

Lived Experience, Practice, and the Academy

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This paper explores my personal journey of where, when, and how I have “landed” to now. It is a sketch of my intellectual development and the impact of cross-cultural sources on my work, my thinking, and my visual practice. I follow a chronological way of looking at how I became informed about philosophy, art history, practice, and Indigenous ways of knowing for the sake of clarity. Although one’s life is not linear and operates in a more cyclic way, I reveal how I was influenced by the diverse lived experiences from childhood up until now.

Key words: lived experience; Indigeneity; ways of knowing; practice; ontology; art; relational; agency

Revisitation is an important learning event. When you go back to a past story it is unchanged but you are different, so you get a new view of what the story means because of who you have become. The redirection that comes from living awareness of the whole of life is key to decolonization. The intelligence of Country reveals itself to us if we listen well, observe these connections closely, speak softly, and be ourselves (Uncle Charles Moran, Uncle Greg Harrington and Norm Sheehan 2018: 78).¹

Observing and listening in a retrospective way seems to elicit a chronological response. Not because it is linear, but because knowledge compounded with learning is exponential, and in this way, it is much simpler to explain it—without forgetting that life operates in a cyclic way, building upon new knowledge with old knowledge and experience. Considering how I think about things in general, I seem to question the idea of “representation.” Representation in this sense is something I consider to be almost flawed and given too much credence throughout history and in contemporary modes of thinking. I believe my stance on representation has been formed as “we” have had representation forced upon us as Indigenous peoples and have found it difficult to enact our right to self-define. This has permeated throughout my own lived experience and intellectual and visual practice development.

Early experiences etched into my existence were significantly about negotiating time and space. Growing up in Redfern, Sydney, and coming from a very large family, time and space were always something to be negotiated. There were always people around, and being the youngest in the family meant that my status to negotiate was not as forthcoming as others. I start this positioning as a way of formulating how I became introspective and developed a sense of observation and “listening” in the various environments that I have experienced. This is the fundamental formation of becoming very observant, which forms the basis of the way of researching and practice that I conduct today. Being observant also meant witnessing in detail many events in our family that, although not very positive and in fact traumatic, meant I developed an acute sense to detail—and in particular a sense to visual detail premised on memory and an articulation of it in visual and written form.

One the most significant events in my formative years as a child was the death of my father,

which proved to be positive for the family. A violent non-Indigenous man with substance-abuse issues, he set the foundation of our childhoods. However, our mother was much stronger than he, and through her strength, commitment, and resilience, we survived his wrath. It is through this event of death that, although liberating, created a strong desire inside me to understand the “living” world that we existed in. At this time, I remember my mother suffering and not being able to cope with many things surrounding her. I felt that I became her crutch and she shared so much with me and I in turn attempted to help her in my limited way. She moved through a difficult phase in her life, which impacted on me in a very strong and defining way. Whilst being observant, I spent time learning about her, her place, and how she navigated the world. I was very concerned and worried about losing her, so whenever something occurred in her life, I felt that I was there. This is what brought us closer. Two additional significant things occurred which further built upon the foundations of who I have become. Firstly, there is a significant presence of mental illness in my family, and in particular, schizophrenia. Through being close to my mother and her experience of seeing her children suffer from mental illness, I became the conduit in explaining what this illness, schizophrenia, was. Therefore, I started to read. For her, my reading started from a medical pamphlet on schizophrenia I found in a clinic and progressed to the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and subsequently Jung, Lacan, and Kristeva. I developed an acute understanding of psychoanalytical discourse from written material and through real lived experiences with family, and relayed my understanding back to my mother. This also developed in concert with a strong feeling of the absurdity of life, coupled with my growing interest in creating visual images (and the ownership of time and space in making these). So I began to look at art history, theory, practice, and philosophy. I started the journey to be able to articulate my thinking of and about representation.

