

# Supportive

ARTPLAY



ARTPLAY - ARTIST ESSAYS NO.3

AVIS GARDNER



Fig. 1

**HELPFUL, CARING, ENCOURAGING, UNDERSTANDING, REASSURING, SYMPATHETIC**  
Characterised by or displaying affirmation or acceptance or certainty etc.

*"A Positive Attitude"* (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/supportive>)

## BEGINNINGS

I have a highly detailed visual memory of my earliest years growing up as part of a small family unit in the industrialised southeast of London, by the Thames Estuary. I spent many hours alone and gained enormous pleasure from creative pursuits and have always felt a complete connection with the natural world. My home was a haven to me.

I recognise this time as the foundation of the passions I have today. They are a source of inner strength and support. While generally finding the whole experience of education excruciating and dull, I am very grateful to have been born at a time and place where women were deemed worth educating and I have also had the freedom to follow my passions. Arriving at Art College, I looked around and felt I was at last among a whole group of people like myself.

With no knowledge of the kinds of careers one could pursue as an artist, my Foundation Course at Canterbury College of Art, Kent opened my eyes to a variety of media and tools. I went on to complete my degree in 3D Design at High Wycombe College of Art and Design, specialising in Silversmithing, with Ceramics and Textiles as secondary subjects. It was here that I discovered my love of mixed media which I still have today.

It was always my aim to support myself, and now my family, through my creative skills. I have had to constantly change direction to keep bringing the money in. I have tried other non-art related work, but I am always drawn back to the creative path. I worked for many years in England as an illustrator/designer for surface pattern and ceramics and also as a designer /maker in my practice. I migrated to Australia in 2007.

## MY PRACTICE

I describe myself as a visual artist and a designer/maker specialising in silver and ceramics. I now primarily work in three areas: jewellery, sculpture and funerary art (fig.1).

I love the alchemy of clay and silver and enjoy technical processes and experimenting. There are so many steps along the way. I have many failures and then fantastic surprises. It is always exciting opening the kiln - this keeps me hooked. The outcomes stemming from these technical processes are unpredictable and that really is the key to my affinity with them - it is like life. My experimentation with the dynamic chemistry between media and techniques is how I physically express my ideas. These ideas are driven emotionally by the interplay of human relationships and the natural world, to which I believe we are inexorably linked and totally responsible for.

The symbolism woven into my work is driven more by what I know and believe than what I see. I have come to recognise many of my beliefs within indigenous cultures from all around the world.

***“Art, whether it be sculpture or adornment, was, and still is created to represent spiritual values that are basic to the survival of the community.”***

*Dubin in Simak and Dreibelbis, 2011, p.15*

***“Every art form has its own intrinsic aesthetic value but may also represent a common thread of meaning running through all cultures. Science notwithstanding, there is more than one “reality” in the world. What we commonly call mythology is really someone else’s religion. The Huichol belief in spirits and supernatural realms, which we tend to regard as mere superstition, may in fact reflect the true state of our inner minds.”***

*Barnett, 2009. <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3441-huichol-art-a-matter-of-survival-iv-an-art-in-evolution>*

Jewellery, Sculpture and Funerary Art may seem at first to be unconnected, but to me they are all very much inter-connected and I would term them supportive. My work has been described as “Found Treasure” and I like the fact that I am making pieces for individuals to “treasure” which in itself is emotionally supportive.

## WORKING WITH CHILDREN

My arrival in Australia was the beginning of my work with children. I launched this new aspect of my career at ArtPlay where I was supported by a great environment, experienced staff and the opportunity to share ideas with other artists. As a visual artist I have worked primarily alone, and I suddenly found myself meeting and engaging in thought-provoking discussions with a group of professional artists. While a steep learning curve, this was extremely stimulating and helpful, particularly towards my sense of “belonging”.

After running several small workshops at ArtPlay, I received a grant from the City of Melbourne to run the project “Creature Comfort Motel”. This project was a result of my concern that my close neighbours were clearing the land and all the living creatures in it in order to accommodate a larger house. I created “Resting Place”, an outdoor totemic sculpture designed for insects to reside within. In doing so I raised awareness of the negative consequences stemming from our diminishing Australian backyards.<sup>1</sup> From this experience I came to believe that the totem style was a perfect form for a collective children’s sculpture, comprised of individual child-made sections.

