

***Eight More* Opening Thoughts**

Sarah McEwan

Thank you so much for having me here this afternoon. I wanted to thank Aunty Cheryl for welcoming us and acknowledge that Wiradjuri sovereignty has never been ceded.

My name is Sarah McEwan. I'm one of the artists in the *Eight More* exhibition where I collaborated with one of my favourite painters Lorraine O'Hara. I'm also the Creative Producer of the Cad Factory, an artist led organisation based in Sandigo, where we are trying to re-imagine the world through contemporary art practices.

I've been asked to speak today because of my involvement with the *Eight More* exhibition, and, because back in 2013, I was the curator of *8 Artists*, the exhibition that *Eight More* is referencing.

I can't tell you how much it means to me that nine years later there is a follow up exhibition to *8 Artists*, an exhibition that paired artists with and without disability to make new work that resulted in a stunning exhibition at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery in May 2013. The original eight artists were Jacqui Meyers working with her sister Julia Roche; Scott Lea collaborating with Vic McEwan; Kellie Hulm with Angela Coombs-Matthews; and lastly, Wayne Emerson collaborating with Jeff McCann.

The reason that *8 Artists* is being referenced is because it was the catalyst for the establishment of the supported studio, the Art Factory, run from Riverina Community College since 2016. Within an arts and disability context, having a supported studio in our community is a huge deal. It shows that we are doing globally recognised, best practice work. This movement began in 1974, with two studios, Creative Growth in San Francisco and Arts Project Australia in Melbourne. Both studios, which still run today, paved the way for learning disabled and neuro-diverse artists to access professional, contemporary art studios that positioned them as serious artists.

The key difference between a supported studio and a disability day service offering art programs is that supported studios employ professional practicing artists to work with its members. Professional practicing artists intrinsically understand artistic practice and the ecologies of the wider arts community, so they are able to offer specific guidance, mentoring, and pathways to assist in the navigation of the arts sector. This peer-to-peer relationship is key, placing the artists within the arts sector, as opposed to the disability sector. I love that within the supported studio framework it is artists supporting artists to learn from each other and to promote inclusion within communities of practices.

As someone who has witnessed and participated in our changing arts and disability landscape, I wanted to share a very, very brief history of how we arrived at our globally progressive position.

To do that, I'm going to take you back to 2010, when I worked at Eastern Riverina Arts, three RADOs ago. As part of my Projects and Communications role, I sat on

the Wagga Wagga Accessible Arts Working Party, convening meetings and delivering a forum.

The Accessible Arts Working Party also consisted of Caz Eckersall from Kurrajong, Leanne Dyer from Riverina Community College, Steven Payne from Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and various staff members from Sunflower House. We were a highly productive group and within two meetings we had a forum planned that focused on regional supported studio models called *Whose Afraid of Disability Arts?* We were going to deliver this forum in May 2011 when I was back from maternity leave – and with the new RADO, Scott Howie.

From this forum and inspired by guest speaker Matthew Perry from Art in the Garage Bega, I suggested to the Working Party that we should do a project together pairing artists from Kurrajong with contemporary artists from the Eastern Riverina region to make new work.

In collaborating with Caz Eckersall, Scott Howie, Stephen Payne and countless others to explore the differences between participating in the arts and having an artistic practice, we were all learning alongside each other during *8 Artists*. During the project we went in directions that we couldn't predict, but there was a form of activist solidarity between us.

In delivering *8 Artists* and having many conversations from 2011 to 2013, it was Leanne Dyer who picked up this momentum from the exhibition and had the vision and support from Riverina Community College, along with encouragement from Accessible Arts, to establish the Art Factory. In 2015, when Leanne asked me to collaborate on establishing the studio and to be the Creative Manager for the first year, I couldn't say no!

From beginning with seven artists, one day a week, the studio now runs four days a week, supporting 36 artists. This growth is a testament to the way the studio is run by Leanne Dyer, Jordy Bos, Kerrie Rudd, Leigh Hewitt, Elaine Camlin and Kia Watson, where they have created a safe space for people to flourish through engaging in contemporary art.

When I walk through the *Eight More* exhibition I am hit by how, as a community, we have demanded inclusion, and we have the Art Factory as a structure to support it, and I feel the legacy of everyone who has been working quietly away over many, many years, without any fuss, to make sure our arts ecology is open and welcoming.

I also see how *Eight More* is connected to the vastness and intricacies of our arts ecologies. For example, Georgia Crowden who is opening her beautiful and claustrophobic *Sink Forms*, in the E3 has worked at the Art Factory. Georgia is also part of a new female-led art collective Nest Studio, and you can see the work of her fellow collective members Tayla Martin and Brittany Hefren in the *Future Photographers Lab*. Brittany also works at Eastern Riverina Arts, in the job I had 10 years ago.

James Farley and Patrick Ronald from f. Stop who curated the exhibition in the Project Lab both have links to the Art Factory. Patrick was part of many conversations during *8 Artists*, and James and I worked together at the studio in 2016 where we share lots of great memories of the fun and friendships created in the first year of running the studio. James has collaborated with Liam Campbell in *Eight More* and seeing their work makes me so happy.

Isobel Lambert and Julie Montgarrett in *Eight More* have known each other for many years, as Julie also worked in the Art Factory too. As one of the most senior and established artists in our region, Julie was there facilitating workshops with five women from Utopia when they came to Melbourne in 1985 to create some of the breathtaking Batik Silks you can see in the main gallery space. Julie was doing a residency at the Meat Market, that had an industrial scale textiles workshop and she changed dye pots, heated wax, and laughed and yarned with the women.

When I asked Julie about how she felt seeing the silks, she told me, it was like seeing old friends, and that she loved the faint aroma of the wax in the gallery. She mentioned how seeing these silks was a way of hearing voices and culture from a part of Australia that isn't often seen. And that like the Art Factory studio, the silks were made in an atmosphere of joy, happiness, and togetherness.

Aunty Lorraine Tye and Brae Tye, whose work is in *Eight More*, is sharing Wiradjuri thinking and connection to place, which echoes many of the imagery in the *Land Marks* exhibition and acts as a reminder that we are living on ancient lands that have always been and always will be First Nations lands.

This web of overlapping lives and practices that we can see this afternoon speaks to the immense diversity of perspectives and cultures that make up our arts ecologies and communities. It reminds me that everywhere, all the time, people want meaning and have this absolute need to explore what it means to be alive and living in this only world we have.

I wanted to congratulate all the artists who are presenting work in these exhibitions for sharing their worlds with us. I want you to know that we are seeing you and thank you for generously sharing your perspectives with us.

I also wanted to congratulate the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and their team because if there is one thing I have witnessed over the years of living in the Riverina, is that throughout everything, this gallery remains an anchor point for so many of us. It has been a key organisation championing inclusivity for the past 15 years. And I see the gallery acting as an always infinitely reconfigurable vessel to hold us, so, thank you, for the work that you are doing. I hope everyone has a lovely opening. Thank you.