

HEALING: ART AND INSTITUTIONAL CARE

20 August – 9 November 2025

● La Trobe Art Institute

Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo and

Finnegan Shannon

Fayen d'Evie

Carol Dobson

Jenny Hickinbotham

Helen Johnson

Alecia Neo

Sue Robertson

Grace Wood

● Curated by Jacina Leong and Amelia Wallin

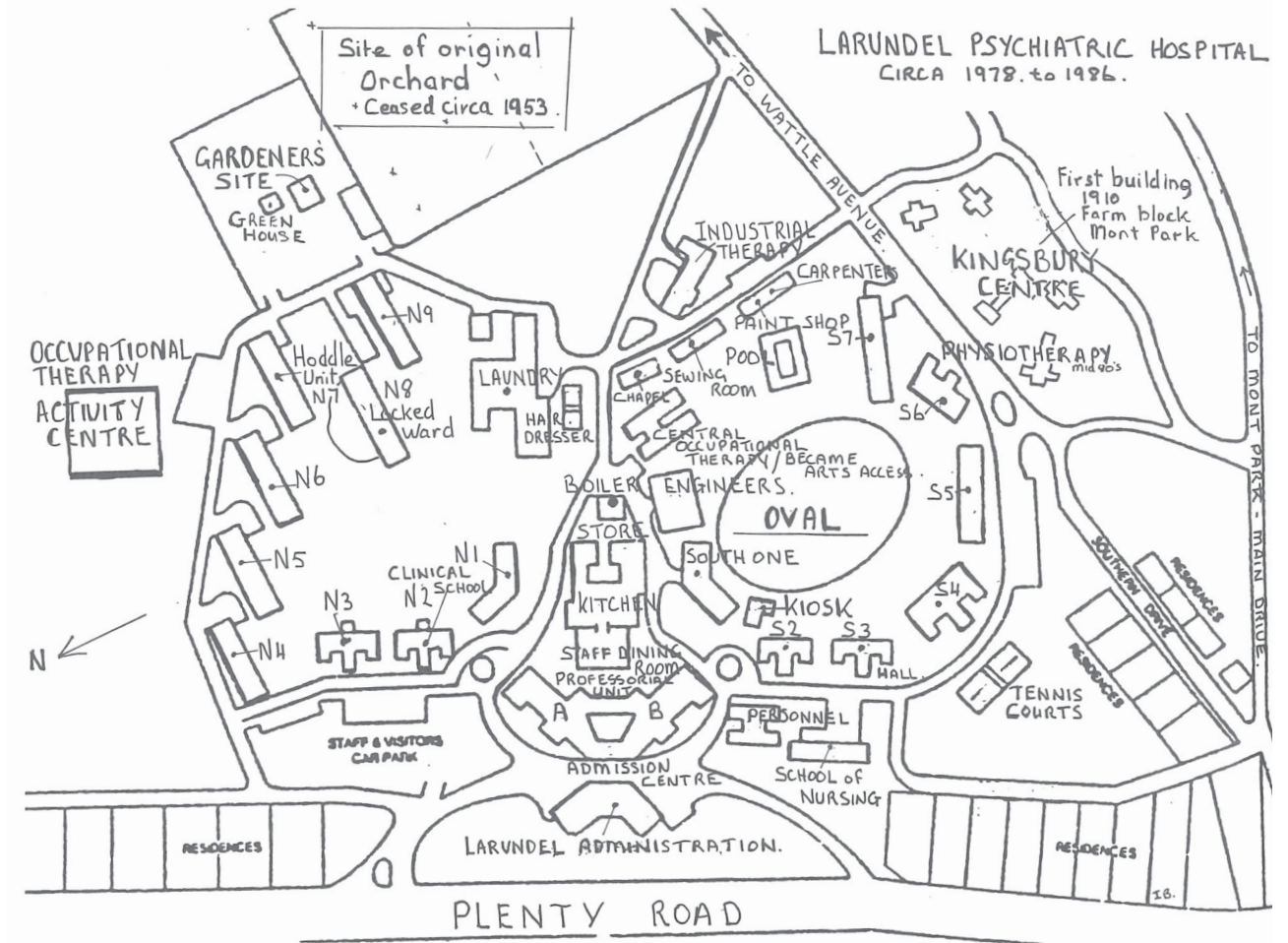
Reflecting on the process of curating this exhibition, we, the co-curators, think of an unfolding. Of one thing leading to another, of new collaborations seeding and coming to fruition, of taking time and following intuitions: the right invitation reaching someone at the right time. This process, while intuitive, was never without criticality or deliberate thought. The resultant exhibition—three years in formation—is testimony to these slow, durational and collaborative methodologies. This co-authored text is an attempt to trace and open up some of the conversations and processes which have shaped the formation of this exhibition, which takes as its starting point the innovative Art Access Studio. In Australia, the Studio pioneered and challenged how art could be used therapeutically by embracing artmaking as an opportunity for self-directed healing and creative expression.

