

Imprinted memories: An art-based inquiry

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Abstract

This paper presents an adaptation of a reflective research inquiry undertaken as part of my master's studies in therapeutic arts practice at The MIECAT Institute. It articulates an unfolding understanding through alternating cycles of amplifying and reduction, of both data and experience, and an emergent exploration inspired by communication with, and a listening to, the wisdom of the Earth body.

Informed by my own values and world views, ecopsychology, nature-based art therapy, and spiritual ecology, this paper is a multimodal, art-based inquiry exploring the personal experience of being in the world through my relationship to memories and my sense of place and belonging.

Keywords

Arts practice, eco-art therapy, ecopsychology, emergence, interpretivist epistemology, nature-based inquiry, phenomenological experience

Introduction

My most potent childhood memories are those of being immersed in the landscape: wide forever skies; the warm, pungent smell of kangaroo grass; paddocks of subtly undulating ground beneath my feet; and the sound of the air as it shimmered the canopies of gums and the windbreaks of melaleucas. I grew up in the city, but come school holidays, my mother would send my older brother and me away from home and from our ailing father to our grandmother's farm, where we would join our cousins and spend every daylight hour in this idyllic, natural landscape. I was smitten with this joy-filled place, full of my own cultural memories, away from the seriousness of home life. My other significant place to inhabit was in the intimacy of creating art.

Being with Mother Earth has always held a resonant sense of connection and belonging for me, so it felt meaningful to choose to inquire into the essence of the intersubjective relationship of the two significant parts of my lived experience – between me and the outer, animate world and the intersection with my inner, creative realm. I have explored how the emergence of artworks, not merely as artefacts, but as expressive, unique 'language', tells of my lived experience, grounded in my passion for the natural world. My inquiry sits alongside a dialectic tension; the push and pull between the creative process of art-making as a transmission of meaning, and that of the dominant codified paradigm of the written word, using my experience in the natural landscape as my companion.

Exploring the potency of this interplay between the landscape and my own art practice, by way of my chosen methodology of arts-based research, I seek to attend to this reciprocal

interchange as an integral part of a lived experience. At a time when the world is ecologically unravelling, when we are experiencing the desecration of land and water, the rapid extinction of species, and a disconnection to our place in the Earth's ecology, it feels vital to be in conscious relationship to the natural world: to rekindle an intimacy with humility, purpose, and care.



Figure 1. Melinda Jane, *Kalimna walking trail on Djaara Country*, 2021, digital photograph.

It is here that I pause to reflect on my own lived experience in relation to the ideas of eco-art therapy, nature-connected therapy and ecopsychology, and my research as an arts therapy student. We recognise ancient artforms, such as prehistoric cave painting and rock art, as evidence that people used art to articulate what was important to their lives, utilising available materials to express their connection and experience. Despite this, the idea of eco-art therapy is seen as a new, innovative aspect of exploring our lived experience. The roots of eco-art therapy reach back to the earliest human art-making, through which people were intimately connected to their environments. It is entwined with the historical use of art as ritual, narrative, interaction, and spiritual connection (Gablik, 1991). Eco-art therapy opens us to an expansion of our awareness and creative responses beyond centring on the individual, group, or specific culture to include larger ecological systems as the source of both suffering and restorative healing (Speert, 2016). I consider the notion of eco-art therapy and ecopsychology as a rekindling of the connections of our cultural practices and knowledge through a weaving of visual stories that includes all aspects of the animate world. As Roszak writes, “Other therapies seek to heal the alienation between person and person, person and family, person, and society. Ecopsychology seeks to heal the more fundamental alienation between the person and the natural environment” (Roszak et al., 1995, p.48). Louv (2005) conceived of the phrase ‘nature deficit disorder’ as he studied children isolated from experiences of interaction with nature, in a world where increased dependence on the

consumption of digital technology has become the way in which we communicate and experience the world. By creating art in relation to the whole animate planet, we reconsider the context of emotional and psychological health within an ecology beyond the individual, community, or even the human species.