What was also significant at this time was that representation became an issue. It wasn't real—the world existed in this strange binary of the real (Indigenous) and the representational (what we “ought” to be). It is here in my time and space of making that I found the idea of “becoming,” of things in the world evolving from a “potential” and from “being.” It was here that I developed a sense of *agency*, although I did not know it was called that back then. I was introduced to Martin Heidegger. In order to develop an understanding of Heidegger, I went back and looked into Aristotle's physics and metaphysics to uncover this notion of “potential.” I arrived at this juncture through an overturning of Plato's *mimesis* and reconfiguring art as presentation instead of representation. In view of Aristotle's *Physics*, the idea of “potential” (i.e., “presencing”) grounds itself. By his method of epistemology (derived from the Socratic Dialectic), Aristotle explains “coming into existence” teleologically by concepts of *substance* and *attributes*, *matter* and *form*, *potentiality* and *actuality*, the *causes* and *motion*. However, it is within his fourth book of *Metaphysics* that he says, “Being is said in various ways.”² Being is relative to *substance*. Furthermore, there is *potential* and *actual* Being. *Potential* Being is coextensive with his concept of *matter*, while *actual* Being is either pure *form* or *actualized* by *form*. His idea of *potential* Being is based on his view of a non-real or a non-Being, that exists insofar as it is *potentiality*, which, in turn, leads to the sense of real Being. What is of great importance is that actuality is prior to *potentiality* both in concept and essence as it is necessary that concept and cognition of the former precede that of the latter. In this *motion*, created from “potentiality” to “actuality,” there is a “happening” or “presencing,” and this is what Heidegger believes to be the fundamental Greek experience of reality. He saw the idea of the “presencing” as *techne*, a “revealing” or bringing-forth, where *alethia* (unconcealment) of truth happens. Heidegger is essentially referring to *agency*—in this sense, the bringing-forth. The self-revealing nature of being, and the notion of *standing-reserve* where things come forth from concealment—artwork operates in this mode of *alethia* (*truth*), where it opens up a “world.” For Heidegger, the setting-up of a World and the setting forth of Earth become two essential features in the “work-Being” of the work. This

impacted on my understanding of making art in a substantial way.

It is here that in order to understand this trajectory I went into Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Nietzsche in his stance of Platonism as nihilism states: “We possess art lest we perish of the truth.”³ This statement is significant as it shifts understandings of art as representation, as *mimesis*. It also further articulates Schopenhauer’s interrelatedness between the material and metaphysical worlds according to his world as will and representation. It is here that I found the ontology of practice as one that further obliterated the ideas surrounding representation predicated on Plato and colonial trajectories. This had a major impact on me in terms of creating my own *space, place, and time*. This was a defining moment for me as I learnt how to focus on the premise of self-definition as a way to dismantle the modes of representation—especially those representations constructed about “us.”

For Schopenhauer, understanding of our world and our “will” in relation is vital to understanding Nietzsche’s overturning of Platonism. Within this mode, he “overcomes” the notion of *nihilism* by the “eternal recurrence of the same”: “Recapitulation—stamp becoming with the character of Being—that is the supreme will to power” (Heiddeger 1984: 38-9).⁴ Thus he creates nihilism within nihilism, the affirmation of “becoming” and the new valuation of uppermost values that are fundamental for all Beings; the “will to power” being the “eternal return” itself, and the “will to power” establishing the “will to power as art,” therefore the “will to create.” Nietzsche’s view of art and truth is established here. He gives us five statements:

1. Art is the perspicuous and familiar of the will to power,
2. Art must be grasped by the artist,
3. According to the expanded concept of the artist, art is the basic occurrence of all beings: to the extent that they are, beings are self-creating, created,
4. Art is the distinctive countermovement to nihilism,
5. Art is worth more than the truth (Heiddeger 1984: 71-6).

Truth represents an otherness that Nietzsche regards as degenerative, the will to truth being a degenerative symptom. And it is in this sense that visual practice is seen in an ontological rather than an aesthetic way. From this positioning, I came to see visual practice as a vehicle to create ontologies and to “reveal” some sort of essence of Being, which opposed the idea of “representation” on a number of levels. I then arrived at this conceptualization of new materialism, which I realized was not new at all. It is here that I revealed, to myself, how the performative actions of creation became more important than the finished work of art itself. The finished work was pushing itself into the discourse of representation. Notions in new materialism seemed all too familiar in Indigenous ways of knowing. In this, the idea of representation again arose and we become second-class once again. I was never satisfied with the binaries that philosophy presented, as it did not correspond entirely with my lived experience. It always fell short, until I started to articulate the premise of *Country* as subject. It is here that I fundamentally understood the shift from will of ourselves to the will of Country.

