nice we are creating our stories, our creation stories.

By creating art that is colourful and vibrant the community is attracted to engage with the art. In addition Aboriginal people feel that they have been a part of shaping a public space and building awareness about their culture and communities. Lorraine speaks about the response from the community to the art completed at the Ribbonwood Centre:

And other kids were saying, oh we love walking to school now because we've got something different to look at... That's good because a lot of people that aren't Kooris told us that they're very proud of that artwork in town and it's lifted the town. And now it's a sort of special piece to them in town now because they feel like their town's got the only ones there because they've got 14 big circles that look out on them with all coloured tiles. But a lot of the people that we've come across have really said thank you because they're really proud of that, yeah.

Many people in this study who have collaborated with the Coomaditchie artists speak of their experience in working with and learning about Aboriginal culture and history. Knowledge of Aboriginal culture offers

participants a deeper awareness and understanding of community life. One participant in our research describes his experience working within the community in this way:

Coomaditchie has given me a much greater insight into a Koori community.... In terms of community building the Koori community is super important for economic, social and political reasons.

Another participant speaks of what she gained from the experience of working with Lorraine and Narelle:

Identifying Aboriginal imagery is a big thing here and overseas. People have familiarity with Aboriginal art and its sacredness. It is the oldest living culture. Knowing and having respect for the Aboriginal custodians of the land is a privilege. Aboriginal culture keeps you real. It keeps your own life in perspective and provides a broad perspective on things.

Our research clearly shows the impact Coomadtichie artists make to building an Aboriginal presence in the area. This is evident in the words of this participant:

The presence of Aboriginal Art creates a different layer of meaning for people. It creates more interest, excitement and challenges people. How boring the public domain would be without public art or visual images.

Thus, our research shows that people in general enjoy the presence of Aboriginal art in public spaces which adds to the cultural flavour of the Illawarra. The placement of Aboriginal art in public places reaffirms that Aboriginal culture and traditions are alive along this coastline and are very much a part of our community which will benefit future generations. In the next section we discuss the way in which art-making builds relationships across communities, breaking down barriers between people.

Transforming relationships through art

A strong theme to emerge from this study is the capacity of art-making to transform relationships across the community. This section explores the significance of relationship building from the perspective of the Coomaditchie artists and the Coomaditchie community as well as the impact of their art practices in breaking down racism and stereotypical views about Aboriginal people.

Art-making has a profound effect on members of the Coomaditchie community. It reduces isolation and enables the building of strong relationships between their community and the broader community, breaking down social barriers that this community has experienced. Here Lorraine

describes the impact on them when they initially began making and exploring art more than 20 years ago:

... art galleries, exhibitions, a lifestyle we had never known. We were mums and aunties... She took us on trips art galleries museums showed us our ancestors arts... our career went haywire ... from then on the CUAC artists cooperative started ...we weren't used to mixing with other people ... We started getting out of our community ... by doing that we had to answer questions that helped to get us where we are today ...We've been to places we have never ventured before... I never would have thought ...it made a big difference to us, opened a lot of doors for us, gotten into places we would never have gone... it opened a lot of doors into your world .. because we had stayed in ours .. she took us to the Paul Keating speech in Sydney .. we never normally go to these things.

Lorraine and Narelle talk about how art changes people's attitudes towards the Coomaditchie community. People have a greater understanding of the work they do. This understanding reduces isolation felt by the Coomaditchie community, breaks down social barriers and builds stronger connections with the broader community:

The art has brought a lot of different attitudes to our community, because this was a no go area, people wouldn't let their kids come here, we were called bad names, but since the artwork and the other things we do here, we have broken down barriers, you know people are really shocked, because they never knew what was going on here, so its broken down barriers and it's given a bit of ease to our community..... I think the art has given a better understanding of our people and culture, its given people an understanding that art is important and that it's important for us people to keep our culture alive.

As well as the impacts of art-making for the Coomaditchie community, this study highlights the impacts of their art practice in the broader community. Key themes to emerge from the study are the capacity of their art practice to connect people across cultural differences and break down some of the social barriers that exist through challenging prejudice and racial stereotypes.

