

Exhibition review

Creative Sanctuary

8 November 2023, ongoing
The Dax Centre, Naarm Melbourne

Reviewed by Beatrice Wharldall

Before colonisation, a creek ran through the area where the University of Melbourne now stands. Under the traditional custodianship of the Wurundjeri people, this creek was a vital ecosystem of the Birrarung, “acting as a lung to clean and renew, a pathway, a water source for all living things” (Cumpston, 2019, p.1). Short-finned eels used the creek (later referred to as Bouverie Creek) as a migratory route from summer into autumn. Now under concrete, this waterway is no more. However, the eels now trace the same watery path through the University’s drains each year, looking for sanctuary (Milroy, 2022).

Visiting at this very time, the thought of those eels passing below my feet seems strangely aligned with the exhibition I came to see: *Creative Sanctuary*, at the University’s Dax Centre. Founded in 2012, the Centre presents exhibitions, education programs and events with the aim of raising awareness and reducing stigma surrounding mental illness through art. *Creative Sanctuary* features work by eight artists with lived experiences of mental health issues, and points to notions of invisible historical traumas, the redirection of energy, and subtle resiliencies that could also describe the ecological story playing out underfoot.



Figure 1. The exhibition’s lead image features water and an eel, paralleling the site’s ecological narrative. Isabella Duncan, *Ophelia*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 1750 × 1440mm. From the Cunningham Dax Collection.

The exhibition features paintings, drawings and sculpture selected across five decades (1958–2012) from the Cunningham Dax Collection. The exhibition includes some works created in art therapy, and some that were not; however, the curation does not differentiate between the two. What draws these artists together is the way they use “art-making to find solace and inspiration in their own creative sanctuaries” (Dax Centre, 2023, p.1), with additional insights in personal statements from each artist in the digital catalogue.

In *Creative Sanctuary*, the Dax Centre faces the challenges that come with transitioning from the therapeutic setting to a gallery environment. Public exhibition of artwork created in art therapy can profoundly affect healing, for better or worse, as many art therapists have underscored (Barnes, 2012; McNiff, 2004; Vick, 2011). By showing artwork publicly, creators may find a renewed sense of agency and self-esteem, as their creative expressions and experiences are acknowledged and appreciated by others. It can also offer an opportunity for family, friends, and the community to participate in the healing process, while increasing awareness about art as a means for addressing emotional pain (Barnes, 2012).

But there are potential risks for artists sharing deeply personal experiences with the public, including feelings of vulnerability and the possibility of invalidation, misinterpretation, or misrepresentation that can exacerbate existing emotional distress (Barnes, 2012; McNiff, 2004).

The Cunningham Dax Collection contains over 16,000 works created by people with a lived experience of mental health issues or psychological trauma. Early works in this extensive collection were amassed by Dr Eric Cunningham Dax (1908–2008), a psychiatrist and early proponent of the use of art in psychiatric treatment.

With Dr Dax sourcing artworks from interactions with psychiatric inpatients – purportedly even collecting them from hospital bins – the Collection’s origins reflect a time when art therapy was used in ways that contemporary practitioners no longer endorse. Artworks were often used without the creators’ consent, in ways that perpetuated the pathologisation, institutionalisation, and stigmatisation of those with mental illness (Talwar, 2019). These issues are further complicated by Dr Dax’s use of and contributions to controversial psychiatric treatments, including lobotomy (“Eric Cunningham Dax”, 2024).

The difficult history of the Dax Collection is not lost on its custodians, who have put considerable effort towards remediating the troubling manner in which early artworks were acquired. Now, the Centre accepts artworks by bequest and donation directly from artists with lived experience of mental illness, and has contacted all artists in the Collection for consent, Gallery Co-ordinator Emily Winslade tells me.

Creative Sanctuary explores the therapeutic benefits of art-making for artists, and the resulting narratives offer a range of insights – which are shaped in large part by the accompanying statements.

These statements primarily focus on the artists' personal backgrounds, often including details about past traumas and diagnoses. In the right context, this can certainly be empowering: to some, however, this could feel like a risky degree of disclosure in a public setting, where artists are identified by name. It is not clear whether these statements were prepared in a therapeutic context as Vick (2011) recommends, but regardless, this degree of detail doesn't seem essential for audience engagement.

But the arts-based reflections, especially those focusing on the symbolism of the making process, are fascinating, such as Jacqueline King's comment on her copper-foil glass work. "I am making things of great beauty out of shattered parts, very slowly and with great patience and love, much like I am trying to rebuild my own life" (Dax Centre, 2023, p.4).

