

Intimate Imaginaries

Intimate Imaginaries is a major group exhibition featuring artists who currently work out of the nationally and internationally renowned studio of Arts Project Australia (APA), a gallery and studio based in Northcote, Victoria, that supports artists with intellectual disabilities. Highlighting 13 vital contemporary practices that have emerged from this self-described 'boisterous hive of creativity' over the past five decades, *Intimate Imaginaries* is the first major exhibition surveying the work of APA artists in an Australian museum.

Coinciding with APA's 50th anniversary, the importance of the exhibition is acknowledged by APA's Executive Director Liz Nowell, who writes in her Foreword for the accompanying exhibition catalogue:

For 50 years, Arts Project Australia has remained steadfast in its commitment to supporting artists with intellectual disabilities and advocating for their rightful place in the art historical canon. This exhibition marks a critical step forward on that journey and reflects a profound shift—one that moves disabled artists from the periphery to the centre of contemporary art.

Too often, artists who do not fit neatly into traditional categories of art are pushed to its edges. *Intimate Imaginaries* challenges this notion and stands as an important moment of recognition, one that I hope signals a lasting change in how the broader art world views and embraces the work of artists with disabilities.

The significance of this exhibition cannot be overstated. For the 13 artists involved, having their work shown in a museum of TarraWarra's stature is a profound validation of their practice, and recognition that they belong at the heart of contemporary art.

From the Curator

Anthony Fitzpatrick:

1. What is the title of this exhibition and how was it decided?

The title of this exhibition brings together two terms which, for me, are the most resonant when I think of the qualities that lie at the heart of the unique entity that is Arts Project Australia (APA). For over a decade, I have had the great privilege and pleasure of visiting APA many times—as both an avid visitor and a guest curator in their exhibition program—and the thing that has always left the strongest impression is the irrepressible creative hum that emanates from the studio. The vitality and energy that is generated on a daily basis by this self-described ‘boisterous hive of activity’—where over 150 artists are provided with time, space, materials and dedicated support to transform their ideas and imaginings into a vast range of compelling visual art forms—is palpable. Working more closely with APA over the past two years to develop this exhibition, I have also come to understand that what underpins this prolific imaginative activity and output is a deep sense of intimacy that is shared amongst APA’s artists, staff, board members and extends out to the artists’ families, collectors, and the broader arts sector. Forming a closeknit community, it is this network of passionate advocates that, for 50 years, has established a familiar, caring and supportive environment in which each of the studio artists has been provided with opportunities to expand their creative horizons.

Intimate Imaginaries is an equally fitting description of the 13 vital contemporary art practices that are represented in this exhibition. While the term ‘imaginaries’ is commonly used to describe realms of pure invention or flights of fancy, it can also refer to more everyday creative activity: how we perceive, shape and make sense of ourselves and the world around us. This conception is one that accords with the ethos of APA where ‘art is not taught, but rather the innate creative direction of each artist is nurtured to elicit works of personal meaning and style’ whereby they are given the freedom and agency to develop their own ‘original and authentic “voice”’ (see APA ‘Manifesto’, <https://www.artsproject.org.au/about/our-story/>). Each of the artists participating in *Intimate Imaginaries* exemplify the immense fruitfulness of this approach which, over time, has enabled them to produce highly distinctive bodies of work that each express a richly inventive and deeply felt worldview.

2. As the curator, how did you work with the artists to create this exhibition?

I was fortunate to have previously worked with three of the artists, Bronwyn Hack, Cathy Staughton and Terry Williams, in the exhibition *Faraway, so close*, a group exhibition I curated for APA in 2017 as part of their guest curator program. In 2021, I commissioned Chris O’Brien to make a video as part of the Victoria Together initiative led by the Victorian Government through [Creative Victoria](#) (O’Brien’s resulting moving image commission, *The Cop Shop*, 2021, presented in *Intimate Imaginaries*.) Through these previous engagements, I established a deep understanding of each artist’s practice, creative processes and, in some instances, a personal rapport and so, in developing the exhibition at TarraWarra, it’s been really rewarding to have the opportunity to build upon these experiences and relationships.

Regarding the other participating artists, I am very familiar with their respective practices from having been a regular visitor to APA exhibitions over the years, as well as from reading catalogues and articles in which their work is featured and discussed. To fully appreciate each artist’s practice,

I spent time at APA researching their extensive oeuvres on their database, viewing works in their art store, and spending time in the studio to see new works in progress. This firsthand research was vital in enabling me to understand the development of each artist's practice over time, both thematically and materially, and the key concerns and preoccupations that underpin their work so that I could make informative choices about the final selection of works included in the exhibition. When working with artists to develop new commissions, I start by sitting down with them to explain the ideas and themes of the exhibition, discuss their proposed new works and the context in which they will be exhibited. For this exhibition, a number of artists making new works also travelled to the Museum where I was able to show them the space in which their works would be installed and discuss any special requirements for the presentation of their work. In other instances, there were a number of discussions with the talented staff artists at APA who specialise in particular media, whether it be textiles, ceramics, or painting, working in the studio every day to support studio artists to develop their artistic practices. Given their close connection with the participating artists, these staff artists made an invaluable contribution in ensuring that the artists had the time and resources to complete the new works they had envisioned for the exhibition.