The study shows that participating in the art-making process transforms people's impressions of the Aboriginal community, as reflected in this comment from a research participant:

I think to be part of another tradition, to be present with people who have a totally different way of seeing the world, that's a real privilege, so when I've been with Narelle and Lorraine, I've seen it as - I always felt greatly privileged to be with those two because they want to share, and secondly,

they're very good at sharing, as in their knowledge and their stories....and help grow our understanding, because you just can't - you can't buy that, and you can't get it in a book.

One of the significant things people in our study talk about is what they learn about Aboriginal culture through the public art created by the Coomaditchie artists and their participation in projects with CUAC. Aboriginal art tells a story, understanding the artwork leads to a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and can have a profound effect on people's perceptions and attitudes. One participant who works with migrants describes it this way:

Well, I guess it's - it raises awareness - you see, especially from people that we work with. As I said earlier, they come here; they don't know anything about Australia and about history, about culture. I guess when they see - they have a different perception of Australia when they see these - Aboriginal culture it's like, what is that?... They get more understanding. I guess - and if you see it in proud display, it gives you awareness. I think it really breaks down barriers to different cultures, yeah. It's accepting - being tolerant to difference, yeah. Different cultures.

The CUAC artists have worked in a number of schools, using the art-making process to educate children about Aboriginal culture and strengthening relationships between Coomaditchie and school communities. Here we see a teacher talking about the artists' practice, explaining how by talking about the artwork, the children are able to understand the story, and "learn another language" based on colour and symbols:

The artwork links in with our Wadi Wadi language and culture program.....the children were absolutely excited when they saw it and even more excited when the artists themselves came to explain the artwork and how it connected to the local community. It's a part of the children's community now and it's as if the Aboriginal community is sharing part of their history with us. So it's not just a work of art that's a pretty picture..... the fact that it has a deeper purpose, it's a teaching wall, the children say they know the colours, they can speak another language..... and that's special.

Coomaditchie artists also speak about the importance of their work with children, and the way in which it provides opportunities for educating and building relationships, thereby preventing barriers developing:

It brings a lot of contact with us, the kids are asking a lot of questions, it's good because you know it helps us break down barriers. The kids know it's Aboriginal art and they ask us about Aboriginal things that involve our art, so that's a really good thing for us and the kids, because like they say

if you catch the kids at that age, they get an understanding earlier and you know it helps break down barriers before they get created.

Our study finds that one of the ways art challenges racial stereotypes and discrimination is by encouraging different cultures to engage with each other. A participant in our study describes how an art workshop bringing together people from different cultures with the Aboriginal artists helps participants to understand each other's culture and assists in bringing the cultures together:

I had about 12 participants from people from different ... cultural backgrounds. So, mixed age, mixed men and women. Then we worked with two artists from Coomaditchie, Lorraine and Narelle. So, each mural there was about six participants in each. I just gave them a theme - what to work on. I said, think about you living - migrating to Australia and your experiences here. So, they came out - the one group came out about living in harmony, so, that's the theme of the mural. The other one is coming together, living together. So, they work on - so, it really brought together - well aside from bringing together people from different backgrounds it gave people a link or it - yeah - link with the Aboriginal communities as well. So, it broke down the barriers and stereotypes. People come here, mostly they don't know about Aboriginal culture and that's great for them to gain some understanding about the culture. Also like-wise for the Aboriginal community to gain understanding of the people that come here, that migrate here.

Having Lorraine and Narelle spend time working in the community, can help strengthen relationships and form stronger links across the wider community, especially when all cultures are encouraged to use the same space. As one community development worker describes:

It just made the link stronger, I think, and it was good that Lorraine and Narelle were able to come here, and then they've come here on a few other occasions after that, so that was good. So, it has - it strengthened those relationships, and it's good for the wider community. Even though we have a lot of Aboriginal people that live in Albion Park Rail, we still have a lot of racism and discrimination, and so to have Aboriginal people use the building is good, because other people see it and think, that's good, yes. You know, it's for everybody, it's not just for certain sections of the community.

