

# The Studio

The history of St Vincent's Artist in Residence Program



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## The studio

I think of my studio as a vegetable garden, where things follow their natural course. They grow, they ripen. You have to graft. You have to water.

– Joan Miro

This is the place of creative incubation. At first, you may find nothing happens there. But, if you have a sacred place and use it, take advantage of it, something will happen.

– Joseph Campbell

On a warm, fragrant morning in early January, I sit amidst a small olive grove overlooking the environs of Kew. There is peacefulness in the air and a renewed sense of hope. I am on the grounds of the Caritas Christi Hospice where people with life limiting illnesses, and often no possibility of a cure, come for some quality of life. This is also the home to St Vincent’s Artist in Residence (AIR) Program, where a wing of nine rooms repurposed as studios stretches out across the grassy hill.

Originally based on the tenth and twelfth floors of St Vincent’s Aikenhead Building in Fitzroy, the AIR Program moved to Caritas Christi in 2008. Here, the studio spaces are awarded to artists annually based on an application process, which is then assessed by the Art Committee. Studios are provided free of charge to the successful artists in exchange for a donation of artwork created during the residency. Forming a large part of the St Vincent’s Art Collection,

these donated works find homes on the walls of St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne (SVHM) for the ongoing enjoyment and contemplation of patients, family and staff.

Operating for nearly twenty years, St Vincent’s AIR Program has, to date, provided over one hundred visual artists with the opportunity to occupy studio space within St Vincent’s Hospital and freely create work. Conceptually, an artist in residence is an artist who creates work in response to their surroundings; where they can work consistently in their studio and be surrounded by their materials and thoughts and inspirations. The overarching theme of community wellbeing is always recognisable within the resulting works. Indeed, the positive, cathartic impact of art on patients has had a long, rich history that reaches as far back as ancient Greece. According to Richard Cork, ‘priests took cue from patients’ dreams when devising therapeutic treatment, large and handsome halls called Asklepieia were built to provide suitably soothing contexts for nursing’<sup>1</sup>.

The State Library of Victoria is home to a collection of thirty-six pencil drawings by the artist Jessie Davis. Dated 1948, these delicate sketches are depictions of patients at the Allergy Clinic at St Vincent’s. Here, patients sit in the waiting room looking, in turn, sombre, morose, numb, calm as they wait for their names to be called. A bespectacled man with a pipe; a hatted lady surrounded by her bags; a child with its head in its hands (crying? In pain?); and on the reverse of a Heinz Turtle Soup label, a man in an overcoat and hat with a rolled up newspaper tucked under his arm, leaves the clinic after his consultation. By responding directly to the comings and goings of the clinic, Davis could be considered an early artist in residence at St Vincent’s Hospital.

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<sup>1</sup> Cork, p.7

The beginning of St Vincent’s Art Collection was established in 1993 during the Hospital’s Centenary Celebrations. Following the tireless efforts of the Centenary Celebrations Committee, an art exhibition was planned with the view to taking a commission on all art sales. The proceeds would then be channelled back into purchasing art for a Hospital collection.

Under the curatorial leadership of Julie Lewis, the Centenary Celebration Art Exhibition was opened on 7 August 1993 at the Victorian Artists’ Society Galleries in East Melbourne. The show proved a huge success and featured works by over fifty renowned artists who had been invited by the Committee to participate. In the Hospital’s newsletter of September 1993, it was reported that 25% of the works on display had been sold during the exhibition<sup>2</sup> (which, according to the minutes of the SVHM Centenary Sub-Committee, equated to a profit of approximately \$14,000<sup>3</sup>).

In 1995, a new era of St Vincent’s was heralded with the completion of the \$160 million Inpatient Services Building. Then Chief Executive Dr David Campbell had a vision that SVHM should be warm and welcoming, not cold and clinical<sup>4</sup>. Patients were officially admitted to the building on the 12 September 1995. Upon opening the doors, Dr Campbell said, ‘We believe it is important, if people come to the hospital feeling comfortable in the surroundings, it helps in the healing process, there is less fear and anxiety’<sup>5</sup>. In addition to the considered architecture – brimming with plenty of natural light and open spaces – the building was designed to prominently display the artworks that formed the burgeoning St Vincent’s Art Collection.

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<sup>2</sup> St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne Newsletter, 1993, p.1

<sup>3</sup> St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne Centenary Sub-Committee, 13 August 1993, p.3

<sup>4</sup> Herald Sun, 1995, p.55

<sup>5</sup> Dr David Campbell quoted in Herald Sun, 1995, p.55

In her article ‘Art in Hospital Spaces’, Jane Macnaughton recognises that ‘hospitals are potentially moving towards providing a “cultural resource” for the communities they serve in the same way as other important openly accessible public spaces, such as city squares, parks and shopping malls’<sup>6</sup>. As such, an aestheticised hospital has the potential to become a symbol of progress for its community.

