



## REFLECTIONS

### ART THERAPY IN OZ: REPORT FROM AUSTRALIA

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We are American art therapists currently teaching in the first art therapy master's program to be established in Australia. The aim of this report is to describe, from our perspective, the development and present status of art therapy in Australia, introducing the reader to information about its history, its national association and its current trends in training and practice. Also included is a comparison between Australian and American art therapy that highlights the unique features of Australian art therapy and its potential to offer a distinctive contribution to the art therapy field as a whole. In order to bring to life the adventurous quality of working in this part of the world and to give the reader a sense of "being there," we have interwoven personal impressions in our separate voices throughout the factual information of the text.

#### About Australia

Australia is a young, energetic country similar to the United States in many ways. It is the world's smallest continent and largest island with a land mass about the same as the US, excluding Alaska. A major difference between the US and Australia is the latter's vast areas of uninhabited land. Most of its population lives on the coastal fringe. For Americans visiting or

living in Australia, it is a mix of both the familiar and the exotic.

*MC:* Before my arrival, I thought of Australia as the ancients referred to it — "Terra Australis Incognita," the unknown southern land. I had never been to Australia before so I really didn't know what to expect. I suppose that, because Australia is so far away, I imagined that it would feel very foreign. I was surprised, however, to see how similar Australia is culturally to the US. In fact, it is sometimes easy to forget just how far one is from North America because the life style here is so close to ours. But the occasional sight of a flock of wild cockatoos flying over the rooftops or a field of exotic wildflowers found nowhere else in the world serves to put things in their proper geographical perspective.

Despite Australia's Western traditions and orientation, it is geographically part of Southeast Asia and it is very much a multicultural society. Since the 1940s, more than four million people from more than 120 countries have settled in Australia and one-fourth of the population is foreign born (Cummins, 1989). Although many cultural aspects have their roots in Europe and North America, the traditions of Australia

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lia's Asian neighbors and its own unique history and terrain have also made an impact.

*FFK*: I first understood why Australia is called "Oz"<sup>1</sup> on a windy day in late August—the end of winter in this "upside down" land. Standing on a hill with a bed of pink everlastings in front of me and surrounded by clumps of muted green eucalyptus, grass trees and other native flora, I could see across a vast plain to a knife-edge horizon, broken only by Perth's handful of skyscrapers. I felt like Dorothy when she first glimpsed the Emerald City, and I later made a drawing of the scene that I titled "Oz without Glasses"—because no special aids were required to enhance the sense of wonder that I felt.

#### The Founding of Australian Art Therapy

In the field of art therapy, professional associations and university-based programs have existed in the US and Europe since the 1960s (Ulman, Kramer & Kwiatkowska, 1977; Waller, 1991) but have only recently been introduced to Australia. The first Australian art therapy master's program was established in 1992 at the Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Along with recommendations from some local therapists and artists, the program's design incorporates features from models of art therapy training in the US and Britain. It provides students with a combination of theoretical and experiential coursework and with field experiences. In line with British models, the students attend individual tutorials to facilitate reflective processing of coursework experiences. Throughout their graduate training, they are also required to attend non-graded sessions run by practitioners skilled in group therapy. In most other respects, the curriculum resembles American art therapy programs and includes courses in history and theory, clinical applications and research.

*MC*: I feel quite honored to be playing a pioneering role in developing art therapy in Australia. In December of 1993, our university graduated the first six art therapy master's degree students in the country. This momentous

event marked the beginning of a new and important phase in the evolution of the art therapy field and I was proud to be a part of it.

Prior to the opening of Edith Cowan's program, the options for those wishing to study art therapy were extremely limited. The choices were Edith Cowan's postgraduate certificate program (the precursor of its art therapy program) or a course of study titled "The Arts in Therapy," developed by La Trobe University in Melbourne in 1991 as part of a master's degree in counseling.

The reasons for the delayed development of art therapy in Australia are not clear but may have something to do with its history as a penal colony (Gilroy & Hanna, 1994). Behavior therapy seems to be the preferred psychiatric treatment in Australia, perhaps because of its compatibility with the reward and punishment thinking of the old prison camp days. Psychodynamic therapy (including creative arts versions) has not been as popular in this part of the world where the distinction between mental patient and prisoner was apparently blurred in the early days. The fact that there are only approximately 20 psychoanalysts practicing today in Sydney, Australia's largest city, offers some support for this viewpoint (Gilroy & Hanna, 1994). In any case, the times are changing and art therapy is beginning to make a place for itself in the psychotherapeutic community.

Among the art therapists currently practicing in Australia are those who were the first art therapy graduates in the country as well as those who have received art therapy training overseas. In addition to this small number of formally trained art therapists, there have been some Australians using art therapeutically for more than 30 years. During the 1960s, for example, the notable Australian painter Guy Grey-Smith pioneered the therapeutic use of art in Perth's Sir Charles Gairdener Hospital working with patients suffering from tuberculosis. He was first introduced to art therapy by Adrian Hill (a seminal figure in British art therapy) while Grey-Smith himself was recovering from TB in a sanitarium in England (Klepac, 1976). His successor at Sir Charles Gairdener, artist Jo Allison, continued his work for the next 21 years and extended art therapy to include patients on the hospital's psychiatric ward.

Jo Allison, now retired, is also a founding member

<sup>1</sup>"Oz" is Australian slang for Australia.

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