As a young teenager, I remember in particular travelling across Australia from Sydney to Perth and experiencing the enormity of Country. I was overwhelmed by this experience, which has impacted on my Being and my thinking ever since. This is something I attempt to articulate in my visual practice today, to “present” the subjectivity of Country. Art practice created a space to explore and reveal the world from multiple perspectives and positionings. And it was here that I started to also reintroduce my Indigeneity and past into ideology as predicated by Indigenous authors. These included Lester Irrabina-Rigney, Veronica Arbon, Norm Sheehan, and Mary Graham. My past seemed to crystalize into this way of looking at the world that was articulated by Indigenous thinkers and philosophers.

I developed a strong theorization of the existence of western ideology being premised by the subject and for the subject. In particular, an Althusserian ideology is an imaginary relation to reality and has no history. Not only does ideology represent a false consciousness, the ideology of humanity does itself operate as this type of consciousness. Knowledge cannot have agency as it relies on the subject. All “otherness” outside the subject is denied agency. On the basis of the Althusserian relationship between ideology, subjects, and the real conditions of existence, the notion of an imagined consciousness presents itself. In light of this, the separation continues where all other modes of thinking are devalued, especially an Indigenous ideological framework based on lived experience. This separation of value is premised on power and the dominant culture that maintains it. I found in this moral superiority that a false consciousness is perpetuated, furthering the split between the real and imaginary worlds. It is ideology and representation itself that further the divide by offering non-existent relationality and agency. In Norm Sheehan’s *Imagined Moral Centre*, ideologies interpellate individuals with no relationality. In this *Imagined Moral Centre*, the dominant power hides its own inadequacies behind othering. An Indigenous ideology positioned on this is the relational as predicated on Country. Relationality has agency. Indigenous Australian methodological approaches operate in their own right, and at the same time they accept existing binaries and ambiguities, as they are not linear in their worldviews and epistemologies. What I found here was the vital importance of *Place*.

Mary Graham speaks of the importance of *Place*, as *Place* operates between the real and the immaterial, the abstract and the concrete. “For most Westerners, inquiry precedes place. Knowledge acquisition both defines and supersedes place. Supporters of the Western scientific method reject the claims of Indigenous knowledges” (Graham 2009: 71).⁵ For Indigenous peoples, *Place* precedes inquiry. *Place* and *Country* are both epistemologically and ontologically central to our ideologies and beliefs. *Place* is a geographical location but also a way of thinking; it is *Land* that has its own Subjectivity. It is here that my practice articulates the subjectivity of *Country* as a living thing—it informs us who and how we are.

Throughout this journey, teaching/lecturing enabled me to develop deeper critical thinking and strategies for imparting this knowledge onto others. It also created structures that could be pragmatic. This became a good foundation to then move further into a research career. This research career was initially philosophically and text-driven but has evolved into practice-led research. I have also been fortunate to share my experience in building other Indigenous peoples’ capacities both in a career, research and practice sense. I now am situated in the important pursuit of decolonizing and Indigenizing curriculum and destabilizing colonial structures. The academy is a site of power, and I operate at the cultural interface of that power and through Indigenous lived experience. Ultimately what I have learned is a combination of learned and lived experience. My learned experience as such in education has always been and still is premised on my lived experience. This is how I have come to view the world and the thinking within it—for better or for worse. I would like to conclude with the wise words of Mary Graham, “I am located, therefore I am.”

Brian Martin is a leading Indigenous artist and academic. Born in Redfern Sydney, he is from Bundjalung, Kamilaroi, and Murrawarri ancestry. He holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts with Honours from the University of Sydney, a Graduate Diploma of Vocational Education and Training from Charles Stuart University, and a PhD by research from Deakin University. A practicing artist for 27 years, Brian has exhibited his work nationally and internationally. His artwork is held in various private and public collections, including the National Gallery of Victoria. His publication history has investigated the relationship of materialism in the arts to an Indigenous worldview and Aboriginal knowledge framework and epistemology. He has further reconfigured understandings of culture and

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 - 3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1888).
 - 4 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Vol. 1 and 2. The Will to Power as Art and The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1984).
 - 5 Mary Graham, "Understanding Human Agency in Terms of Place," *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, no. 3, (2009): 71-7.