

Every picture tells a story

As part of a series of articles looking at the role of art in releasing the creative potential of people with dementia, **John Killick** showcases the work of Australia's Dr Julie Gross McAdam, founder of the McAdam Aged Care Art Recreation Therapy (MAC.ART) program. It involves participants translating their life stories into beautiful artworks, including murals

Julie Gross McAdam has developed a process – uniting two art-forms – storytelling and painting. The combination is unusual; the end-products are unique. She works with an aged care facility conducting personal interviews with residents with dementia, teasing out special features, such as neighbourhoods where they have lived, occupations they have had and particular interests they have developed, moving towards a social profile of the institution.

As Julie puts it, she is looking for “an overarching theme” to emerge for the artwork, “created by the common threads that are woven through the collective experience”. This design can then accommodate specific instances reflecting residents’ lives and stories. An example might be that of a particular occupation concentrated in one part of a town, which is



One of *The spirit of Colton Close* artworks, with ‘Nell’s house’ at bottom right. Photos courtesy Dr Julie Gross McAdam

relevant in the history of a number of residents.

A collaborative effort

As a graphic artist, Julie draws the outline of the mural for others to fill in the details.

Occasionally she does smaller one-day projects with groups of just a few people, but the process remains the same as for the larger murals. This is in no way to be compared with a colouring books approach. It is a far more complex and creative procedure than that. First is the fact that the artwork’s theme and outline



Detail of ‘Nell’s house’ in one of the *Colton Close* murals

emerge from the participants; secondly, because of the scale of the enterprise, the end result is the work, literally, of many hands. Usually the works only contain people’s names, but there are a few examples of artworks incorporating words into the designs.

The contribution which each person makes as part of the artwork’s grand design is not time-limited, and the line between storytelling and painting is often blurred, as new reminiscences emerge. Julie documents every stage of the process, so there is a dossier of notes and photographs as a record of each initiative. Finally, the names of everyone who has contributed are inscribed on the artwork, and there is an unpretentious ‘opening ceremony’.

Therapeutic benefits

I asked Julie to what extent she considers the process she is engaged in as a therapeutic

one. Whilst MAC.ART is clearly not a formal therapeutic technique, Julie claims it has therapeutic effects. She has been much influenced by the ideas of the therapist Edith Kramer who coined the term ‘modern folk art’ for this kind of initiative.

Apart from the benefits gained by individual participants, there is the communal effect of seeing shared history translated into a visual medium, which may speak more vividly than the verbal language. In the example given to illustrate this article, Julie explains the benefits brought to Nell (see ‘The story of Nell’, p12). For Nell, recounting life experiences was both life-affirming and enabled her to leave a tangible legacy behind. This is an example of what American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton termed “symbolic immortality”.

I also asked Julie what some of the participants had to say about the painting stage of a

MAC.ART project. Here are their comments:

"My fourth grade teacher told me I was no good at art, but you have made everything so easy for me."

"I cannot draw a straight line and I cannot believe that I have done this."

"I didn't think I had it in me."

"The colours are so beautiful. I can see the picture coming to life."

A 99-year-old man once told Julie: *"I have always had to apply myself to something more practical, so it is lovely at my age to discover something new and interesting to do."*

"There has been a common theme to emerge as I have been facilitating MAC.ART," Julie explained. "It is the misconception that only trained artists can paint. When viewing the finished artwork many onlookers believe that I must have painted the artwork for the participants. Family members sometimes comment that 'I don't believe that my mother could have done that', until they are shown photographs of her totally engaged in the creative process.

"Many still believe that people living with dementia are not creative and cannot concentrate long enough to participate, but my academic research and personal experience do not bear this out."

A celebration of life

Amongst the dozens of artworks created in the MAC.ART program, many of which can be seen in aged care facilities throughout Victoria, are some with the following titles: *Windows on the world, Edwardian postcard, Life is but a dream, The world's a-bloom, Worlds within worlds* and *The circle of peace*. These give some idea of the scope of the various projects. Since MAC.ART began in 2001, more than 3000 individuals have collaborated

The story of Nell

By **Julie Gross McAdam**

Every story is special and every picture tells a story. A particularly good example of the power of storytelling when combined with art can be found in the story of a resident with early stage dementia named Nell, with whom I worked in a Melbourne hostel in 2003.

Nell was 91 years old when she made her contribution to one of two artworks that are now known as *The spirit of Colton Close* artworks. Nell worked on a hostel artwork which was designed to commemorate the contributions and 'spirit' of a number of culturally diverse groups living at the facility. In the central image, a man and a woman represent residents from the four corners of the world who came to Australia and then spent most of their lives working in inner city factories. These two figures symbolically represent the supporting backbone provided by workers necessary to the building of the nation. What has come to be known as 'Nell's house' is situated in the bottom right hand corner of the artwork.

Nell was sitting by herself in the courtyard when I approached her to take part in the art activity. She was soon captivated with the story of the images and her gaze quickly settled on the outline of the row of terrace cottages. Studying this image, Nell made an immediate emotional connection, and began to share her story.

Nell's teenage years were spent working in a boot factory before the Great Depression, until she met her husband Bob at a local dance at Collingwood Town Hall. The couple fell in love and when they had saved up enough money to get married, they moved into the back room of a small terrace house. They shared the house with members of Bob's extended family. Both of Nell's children were born in that little green house with a red roof.



Nell, aged 91, working on one of the two *Spirit of Colton Close* artworks, painted by 220 residents, staff, family and friends of Colton Close aged care hostel in Glenroy Victoria. Photo courtesy Dr Julie Gross McAdam

The drawn image of an inner city terrace house generated powerful and emotional resonance in Nell. She felt connected to the house as she painted its roof red and later spoke of visiting "her house" to her son and other residents. She enjoyed the common experience of chatting and sharing her experiences of the artworks with others.

Nell was totally surprised by her achievements and she took quiet pride in the finished work. Participation in creating the artwork gave Nell an opportunity to reminisce and relay stories of her married life and her children, living in inner city Melbourne in a bygone era. For Nell, her participation seemed to fulfil her traditional role of respected elder and storyteller. As a custodian of the culture, sharing these stories would once have reaffirmed her position in a society where she would have been held in high esteem.

to create over 30 major artworks in Australia and North America.

In 2002 John Begg, then with Anglican Aged Care Services Group (now Benetas), in whose facilities a number of murals were created, commended the project in the following words: "This celebration of life through painting is a recognition that the opportunity to learn and to grow transcends age, disability and circumstance."

Pushing the boundaries

The MAC.ART program is obviously expensive to implement. Since its inception it has been funded by grants

from philanthropic organisations and exceptionally generous donations by individuals.

Throughout its history it has successfully appealed to aged care organisations, mainly because the content is specifically written to meet Australian aged care legislation, and the legacy of each project is a substantial and striking artwork of which a facility and its staff and residents can feel proud.

In the wider context of the arts in dementia, MAC.ART has already assured itself of a place for pushing the boundaries of what is possible. ■

■ John Killick has worked as a communicator with people with dementia for 21 years, has edited six books of poems by people with dementia and written many articles and books about person-centred care, communication and creativity. Contact him at: johnkillick@dementiapositive.co.uk Dr Julie Gross McAdam is a gerontologist, author, dementia care specialist, founder and director of the MAC.ART program. Contact Julie through her website: www.macart.com.au

The articles in John's current series on the arts feature individuals who have made a special contribution to the Australian scene.