The Art Access Studio (1989–1996) was a non-diagnostic, artist-led studio space on the grounds of the former Larundel Mental Hospital (1953–1999).¹ From accounts of those who used and delivered its services, the Studio was a generative space of artistic and therapeutic production.² The works produced in the Studio were exhibited in the hospital wards, and at one point in a small on-site gallery, as well as at public exhibitions across Victoria.³ Within the Studio, clinical staff were absent and people were free to be themselves. Exhibiting artist, and former user of the Studio’s services, Sue Robertson compared it to “the backyards of wards, under trees, where people said real things, away from psychiatry.”⁴ Like in this exhibition, co-creation and informal collaboration fostered a sense of community and were key to the Studio’s function and success. As Sue reflects, “you know, we found our stories, each other; it was wonderful”.⁵

In preparation for Larundel’s closure in 1999, a number of works that had been produced in the Studio moved to Neami’s Splash Art Studio in Preston in 1996.⁶ They remained in storage until Splash Art Studio also closed, in 2015, at which time over 1,400 works that had been produced at Larundel’s Art Access Studio entered into the custodianship of La Trobe University and became what is now referred to as the Larundel Collection. This significant gift was in part due to the geographical ties between the former hospital grounds and the University’s Bundoora campus. The gift was also in recognition of opportunities such as this very exhibition, through which the Collection can enter into critical discourse and dialogue with artists, researchers and the broader public.

We acknowledge that this work unfolds on unceded Country, where sovereignty was never ceded. The stories held in these lands, and ongoing work for First Nations justice, are not separate from the themes of care and healing explored in this exhibition. To speak of healing here is to speak also of the unfinished, ongoing processes of truth-telling, relational repair and decolonial reckoning. To speak of institutional care without attending to the colonial foundations of the institutions such as Larundel would be to leave the roots of colonialism untouched. It strikes us that healing, like the unfolding collaborations that underpin this exhibition, is also a slow and intuitive process. This exhibition approaches healing as a process of repair that is continually unfolding.

Healing: Art and Institutional Care brings contemporary artistic responses into dialogue with select historic works from the Larundel Collection, creating a bridge between sites of artistic production and modes of creative exploration. In determining which artists to engage,



[Figure 1] Iliya Bircanin and Alex Short, *Glimpses of the past: Mont Park, Larundel, Plenty*, 1995.

our approach of thinking and acting from place meant looking to people who had lived experiences within Larundel, who have spent time within its walls and grounds, as well as those with lived experience of mental ill-health, neurodivergence, disability justice and care-giving. True to the spirit of Art Access Studio, the contemporary artists participating in this exhibition have engaged in experimentation, play, collaboration and creative documentation. The common thread running through all works in the exhibition is the use of artmaking as a means of personal reflection and emotional processing. Whether emerging from institutional contexts, community settings, or personal ritual, these practices position artmaking as a vital form of agency, expression and resistance.

Our primary research into the Larundel Collection reinforced its direct and situated correlation to La Trobe University. Within the archive, we found hand-drawn maps that detailed the network of buildings, gardens and fields that had once been hospital grounds [Figure 1]. Today, the fields are replaced with university classrooms and administration buildings, while other buildings that lay destitute for decades are being repurposed into apartments. The material (dis)connection between sites is highlighted in Jenny Hickinbotham’s commissioned work, *Song to Sue*. Filmed on the site of the former Hospital, Jenny sings a song written for Sue Robertson, a friend and former patient of Larundel. Passing through construction sites and hollowed out buildings, Jenny captures a place in transition, where the former hospital is all but erased. For Jenny, her artistic practice is a “cathartic expression of exploratory story-telling, and in itself a form of recovery.”⁷ In returning to this site, Sue and Jenny reanimate its history. Jenny’s *Song to Sue* is a gesture of friendship, remembrance and resistance.

