

My Days in Prison

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This file was written by Max Darby for Art Education Victoria.

Those who think they know me don't realise that I spent time in prison. I could begin by talking about the thunderous, echoing, clanging of the heavy metal doors closing behind me as I entered into the inner sanctum of Pentridge and along the inside of the front wall near Bell Street; the hollow sense of helplessness and fear experienced by everyone who was ever incarcerated there. And, that unique feeling of 'aleness' – though being alone was seldom a reality. I won't go any further down that path though because this article is more about hope than hopelessness.

Before you freak, I didn't 'do time' there though I did 'spend time' there... considerable time there! This article is about 2 quite different kinds of experiences concerned with art and prison life.

Judy Atwell , a wonderful Primary Art Advisor to schools located in the Coburg Region, alerted me that there were three art students 'inside' who were trying to study in isolation for their VCE (some of you as 'old as me' might remember the wonderful Primary Art Advisors and Secondary Art Consultants who once supported art teachers in schools). At that time I was Chief Examiner for the VCE Art Course. I had no idea there were students there trying to cope with the challenges of study as well as the challenges of their own private hell. Interestingly, nor did 'the system' realise that 3 of its students were 'inside.' They were just numbers! I also had no idea about the nature of those challenges being undertaken without access to a teacher.

"Sure, I'd love to 'go inside' and be a mentor". So, that's where it all began.

As an experienced art educator I knew exactly what they needed to be successful. And, who better than the Chief Examiner to help them on their way, right? Wrong. I was totally wrong.

What they didn't need was a formulaic approach to success. What they did need was someone to listen to what they wanted to say, to respect how they chose to express it, and to verify their right to feel the way they did. Most importantly, what they wanted was an audience (me at that initial point) to be able to accept what they felt about their situation and life's experiences – a kind of 'communication of emotions' from one person to another that is based on the Leo Tolstoy view of what art is (the communication of emotion from one person to another). Having taken all of that on board, I then needed to work out how 'the system' could adapt to this 'personal stuff' rather than how their 'personal stuff' could be adapted to fit into 'the system'. I often wonder why this isn't the starting point of all art education rather than squeezing students into expectations that are not art expectations.

The works I viewed each time were all paintings (less damage might be done to 'self or others', I figured, with a paint brush than with chisels and a mallet!). They were always very quickly and expressively painted, almost carelessly, lacking in complex skills and technical competence, spontaneous in style with little planning (or little conscious planning), and demonstrating only a rudimentary understanding of formal composition and the elements and principles of design. Any temptation to think they were 'kind of horrible' in terms of what senior school art has become, was almost understandable given my experience with so much successful senior art. But, not one of the works could be ignored and each demanded

attention. They were strong, powerful, emotional, touching. I wonder now how Tolstoy might have seen those works? I wonder too how artists such as Munch (*The Scream*), Picasso (*Guernica*), Tucker (*Images of Modern Evil*) and Archibald Prize winner Adam Cullen (*Portrait of David Welham*) might have evaluated these paintings if they'd been examiners! I also imagine none of these artists would have done well themselves had they presented for VCE because their work wouldn't have performed well against the criteria devised for assessment in those days – or these!

It was far too easy to allow words such as 'obvious,' cliché, 'simple' or 'lacking in depth' to come to mind as I experienced different and new paintings (words we might have used for so-called 'weaker' VCE students). I remember one that was of poorly depicted rabbits (if reality was what you were looking for) caught painfully in traps. Dark, brooding, almost dirty browns set against a blue/black background with lots of blood; kind of 'frantic' in style, and probably painted without ever washing the brush. And, such an obvious metaphor. Another painting was primarily of dark, heavily textured grey stone walls with bars and barbed wire across a tiny window seen distantly in the left hand corner; little knowledge was shown of linear or atmospheric perspective. The walls in the painting were almost 'scrubbed' onto the paper and there were developing holes and tears on the surface. Nothing of life and beauty could be seen through that tiny window space, no hint of 'an outside'. No sun, not trees, no birds and no hope. There was another painting of a wilting flower in a glass jar (not a vase) located in a light deprived room surrounded by more dark and gloom shapes. I thought of the wonderful studies made by students showing flowers from different angles, overlapping and foreshortened, close up and far away, in association with other objects or people, hinting of sweet smells and soft touch – all rather powerlessly pretty, kind of like Valentine's Day! Here, just thorns. And, there was one of a lonely figure running in a dark, shadowy laneway with a street light in the far distance and another of a series of abstract works that were quite disorganised using 'dirty' greys, browns and black. I think of those things in the context of today's political and social climate and the experiences of those who arrive here, often unwelcome and

always with past and present dangers. And, despite the overdue 'apology', to those who have been here much longer.

