

The Art of Optimism

Organisations around Australia are marrying art and justice to empower communities and elevate the voices of hidden artists.

by **Sonia Nair**

Sonia Nair is a Melbourne-based writer and critic who has been published in Kill Your Darlings, Meanjin and Australian Book Review, among others.

The activist and artist Keith Haring once said that “art should be something that liberates your soul, provokes the imagination and encourages people to go further”. The power of art as an avenue to advocate for a better world is pretty well understood. But on an individual level, art can give people a chance to be seen, to be understood, to be taken seriously, to have access to new communities and even to be celebrated.

There are numerous organisations around Australia that are empowering creators and communities through art. Emboldened by these programs, thousands are creating paintings, theatre pieces, textiles, installations and more, that educate, delight and in some instances, provide opportunities for necessary community services.

Social justice and art are linked, and on an individual level, art can be a way to transcend isolation and manage disadvantage. As these organisations and artists attest, art has the power to connect, to educate and to heal.

Switching on the Spotlight

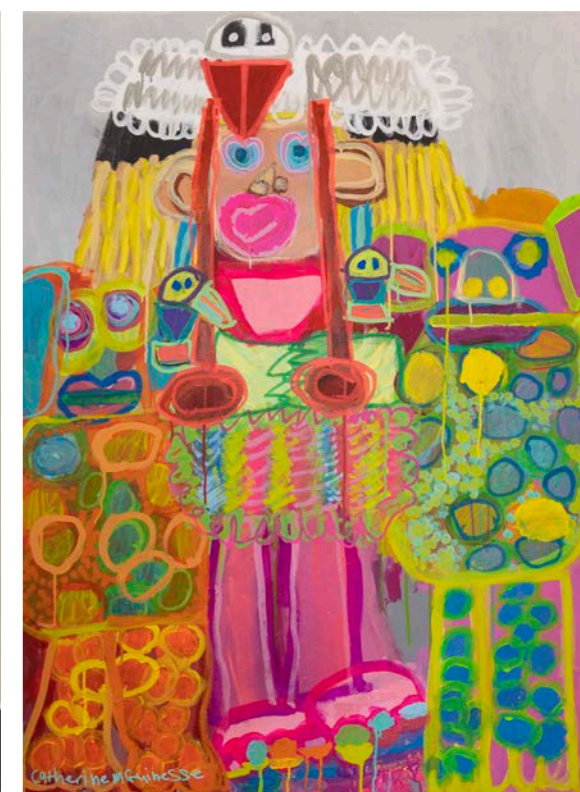
Yindjibarndi Elder Allery Sandy, an accomplished painter, educator, performer and community leader, first became involved with theatre company Big hART through her two grandsons, who acted in plays staged by

the organisation that travelled around Australia. Sandy soon started acting herself, as well as writing songs, singing in the choir, and attending meetings as an Elder.

“We community ladies – Elders of this community, both Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi – we get involved with what Big hART is doing to see if it’s appropriate for the community,” she says. “They get the okay from us.”

Big hART runs on an ethos that performance that is “imbued with the voices of lived experience” is the most powerful art there is. The organisation works with disadvantaged communities to create high-quality theatre with the aim of effecting generational change. One of these landmark works is the New Roebourne Project, a First Nations collaborative piece, born out of a need to raise awareness around the effects of the carceral system and the suffering in the Roebourne community after Yindjibarndi boy John Pat died in custody in 1983, just a month shy of his 17th birthday – triggering the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Projects like Hipbone Sticking Out, a powerful theatre piece involving John Pat’s family that toured nationally, have been healing for members of the Pat family, Sandy included. “It was a privilege to be part of these projects and be a support to my sister when she was alive and with family,” she says. “We’ve found peace... These



TOP LEFT: THOM ROBERTS, A PORTRAIT OF ADAM (SHANE SIMPSON AM); TOP RIGHT: CATHERINE MCGUINNESS, ROSARY WITH THE SEAGULL; BOTTOM LEFT: DETAIL FROM LOVE OWLS AND MERMAIDS SINGING IN THE RAINBOW POP; BOTTOM RIGHT: LISA TINDALL, MOONLIGHT STARBORNE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND STUDIO A

Personally, I think people are – on the whole – good and that much of the social harm people experience is caused by ignorance, clumsiness and invisibility.

SCOTT RANKIN, BIG HART FOUNDER

projects keep the families going because justice wasn't done for the family.

"I get very emotional thinking about it. If it wasn't for this, we wouldn't be recognised. It's good for Roebourne – we never used to have anything."

Big hART co-founder Scott Rankin was inspired by the idea that "it's harder to hurt someone if you know their story" when he co-founded the organisation in 1992.

"We work with hidden issues and hidden communities," Rankin says. "Personally, I think people are – on the whole – good and that much of the social harm people experience is caused by ignorance, clumsiness and invisibility."

Thirty years ago, in the Tasmanian industrial town of Burnie, Big hART launched their first project, GIRL – a workshop program for young offenders that helped reduce juvenile offending rates in the town through the production of a large-scale theatre performance (which they later performed at the National Festival of Australian Theatre). Today, Big hART is the largest social change arts and media company in Australia, having worked with more than 10,000 people in 50-plus communities.