Our study explores the experiences of some of the participants involved in creating art with the Coomaditchie artists. They describe how their own racial stereotypes about Aboriginal people are challenged and changed through participating in artwork projects. Here a participant describes the way in which working with Lorraine and Narelle strengthens her understanding and

builds a safe relationship for her to explore her perceptions and beliefs:

My personal experience of the time I shared working with Lorraine and Narelle was a total shame to myself. I have learned and now have the most respect for both Lorraine and Narelle, that I will take that wonderful experience with me throughout my life. Having lived in the same area most of my life, I had such a different opinion of the Aboriginal people and how they lived.....my time at Coomaditchie has been the most enjoyable and memorable. I have made new friends within the Aboriginal community which has come to a great surprise to myself, family and friends. I have a lot of respect for the Aboriginal culture and of their heritage.

Thus, through art-making workshops different cultures have the opportunity to work together. As a result cultural understanding is built through personal relationships. Another participant describes her experiences this way:

Today I talked with Lorraine and Narelle in quite an intimate way. Like we shared our story. I shared my feeling with them, my experience with them and to my surprise we got quite similar experience ... we got one thing in common about prejudice to me as a Muslim and them as Aboriginal people in Australia.

The opportunity to share experiences and stories through art-making leads to more positive views about the Coomaditchie community and the Aboriginal community in general. Once barriers are removed shared experiences develop friendships between the participants, leading the participants to become more accepting and tolerant of others. In the next section we discuss the way in which Aboriginal artwork facilitates access for Aboriginal people to services and organisations.

Art creating spaces that are Aboriginal friendly and facilitate access by connecting people to their cultural heritage

Aboriginal artworks are often commissioned because they connect Aboriginal people to culture and heritage. This results in Aboriginal people feeling welcome and more likely to access the space. We find that Aboriginal people feel welcome in a space that displays Aboriginal art. Here one host explains:

It was a new clinic not known to the [Aboriginal] community. We wanted to invite Aboriginal people to come and check out the service, so we needed to do some things to welcome local Aboriginal community members into the clinic, and one of the easiest things for us was to have some large [Aboriginal] artworks inside the clinic... It allows the place to feel culturally friendly... we dedicated such a big space for Aboriginal representation”.

And again in another centre:

As soon as they saw that artwork, they would know that they were welcome in the centre, because it is about having their culture in the centre. So that's why we did it...

This feeling of connection to culture is expressed by one host:

For local people – and I've seen the expression on their face when they come to the door and they look up, and they go, "Oh", and they come in.

She describes how having an Aboriginal artwork in the doorway of the building welcomes Aboriginal people into the building. Aboriginal people feel welcome and at ease because of the artwork.

This same method is used in other settings, for example a magistrate commissioned Aboriginal artwork to be placed in front of the Courthouse, in order to make this place which is usually so threatening for Aboriginal people, somehow more "friendly" and familiar.

(Name) thought it would be nice to have a piece of artwork on the pole, and to sort of break it down a little bit, so that when Aboriginal people came they could see the artwork on there...(name) wanted it like friendly.

The intention in having this artwork there is that it puts Aboriginal people at ease before they enter the building:

You've relaxed them before they gone in so that they could handle the situation, such a bad situation just a little bit better...it's a distraction to what they are there for...it does take a bit of that edge off...You can't change why they are going to court but it might ease it a bit.

The making and presence of Aboriginal art is used to "break the ice" in other emotionally challenging environments:

We hung a calico up on a wall. We allowed the women to paint if they wanted to. It was a delicate subject. Not everyone painted on this large canvas.

Here we see that this painting is used as the "welcoming in" activity for a group of Aboriginal women who have been traumatised. It is expected that using this activity would be less confronting than starting with talking, that it would "break the ice" and encourage participation.

When Aboriginal people feel welcome in a centre because their art is present, they are more likely to access that centre. Aboriginal people are also more likely to use these centres because of the Aboriginal colours and graphics on

the pamphlets. Here Lorraine describes the value of artwork in facilitating access for Aboriginal people:

... the art work is important in centres, colours are very important to Aboriginal people because it is their colours on the pamphlets, they will pick it up and read it, their designs on the pamphlets ...it's very hard to get them to go to hospital or to access doctors.