1

The Larundel Mental Hospital in Bundoora, Victoria, went through several name changes over its lifetime, reflecting shifts in mental health policy and institutional language in Australia. We refer to it as Larundel Mental Hospital, reflecting the language used by the Victorian government.

2

Rosemary O’Neill, “Seeing What I Could Do”: The Experience of Art-Making at the Art Access Studio, Larundel Psychiatric Hospital, 1989–1996,” Masters’ thesis, La Trobe University, 2021

3

Archival records accessed by the authors.

4

Ibid., O’Neill

5

Ibid., O’Neill

6

Splash Art Studio was a community-based arts program run by Neami from 1995–2015. Neami took over management of the Arts Access Studio program on the site of the Larundel hospital in January 1996. In November 1996 Neami Splash Art Studio officially opened at its new High St Preston site. The program supported people experiencing complex and enduring mental health challenges to develop an arts practice with guidance from a team of community artists. Neami National is a not-for-profit organisation that continues to provide services to improve mental health and wellbeing in local communities.

7

<https://blindsides.org.au/program/sticks-and-stones-will-break-my-bones-but-words-can-totally-destroy-my-mind>



[Figure 2] *Carol Untitled, 1–3*
1992 synthetic polymer paint
on paper La Trobe University
Larundel Collection, Donated
by Neami National, 2018.
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[Figure 3] Image from the
Larundel archives,
photographer unknown



We met Sue Robertson through her connection to Jenny. As well as featuring in *Song to Sue*, we learnt that Sue had participated in the Art Access Studio, where she created paintings and other artworks. While many of the works now held in the Larundel Collection were left behind by users after discharge, Sue made the deliberate decision to take one painting with her upon leaving the hospital—a work titled *Three Friends*. Painted in bright colours, *Three Friends* depicts three women standing closely together, a composition Sue describes as having emerged spontaneously as she was painting.⁸ The work speaks to themes of companionship and mutual support within the context of the hospital setting.

While Sue chose to take her artwork with her, Carol Dobson has multiple paintings and drawings that remained at Larundel after she left, eventually forming part of the Collection. We were fortunate enough to meet with Carol to view the artworks she had created at Art Access Studio, three decades earlier. During this visit, Carol explained that three separate paintings were conceived as a triptych. Together, they represent three different stages and states of mind, from being in a clinical setting with doctors, through to a space of psychic freedom. She later gave her express permission for these works to be included in *Healing*. In the course of our archival research, we discovered a photograph of Carol's paintings stacked vertically, one above the other, displayed on a hospital wall [Figure 2]. This archival material informed our decision to exhibit the paintings in the same formation, as an echo of their original display and Carol's intent.

To further recount the experiences of Larundel, within this exhibition guide we include a poem by award-winning poet Sandy Jeffs. *Alice in Larundel Land* was inspired by a walk through the derelict site of Larundel, where Jeffs had been a patient during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The title itself references a pantomime written by chaplain Len Blair and performed by staff at Larundel in 1979.⁹ The poem invites us to wander through memory, “madness” and the ruins of a place that still holds meaning. Jeffs writes in order to ensure the memory of the institution, and the lives lived within it, is not forgotten. “Lost memory is lost wisdom,” she says, and with the closure of Larundel, she believes it is vital to acknowledge what was gained and what was lost. As she reflects, “we can’t go back to Larundel, but we now have a system that is vastly underfunded, overstressed and inadequate ... there is something very broken and wrong with how we treat the mentally ill.”¹⁰

The Larundel Hospital is a story particular to the northern suburbs of Melbourne, yet its operations and eventual closure share parallels with processes of psychiatric deinstitutionalisation across Australia, Aotearoa, the UK and the US. What makes it distinct, however, is the Art Access Studio. While many hospitals employed art therapists, the Art Access Studio modelled the benefits of artmaking for connection and collaboration outside of a diagnostic framework. We became interested in the blurring of roles such as artist, art therapist, patient, participant, which led to our commissioning invitation to Helen Johnson. A painter before she trained as an art therapist, Helen's work in this exhibition draws on both disciplines. Here, she presents a series of works on paper that she produced alongside participants during art therapy sessions she facilitated. The works vary in energy and form. Some feature repeated geometric patterns, others contain loose, squiggly lines or spontaneous gestures,

while a number follow the path of a rolling marble, tracing unpredictable movements across the paper surface. Laid out on a table rather than framed on walls, their arrangement echoes how they were first shared with us during the development of the exhibition, and also how they would have been laid out at the conclusion of a session.

