



CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

Healthy people, healthy country and healthy art careers: Understanding creativity and cultural identities in new Indigenous artistic practices and industries

Final report

1 September 2022

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Mowanjum artists including Rona Charles, Petrina Bedford, Edna Dale and Leah Umbagai.
Photo: N Yeatman- Morgan, University of Melbourne.

Project summary

The links between the social and emotional wellbeing of people and the physical and spiritual wellbeing of Country are widely recognised in Indigenous public and research spaces. The role of artistic and creative practice in this nexus is often assumed in the Indigenous context, but there is much more to learn about the nature of this role, and especially how the careers of Indigenous artists are intertwined with the health and wellbeing of people and country in remote Indigenous communities.

In this project, three Indigenous artist-researchers from the Mowanjum Art Centre in the west Kimberley undertook a five-day printmaking residency at the University's Southbank campus. The artworks will be shown at a public art exhibition. The residency aimed to illuminate the creative priorities, concepts, processes, practices and desired futures of Indigenous artists through the development of a portfolio of artworks. The works will also be documented in a digital workbook.

This project sought to understand what these artistic and creative practices reveal about the relationship between the art industry, in the Indigenous context, and the wellbeing of Indigenous people and country. This project also examined how this information might be used to help Indigenous artists and their communities to flourish.

This project ran from Nov 2019 to September 2021

Research team

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Partners

Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Cultural Centre.



Leah Umbagai. Photo: M. McPherson

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Background

Research context

Links between the social and emotional wellbeing of people and the physical and spiritual wellbeing of country are widely recognised in Indigenous public and research spaces, informing the trope 'Healthy Country, Healthy People' (Burgess & Morrison, 2007). While the role of artistic practice in this nexus is often assumed in the Indigenous context, little is yet known of the mechanisms for this (Australia Council, 2017). Multimodal arts practices including ceremonial action, oral expression and material creativity have considerable influence on individual, community and cultural wellbeing in Australian Indigenous contexts and elsewhere (Garma 2002, Koen 2008, Australia Council 2017). Area specialists from music to language detail how local Indigenous creative traditions are expressions of diverse knowledge systems, upon which future global societies may rely (Evans 2010). Yet Indigenous arts practices across Australia are recognised on international scales as critically endangered (ICTM-ANZ, UNESCO). The need to address the endangerment of these practices for the benefit of local, regional, national and global societies is therefore a matter of critical urgency. The University of Melbourne has strong track record in materials preservation and intangible cultural heritage sustainability.



Leah Umbagai, 2019 Photo: M. McPherson

Project aims

This project addressed the need for research that supports practices of Indigenous arts and artists in current modes and industries. Attention to material culture sustainability has so far focused on materials preservation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and craft sector as an industry, and the role of local arts centres in supporting individual artists. There is little research investigating the career and enterprise attributes of artists themselves, or that contemplates the operations of arts centre as ecosystems.

Our project aimed to explore Indigenous artists' perspectives on the potential of new creative artforms such as printmaking to contribute to achieving sustainable livelihoods through creative practice on country, thereby positively influencing individual and social wellbeing.

Methodology

The research team engaged with Indigenous artist co-researchers connected with the Mowanjum Aboriginal Art Centre in west Kimberley, Western Australia, to better understand the artists' practices in forms of material creativity, ceremonial performance, and oral expression. In the course of a *Workshop On Country, Symposium and Ceremony* (25-29 November 2019) at the Southbank campus, three Indigenous artist-researchers developed a portfolio of printmaking artworks. The artist-researchers were supported in the residency by an artist-printer. Building on ideas of arts-tailored entrepreneurship put forward by Bridgstock (2005, 2013), the research team used knowledge-exchange to support and investigate the potential for developing printmaking capacities as a sustainable component of the portfolio careers of Indigenous artists living in remote areas.

The collaborative, participant-guided research pursued four subsidiary objectives at the intersection of creativity and wellbeing:

- Facilitation of a 5-day collaborative printmaking program at the Victorian College of the Arts Printmaking Studios that allowed for expression, exploration and understanding of artist priorities and perspectives on practice to identify their significance to the artists and desired futures.
- Artist-led analysis of socially and emotionally significant concepts, origins, images, and processes to discover and delineate the image making possibilities of printmaking.
- Exploration of pedagogical creative and cultural knowledge transmission about art practice, and how this is enacted in printmaking. To be documented in a digital workbook of how the artworks were made.
- Research creation exhibition of artworks at studioFive, Melbourne UNESCO Observatory of Arts Education (MGSE), and development of exhibition collateral including a digital catalogue and website.



