

Towards an Indigenous Australian knowing: A personalised perspective on art therapy – Carmen Lawson talks with Tarquam McKenna

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Abstract

This article presents the work of an Australian art therapist, Carmen Lawson, and her art therapy interventions with an Indigenous man in her Perth community during the last ten years of her professional working life. A formula of conversation and ‘yarning’ occurred between the article’s author and the art therapist. The conversations are accompanied here by the artworks of her client, ‘Evan’ (chosen pseudonym). The images serve to provide a sense of Evan, as a participant in the art therapy process, and give insight into the Indigenous ways of knowing that actively impact on art therapy.

Keywords

Indigenous epistemology, art therapy, grief and reparation, Carmen Lawson

Introduction

Artists, writers and performers should desist from unauthorised incorporation of Indigenous heritage in their works. Instead they should support the artistic and cultural development of Indigenous peoples and participate in public awareness campaigns to promote Indigenous art and culture.

Joseph Wambugu Githaiga, 2004

There is information that is restricted, that our children cannot learn about, there is information that is restricted even to adults, there is information that is of a secret or sacred nature, that many people have no knowledge of or access to. That knowledge is only there for certain people to have access to.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 1986

From 2002 to 2004 I supervised and trained an art therapist in Perth, Western Australia. She is a Murri¹ woman. To the best of my knowledge

Carmen Lawson is the first Indigenous art therapist qualified in an Australian Master of Arts program. Carmen and I worked together at Edith Cowan University at that time and often discussed how art therapy could address the political and cultural movements that were occurring in Australia with regard to the Indigenous presence. This was of course before the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology to Indigenous Australians. The work in training and supervision addressed a series of encounters with her clients, their stories, and art therapy in group-work. Our work attended to how Indigenous ‘Australia’ was becoming more visible on the cusp of what was to become the pivotal moment of change with the apology speech. Our work together also focused on the issues of Indigenous representation, power, and control. This article is a ‘revisiting’ of that time and considers how Carmen saw art therapy then and how she sees it now – up until her recent retirement. More than ten years on, I met with Carmen again to have a conversation and to hear how her