3. What ideas and themes are addressed in this exhibition?

By turns ingenious, irreverent, poignant and joyful, many of the works in this exhibition convey the artists' personal perspectives on everyday environments, interactions and phenomena. From the autobiographical to the observational, the practices of artists such as Samraing Chea, Chris O'Brien, Lisa Reid, Anthony Romagnano and Cathy Staughton reveal the multiple ways in which we can be intimately and imaginatively entangled with each other, and with places and things in the world. The highly tactile works of Alan Constable, Bronwyn Hack, Mark Smith, Georgia Szmerling and Terry Williams, prompt a more physical and bodily response to their distinctive haptic and material qualities. While other artists, such as Fulli Andrinopoulos, Wendy Dawson and Julian Martin, employ abstract shapes, vivid colour and gestural forms of mark-making to evoke emotive, metaphysical and interior states of being.

While the participating artists utilise a range of media—including painting, drawing, ceramics, soft sculpture and video—all the works in the exhibition share a tangible, handmade aesthetic; a personal touch which provides a sense of immediacy and draws us closer to the creative processes embodied in the work.

Ideas and themes addressed include:

- imagination is an everyday activity which informs the way we experience the world around us
- there is a 'multiplicity of imaginaries' represented in the exhibition, each firmly anchored in the artist's individuality, interests and lived experience
- how significant places and memories can shape one's identity
- the intimacy and emotional connections that can be experienced in the presence of familiar objects
- how observation and invention are often intertwined in the narratives by which artists shape their worldview
- the ways in which artists can instill an experiential dimension in their works through the various processes and particular media they employ in their making

From the Artists

Chris O'Brien

1. What inspires your art practice/artwork?

I imagine living in an old house with housemates in Sydney. Old houses inspire me and so does embroidery and sewing. Old houses are better than the new ones. When I am driven around by my dad, I find the old houses and use them in my artwork. Sometimes I use houses that I see in Margaret McIntosh and Rob McHaffie's artwork.

2. Please explain your preferred choice of materials and techniques you use in your art practice.

I like designing houses in 3D Home Live, a computer program. You can print them too in 3D in plastic. I use foam to make houses and then add embroidery and sew them together. I like drawing with my friends and I also do printmaking, film and Zines. I make Zines about me living in the old houses with friends. I also made a short movie at TarraWarra with Arts Project staff Penny, Tom, Caroline and it was fun.

3. What is a day like when you are working on your art practice?

I sew on most days, and I like drawing. Making work keeps me busy and happy and I hope that I am in exhibitions. I sometimes paint and use the computer. It's nice and quiet and I can do whatever I want.

4. Is there something important you can share with students about your journey to becoming a professional artist?

Maybe you can get some funding to find a studio with support and they will help you be an artist. Get good at artwork and you can make it your job. Maybe we can work together someday.

Georgia Szmerling

1. What inspires your art practice/artwork?

Nature inspires me. The calmness, different smells and textures are beautiful. I love seeing birds and animals in their habitat.

2. Please explain your preferred choice of materials and techniques you use in your art practice.

I use a mixture of lots of different materials. I take ceramics, using clay and build sculptures, and can also use leaves and things I find to make texture. I am also a printmaker and painter. When I paint, I use acrylic paint, ink and when I draw I like pastels. I also like using watercolour pencils. I take photography as well and visit local places like the Merri Creek as inspiration. It is surrounded by nature and animals and ducks. Sometimes you can see the ducks landing in the creek.

3. What is a day like when you are working on your art practice?

Depending on what I am doing every day is different. When I am making my art I find it relaxing. I feel supported and safe while I am making. I can work on it all day. It is my job. When anyone asks my what my job is, I say I am an artist.

4. Is there something important you can share with students about your journey to becoming a professional artist?

Try to learn new skills all the time and try different things.

Lisa Reid

1. What inspires your art practice/artwork?

Items and moments from my past inspire my artwork. History inspires me. It reminds me of the things my mum used, like my mum's old sewing machine. I use photos and still life objects to reference in my work.

2. Please explain your preferred choice of materials and techniques you use in your art practice.

I use paints, pencil, clay and glazes in my work. In ceramics I hand-build pieces using slabs. I use reference photos when I draw on the computer. My drawing has a lot of detail, and I can work on one piece for a long time. I like to take my time. I also use gouache and coloured pencil and printmaking.

3. What is a day like when you are working on your art practice?

I like to take my time with my work. I like to keep myself busy and making a lot of different things keeps me interested. When I am working, I am focussed. But I also do like socialising with my friends. I love seeing my work come out of the kiln.

4. Is there something important you can share with students about your journey to becoming a professional artist?

Arts Project is a very good place. It is where I have learned about different types of art. I have learned and tried different art mediums. My advice is to be patient and encourage yourself to take your time. Be organised.

Mark Smith

1. What inspires your art practice/artwork?

Life itself inspires my practice. I try to create symbols that can mean different things to different people or have multiple meanings. I like making artwork which the viewer can interpret how they choose. Looking at the new world of Artificial Intelligence (AI) collage also inspires me.

2. Please explain your preferred choice of materials and techniques you use in your art practice.

I use textiles which I choose as they don't necessarily match or are not commonly matched. I use tactile materials, such as clay, fabric and other textiles. I am attracted to making 3D work and sculpture. Right now, I am looking at AI technology and creating my short films. AI is so new so seeing the different concepts and genres juxtaposed against one another is interesting.

3. What is a day like when you are working on your art practice?

A day creating artwork gives my mind a good, thorough workout. It's great as there are no barriers that I face when I am creating. You are your own boss and you have the opportunity to be flamboyant and free.

4. Is there something important you can share with students about your journey to becoming a professional artist?

Make what is important to you and don't stray too far from what you love and what you believe in. There's never any need to be mundane.