In addition, our study suggests that the making of Aboriginal art as part of a program is very useful for facilitating Aboriginal access to the program. One program facilitator speaks of how she reinvented a program to make it more culturally appropriate for Aboriginal women:

[The current model] was not the appropriate way, and they [Aboriginal women] probably wouldn't want to come in here.... an 8-week group for women became a three-day workshop, where we include practical things like artwork, and all those sorts of things in our plan. So that there was more yarnning and discussion around the issues....around cycles of abuse, and patterns, and things like that.

So in summing up, the presence of Aboriginal art in a space helps Aboriginal people to connect to their culture. It also helps bridge the cultural divide between mainstream and Aboriginal culture assisting Aboriginal people to feel welcome in and more likely to access mainstream services. In the next section we explore how art is used as a tool for community engagement and participation. We also explore how through the art-making process people are able to form new friendships, find new ways of expressing their own story and develop a sense of belonging to their community.

Art-making as a tool for community engagement and participation

This study explores the valuable contribution and impact art-making has on communities. The work of the Coomaditchie artists captures the spirit and atmosphere of the cultural and social surroundings and offers many opportunities for community engagement as well as inspiring creativity in others through participating in making art. The study shows that when people participate in art-making they are likely to form new friendships, find new ways of expressing their own story and develop a sense of belonging to a community.

Lorraine and Narelle use a variety of ways to engage participants in creating their artwork. In some cases engagement with the public happens quite by chance while the artists are working on a public art piece. One of the artists describes her experience connecting with the public:

When I was doing the hands one [Ribbonwood], a little disabled kid came

up to me. I think he was Chinese or Asian.....Yeah, a little Asian boy anyway.....The little Asian boy came up to me - and he was disabled - and goes, 'what does that yellow hand represent?' and I said "that represents all the different people in this area.' He goes,' it could be my hand' - because he was Chinese, a little Chinese lad - and I said 'yeah, that is represented for your people', and he was so happy. He ran away telling them that..My hand is over there...Yeah, yeah. Because it was a yellow hand, see.

Here we see how this piece of art opened up a line of conversation between the young boy and the artist. This in turn gave him a sense of connection with the artwork and a strong feeling that he belonged to one of the many different cultures within his community.

The artists describe another example of how members of the community engage with the artists and make a personal connection with the artwork:

You know it [Blue Dreaming] brought conversations too....'you know what it's funny you put lobsters on there.'....he said ... 'for years I've been diving out there....there's a place where there's always been lobsters,' he said..so, this is a non-Koori and he goes 'you know, it's really the appropriate paint[ing] for here', he said 'because I have been diving for years and I have always got the lobsters out of the bay just out there'....which is really good too.

Here we see how a community member is drawn into a conversation with the artists about the subject of the artwork, acknowledging the significance of where it is positioned and how it actively shapes the space. He makes a connection and notices similarities between his own culture and the Aboriginal artists' culture reflected in their artwork.

In many other projects, the artists work collaboratively with community members to create art using murals, mosaics and outdoor public art works. These projects engage people with each other, forge new friendships and relationships, build a sense of community and actively shape a space.

Our research suggests that although there are many different cultural identities and different ways of expressing these, art-making can facilitate friendships through working together on the art-making process. The projects can provide a way for people to come together across cultural differences and share their stories. One participant from the study reflects on the importance of interacting with different cultures and working together:

I think it's very interesting for them to see - they're coming here and they

see something different. Yeah and as I said as well with these people, them working together, it's important as well. So, they learn how to deal with people from different cultures. So, some of them had not met and friendships have developed during this process, so that was great. Yeah, so it's like teamwork as well. They had to work together instead of doing their individual art, yes - so they work as a group.

When working together as a group, participants describe how conversations are opened up, so that they feel confident to share their stories through the art work:

So, as I said, it's important as well with every project that you bring people together and friendship develops. It helps with a lot of things, a lot of issues, like socialisation - give them something to do and relaxing.

The power of art-making as a tool for community engagement is expressed by one of the participants who commissioned the artwork this way:

We operate from a real community development perspective, that's why it's easy to do, because that's what artwork is. Getting other people involved and bringing out their skills that they have that they don't know they have - that's community development, yes, and it's true community development. That's where working with Lorraine and Narelle - they're true community development workers..... They do it every day of their lives.

