



Interview with Sue Davis

What is Our Feathered Neighbours ?

[Our Feathered Neighbours](#)¹ is an exhibition by twenty-four children aged 7-12 who attended Art Club in 2017. It explores the native birds that live beside us as our neighbours. Each year [Art Club](#)² creates a unique collaborative installation for the ArtPlay Gallery Space over five Saturdays during fourth term.

To begin this year's project I created twenty images and information posters about native urban birds that are commonly seen in Melbourne and we explored these birds with the help of the City of Melbourne Park Rangers. The children then chose their favourite bird to paint in watercolours. They also wrote about what they had learnt and why they had chosen that particular bird. This was a way to familiarize themselves with their bird by having to look really closely at it. Then, for the following four weeks, they created and painted cane and paper sculptures of their birds, starting with patterns I had made. Large paper maché trees, leaves, rushes and 'Billy Button' flowers were created from paper maché to represent the birds' habitat, and a soundscape of the birds' calls was commissioned from Bryan Phillips.

How did the subject matter and form of the exhibition come about?

Urban birds are a particular interest of mine that I am exploring through drawings in my own practice. This interest developed gradually through taking my dog for walks and noticing all the birds. Wanting to know more about them led me to read Tim Lowe's *New Nature*. He writes that 'nature' isn't something just in National Parks but is all about us, even in the city, and that many native birds and animals have adapted and thrived in urban areas. This was a bit of an epiphany for me. I wanted to explore this new awareness as, like me, many people overlook the birds around them and I thought it would be something that children would really enjoy. To my surprise, quite a few of the Art Club participants already knew a lot about birds which was great as it tapped into their existing interest and they were able to teach me things too.

At the time of doing this project I was unaware that this theme seems to be part of the zeitgeist. In 2017 there was an exhibition in Sydney at the Custom House called 'Something Else is Alive. An exhibition uncovering the secret city of animals that exists among us', a bird themed exhibition at Bundanon, and another artist at ArtPlay is doing a project on urban animals this year.

I chose to explore the birds through watercolour painting (which is the traditional method for those exquisite natural history illustrations) and sculpture, as there is nothing like sculpture for getting to know your subject from all directions. The cane and paper technique is a tried and tested method that I have used with children to quickly create large, cheap and environmentally friendly sculptures. The species of birds chosen dictated the habitat needed – trees, ground area, perches and marshes – and these were indicated quite minimally.

Why did you get City of Melbourne Park Rangers involved in the work and what did they contribute to it?

¹ <http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/arts-and-culture/artplay/whats-on/Pages/exhibition-our-neighbours.aspx>

² <http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/arts-and-culture/artplay/whats-on/Pages/artclub.aspx>

Research is the initial step with all art projects and what better way to research birds than to draw on an expert's knowledge. The Rangers were brilliant and great with the kids who got a lot out of their visit. Their many anecdotes about the birds brought the particular personality of each species to life as well as imparting information about how the birds' beaks and feet are adapted to what they eat. An understanding of the particularities of each bird helped the children to look closer at them when painting or sculpting them.

You've made many artworks with children that touch on environmental themes. Why is this important to you and to children?

It is my area of passion and the most important issue for our times. My aim is to ignite the children's passion for the environment so they can take better care of it than my generation has. Art is a way of training people to look very closely at things and to experience the wonder of nature. I also hope that from these projects children can see that art isn't just making pretty pictures—it's about ideas and about what matters to each individual artist. It can also be political and potentially make a difference.

What are some of the issues that have come up for you and for children when making this kind of work?

I am constantly dealing with the difficult issue of making environmentally themed work and yet not always using environmentally friendly materials. This project was made with paper maché using cane and paper which is OK, but we ended up using PVA glue, which is a plastic, rather than flour and water glue because it dried quicker and we had limited time. We also used acrylic paints (which again are plastic) because I haven't been able to find a suitable alternative. It is an ongoing issue to make my practice more environmentally friendly whilst dealing with cost and finding materials that are easy for children to use.

My work focuses on nature in urban areas, loss of habitat, the wonder of nature, the effects of plastic and the amount we consume. All these projects aim to inspire awareness and care for the environment or to encourage practical steps that make a difference, such as recycling or reducing consumption, because I do not want to fill children with a sense of dread and helplessness.

Projects like *Our Feathered Neighbours*, which have an exhibition outcome, also have conflicting needs. Working on a project together over a longer period of time is not often available to children and has many positive aspects—working collaboratively, negotiating, building relationships, patience and persistence, and experiencing the thrill of being part of something bigger than themselves. But the nature of these projects also means that children have to work to deadlines and the end product has to be of a robust and finished standard to endure an exhibition. This often works against the natural way that children work.

I notice that children are taught a lot about sustainability and recycling but without understanding why. Why do we want to save the environment? Why is it so special? What does recycling do? What is the connection between recycling and the environment? What is consumption? What does sustainability mean? I try to discuss the answers to these questions but it's tricky to do so without getting technical – it's an ongoing quest!