Through an art therapy lens, there is a rich representation of therapeutic mechanisms at play.

Emma McEvoy uses photography to symbolise and communicate experiences that are not easily put into words, saying, "struggling to articulate myself in therapy, I found solace in creating images that would act as bridges between my world and this world" (Dax Centre, 2023, p.6). She describes her experience of recovery through surreal landscapes, where oversized paper cranes and figures in bubbles juxtapose stormy seas (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Emma McEvoy, *The Paper Crane*, 2012, digital print on rag paper, 245 × 245mm. From the Cunningham Dax Collection.

Isabella Duncan's painting *Ophelia* (Figure 1) and Elizabeth Turnbull's painting *Freedom* (Figure 3) identify sanctuary in specific places, real and imagined. Turnbull's use of text and figure capture the sense of freedom felt on her island home.



Figure 3. Elizabeth Turnbull, *Freedom*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 457 × 459mm. From the Cunningham Dax Collection.

While these works could be considered diagrammatic, in that they seem to intend to communicate a feeling state or message (McNiff, 1992), others appear more process driven.

Some find sanctuary in the art-making process itself. Artist NEG contextualises their abstract, fluid watercolour painting, saying, “I can paint tranquillity and in the doing feel some tranquillity myself” (Dax Centre, 2023, p.10). Renee Sutton, also working abstractly but with a brighter, more graphic visual language, “paints what she feels at any given time” (Dax Centre, 2023, p.10).

Some works read as embodied products of the art therapy process (McNiff, 1992), such as Rosa Niran’s series *Chuck No. 2–5* (2007). These four paintings depict nude figures looking out into strange, verge-like spaces that shimmer like the surface of water. This series seems more like subconscious evocations of the disorienting nature of self-reflection: giving form to the disarming, vulnerable angles we see ourselves from when we look ‘below the surface’ (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Rosa Niran, *Chuck No. 5*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 400 × 300mm. From the Cunningham Dax Collection.

In her own words, Niran is:

Describing feelings that I have no words for. When they appear before me, I can see them and conquer them. The thing I have learnt, that once it is out in a drawing, on the canvas, it is outside my mind and I can have temporary peace. (Dax Centre, 2023, p.8)

This therapeutic process of externalisation, as we consider it in art therapy, seems key to a number, but not all, of the works. The presence of artworks that externalise difficult experiences alongside those depicting harmonious, safe spaces paints a complex tone to the exhibition, perhaps more tangible to art therapy audiences. This oscillation between positivity and pain, however, contributes to a rich and layered depiction of well-being and recovery that offers value to all viewers.

Despite being arranged briskly due to a last-minute scheduling change, *Creative Sanctuary* is testament to the Dax Centre's commitment to destigmatising mental illness through art. The exhibition's professional presentation, combined with the Centre's emphasis on education, reflects a closer alignment with contemporary values of client-centred art therapy than originally practised by Dax himself.

The exhibition also sits at the intersection of ethical tensions, emphasising a need for clearly defined clinical objectives within collaborative curation. While the initiative provides a great opportunity for collaboration with art therapists to create presentations that prioritise client

safety, there remains ambiguity about the role of art therapy in the exhibition. Future opportunities for genuine multidisciplinary collaboration between art curation and art therapy would no doubt be welcomed in both fields.

Sanctuaries, real and creative, are places that stand apart from the rest of their damaged environments. They require a gentle tread in order not to disrupt complex, hidden systems. This space is certainly on the way to a sanctuary, much like the eels travelling below are as they make their way out to sea. The eels have been persistent, tenacious, and are closer to safety now than they have been in the past, given growing public interest and recognition. Collectively, they are making their way, as are the arts in health. It's not an easy task, but as I leave, I'm reminded again of the collective effort required for healing and see that commitment running through the waters here.

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About the reviewer:

Beatrice Wharldall

MAT, GDipPsync, BFA, AThR

Beatrice Wharldall (she/they) is an art therapist and artist living on the unceded lands of the Kulin Nations (Naarm Melbourne, Australia). With a background in psychology and visual art, her work has been primarily in oncology and community mental health.

Beatrice wants to use her work to build a better future, dissecting notions of mental health and illness in ways that feel more true to life than representations seen in medical settings and popular culture. She cares deeply about the effects of capitalism on the environment, and has a research interest exploring how art therapy can be applied to emerging global concerns, such as climate grief, through research and community-based practice.



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