Reflexive objectives

Arts-based research is a disruption to traditional research as it expands methodology rather than adopting the arts to form an adjunctive relationship. The form of my naturalistic and interpretive inquiry seeks to question the conventional paradigms of communication and understanding by looking at the alternative language of art-making, within the context of relationship with the ecology of the Earth. It is not that I am uninterested in the idea that language can coexist, support and potentially companion my artwork as a means to explain or give an audience access to art. My primary focus is, however, that art-making itself is a reflexive, embodied process of meaning making that can be language enough. I have chosen to focus on a phenomenological understanding rather than an explanation as an objective, thereby fostering subjective meaning-making of lived experience through interaction and connectedness to 'being-in-the-world' (Spinelli, 1997).

Through the forming of this inquiry, other questions have arisen for me: *What is our aesthetic response to the ecology of the Earth? How can we truly live a reciprocal existence with the landscape that we inhabit?* Kimmerer (2013) speaks of a mutual exchange in our relationship with Mother Earth: that we are inextricably connected to Her through the potentiality of reciprocal relationship. I will hold these questions in my inquiry while considering Merleau-Ponty's (1962) ideas of phenomenological perception as a reciprocal exchange between the living body and the animate world that surrounds it.

For me, as a multidisciplinary artist and art therapist, making artwork is a responsive experience to being in the world; it is part of who I am. What is revealed within this reflexive process can be emergent and unexpected, and profoundly significant to my lived experience. My creative process often begins with a single moment or an experience with nature that resonates with me – where I feel an emotive response, a bodily sensation that moves me, a moment of awe and phenomenological connection to the natural world as 'Other', as companion. The artwork becomes a woven thread of this lived experience and may include imagery and motifs suggestive of the phenomenon that sparked the bodily response. Within this articulation of art-making comes a deepening of connection to my world view and to my relational sense of place with the Earth body. This is an emergent, reflexive process and can take many iterations to come to a resolution or congruency.

I am reminded of the theory of Roszak (1995) relating to the dichotomy of 'in-here' and 'out-there': the conceptual distance that has been created between ourselves and non-human nature, and how my creative process is a movement towards a dynamic centring of my interrelatedness with the natural world, acknowledging that we are 'of' the world, not separate from it. Deep ecology (Devall & Sessions, 2001) and spiritual ecology (Vaughan-Lee, 2016) seek to redefine the Western cultural paradigm of the separateness and objectification of non-human life forms, to reconnect us with the animacy of the Earth, to

understand and respect the sentience of all beings, and to honour ancient, wise ways of knowing as opportunities for reciprocity and kinship. Through art-making and the creative connections of sensory language, we can communicate with the natural world around us, recognising that the wordless intelligence is also united with our own inner landscape.

Ways of being

My methodology is defined by an interpretivist epistemology, where I am part of the research and the interpreter of the multimodal data. This is a living inquiry where I consider my ecocentric, nature-centred world view – that humans are not a superior species, and that plants and animals are all sentient, evolutionary partners – in relation to my belief that art-making connects us to our true self and to the Earth body, and is language enough in expressing embodied experience. In this art-based inquiry, the art-making exists both as companion to my inquiry and part of my research methodology. This is my present place of knowing, my reference point for emergent process. The artistic process is a visual and expressive harnessing of nascent, emotional responses and a way to come to new knowing, and in this sense is research data.

I am aware of a dissonance when forming this written interpretation of a living inquiry: both the paradox of using dominant language to describe what is unspoken and the objectification of intellectualisation through the written word, which can keep us at a disconnect with the natural world, and potentially undermine the potency of experience. To remain present and reflexive in my inquiry, I bracket this discord into the process as a focused reminder to not be too weighed down by expected ways of being, and instead be open to the phenomenological wisdom that emerges.

My creative process is characteristically cyclical: for many years, I have had a daily practice of walking amongst the trees on Djaara Country, observing, listening, and experiencing place as a sensory and collaborative interaction, returning to my studio resonant with this intersubjective experience. The evolution of the art-making is an emergent response; the incipient art-making is a creative inner unfolding and I return to nature seeing more because of what has come forth in the making. I walk, observe, and experience, and so the reflexive cycle of new iterations continues. The holding of bodily awareness is both a felt sense (Gendlin, 1997) and a collection of mental aesthetic snapshots that become visual and sensory stimuli for my art-making process: the verdant beauty of a mossy boulder; the cool, fresh air tingling in my nostrils; the sound of white-winged choughs echoing, as they fly overhead; the graphic, meandering scarifications, caused by termite feasting, on a giant fallen eucalypt. This is an emergent knowing born from the intersubjective space between me, the Earth body, and the artefacts; meanings are arrived at through companionship and somatic and sensory dialoguing, without words. Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a Daly River woman of the Ngangikurungkurr tribe, writes of the reflective practice of ‘Dadirri’ (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022); an inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. I honour ‘Dadirri’ as a way of being present in this space of co-inquiry; the materials are supportive and bear witness to my phenomenological experience with the Earth as a living being. There is no need for spoken language.