All of the works were of similar topics although I now mostly remember the impact rather than the specific details. Often, there appeared to be little progression from one week to the next. Static, re-worked and over-worked. Strong feelings re-visited. 'Obvious', it now all seems, but unexpected back then. I had in mind the countless images I'd seen made by those living 'outside the walls'. I wondered what these guys (who called me mate when I wasn't really) were 'inside for' and what had encouraged them to take the directions they had. I was happy not to know as I began and left each session.

I do remember there was nothing 'bright and attractive' in the traditional educational sense and little that would appeal to those not tuned in to brutal honesty and hard-edged truth without compromise. I'd been indoctrinated to expect creative, imaginative, bright and expressive use of colours, skilful brushwork, tonal variations, well thought out and 'varied interpretations' of ideas and a kind of 'pseudo-intellectual' interpretation of 'the experiences of life' – a good, honest and well-heeled life!

I freaked at thoughts of the descriptions that would probably have been applied to the works I saw there, such as 'unskilled', 'lacking in talent', 'limited ability', 'careless', 'sloppy', 'clichéd', 'too obvious' or 'too simplistic'. The process wouldn't have allowed examiners access to personal information such as incarceration. I imagined these works being assessed or moderated and hoped to hell that people making decisions about them had at sometime experienced some level of despair and helplessness that would allow them to recognise the immense value and necessity of these highly expressive works. Even Chief Examiners rightly have limited access to 'things that happen' so I never did find out. But, I'd had experiences in the past where works which were

wonderfully different and a little outside the 'usual game plan' had appeared to have been severely disadvantaged. And, surely, if these people here could not express deep and dark thoughts and ideas in their art about their own reality, and have it valued, I would need to ask – 'of what use is art at all'?

Two things are important. Everyone has the right to express through their art what they feel and experience in life. That freedom of expression should be free from 'predetermined expectations' of what art is and what they must do to have their work valued. That freedom should not just apply to the art world, but to art made in schools. And, secondly, art teachers have unique opportunities to encourage the right of expression and to contribute to the well-being of the people with whom they work, regardless of youth or age; regardless of personal status and position in the social structure of life, and regardless of the expectations of art, education and society. And this applies just as much to school art as it does to prison art. In 2007 I wrote in another AEV article (*Authentic Assessment in the Visual Arts*) that the starting point for assessment in art should be with what students actually set out to do and what they actually achieve rather than with what we, who are generally middle class, well-educated, well-trained, well-organised, highly-experienced and usually Caucasian, think students should be doing. I suggested a new approach to assessment that allowed the use of 'emerging criteria' or 'emerging interpretations of criteria.' This would provide flexibility to modify or adjust how we make judgements about student art if what we encountered was different to what we predicted. Information that 'emerged' when the works were viewed could take precedence over what was expected. So passionate was I about it that I wrote my Doctorate Thesis about it! With such an approach the works made 'inside' would have been guaranteed a fair viewing.

The second examples of prison art (craft) to which I want to refer were made in Pentridge and Ararat jails and can be seen in the photographs accompanying this article (to be added). They were made by a prisoner

known simply here as 'John' who clearly was a skilled craftsman who could have made a valuable contribution to society given 'other' circumstances.

His example is quite different in some ways to those discussed above. In fact, it's easy to imagine that John's craft would have played a big part in whatever rehabilitation he was able to achieve. There is something about engagement in art, and the crafts, that is humanising, confidence-building and that contributes to a positive self-esteem. Among other things John made the boat, a jewellery box and a coffee or occasional table. He was incarcerated for a serious offence and, being of British descent, was deported immediately his time was served. Hopefully, he was able to make a better life for himself once he arrived back home. 'John' presented these woodworks to the father of a close friend of mine who nursed him during his Pentridge time in prison here. The exquisite inlays of veneer which form the patterned designs that can be seen in some of the works provide hints of a man who had another side to his personality and experience than his prison time would suggest. With greater guidance and/or care at some stage in his life, maybe even at school, there is the possibility that 'John' might have made something significant of his life. That, of course, isn't to say that he didn't. Christine's attempts to find out about him have been unsuccessful to date.

Look closely at the remarkable detail of the boat and its fixtures (photo to be included). There is such care and persistence, and such love of materials and correct working processes, and so much patience. My friend Christine still has those works and values them as much for the love and care they represent as she does for the skills used to make them. Perhaps one day they will find their way into a museum of memories about those imprisoned. They represent the best of prison life when usually we hear only about the worst of it.

My experiences 'inside' and the value seen in the works created there makes me realise and value the role of art teacher as 'care takers.' Care

takers of people. It is a privilege we should always accept and enjoy.

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