

tree of health



Ursula piecing the mural back together ready for tile adhesive; photo: Victoria Lovell

A ceramic mural project with Ursula Dutkiewicz

Earlier this year I travelled to the United Kingdom, firstly as a participating artist at the British Sociological Association's Annual Conference. This was part of a research project by Maria Tamboukou titled *Am I that Name? Nomadic lines in becoming a woman artist*. Secondly, I was invited by Dr Gaynor Sadlo to the University of Brighton, School of Health Professions, as an Artist-in-Residence within their occupational therapy programme. Dr Sadlo leads that subject on the university's attractive Eastbourne Campus. Gaynor says that within her classes she "tries to create an atmosphere of mixing fun and empowerment where all the participants contribute and learn from each other". She wanted her students and staff within the school to participate in an art project, to further gain understanding of the health effects of creative activities. Dr Sadlo is a sculptor and ceramic artist herself, who has not only exhibited her own work but has had numerous collaborations with her husband, the painter, enameller and jeweler Alexander Sadlo.

We decided together that we could create a *Tree of Health* for the faculty's newly refurbished building. In order for such a project to take place at the University it needed to be research-based, so a process was set in place to assess the value of this art-making in therapeutic practice. To achieve this, a branch symbolising



The sun after firing, photo: Ursula Dutkiewicz

the tree was set up in the room and participants were encouraged to write about their experiences of making a part of the tree, on a leaf-shaped card. We were particularly interested in expressions of how it made them feel. These leaves were then hung from the *Evaluation Tree*. Staff and students were encouraged to 'drop in' and take part in the making of the mural, in an informal, relaxed manner.

I set myself up in the occupational therapy creative area, a wonderful studio that overlooks the University grounds, assisted by the ceramics tutor Victoria Lovell. The activity took place each afternoon over a two-week period. I set up a clay-cutting station, space for rolling out slabs, boards and needle tools for cutting out the tiles and an area for painting. The table was covered with butcher's paper, which was used as a template for the mural. The original sketch was based on a Tree of Life I had seen, but I knew once the mural got started it would develop its own character.

Slowly the students and staff started to come and go, and many, being so time poor in their busy academic life, opted simply to make a leaf to add to the tree. Everyone was encouraged to write or stamp words that they associated with health into the tree. Embedded in the branches and leaves are messages



1 *Tree of Health* drying in the Occupational Health creative area
2 **Dr Gaynor Sadlo**, *Creative Hands* (detail), photo: Ursula Dutkiewicz
3 **Victoria Lovell**, *Hare* (detail), photo: Ursula Dutkiewicz


The *Tree of Health* mural was made using 'Crank' clay and fired to 1100°C. The mural is mounted on board, h.180cm, w.120cm.

associated with health, including 'here and now', the contribution of the meditation lecturer, 'breath', 'play' and even 'football' gets a mention.

Victoria made a curled-up hare, which in medieval times symbolised fertility. I then created a hollow in the tree for the hare, which looked rather womb-like. Gaynor's contribution was a pair of hands reaching around from behind and hugging the tree, with letters on the fingernails spelling out 'creativity'. Once the trunk reached the branches I added a sun, so the viewers have the sun in their face, as it were, which always makes people feel better. As the days went by people added branches, fruit, birds, butterflies, animals and more and more leaves. It became not only a tree but a veritable ecosystem!

On the last day many of the participants returned for a gathering to celebrate our achievements and

there was a generous and positive response to the outcome. Over the next few weeks the mural was dried, glazed and fired by Victoria.

This was a joyful and inspiring art project to be involved in. I loved being at an educational institution where art-making was not graded but instead was concerned with how the process made you feel, and to experience the positive value of the process to one's health and wellbeing. The project will feed into the ongoing search for understanding of the mechanisms by which such 'occupations' seem to bring health benefits. 

Ursula Dutkiewicz is currently one of the resident artists at the Gasworks Arts Park Ceramic Studio in Albert Park, Melbourne.
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