Figure 2. Melinda Jane, *Kalimna Park, Dja Dja Wurrung/Djaara Country*, 2021, digital photograph.

Creative synthesis: A multimodal language

As a visual artist, I resonate with the words of Gunaratnam (2007), who talks about the origins of personal artistic representations coming from an “emotional, sensual and corporeal opening out to others that involves the suspension of intellect” (2007, p.271). I find my own artistic representations to be an attuning to sensory perception, a phenomenological investigation that connects me to the natural world and to my own personal ecology and sense of place. I don’t seek to make interpretations or judgements through the visual imagery I create, but rather allow it to be a descriptive mechanism of how I dialogue with the world. In the studio, I sit with a dialectic tension that feels like an access point to inquiry.

I seek to inquire into this idea of ‘tension’, both literal and metaphoric, and am drawn to enter an artistic dialogue as inquiry, through multimodal exploration (see Figure 3): a weaving of layered form and visceral tension using a gathering of familiar eucalypt leaves and cockatoo feathers from my own garden. However, this response seems disconnected somehow from the intention of my inquiry. I feel I am only an observer: interpreting, judging, and evaluating, rather than relationally engaging. I feel stuck, as if I am taking on the rigidity of the taut fabric.



Figure 3. Melinda Jane, *Dialectic tension*, 2021, muslin, eucalyptus leaves, cotton thread, embroidery hoop, 200mm dia.

I return to the idea and the felt sense of art connecting me to my true self and to the landscape, reflecting a symbiosis with the Earth, and am immediately taken to the wisdom of Indigenous ways of being on Country and the language of speaking through, and with, the land. I decide to take my art-making materials into the forest and be open to what may emerge.

This arts-based research is created on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, the unceded land of the Djaara people of the Kulin Nation. The land here is rich with beauty and wisdom, from beneath the forest floor to the canopies of the tallest trees, and above. From the flowing of Gunbungwerro, also known as the Loddon River, to the granite outcrops of the mountain of this land, Leanganuk (Mt Alexander), I am privileged to call this place home and honour the First Nations people and the interconnected systems of life that depend on and interact with this land: the plants, the animals, the elements, and the people, as well as the stories of place. I acknowledge that I am both a guest on this land and a part of these surroundings. Ecologist Abram (1996) writes that when we enter a forest, we both see and are seen by the trees, plants, and animals around us. He describes this ancestral experience with the animate Earth as the “age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape” (1996, p.ix). It is here on this land that a sensory ecopoiesis begins.

The geography of the land here is formed in part by weather patterns, erosion, drought, fire, and the severe effects of the destruction of settler mining. For the Djaara people, ‘Djandak’, meaning Country, is more than just a landscape, it is more than what is visible. It is a living entity that holds the stories of creation and histories that cannot be erased. There is a relational attending to the Earth body as I feel my legs resting on the ground and hear the sounds of the forest breathing around me and through me. There is a presence to this moment and all its sensory offerings, as well as an awareness of spirit that is resonant in this land.

I walk with purpose until I get to the path at the edge of the forest. It’s like entering a holy cathedral. The vast beams of branches arch overhead; the light through the canopy glints yellow and red, like stained glass; the reverential quiet is crisp and pure. The sense that

kangaroos and wallabies have trod these tracks makes me feel like their kin. I can feel the rough terrain even through the thick soles of my hiking shoes. It's reassuring in its unevenness. I breathe deeply, as if to take some of the bush into my lungs, as I move steadily in this familiar space. It's mid-October, so the air is full of the olfactory combinations of acacia and eucalypts. There has been much rain and the understorey shows its thanks with an abundance of chocolate lilies, yam daisies, and everlastings. I brush past the still-wet wattles; the cascade of water jewels sprinkles like confetti at my feet. Trickle of rain have become rivulets of water, making their mark as they pass through and across the land, creating waterholes for insects, small marsupials and a multitude of birds.