This “Creature Comfort Motel” project was multi-disciplinary, involving design, drawing, ceramics, sculpture, photography and science. Over one hundred 9-year-old children from three very different schools participated in a series of workshops. After introductory visits to the schools, I left work sheets with the art teachers in order to engage students in preliminary design development. This included references to insect behaviours and architecture, and microscopic images of nature. I returned a week later to work individually with the children - talking through their designs and helping them realise their ideas. I was encouraged by how involved the students were and by the complex designs they came up with. This school visit was vital, as I had to ensure I had all the equipment necessary to enable the students to realise their designs.



1. For more information about the changing face of the Australian Backyard see: Hall, T. (2010). *The Life and Death of the Australian Backyard*. CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Australia

2. For further information see: Townsend, W. & Weerasuriya, R. (2010). *Beyond Blue to Green: The benefits of contact with Nature for mental health and well-being*. *Beyondblue*. ([http://www.hphpcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/beyondblue\\_togreen.pdf](http://www.hphpcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/beyondblue_togreen.pdf))

Shortly before undertaking the project, I moved to a house with a garden of pebbles and conifers. There was no insect life at all - it was completely lifeless. So I set about making an organic 'living' garden, which now has an abundance of creatures thriving in it. I documented the progress as part of the project. This was a perfect example to show the children how small actions can have a huge impact. Important elements of this project were to endorse the positive aspects of connecting with nature and to impart a sense of empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Many children are fully aware of problematic issues concerning the environment today, but they have no idea what they can do about it.

At ArtPlay, the students were highly focused and determined to finish their work. Some young students demonstrated wonderful modelling skills and great attention to detail, while others showed great perseverance when dealing with a new medium (fig.2)

Clay shrinks quite dramatically when high-fired and each piece had to have an adequately-sized hole through it. There are also quite specific requirements to ensure the clay survives the firing process - for example the clay must not have air trapped anywhere and pieces have to be stuck together in a certain way. Therefore it was necessary to have the ratio of one adult (teacher, parent or ArtPlay staff member) to every four students.

I began each workshop with a short ritual. This involved forming a circle and using simple breathing techniques to help bring the children into the present and to let go of other thoughts. I find this to be a very helpful beginning to the creative process. The workshops were quite intense, lasting for four hours with very few breaks. One group took no lunch break at all. I think this could be attributed to their feeling of importance in coming to a special dedicated art studio.

The children involved came from very different backgrounds and this made no difference to the results. There were many children for whom English was a second language and some were new to Australia. Some children had difficulties with the communication requirements in their mainstream schooling. However, they excelled at working with clay and in doing so experienced a sense of achievement. Their 'sense of self' was supported.

Throughout the project I gained a huge amount of support from teachers. These teachers made the children feel emotionally comfortable and also went to great lengths to engage those who were initially less confident or who were struggling to visualise the final outcome. At the end of the project, it was often these children who asked, "Can we do this again?"

The designs were as varied as the children, and aspects of their personalities and abilities had much to play in the outcome. It takes various elements of your personality to enable original designs to come to fruition. These include discipline, perseverance, patience, curiosity and humour, as well as hand-eye coordination and the ability to learn new skills. I noticed how some children, whose designs may have appeared less complex, both enjoyed and were extremely competent at working with very little assistance. I observed the wonderful co-operation and support between students too. I didn't feel that any child was disappointed by their efforts. I think this exemplifies the belief that one should have high, but not unrealistic, artistic expectations and expectations to succeed.

Collaborative art projects promote 'connectedness'. I can empathise with feelings of separateness and there are many reasons for this in all social groups - being perceived as 'different' is enough. In disadvantaged and multicultural areas there is a more prevalent unfamiliarity of environment for displaced peoples, often adding a sense of fear and isolation which these projects can help to alleviate.<sup>3</sup>

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3. See: *Ted Talk by Professor Brené Brown (2010) The Power of Vulnerability*. 3.Ted Talks Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html) and

*Ted Talk by Professor Brené Brown (2012) Listening to Shame*.