Clearly we see the Coomaditchie artists are particularly skilled at what they do in connecting and engaging with participants through their art practices.

The artists reflect on this process of community engagement, describing how they connect with the community, involving them in planning public art:

it was about involving the community and taking, you know, taking part in artworks and project stuff we were doing out there. So they could look after those things because they were apart of them as well. So um, they were trying to create better communities through art projects and you know and people have ownership over what was made and things like that...There was a big process of having a big day out there with the whole community...we actually got people working with us, to see what they wanted on the poles and what things they wanted to do in those areas... It was really nice talking to people and, you know other people there too as well about living there, and so we had a lot of contact with people there as well. So it was good...so there was, quite a lot of people involved with that ...Yeah different artists and we had like, the people from the community.

Our findings show that when art-making is used as a tool for community engagement it offers a great opportunity for community members to be more involved, giving them a sense of identity and belonging to their community. The next section discusses the way in which public art and art-making processes build pride in place.

Building pride in place through public art and public art processes

Public art and the public art-making process helps build pride in place. Firstly public art incorporates stories of local people in their local area which creates a sense of identity and belonging. Pride in public art and where it is placed often means there is no or minimal vandalism. Furthermore public spaces are enhanced by art and colour and so, public art can have a transformative effect.

In our research the CUAC artists speak about how they involve local people in the production of art, assisting them to tell their stories, placing those stories in the public space and in doing so, building a sense of pride in place. Art is used as a tool that gives people the ability to share their stories.

Our study shows that when the community is consulted and has the opportunity to participate in the refurbishment of their local area, they develop a better sense of their area, a sense of pride and place. Here we see a collaborator emphasise the importance of this:

It's really important that they have the ability to share their stories, and in sharing, because they can share their stories within their art work, and because their art pieces are part of a public framework, it means that lots of people can see their work and see where they're coming from, which is ...it's so important in terms of the social framework of spaces, of public spaces, that we see as many voices as possible help to shape those spaces, from people with migrant backgrounds, people with Aboriginal heritage, with children.

During our research we find that involving local people in the art-making process helps create a sense of belonging and a connection to their community, which then establishes a sense of pride and ownership. Here the artists discuss the refurbishment and regeneration of a local area. Through community consultation a bread oven was built. The artists describe the impact on the community:

It gave them something to do; it gave them their bit of pride in their community, of taking care of something that belongs to their community.

The process of building the bread oven helped to engage the older men of the community who had been used to working their whole lives. Participating in this art project gives them a sense of purpose, a sense of life after work. The

bread oven continues to be a local feature that is valued and looked after by members of the community. The artists describe it this way:

Especially when they finished work you know, they worked for a long time them old fellas and you know they are used to working, once they have been working all their lives they gotta have something to fill that hole, that void after they finished work, it became pride thing for them, and they did, they looked after it beautifully.

We also discover that by involving the community in the art creating process vandalism is greatly reduced because a sense of ownership and inclusiveness is felt by all in the community. As one of the artists says:

It gives them ownership, it gives the kids pride in their area because they did it and they don't want anyone else destroying it so they will keep an eye on it.

One of the themes to emerge from our data is that public art has the ability to transform a space. One of the participants describes it this way:

So it's a wall, and the idea of the wall is that's its bright and colourful and that its like an entrance statement, something that actually helps, when you see it, you sort of go, 'what's that?', and it intrigues you, and hopefully it makes you want to stop and slow down instead of driving by at a million miles an hour.

Public art changes a space into something people notice. A place now has a story or theme that otherwise may have been barren. Art enhances and brightens public spaces, bringing them alive. A local community development worker who commissioned artwork for her Centre talks about the response she gets from the community when they look at the beautiful colours in the work and the impact it has on her Centre:

They love it. They just love the artwork, and they always want to know who was involved, what does it mean. It just really brightens - it gives the centre a soul, ... it feels like it's a people place - yes, so it has a soul and it has a life, ... I love bright colours...Yes, and that was what was good with L and N, because they do like bright colours as well, so it's wonderful. .. We want people to come in and feel better about themselves, and that's what that artwork does...

