

Visual Echoes: Using art practice to argue Human Rights issues

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Abstract

Increasingly, collaborations between scientists and artists in interdisciplinary projects are pushing the boundaries of the role of art beyond its traditional function as a creative tool to extend and explore issues of ethics and aesthetics. Within the current political climate, it is timely to look how artists can address human rights issues in contemporary art practice as advocates of global human rights issues, to influence public opinion through their practice.

This paper examines the use of the artefact as an agency, as a tool for the dissemination of knowledge, and as a subversive tool in visual arts practice. It demonstrates how the visual outcome of studio-based doctoral research is able to use conceptual problem solving in relation to personal, social and cultural issues and to use the experiential knowledge base for creative practice. By forming effective collaborations, the artist can act as an agent for change that makes a meaningful contribution to community, using the creative product through its visual imagery as an interventionist strategy.

Keywords:

Human Rights; Advocacy; Art Practice; Community Development; Visual Imagery; Gaze

Introduction

This paper examines the use of art as agency. As such the artefact or art product driven by conceptual framework becomes a tool for the dissemination of knowledge. It operates as a subversive tool in visual arts practice. The use of experiential knowledge base by using conceptual problem solving in relation to personal, social and cultural issues can drive creative practice to become the visual outcome for studio-based doctoral research.

Creative Production and Human Rights

Within the current political climate it is most relevant for artists to act as advocates of global human rights issues and to influence public opinion through contemporary art practice for community development for example, in issues of child safety, domestic violence and racial bias. The artist is able to responsibly and independently target capacity building, address questions through critical dialogue and raise awareness of established power bases. It suggests a greater value for art practice, as a more transferable, versatile product that is able to collaborate with other art practices like performance or film to occupy sites other than the traditional gallery.

Creative production is a term filled with ambiguous notions and fluid definitions. When examined closely, creative production is identified through a number of elements. It involves an initial idea or notion that stimulates or propels the process from which a final outcome is realised through the creative product. Creative production relies on the skill and expertise of the artist for its final outcome. The assessment, however, of the value or success of the creative product is based on an external variable, the viewer (made up of the gallery audience, peer group or critics).

It is undeniable that the viewer continually places demands for innovation and entertainment. In his book *What's Wrong with Contemporary Arts*, Timms states that the promotion takes place in visual culture through 'an increasing commodification and trivialisation of art' (Timms, 2004). Timms argues that increasingly artists' careers are dependent on the amount of publicity they attract. Artists succumb to 'visual gags, titillation, public scandal or platitudinous commentaries on newsworthy social issue, under the pretence

of challenging public perceptions' (Timms, 2004:11). Artists who show their work cannot ignore their relationship with the viewer and the viewer's response to complete the dialogue (analysis in terms of looking). The reliance on the viewer to complete the creative process places the artist increasingly at the mercy of the viewer as an intangible, insatiable and unreliable entity.

Visual culture depends on the reception of the meaning behind the art and open dialogue for communication of issues in current art practice. A responsible artist with a social conscience, who wants to contribute and be relevant in society, cannot be anything but political and interventionist in this global climate of excess and violence. It is possible for art, through its imagery, to be 'respectful towards, yet at the same time more demanding of its audience' and not be 'facile nor wilfully abstruse, rewarding patience, knowledge and dedication'. Timms argues in support of 'greater intellectual, emotional and psychological complexity as a counter to market driven popularisation' and towards a trend that is more demanding of its audience (Timms 2004: 13).

By placing humanist ideals in art practice an artist is able to drive an authentic agenda that benefits community and creates meaning for the audience. Kelly in *Art and Humanist Ideals: Contemporary Perspectives* argues there is a growing trend for humanist ideals in art practice because 'art has the capacity to be prescient and to share both knowledge and a worldview with sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom.' He maintains that due to its conceptual position it is 'the expression of human impulses that cross all media borders and virtually all stylistic boundaries' (Kelly 2003:11).