*Ted Talks Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame.html)*



Interestingly, education of children can aid the family group as a whole. As awareness of the value of urban personal space is increasing; community, school gardens and backyard projects are thriving and the philosophy of 'Think Globally, Act Locally' is generating positive results. This works extremely well with children from all backgrounds, and art projects can help to increase children's understanding and curiosity for their local natural environments. With engagement, they recognise their connection to it and, in turn, to the outer world. As their connection grows, so does their desire to support and protect it for themselves. I see this as a perfect way to enhance environmental education.

Practically, I had completely underestimated the sheer volume of work I would be undertaking at home. Transporting, colouring and, in some cases, fixing, that amount of work was quite overwhelming. I felt an enormous sense of responsibility, as the children only had one opportunity and had taken it very seriously. After the workshops, I fired all the works, coloured and fired them again. I then installed all the pieces at ArtPlay as an exhibition. We held a launch party for all the children involved and their parents.

This was opened by Councillor Ken Ong of Melbourne City Council and included as guest speaker Dr Michael Nash, PhD Research Fellow Entomologist from The University of Melbourne. The launch was very exciting, especially because all of the children had yet to see their finished collaborative work. It reinforced to the children that their art works were taken seriously. As an art and science project, the presence of the entomologist added a real sense of value to the project and proved to be a highlight for the children (fig 3).

With the great support from ArtPlay, the project was successful in the end. This has increased my confidence and I also have now adapted working models for my residencies and other collaborative workshops. Artists are encouraged and supported at ArtPlay to take risks and embark on new projects, which often prove to be satellite models for work elsewhere.



Fig. 3

I've learnt that my principal aim is to inspire, and I do that best by sharing my passions with children and families. So although the art and craft skills I can pass on are important, they are secondary to being a mentor or role model. I hope I will inspire them to open their minds and find their own inner passions. A teacher I worked with said to me: "Your passion is contagious". This is the key to working with children for me. My passions are integral with my practice and enhance it. Unwittingly I have found what Sir Ken Robinson (2010) would describe as my 'Element' - a working combination of my skill with my passion.

When I embarked on this journey of working with children, I did not envisage the elements that this particular area would support in my own practice. It has been wonderful to see my concepts embraced, beautifully expressed and owned by many children. It is an experience that has opened up possibilities for my work. There is an unexpected pleasure too. It's a bit like jumping the waves - you feel a bit uncomfortable doing it as an adult alone, but when you are with a child it feels perfectly acceptable. To my mind, art is integral in our lives and vital for a healthy community. It is not just about being an artist, it is about activating the imagination.

***"The really wonderful thing about using your imagination is that you don't have to be an artist or an inventor; it works for everyone."***

*Christensen, 1994, p. 41*

So in line with the thinking of American Artist/Illustrator James C. Christensen, imagination has huge potential and energy, which creative subjects allow to unleash. During artistic pursuits the mind has the opportunity to experiment and explore new ways of thinking, where there are no right and wrongs. This enables us in life to approach problems of all kinds with a greater range of possibilities.

***"When we allow ourselves access to the treasures and raw materials in the imagination, we can meet any problem ..."***

*Christensen, 1994, pp. 16-17*

Thus supporting us on our life's journey.

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*References:*

1. Barnett, R.A. (May, 2009) *Huichol art, a matter of survival IV: an art in evolution from*<http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/3441-huichol-art-a-matter-of-survival-iv-an-art-in-evolution>
2. St. James, Renwick (1994). *A Journey of the Imagination: The Art of James Christensen. The Greenwich Workshop. Shelton, Connecticut.*
3. Dubin, L.S. in Simak, E and Dreibelbis, C. (2011) *African Beads, Jewels of a Continent. Africa Direct. Denver, Colorado*
4. Ken Robinson Ted Talk: *Bring on the Learning Revolution.* [http://blog.ted.com/2010/05/24/bring\\_on\\_the\\_re/](http://blog.ted.com/2010/05/24/bring_on_the_re/)