Our research demonstrates the importance of involving community members in public art. It helps create a sense of belonging and inclusion. Using art as a tool allows people to have their voices heard in a creative way through collaborative art practices. This can help build a strong sense of pride and connection to a person's culture and each other. In the next section we discuss

how the making of art through workshops with Lorraine and Narelle is used as therapy to assist Aboriginal women to deal with traumatic experiences.

Art-making as therapy

Our research shows that collaborative art workshops run by the Coomaditchie artists are very therapeutic, enabling those who participate to talk about or express difficult experiences in ways that more conventional forms of therapy are less likely to facilitate. Participants in art workshops with the Coomaditchie artists engage with their feelings and emotions by being able to “talk sideways” with the artists and other participants. One of the artists describes the process this way:

When we paint we don't always look at each other to paint, we talk sideways. Some people can't talk straight on, some people talk sideways. When you talk sideways you seem to get more outta people.

The art practices used by Lorraine and Narelle enable people to talk about difficult experiences while painting. The participants can sit side by side with Lorraine and Narelle. This simple act gives people a sense of safety and comfort and with this comfort they are more able to talk about difficult issues in their lives. This process of doing art in supportive groups facilitated by Narelle and Lorraine enables people to express their stories through their painting and talk about their experiences with the other participants.

For example through their art workshops Lorraine and Narelle worked successfully with people affected by domestic violence. The environment that they create in their workshops at Coomaditchie is less formal, comfortable and creates a relaxed atmosphere that can assist with the healing process. One of the research participants describes what she observed this way:

So over the time the women working on the boards (artwork) they talked a lot about their experiences, like you would in any group, but they did it while they were painting and they developed the stories...I think it was pretty clear to me that the group of women would perhaps not be as comfortable coming in here and sitting in a learning environment where we might run a group.

The same person talks about how art facilitates discussions around important issues that the participants are dealing with:

A three-day workshop, where we include practical things like artwork sorts of things... So that there was more yarnning and discussion around the issues, which were very important and vital issues....around cycles of abuse, and patterns, and things like that. All sorts of stories come out. It was actually very - a very sensitive group, and I think better outcomes,

and lots of support for each other, and all those sort of things.

A reunion held in December 2003 for Aboriginal Women who spent time in the Parramatta Girls Training School, is another example of art-making as a tool for healing and understanding. During the 1950s and 1960s Aboriginal children were brought before the court by the Aboriginal Protection Board. As a result many Aboriginal children were removed from their parents' care and put into institutions like the Parramatta Girls Training school.

The reunion was held to help with the healing process by assisting the women to face old ghosts as a group. An art workshop facilitated by the CUAC artists provides participants with the opportunity to paint their stories and to use the art as a way to express their emotions, in a relaxed and comfortable environment. One of the women who participated in this reunion describes the impact of the art workshop this way:

Coming to the reunion really helped women – yarning, doing artwork, being with women who had similar experiences..... it gave them a lot of release...It was like we were back in that home again. We were giggling and comforting and telling my story by the art and what it means to me to put it down that way.

The workshop is a way for the participants to release some of emotions that have been locked away for so many years:

Well it released a lot of anger. It released a lot of sadness .It released a lot of happiness. The good times and the bad times and all that. And us as women of survival from a place like that.

This participant describes the role of the Coomaditchie artists this way:

Lorraine and Narelle played a huge part, they were like mentors for us really they were there mentors, sisters, girlfriends, everything all rolled into one mother, being there and understanding and counselling.

Through the work with the Coomaditchie artists, art is also used as a tool for reflection. It enables people to reflect on the good or not so good aspects of their lives and share this with others. Our research shows art painted with a theme, subject or issue that the person has experienced causes a flow on effect, and it helps others to open up to talking about their own experiences. Another participant from the study describes this flow on effect for the clients that visit her centre. The clients respond to the artwork hanging on the wall. It makes an impact on them because they can relate to the story behind the art:

We had an instance once where a mum and her daughter were looking at it [artwork] and the daughter was very moved by it, and it went on –it led on to a big discussion in the therapy room, with the mum and daughter

around how their lives were being impacted by violence, which may have not come up otherwise.

