

Collaboratory

A Series of Exhibitions Concerning Collaborative Practice

Dr Kent Wilson

We believe so fundamentally in the power of collective endeavour at LAI that we have developed a series of exhibitions exploring how collaboration is undertaken in arts practice. In 2018 we kicked off this *Collaboratory* series with two exhibitions: Jon Cattapan + Ben Aitken, and The Ryan Sisters. The former provided an opportunity to examine collective working methods in a medium not normally associated with collaboration – painting. It also provided insight into a mentor/mentee relationship, with iconic Australian artist and Director of the VCA, Professor Jon Cattapan, working together with non-tertiary trained, young rising art star Ben Aitken. The canvas became a non-hierarchical, level playing field of interaction for both artists to push their own image-making habits and engage in a visual conversation across time and space.



Jon Cattapan + Ben Aitken, *Circling* (2018), oil and acrylic on canvas. Photo by Ian Hill.

The Ryan Sisters' exhibition offered our audiences an insight into familial collaboration. Pip and Nat are indeed sisters, and each maintains their own individual practices. They join together to work as a duo, under their eponymous title. A duo that has evolved into a sort of hybrid identity – "There is a 'person' now, we find ourselves referring to the 'Ryan Sisters'. There's a very strange sort of beast that has been growing between us." The darkened space of their installation, a séance-inspired atmosphere, evoking an uncanny sense of absented presence, or perhaps the presence of absence, and reinforcing this notion of conjuring influences beyond the material reality of physical bodies.

At LAI we treat our exhibitions as one part of a constellation of programs. Our educative and public engagement offerings sit on an equal register, not supplementary or as add-ons, providing for pathways of understanding into the rich depths of contemporary arts practice, as well as parallel explorations of ideas gathered through engagement with other disciplines.

As part of the programming of *Collaboratory* (2018) we held a symposium, 'Sum of Parts', on 16 April 2018 in our LAI auditorium with Dr Jasim and Dr Sara Al-Rawi from the La Trobe Institute of Molecular Science, and Pip and Nat from The Ryan Sisters. The Doctors Al-Rawi are father and daughter, working together on projects in a scientific setting, and offered another angle into understanding the nature of collaborative efforts undertaken between members of the same family. While co-authorship in the sciences is now the norm and artists are increasingly forming collaborative partnerships, the practical mechanics of how they work together is rarely discussed. This interdisciplinary discussion provided terrific insights and reflections that revealed similarities in methodologies across different areas of intellectual and creative endeavours, and teased out some of the complexities that come from knowing your collaborators in an intimate way.



The Ryan Sisters, *Is Anybody There?* (2018), wooden table, silicon, lamp. Photo by Ian Hill.

Reflecting on the intimacy of connection that comes from working with family, Dr Sara says of her father, "He is my best friend. We talk. We have coffee. We complain about the price of tomatoes. (But) what I found ... when it comes to dealing with a professional environment ... he is Dr Jasim Al-Rawi. He is not my dad. What I find as a budding professional scientist, this helps with dealing with work professionally ... when it comes to dealing with the real stuff, the good stuff ... we can well and truly talk about experiments and how things are set. I found that to be very useful."

For The Ryan Sisters, there is a supportive quality to the nature of their relationship in a collaborative context. "We are kind of on a see-saw a lot of the time. When one of us is up, the other one is down. We support each other to help each other out. We were brought up to put other people first, so there is a caring relationship. We are also best friends, which adds another element, as well as the collaborative practice. And because we know each other so well, there is no holding back. Sometimes we don't even need to talk about some things, we just know. There's a kind of unspoken reading of each other."

For LAI's next iteration of *Collaboratory* (2021) we have commissioned artist Danica Chappell to produce work inspired by a collaboration with La Trobe University Bruce Stone Research Fellow Dr Donna Whelan from Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences. In this way we can learn more about collaboration across disciplines and open discussion around art-science endeavours, which is become something of a growing field. The project is also part of a significant state-wide festival event, PHOTO 2021, which is itself a rather large-scale collaborative enterprise of arts organisations coordinating their exhibition offerings with a focus on photographic imagery. Dr Whelan's work in building a next-generation single molecule microscope that explores DNA damage and repair pathways, offers fascinating insight into the nature of image capture and interpretation. Coupled with Danica's use of traditional photographic techniques and modification/manipulation of composition, colour and scale, this project will provide a substantive resource for our audiences to unpack and contemplate when presented in January–March 2021.



Danica Chappell, *Glimmer (working title for picturing objects)* (2019), daguerreotype table. Image courtesy of the artist.

In many ways, *Collaboratory* (2021) will pick up threads from the discussions coming out of the first iteration around the relationship between practices in the sciences and the arts. Danica has noted in her engagement with Dr Whelan, that "the intention and purpose in Donna's individual processes have parallels that I could draw upon in a likeness to my own. In the end there are clear intersections between our working processes, even if we do

describe, perform and manifest our knowledge and ideas in different ways for a different audience.”

What also runs across each of the collaborations undertaken in this series of investigative exhibitions is a sense of *discovery* – whether it is Jon and Ben learning more about their intuitive habits in mark making on canvas through an exposure to another artist’s incursion into their image construction, or whether it is Dr Jasim’s revelation that “I learn from my students all the time. Collaboration, even from students, I mean – I even learn from a child!” The excitement that comes from learning new things is an energy force. It is a motivation that encourages us to strive. As Danica explains about her insights into working with Dr Whelan, “We are both using materials and substances to examine something that would otherwise be unseeable or unmade. It’s fascinating that we are both teasing details out of a substrate using various filtrations and density of light. However, the scale is vastly opposite in each other’s work. Equally intriguing and completely unexpected was the shared aspects of ‘working blind’ to feel our way over the terrain of the substructures we each use in our processes.”

We look forward to sharing the outcome of this most recent collaboration in early 2021, postponed as it was from April/May 2020 due to the CoVID-19 crisis. We are also thrilled to be able present a large-scale artwork of Danica’s that will skin the façade of LAI on View Street, Bendigo, and celebrate the power of creative and scientific work undertaken in La Trobe University settings.

More [images of the 2018 exhibitions can be found here.](#)

Links to artists’ websites:

[Jon Cattapan](#)

[Ben Aitken](#)

[The Ryan Sisters](#)

[Danica Chappell](#)

Learn more about Dr Donna Whelan here:

[Dr Donna Whelan](#)