Edna Dale, 2019. Photo: M. McPherson

Key findings

Key findings and insights relate to knowledge exchange, the value to Indigenous artists of achieving printmaking proficiency and challenges associated with doing so, and the impacts of remoteness on printmaking capacity on country.

Knowledge Exchange and networking:

- An Artist-led analysis of the concepts, origins, images, and processes of creative and cultural practices not only builds knowledge of image making possibilities for printmaking, but it also develops capacities in sharing and maintaining knowledge in ways that have social and emotional significance. It reinforces the diplomacies of cultural knowledge – the ‘who is responsible for what’ knowledge and how this knowledge is shared.
- The opportunity to come to the VCA allowed for new relationships to be develop between the artists groups from Mowanjum Art Centre and Kaiela Arts, Shepparton.

Printmaking skills development:

- Workshop discussions endorsed the value of developing printmaking skills for independent practice;
- further opportunities to work with artist printmakers is needed if professional level editioning proficiency is to be achieved by artists.
- Artists’ positive evaluation of printmaking as a useful contribution to artists’ livelihoods was further confirmed by McPherson’s subsequent invitation to provide workshops in Mowanjum.

Printmaking in remote locations

- Due to space constraints at Mowanjum Arts Centre the practicalities of facilitating printmaking need to be investigated in situ to discover how ongoing storage and access to the necessary equipment and materials can be achieved. Similarly, a logistical solution enabling artists who live in remote communities (often several hundred kilometers from the Centre) to access the printmaking facilities, once established, needs to be developed.
- Costing of prints should include an appropriate contribution to the establishment and maintenance of printmaking facilities at Mowanjum, as well account for the higher freight and cost of living expenses of remote communities.
- A sustainable solution to minimising the detrimental ecological impacts of printmaking (e.g. from processes, materials and other resources) specific to remote communities needs to be developed.
- Small (A4) craft presses that are easily transportable may be optimal for the Mowanjum context.

Project outcomes



Petrina Bedford, 2019. Photo: M. McPherson

Non-traditional research outcomes:

Creative works:

Small portfolio of printed works in lino, with Edna Dale, Petrina Bedford, Leah Umbagai and Pete O'Connor.

In Preparation:

Exhibition and Catalogue;
Printmaking Process print and ebook

Grants awarded, or in preparation

Awarded:

McPherson 2020, University of Melbourne Early career research funding for Printmaking Junba: foundations & futures of new Indigenous arts practices & industries. (Fieldwork has been delayed until 2023 due to pandemic and community Sorry Business)

McPherson, Onus and Treloyn 2023, Indigenous Knowledge Institute Seed Funding for Kupungarri On Country Print Project. (\$20,000)

In Preparation:

McPherson 2023 ARC Linkage

Discussion, implications and future directions

Bringing artists from the remote community of Mowanjum and its surrounds to the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music for the five day workshop shows how the university and its resources can be opened up to artists for whom attending art school may not be possible. However, while having access to artist-printers Ros Atkins and Megan McPherson allowed the artists to watch the process of editioning, there was insufficient time to develop printmaking skills to the level required for autonomous practice. Editioning of the artworks was therefore completed by Atkins and McPherson.

Furthering the aim of skills development for community, in place, in the community, printmakers from Edith Cowan University visited Mowanjum for a week's workshop in 2022 and McPherson will be leading a two-week printmaking workshop there in February 2023.

The implications for further and future work in this area revolve around time commitments for editioning and achieving self-determination of artists' independent practice. In addition, with funding from the Indigenous Knowledge Institute (University of Melbourne) we have been requested to develop the Kupungarri On Country Print Project by Elder Rona Charles, which will involve delivering lino printing workshops in the remote community of Kupungarri (Mt Barnett). This project addresses a need for arts development for women in the community who have care responsibilities which mean that they cannot easily travel to Mowanjumb Art Centre. Women will come to Kupungarri via the daily school bus. We will use small (A4) craft presses that are easily transportable and make small prints. We will teach editioning processes to afford the development of these printmaking skills throughout the community. The implications for this project for influencing women's wellbeing and creativity is a further question to be researched.

Further directions for the project include investigating how artists can influence the way these prints are marketed through the art industry (self-determination) and how remote artists can successfully develop a portfolio art career.



Peter O'Conner, 2019. Photo: M. McPherson

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More information

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>

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