⁸
Ibid., O'Neill
⁹
<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/424/article/882725>
¹⁰
<https://www.sane.org/media-centre/media-releases-2020/sandy-jeffs-out-of-the-madhouse>

Rather than presenting finished outcomes, each piece documents the process, honouring the therapeutic space not only as one of care, but also one of inquiry, attunement and creative experimentation

Artist **Fayen d'Evie** is similarly interested in the draft or the unfinished. Our commissioning invitation to Fayen reached her during the week that she relocated from her regional property in Muckleford to inner city Kew, an apartment within Willsmere, also known as the former Kew Lunatic Asylum (1872–1989). This emplaced context, alongside our serendipitous invitation, sparked a new research direction focused on the early history of asylums in Victoria. Fayen had already been exploring the state's pervasive eugenics movement and its ties with suffragism. Alongside this emotionally heavy research, Fayen embraced weaving as a therapeutic, tactile and embodied practice, oriented through blindness. As someone who has lived with fluctuating vision throughout her life, Fayen brings to her practice a sustained exploration of blindness as a critical and imaginative position. Inspired by images of workers producing mats at the Blind Asylum, Fayen began experimenting with ways to reverse the logic of weaving, proceeding from touch rather than vision. Her unfinished tapestries are included in this exhibition.

Through her research, Fayen recognised aspects of refuge within her new home, such as the carefully planned gardens and the large windows intended to let in light. Fayen emphasises the reparative potential of such spaces as the Kew Lunatic Asylum, challenging us to hold this alongside the dominant narrative of harm and abuse. Her project proposes a new model of asylum, as places where people who refuse normalcy can individually and collectively dream.

Grace Wood's new body of work, *The Four Sheets*, takes a different approach to the Larundel Collection. Through photography, collage and expanded installation, Grace continues her exploration of how image-making intersects with care, memory and institutional systems. Grace has formerly used mediums such as collage and tapestry to explore the layered echoes of shared local histories in sites such as Bundoora Homestead, also in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. During her research visits to the Larundel Collection, Grace was drawn to the Studio's innovative repurposing of used bedsheets as material for printing and collective artistic production. Grace employs a similar economy, reworking sheets into tapestries and soft collages, suspended across the gallery. *Studio Sheet* was developed in collaboration with artists from Arts Project Australia, where Grace works as an artist facilitator. Such collaborations extend her commitment to inclusive, collective practices that unsettle the boundaries of authorship and reflect broader modes of care.

Grace was also drawn to archival photographs of community open days held at Larundel, featuring parades and performances in handmade masks and costumes. One photograph documents a cluster of colourful balloons being released into a clear blue sky, with notes tied to them [Figure 3]. This act of release is reimagined in one of her artworks, *Sky Notes*, in which audiences are invited to write their hopes onto coloured paper, which is then pinned onto a found blue sheet. Rather than reproducing artworks or images from the Collection, Grace thinks with its textures and absences to offer a fragmentary response, sensitive to the ethics of representation.

While our approach to this exhibition prioritised commissioning new work that spoke to the local story of Larundel and the Art Access Studio, it felt equally important to include international artists to highlight how themes of care, support and solidarity resonate globally. For this exhibition, Singapore-based artist **Alecia Neo** presents *Between Earth & Sky*. This single-channel video work and installation was developed in close collaboration with a community of caregivers

of persons living with mental ill-health and degenerative disease. Working with the movements, perspectives and lived experiences of nine caregivers, *Between Earth & Sky* draws attention to caregiving not only as a form of labour, but as a complex, embodied and relational act that requires support and solidarity in and of itself. 14 kites accompany the video, each bearing close-up photographs of clothing worn by the participating caregivers and care receivers, symbolising both vulnerability and freedom. This work traces often-unseen impacts of care on the caregiver, revealing how caregiving unfolds within (and sometimes in spite of) systems that can be fraught or inadequate.