Clients use the artwork to talk through issues in the counselling session, using the symbols and stories painted in the artwork to express and make sense of their own situation.

The same worker describes other experiences where clients have looked at the artwork, connected to it and it has drawn out conversations:

....clients have gone by, and stopped and it's created conversations for them, with either their family, or their therapist, or whoever they are seeing.....It's a talking point and often frees people up, to almost project what they've come about, and look at that piece of art, and go that's had an impact on me

In conclusion, the unique practices of the Coomaditchie artists facilitate the use of art as therapy. This proves very beneficial for people who have difficulties talking about their experiences and helps bring out the conversations that need to happen to help with healing processes. For some people, art therapy is less confronting than traditional forms of therapy.

The findings of our research demonstrate how the Coomaditchie artists use a distinctive approach to their art production and collaborative work with communities, groups and other artists. They modify their art practices to meet the needs of different groups and thus facilitate participation in the creative process.

The Coomaditchie artists share their Aboriginal culture through symbols and stories and encourage people they work with to share their stories too. The artists use their art to connect children and young people to their Aboriginal heritage and culture which raises pride, self-esteem and self-confidence.

The public art that the Coomaditchie artists produce both reclaims and reasserts the strong presence of Aboriginal culture and heritage in this region. The study notes that their art has the potential to shape the way we see our surroundings and in doing so builds an appreciation in the community of Aboriginal culture and heritage.

Their art-making is a powerful tool for reaching out and building relationships across the community, breaking down barriers and transforming stereotypical attitudes about Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal artworks are contributing towards creating places that are welcoming and less threatening to Aboriginal people, improving the access of community centres and institutional environments to Aboriginal people.

Furthermore, the creation of art in public places is a conversation starter enabling real contact between the artists and passers-by. The process of making art is shown to be an effective tool for community engagement, bringing people together in a creative process, finding a common language and forging new and lasting relationships. Public art and public art-making processes also contribute to building a sense of pride in place , incorporating stories of local people, and developing a connection to place and a sense of belonging. Finally, the art-making process can assist people to tell their stories and redress the impacts of loss and trauma. The study shows the capacity of art-making to assist people to heal, bringing out conversations in a relaxed, less confronting way than conventional forms of therapy and providing opportunities for people to make sense of their situation.

Recommendations

- The CUAC artists take an approach to working with people in a creative process that has been demonstrated to achieve positive outcomes for individuals and groups. Involvement in creative community activities enhances the physical environment, sense of community ownership and creates safe community spaces that are welcoming and attractive. This work directly contributes to current social policy objectives to do with social inclusion and community strengthening and needs to be properly recognised and supported by the provision of sustainable funding arrangements at both State and Federal government levels.
- A significant part of the art-making projects facilitated by CUAC involve working with children. The capacity to work with children and connect them to their culture and heritage in partnership with schools and community groups is an important initiative that could be taken up in a more coordinated way by schools in the Illawarra region
- CUAC has been actively engaged in the production of public art projects in the Illawarra since 1993. The work of Coomaditchie over time, has made a substantial contribution to reconciliation in this region and this needs to be recognised and celebrated. Participatory based art projects that CUAC has led or been part of has been a powerful bridge builder in raising awareness of Aboriginal culture as a living culture and challenging racism and breaking down barriers.
- There needs to be recognition from policy makers and governments of the crucial role small groups like CUAC play in developing a sense of belonging, their role in building social connections, participation and the resultant positive impact on the health and wellbeing of those who participate. State and Federal agencies should commit recurrent resources to these groups, rather than only funding short-term, one-off projects.
- While small in scale, this study suggests that the public art produced by CUAC resonates with those who have commissioned the works and with the wider community. An ongoing commitment by local government to support Aboriginal artists is both an investment in the spaces and character of our urban areas and the local economy.
- In many cases the art-making practices and artworks produced by the Coomaditchie artists make a contribution to improving access for Aboriginal people and assisting them to participate in programs they had not previously. Government agencies along with community organisations need to recognise and support these initiatives and promote the collaborative partnerships these initiatives rely on.

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