According to the 1995 Annual Report, the Centenary Art Collection ‘was further consolidated by a donation from St Vincent’s Private Hospital of 150 crucifixes’<sup>7</sup> designed and created by Melbourne artist Heather Ellis. The report states that ‘the artwork is a major feature of the new hospital and helps to enrich the environment for patients, their families and staff’<sup>8</sup>. The following year, over 100 paintings were donated, loaned and purchased for the new building, further expanding the Collection.

But by far the most crucial component of the Collection is the donated works resulting from nearly twenty years of the AIR Program. In 1996, St Vincent’s hosted its first, official Artist in Residence. Brother Patrick Henigan was a Franciscan Friar and painter who had completed his Diploma of Drawing between 1970 and 1978 at the Prahran College of Advanced Education. Commissioned by St Vincent’s Hospital and generously supported by the Green Shop, Brother Patrick worked for six months as an Artist in Residence in Fitzroy’s Aikenhead Building to render the Patron Saints of the nine Care Centres.

A photograph exists of Brother Patrick, brush in hand and a look of concentration on his face, as he sits on the tenth floor of the Aikenhead

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<sup>6</sup> Macnaughton, 2007, p.86

<sup>7</sup> St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne Annual Report, 1995, p.24

<sup>8</sup> St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne Annual Report, 1995, p.24

Building. Natural light from the window streams in over his shoulder and across his canvas as he applies paint in broad, lively strokes. From Julian of Norwich, Care Saint of the Psychiatric Service Inpatient Unit (‘All will be well and all manner of things will be well’<sup>9</sup>), to St Peter, Care Saint of the Intensive Care Centre (‘Silver and gold I have none, but what I have I give to you...’<sup>10</sup>), Henigan’s Patron Saint paintings were depicted in a way that could be understood by all, irrespective of religion. The series was launched on the 18 November 1996 and installed in the Care Centres in 1997.

From 1996, the Collection continued to grow as the result of loans of works from the Vizard Foundation and the National Gallery of Victoria, as well as a range of artists including Reg Cox, Wally St John, and Mary Stylianou. At the same time, many organisations and artists generously donated works, such as the ANZ Bank, and the Dobell Foundation, and artists including Jennifer Joseph and Jeffry Wilkinson.

In order to properly maintain the Collection, an art committee formed in order to establish an art policy and terms of reference. On 9 April 1998, the terms of reference for the Art & Aesthetics Committee were submitted for review, whereby the main objectives were to ‘maintain the architectural and artistic integrity of St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne and its art collection’, and ‘to create an aesthetically and spiritually supportive environment through the use of visual art mediums at SVHM campus’<sup>11</sup>.

On the 14 May 1998, Committee member and St Vincent’s Hospital Art Curator Julie Lewis raised the possibility of establishing an artist in residence program. The committee minutes state that the studio space could be made available to

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<sup>9</sup> Care Centre Saints St Vincent’s Hospital pamphlet, 1996, n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Care Centre Saints St Vincent’s Hospital pamphlet, 1996, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Art & Aesthetics Committee minutes, 9 April 1998, n.p.

an artist at the SVHM campus free of charge, and that ‘in return the artist would be commissioned to create an artwork that could be added to the SVHM Art Collection. Space on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of the Aikenhead has been previously used for this purpose’<sup>12</sup>. The proposal was met with great enthusiasm and was approved by the Committee in principle.

During the Art Committee meeting on 9 July 1998, Lewis shared an application for Artist in Residence by the artist Annette Douglass. Bringing with her a rich exhibition and residency history, Douglass expressed her desire to use her residence at St Vincent’s as a way of connecting with the area and collaborating with members of the St Vincent’s community – her studio door would always be open<sup>13</sup>. On the 12 November 1998, it was noted in the Art Committee minutes that ‘the Artist in Residence has commenced her work in room on 9<sup>th</sup> (sic)<sup>14</sup> floor, Aikenhead’<sup>15</sup>.

Following her time as a St Vincent’s AIR, Douglass donated her work, *In the Garden*, to the Collection, and it still hangs proudly on the Hospital’s wall all these years later. It is a vivid, uplifting work, where peach and fuchsia tinted roses bloom across a landscape of yellow, while two blue birds nest serenely amongst them.

Since these early days, the Program has enjoyed a rich and diverse group of Artists in Residence working across a range of mediums and techniques, including Bruce Earles (2000), Ben Quilty (2002-03), Vincent Fantauzzo (2005-06), Maryanne Coutts (2007), and Marco Luccio (2007-08). Now a household name, when Quilty became part of the Program in 2002 he was just 29 years

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<sup>12</sup> Art & Aesthetics Committee minutes, 14 May 1998, n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Art & Aesthetics Committee minutes, 9 July 1998, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> I believe this should read 10<sup>th</sup> floor because the 9<sup>th</sup> floor was not used as part of the AIR Program.