Resistance and solidarity between care-givers and care-receivers continue in a collaborative work by North American artists **Finnegan Shannon** and **Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo**. Finnegan's broader practice critiques ableist structures, specifically the lack of disabled-friendly seating in the public domain. When invited to participate in the exhibition, Finnegan in turn invited Lukaka to join them in the creation of a new collaborative work. Lukaza's participatory and text-driven projects invite audiences to recall and share their own lived narratives, offering power and weight to the creation of a larger dialogue around the telling of B.I.Q.T.P.O.C. (Black, Indigenous, Queer, Trans, People of Color) stories. For this exhibition, their collaboration has produced a bench laden with slogans for access and solidarity, produced in a mix of the artists' handwriting. Audiences are provided with newsprint and crayons, and invited to make rubbings of the slogans. In this way, the messages of solidarity and interdependence are distributed widely, available for the audience to take with them.

To speak of healing is complex. It is not always linear and at times remains unfinished. In developing this exhibition, we have tried to remain attentive to the ethical stakes of working with such themes. Rather than present healing as a singular or 'positive' outcome, this exhibition holds space for the contradictions it contains. While we have sought to centre the lived experience of Larundel, we also recognise the limits of what and who is represented here, including voices that remain absent or only partially heard. This exhibition can only ever be a small part of a much larger, more complex story, one that continues to unfold across bodies, communities and time.

Throughout this exhibition, collaboration emerges as a central thread: between artists and the communities with whom they work; between artists and us as curators; and as curators in a shared process of listening, reflecting and un/learning. These relationships, built across time and care, are not merely contexts for the work but integral to the work itself. In many ways, they are the work.

Healing: Art and Institutional Care does not seek to offer answers, but to invite questions about what art makes possible in places where language falters, where care is precarious, and where histories linger in bodies, institutions and materials. We offer this exhibition not as a conclusion but as a conversation. We invite you to carry its questions with you, to tend to them gently, and to let them be transformed in the rhythm of your own unfolding.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our sincere gratitude to Rosemary O'Neill for her outstanding scholarship on Larundel; to Patricia Fenner, whose advocacy was instrumental in the donation of the Larundel Collection to La Trobe University; and to the members of our working group for their help guiding the ethical considerations of this project. We also thank Jensen Tjhung for fabrication, Greg Hunter and Karen Annett and the team at LAI, Kate Richards and our peers in Art Therapy, Judith Hickinbothan and the participating artists for their generous contributions and collaboration.

Thank you for visiting Healing: Art and Institutional Care

This exhibition engages with histories and contemporary experiences of mental health care, institutionalisation, and healing. It highlights stories of vulnerability, creativity, and solidarity, shared through personal artworks, archival materials, and critical reflections on care.

While the exhibition aims to offer space for reflection, listening, and connection, we acknowledge that the content may evoke strong emotional responses—especially for those with lived experience of mental illness, trauma, or institutional care.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, distressed, or simply need someone to talk to, please know that support is available. You may wish to speak to a trusted friend, family member, or health professional. You can also reach out to the following services:

Lifeline

13 11 14

24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services

www.lifeline.org.au

Mind Australia

Recovery-focused mental health services, including community programs and peer support

www.mindaustralia.org.au

Beyond Blue

1300 224 636

Support for those experiencing anxiety, depression, or emotional distress

www.beyondblue.org.au

SANE Australia

Information, forums and peer support for people with complex mental health needs and their carers

www.sane.org

Griefline

Support for grief, loss and trauma. Offers free, confidential phone support, online forums, and peer support groups

www.griefline.org.au

QLife

1800 184 527

Support for LGBTIQ+ people, including those navigating mental health, isolation, or discrimination

www qlife.org.au

Blue Knot Foundation

1300 657 380

Support for adult survivors of complex trauma, including institutional abuse and neglect

www.blueknot.org.au

Head to Health

Government portal for finding mental health services near you, including local mental health clinics

www.headtohealth.gov.au

Accessing Counselling or Psychology Services

You can speak to your GP about a Mental Health Care Plan, which gives you access to Medicare-subsidised counselling or psychology sessions (up to 10 per year).

Find a qualified psychologist at:

www.psychology.org.au/Find-a-Psychologist