Along the familiar rocky tracks through ironbark forest, I gather fallen leaves, curling bark, drying flowerheads, and clusters of seedpods. Then, as I kneel, pressing my physical body into the forest carpet of eucalypt leaves (red box, stringy bark, and long-leaf box), I lay my findings gently between soft folds of cotton-rag paper and calico, brought here from my studio as familiar elements of my creative etymology. I slip the collection between the smooth paper concertinas like sacred treasure, tying them around with lengths of cotton twine.

An intimacy of my experience is mirrored in the natural elements' biology, embossed into the supple paper surface. There is such a ritual attention to this process and in the relational space between me and the familiar. There is a quality in the felt sensing of experience that feels sacred: a way of knowing and communicating without words that creates a greater intimacy between me and the bush forest. I am drawn to record our silent conversations in a composition that invites the landscape to do the 'talking'.



Figures 4 and 5. Melinda Jane, *Findings in wrapped-up parcels*, 2021, calico fabric, eucalyptus leaves, Australian native grasses and flowers, cotton twine.

I carry the wrapped parcels (Figures 4 and 5) to my studio. To invite these pressed findings to have a voice, I am drawn to imbue them with the living elements that connect me to the more-than-human world: fire, water, air, earth, light, dark and spirit (Figures 6–8). As Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest, the artwork within the inquiry becomes the research, and I am aware of the fluidity of this process and the importance of openness and being present to the 'un-knowing' (Spinelli, 1997) as an aspect of intersubjectivity and valuing of other.



Figures 6–8. Melinda Jane, *Fire, Water, Air, Earth, Light, Dark, Spirit*, 2021, iteration of inquiry, calico fabric, cotton rag paper, eucalyptus leaves and seedpods, Australian native grasses, acacia leaves and flowers, cotton twine, rusty cast-iron pot.

My methodology is emergent and reflexive; I allow the materials to be companions to inquiry, allowing a decentring of myself and a creation of ‘we’ as a single fabric in this intimacy with Mother Earth. I “embark on a process of discovery, exploring its sensory properties and its capacity to change and transform under our gaze” (Tufnell & Crickmay, 2015, p.74). This aspect of the physical process of inquiry begins with the lighting of fire. Igniting the flame with air and spirit, the cast-iron pot of water heats over the warm glow. The wrapped paper and cloth parcels gently slip beneath the bubbling water surface; colours emerging from within the paper form a rising hue, deep and resonant of the land. I hold a place of gentle witnessing to this process of transformation and articulation through action, intentionality, and purpose.

I eventually allow the fire to dwindle, and I remove the offerings from the now cooling water. They feel warm and alive, the corners softened by the spirit of the water and fire. As I unravel the twine, the folds and corrugations suggest records of lived experience: the marks

of presence, and traces of connection, capturing the light and life of these exquisite animate forms. The modest marks are breathtaking in their beauty; as a record of narration, an archive of belonging, they hold the wisdom in the space between the folds as a memory of place and connection. I will return the leaves and flowers to the Earth. Their spirit, the imprint on the soft paper, offers a legacy through the reciprocal, intermingling embossing, transforming the immaculate surface to a rich artefact of experience. By a decentring of ego and my Eurocentric dominant language, there is a kinship and tenderness, an intimacy with Mother Earth to be ‘we’ as part of a single fabric. As Atkins and Snyder (2018) describe, nature-based expressive arts therapy is an engagement in “a sacred practice that helps us cultivate our own sanity and re-member ourselves as cells in the body of the Earth” (p.118). Moon (2008) speaks of the importance of cultivating an artist identity and sensibilities as an art therapist that “involves the intentional, disciplined development of an artist’s eyes, ears, hands, and hearts so that this identity permeates and informs everything we do as art therapists” (p.48). Moon continues by saying we must use all our senses “to be present with, focused on, and receptive to what is right in our midst... [while being] attentive to what is within us, to our inner murmurings, the intuitive responses, the visceral reactions to that which we encounter” (p.49).

The following images (Figures 9–14) represent iterations of process as well as the final creative synthesis (Figure 15): multimodal representations of telling the story through experiential understanding of my inquiry. They are clarification of the intersubjective space that speaks to me of relationality, openness, curiosity, uncertainty, reciprocity, interconnection, presence, beauty in stillness, and the cyclic nature of being.



