

THE LARUNDEL COLLECTION AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

I commenced studying Cultural Materials Conservation in 2004, drawn to the field by the aura of the object and the lure of looking beneath layers of paint to reveal secret pasts. Materials and processes, the physical nature of the object, was front and centre in my mind. A key component of the course however was dedicated to considering the ethical care of objects. Ethical care tended to relate more to the integrity of the intangible aspects of objects and an appreciation of diverse politics and cultural approaches to maintaining cultural histories.

I found the ethics of care to be an expansive field, an active and ongoing dialogue between objects and culture. The material needs of collection objects are largely routine and controlled but their cultural needs can be unique and dynamic over time. In the intervening years, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exchange has increasingly moved public dialogue toward an awareness of intersectionality and privileged viewpoints.

As custodians of La Trobe University's Cultural Collections, La Trobe Art Institute has oversight of a broad range of objects with diverse stakeholders. The Larundel Collection is a subset of the LTU Art Collection which highlights the complex nature of collections, their communities and their trajectories over time. Comprising approximately 1,500 works created by psychiatric patients, the Larundel Collection was gifted to LTU by NEAMI National in acknowledgement of La Trobe's long-standing investment and current emphasis on Art Therapy within the School of Psychology and Public Health as well as the University's connection to the original site of production.

The Collection takes its name from the Larundel Psychiatric Hospital, which was located in Bundoora. From 1988 to 1996 an art studio known as the Art Access Studio operated on the grounds of Larundel and it was here that the artworks were produced. While art therapy had been introduced to Victorian psychiatric hospitals by Dr Eric Cunningham during his tenure as Chairman of the Mental Hygiene Authority (1952 -68), such programs had a clinical focus, with patient artwork utilised as diagnostic tools. The Art Access Studio departed from this model, offering patients the opportunity for self-directed exploration of their creativity. The program was run by practising artists, participation was voluntary and the patients' works were regarded as art and not subject to analysis. When state-wide de-institutionalisation brought about the closure of Larundel in 1996, NEAMI Ntl took over management of the Art Access Studio. The Studio was relocated to a community setting and became known as Splash Art Studio.



LTULAR397
Carol Dobson
Untitled
1992
acrylic paint on paper
76 x 56 cm

It is not clear how the range of works now known as the Larundel Collection came to make the transition to the new community-based studio, but they stayed in NEAMI's custodianship until Splash closed in 2015. The mix of uncertain provenance, navigating uncertain parameters around production by persons with an experience of mental illness meeting legal definitions of 'sound mind' and the value of collecting marginalised histories presents a complex case study on the ethics of care.

A review of the work undertaken in early discussions around acquisition includes the following assessment by the then LUMA Artistic Director, Michael Brennan

Many of the works are expressive and visceral and honest, imbued with an authenticity that reflects the complexity of concerns that motivate artists to create. It is obvious that those who made art through these studios had practices that were central to their lives. The objects collected here are clearly by artists with a disability and not people with a disability who have been asked to make art as therapy. The distinction is an important one.

Brennan advocates for the work to be exhibited if La Trobe should take the collection on, to curate it into exhibitions, to honour the place of artmaking as intrinsic to the lives of the makers. However, the legal and moral rights of the artists complicates this aspiration. The lack of provenance for many of the objects makes honouring the intellectual and moral rights of the artists challenging.

Current research by LTU MA in Art History candidate Rosemary O'Neill, aims to grow our understanding of these issues. Through her previous role as a Community Artist at Splash Art Studio Rosemary has a long association with the artworks and the community of people who made them. Her research focusses on gaining an insight into the experience of art making for the makers of the Larundel Collection. As patients in psychiatric hospitals, the people who made the art works were marginalised, their voices unheard by the rest of society. Similarly, dominant discourse about art made by people with an experience of mental illness privileges the views of psychiatry and the art market over that of the maker, characterising the art as either graphic illustrations of pathology or the spontaneous outpourings of the untrained 'outsider' artist. By gathering first-hand narratives of the lived experience of artmaking at the Art Access Studio, Rosemary's research seeks to acknowledge the makers' authority and privilege their understandings in how we approach the art works in the Collection.

By foregrounding the makers of these objects, Rosemary's research will enable LAI to make better informed decisions around curating these objects into public space. Currently, access is limited to research and teaching purposes. Before COVID-19 related closures, LAI had been preparing to welcome a second cohort of Art Therapy students into the collection store to view and discuss the significance of the work in the Larundel Collection in the growing field of arts and health.

Established last year, these visits are a 3-way conversation between LAI, Art Therapy staff and students and Rosemary O'Neill. The visits embed LAI's commitment to object-based learning as central to our Collections access methodology and enact our commitment to providing students with professional practice learning opportunities. The visits offer students in the Master of Art Therapy program an opportunity for material learning about the nexus that exists in the experience of art as practice, therapy and cultural object.

For last year's student cohort sitting with these original works of art provoked questions around the future journey of these objects and the potentially therapeutic benefits of addressing and recording provenance and artist permissions at the time of production. Students were able to consider the real impacts of handling art objects, caring for and storing them in their practice within an ethical context. In this, their future clients became multidimensional, rich artistic beings who's work spoke beyond words to experience and identities.

Danielle Smelter is Collection Curator at La Trobe Art Institute with an MA in Cultural Materials Conservation and a practice led research focus on witnessing and trauma and the anticipatory nature of anxiety.

La Trobe Art Institute acknowledges the essential research and contribution of:

Dr Libby Byrne teaches in the Master of Art Therapy Program at La Trobe University whilst developing her own artmaking practice in the emerging field of Practice-led Theological Inquiry. Having worked as an art therapist in palliative care and with trauma recovery her current research addresses the nature and significance of art, both made and received, in the process of healing that is required for human beings to flourish and live well with illness and in health.

Ange Morgan is an art therapist working within adult mental health services. They lecture in the Master of Art Therapy at La Trobe University, and have research interests in homelessness and trans and gender diverse practice.

Rosemary O'Neill is a Masters by Research candidate in Art History at La Trobe University. From 2005 to 2015 she worked as a community artist in the mental health sector. She creates works of art in clay and on paper.