

PACFA Conference 2019: Working with Trauma

Art therapy within an Indigenous Community: Navigating a path between Western and Indigenous ways of healing

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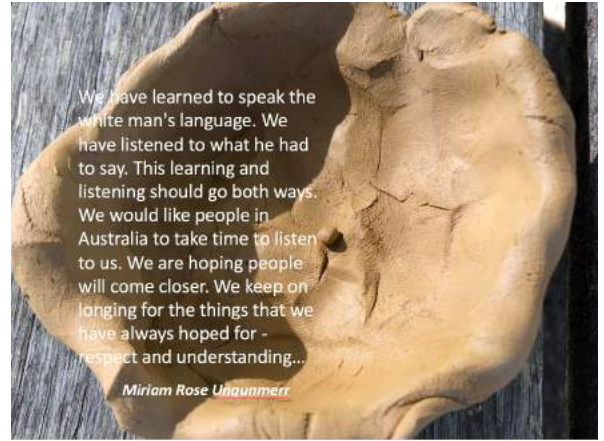
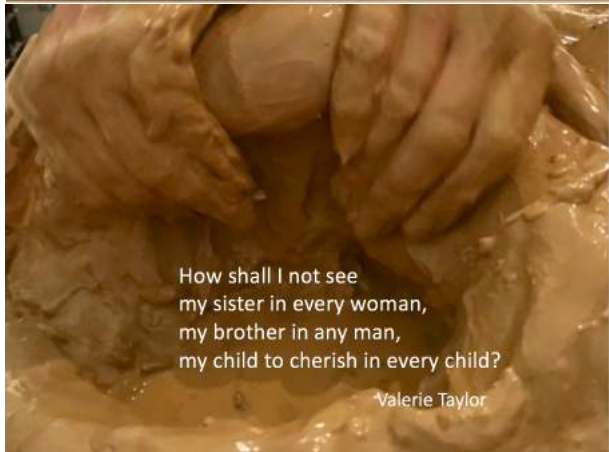
I acknowledge the traditional custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to Land, Waters and Community. I pay my respects to Elders, past, present, and emerging.

Abstract

This paper addresses therapeutic issues arising from my work as an art therapist at a rural Aboriginal Pre-school community to which I was introduced during my clinical placement as part of my training. Initially working with individual children I became aware of the strength of community wide experiences of inter-generational trauma and developed a community art project in response to this. As a visiting non-Aboriginal art therapist working in an Aboriginal community I undertook to develop what felt to be a way of working where art therapy could speak with ethical awareness to multicultural issues within a culture-based practice.

This paper explores the tension between working within a Western European psychodynamic model of healing and that of Indigenous cultural practices and explains the evolution of the art project in an attempt to bridge this gap ethically while offering a specific healing process in response to ongoing trauma. Concerns specific to the art therapy project arose from the tensions between myself as art therapist applying Western modalities of psychodynamic practices while addressing the needs of the individual within a community whose traditional and long serving methodologies of healing have been debilitated by colonising practices.

In an attempt to work with cultural difference and inherent disparities of agency and power, the project developed collaboratively with community Elders, engaging with Language and Dreamtime Story. Clay was chosen as a material appropriate to both Cultural and psychotherapeutic needs. Facilitating the co-creation of artwork between families and children became the vehicle for intuitively negotiating my way between my identities of artist, therapist and outsider with my own relationship with persecution and loss in a community that is both extensively connected yet suffers traumatic disruption and alienation. Therapeutic concepts underlying the project developed from thinking and feeling at the interface of the Aboriginal concept of deep listening called Dadirri and psychodynamic notions of a containing presence. Psychodynamically, the artmaking held a place for possible healing offered by the haptic qualities of shared clay work and the possibility of the re-igniting of imagination within specific cultural circumstances of trauma. The project generated participation of two hundred artmakers aged between two and 96. My experience is that within a frame of collaborative art making lies the potential to facilitate individual creativity that results in a tangible statement of self-identity for the children in connection to family and Community.



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