Figures 9 and 10. Melinda Jane, *Iterations of inquiry*, 2021, calico fabric, cotton-rag paper, eucalyptus leaves and seedpods, Australian native grasses, acacia leaves and flowers, cotton twine.



Figures 11 and 12. Melinda Jane, *Iterations of inquiry*, 2021, calico fabric, cotton-rag paper, eucalyptus leaves and seedpods, Australian native grasses, acacia leaves and flowers, cotton twine.



Figures 13 and 14. Melinda Jane, *Iterations of inquiry*, 2021, calico fabric, cotton-rag paper, eucalyptus leaves and seedpods, Australian native grasses, acacia leaves and flowers, cotton twine.

Gathering

There is an intersubjective, sensual dance between me and the creative synthesis. The layers of inquiry suggest process but also become iterations of sensory perception, lived experience, meaning making and the movement of time. It is as if the layers are revealing aspects of self, the continuous interconnections within the animate world, and transmissions of understanding, rather than camouflaging or hiding something in the folds. They reveal past histories, create current meanings, and tell stories without words. Dialoguing with literature throughout my research inquiry has been valuable as a method of co-constructing meaning, and I contemplate the words of Kalamanzowicz (2013): “I represent what I perceive, but it can never be the whole; it can only be my whole at a particular moment” (p.42). I am distilling the ‘conversations’ between me and my companion, the animate world, while staying with the openness to the unknown. My emergent, creative process has allowed me to explore my relationship with the natural landscape in a reflexive, phenomenological way that has formed the evidence of experiential knowing.



Figure 15. Melinda Jane, *Multimodal articulation: Imprinted memories*, 2021, cotton-rag paper, 700 × 150mm.

We live in a time in history where our disconnection to the Earth echoes through fractured communities and our struggle to connect with our own spiritual capacity – where human desire to exercise control over the environment has found us in deep ecological crisis, mirrored in our growing inner turmoil and increased separateness from each other. We must seek new and sustaining human–Earth relations, that support our own psycho-social environment: to see the ecosystem of the Earth-body not in isolation but interwoven with our own physicality. In the eloquent words of Tufnell and Crickmay (2015), “As the heart itself belongs within the vast branching network of arteries, veins and capillaries of the body, so, who we are is not separate from all that we love and that sustains life in us” (p.267).

Art-making has been the accessible, multimodal language of exploration and expression that has given voice to my inquiry and my intersubjective, relational connection to the Earth. An attentiveness to expressive imagination through art-making and creative arts therapy, as a way for inner expression to dialogue with the natural world, holds possibility for others as a gentle access point towards self-care and healing our relationship to self and planet. By acknowledging the wisdom of our own physical, sensing body in living interaction with the world, along with our ability for creative expression as a reciprocal dialoguing with the Earth body, we have the opportunity to open to a presence that the intersubjective space offers and an attention to the present moment. It is an opportunity for inner and outer worlds to mirror each other in a way that brings an awareness to being with, and of, the natural world: of reconnection with the animate by seeing the natural world not as a resource, but as a storyteller and a reflection of the sentience of all beings.

I breathe in, filling my lungs. The forest is glistening with the welcome rain and the sky above is clearing to a bright blue as the sun’s arc glows through the trees. I stop to look, I stop to smell, I stop to listen.

In the stillness, I know who I am.



Figure 16. Melinda Jane, *Kalimna Park, Dja Dja Wurrung/Djaara Country*, 2021, digital photograph.

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Melinda Jane is a multidisciplinary visual artist, experienced art and design teacher, early-career creative arts therapist and writer, living on Djaara Country in Central Victoria. She has taught in both state and independent schools, including in juvenile justice, has run studio-based art programs for young people, facilitated community and festival arts projects, and worked in community theatre. She is currently completing her final year of a Master in Therapeutic Art Practice at MIECAT in Naarm (Melbourne) and is a strong advocate for inclusive well-being programs within education, with a focus on health, spiritual well-being, and healing connections to the Earth through art and creative process. Her creative practice is informed by a direct experience and reciprocal relationship with the natural world; exploring the intersubjective space between the felt sense of the body, time and place, and the inextricable links between these elements. Melinda explores the nature of existential phenomenology and ecopsychology in relation to liminal states, memories, and connections to place.



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