The numbers only tell part of the story, however.

"Numbers, data and 'evidence' are important, but they're not everything," Rankin says. "Depth, narrative and time are the hallmarks of exemplary work – creating space for lived experience to speak powerfully and for participants to benefit from both the processes involved in making art that can carry their voice as well as the impact of the voice itself."

Nowhere in Big hART's history is the impact of art more evident than in the eight-year Namatjira Project, a career highlight for Rankin. Big hART worked with the family of revered Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira, who had been denied all rights or revenue from his work and were living in poverty. Big hART helped put together the award-winning play *Namatjira*, which toured nationally and internationally, taking Namatjira's grandchildren – who acted in the play – all the way to Buckingham Palace. A groundswell of momentum led to the return of Namatjira's copyright to his family.



SCENE FROM HIPBONE STICKING OUT



BIG HART'S SONGS OF PEACE, 2022



ARTIST LISA TINDALL

The Room Where It Happens

To painter, quilter and sculptor Lisa Tindall, Sydney-based arts collective Studio A is her family. "At Studio A, I get together with my friends and make things. I sit down and draw and paint and have to make decisions myself," she says. "The staff members help if you need it."

Creating visibility was the thought behind Gabrielle Mordy and Emma Johnston starting the organisation in 2016, which assists artists with an intellectual disability access professional development. Studio A provides its current stable of 18 artists with administrative support as well as guidance on how to achieve their professional goals, whether it's

partnering with a mentor artist, learning a new skill or going on an international art residency. "One of the inspirations in starting Studio A was the lack of representation of artists with intellectual disability in Australia's cultural institutions," Mordy says.

Overturning the perception that artists with disability produce artworks only for therapeutic or recreational purposes has been key to Studio A's modus operandi. "We use professional art standards to platform and present the work, and position our artists' work in mainstream galleries and art competitions, where it can be critically engaged with and regarded for its artistic merit," Mordy says.

Challenging perceptions is something Tindall delights in. "When people see my artwork exhibited, they see a new side of me. Sometimes, they are shocked. I feel wonderful."

For Studio A artists, visual art is a language many use to convey stories they otherwise may not have been able to communicate. "People with intellectual disability can often struggle with mainstream forms of communication such as speech and literacy," Mordy says. "This can mean they are often misunderstood or worse still, deemed as not having anything to say. Visual arts can be a much more flexible language system."

Working with artists on an ongoing basis is integral to Studio A's goal to remedy the exclusion of artists with a disability from the mainstream art world. "If you struggle to read or write, send emails, compose a CV and/or travel independently, then it is really hard to pursue a career as an artist. It does not matter how great the art is that you produce," Mordy says. "If you cannot attend art school, you are denied access."

It's only been a few years since its establishment, but Studio A's artists have already attained professional acclaim. In 2021, two Studio A artists had their work selected for the Archibald Prize and one Studio A artist had their work selected for the Art Gallery of NSW's collection of works. This year alone, four Studio A artists were selected as finalists in the Archibald Prize.

What Mordy finds most rewarding as part of her job is seeing Studio A's artists access what they find meaningful. "For Archibald Prize-selected Studio A artist Thom Roberts, professional success means he can purchase whatever he wants at Kmart and can make as many photocopies as he likes at Officeworks. These are the activities Thom values, and his earnings mean he has the choice to access them.

"Professional success means that in a social setting, when he is enjoying what he terms a 'juicy beer', and when someone asks him, 'what do you do?', Thom can confidently look them in the eye and say, 'I am an artist'."

Art as a Lifeline

"It's important for older people to sit down and paint in community on our Country, talking about what they been doing in early days," says Irene Nangala, chair of Indigenous-run and owned not-for-profit health service Purple House. "They've got to be with the young people too, to tell them the truths so they can think and listen to the old people, what



IRENE NANGALA, CHAIR OF PURPLE HOUSE



WORKING ON KINTORE WOMEN'S COLLABORATIVE PAINTING

they're telling. Teaching them stories about the culture."

Purple House, located in the Western Desert of Central Australia, is quite literally the house that art built. The service means Pintupi people of Western Desert no longer have to leave their families and Country to seek treatment for end-stage renal failure.

It was funded by the sale of four collaborative paintings and other works by Papunya Tula artists from Walungurru and Kiwirrikurra, which in 2000 were auctioned off at the Art Gallery of New South Wales to the tune of \$1 million.

The service started with a dialysis clinic in Kintore in 2004 and from there has added 19 remote clinics, two mobile dialysis units – called The Purple Truck, which allows dialysis patients to head back home for festivals, funerals and other cultural business – and a bush medicine social enterprise called Bush Balm.

"Papunya Tula paintings are stories of Country, Tjukurrpa, sacred sites, knowledge, story and looking after people and culture," says CEO Sarah Brown, who has been working with the organisation's board of Indigenous directors for the past 20 years to fund dialysis infrastructure to help older people remain on Country. "If people had to leave their communities to come to town for dialysis three times a week, they would be taken away from everything they value and that keeps them strong."

Nangala says people like to come to the dialysis clinic in Kintore, which is important to her. "It's better for us and all the people to come and have a feed here, to sit down and relax and tell stories or whatever they want to do." ■