<sup>15</sup> Art & Aesthetics Committee minutes, 12 November 1998, n.p.

old and still an emerging artist, having just completed his Bachelor of Arts and Design at the University of Western Sydney the year before. During his residency, he was awarded the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship. Following the completion of his residency, Quilty donated his painting *St Vincent’s Studio* to the Collection. Thick with Quilty’s trademark impasto, *St Vincent’s Studio* depicts the spatial lightness and air available on the top floor of the Aikenhead Building across soothing plains and cool hues.

The studio as muse was also a theme for St Vincent’s AIR Maryanne Coutts. Coutts was the recipient of the Portia Geach Memorial Award for portraiture by Australian women with a work she completed during her twelfth floor studio residency in 2007. Entitled *Melbourne*, the painting is a self-portrait of Coutts standing in the midst of her studio. A haven of creativity and inspiration, the glassy blue Melbourne skyline is visible through the studio’s generous windows. According to the judges, the work ‘presents a profoundly satisfying integration of interior and exterior space and light which links the subjective space of artist’s studio to the world outside, and by implication, to the psychological space we occupy as viewers’<sup>16</sup>.

Between 1996 and 2008, the Aikenhead’s breathtaking views and luxury of space was, for the artists, a deeply rewarding experience. As photographer Jessie Boylan reflected upon her residency in 2007:

Looking out across the top of the city from the tenth floor of St. Vincent’s has been a wonderful experience each time I am up there. Some people find the long desolate corridors quite creepy - however I revelled in the serenity and the

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<sup>16</sup> Federation, <http://federation.edu.au/about-feduni/our-university/history/art-and-historical-collection/honour-roll/c/dr-maryanne-coutts-1960-> (accessed 29 January 2015).

questions about the history of the place and the people that were perhaps once there.<sup>17</sup>

A new era of the Program began in 2008 when it was decided that there was ‘an increased OHS risk in Aikenhead...particularly with fire...what makes the risk even higher is the significant drop in traffic from the tenth floor up’<sup>18</sup>. The Art Committee put forward a request to the CEO and Executive support of the Mission Department to support its recommendation that the AIR Program move from levels ten and twelve of the Aikenhead Building to the Mannix Wing of Caritas Christie Hospice in Kew. On 28 July, it was announced that the recommendation was successful. With the assistance of the Hospital’s new art curator, Monique Silk, the relocation of the artists to Caritas Christi was smooth and successful, taking place between 2008 and 2009.

With this new era came a strengthened relationship between artists and the St Vincent’s community, whereby greater opportunities to meet with patients and their families became possible. Jenny Zhe Chang was Artist in Residence at Caritas Christi between 2010 and 2011 and she revelled in the opportunity to connect with the community:

Normally (the patients and their families) came to visit my studio. They asked me questions or told me whatever they wanted. It is a privilege to have those experiences. It gave me a whole new perspective in life. It has inspired me to create my signature artwork.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jessie Boylan, email communication, 2007. (Reproduced with the artist’s permission).

<sup>18</sup> Monique Silk, email communication, 16 May 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Jenny Zhe Chang, email communication, 2011. (Reproduced with the artist’s permission).

Zhe Chang’s donated works made during her residency reflect the deeply connected way she felt about her situation. In particular, a series of three tulips painted on canvas in serene hues of blue in varying stages of bloom – pale sheathe-like petals fold out in space. Unlike Sylvia Plath’s tulips (‘a dozen red lead sinkers round my neck’<sup>20</sup>), Zhe Chang’s tulips are calming and undemanding – they do not chastise the viewer. They soothe.

2012-13 AIR Catherine Bell also embraced her time at Caritas Christi to connect with the patients. Bell’s residency resulted in an exhibition held at the Substation in Newport entitled *Flower Tower*. Featuring a four-metre tower of individual, handmade paper flowers made in collaboration with the palliative day care patients at the Hospice, *Flower Tower* is an uplifting monument to life itself. According to Bell, ‘the idea was to foster collaboration and connectivity where the individual creative contribution of each flower is vital to the larger communal work’<sup>21</sup>. Of its exhibition in a contemporary gallery setting, Bell felt it would ‘help demystify what happens in the hospice setting’<sup>22</sup>.

As I sit in the olive grove at Caritas Christi, aware that one or two of the artists are busily working away in their studios behind me, harnessing the creative power and inspiration of the surroundings, I consider what it means to the artists to connect with the St Vincent’s community during the creative process and then again, once the work has been made and hung on the walls. As 2010-11 AIR Jan Lewis reflected:

If I gain another residency at St Vincent’s I would value some interaction with any patients who are ok to sit outside in the beautiful gardens or even just to share the same view...not necessarily to talk...just to be with someone and share a moment – a time – a piece of fruit – a view.

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<sup>20</sup> Plath, 1981, p.161

<sup>21</sup> Catherine Bell quoted in Coen, 2013, p.13

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Bell quoted in Coen, 2013, p.13

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