Arts Patronage and Institutionalised Funding

It is also pertinent in this age of economic rationalism, to examine the arts rate in Australia through the nation's allocation of funds for the community and cultural arts development. In recent times the area of community and cultural arts development has undergone major changes with the questioning of its value. Due to the absence of alternatives for funding, artists are compelled to respond to institutionalised national funding networks, like the Australia Council and the State funding bodies like Arts Queensland. The criteria for the

government funding bodies are seemingly democratic, by engaging in the principles of best practice. For the allocation of grants, proven artists are selected under rigorous, defined criteria before a panel of assessors who place the applicants in rank order to gauge the value of applications before them. Creative production is then often framed and propelled through these defined policy 'outcomes' that leads to the question of autonomy in the creative production.

When grants are allocated, artists are required to document and gather data for grant acquittal at the end of the project. For the artists the data available is limited to peer feedback, the exhibition report, the visitors' book in galleries and anecdotal reports. To acquit grant monies and further their art practice the artists have limited methodologies to gather evidence of success. The artist cannot rely on the aesthetic response (difficult to gauge as it may be metaphorical, emotional and subliminal) but on the attendance numbers at their exhibition; a system that is reinforced by Government policy.

Gauging Aesthetic response

I align with Kelly in stating that 'the arts can address historic/metaphoric truth, act in the important role as witness, reference injustice, help to raise the bar on awareness of human dignity and create images which are moving and spiritual in the deepest sense' (Kelly, 2003:116). To illustrate the power and potential of art Kelly highlights how Picasso's *Guernica* was a dual contribution to art and humanity to change the tide of history using Picasso's comment that 'a painting can never stop a bullet' but that 'a painting can stop a bullet from being fired' (Kelly, 2003: 117). Unfortunately, this knowledge is lost on the policy makers of our nations.

The ability to gauge aesthetic response is elusive. The success of the humanist contribution in creative production is difficult to quantify and cannot clearly be measured within the data gathered by the arts industry to support an argument for the cultural and social health of our nation. However, the Cultural Policy Centre, at the University of Chicago, in a project called '*Measuring the Aesthetic Experience*', has attempted to address a wide range of theoretical, methodological and policy issues by 'drawing on an

interdisciplinary team of collaborators.’ This project will develop and implement both quantitative and qualitative measures specific to the aesthetic response. However, the complex combination of two opposing views on gathering evidence of aesthetic response gives rise to more questions than answers:

One is that art is so profound and meaningful that it is only for the individual to experience and it cannot be measured, the other perspective is that the success of art and museums is often indicated by the numbers of people who attended exhibits. (O’Muircheartaigh 2001:1)

Artist as Agency

Despite inherent obstacles to gathering evidence to support new collaborations, the traditional ideological relationship between artist and museum is increasingly being challenged through new collaborative projects such as modern bioscience to extend and explore issues, ethics and aesthetics. In Australia, as an overwhelming response to the global abuse of human rights, new collaborations have been formed to highlight social and political issues. In 2003, as part of a research project undertaken by the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, an international conference, ‘*Art and Human Rights*’ coincided with an art exhibition entitled ‘*Witnessing to Silence*,’ to bring together ‘scholars in many disciplines...law, humanities and the arts.

Turner, in the article, *Artists and Human Rights: Witnessing to Silence*, expressed the aims of the project as exploring ‘the interconnections between art and human rights.’ In making the connection between power and imagery she also adds that the ‘project is based on the belief that art and artists provide special insights in understanding the world. While the power of art is to mirror the failures and the aspirations of humanity, at the same time it highlights our common humanity,’ thus establishing a political role of agency of art. (Turner, 2003: 1)

Artists are aware of the power of imagery and have to make informed decisions on using the most appropriate and powerful medium to convey the message in their creative product. The audience bombarded with constant

visual stimulation, needs to prioritise the value of the visual image. To keep the interest of the audience 'visual gags' are relevant to the art making. As a practicing artist, my awareness of the role of visual imagery and the capacity of the audience to absorb and digest the meaning and messages in my exhibition is an essential criterion in gauging the success of my visual product or creative artefact. An exhibition has to compete with mass culture for an audience.

This leads me to question my reliance on the 'interpretive strategies beyond the now familiar use of semiotic terminology' (Mirzoeff, 1999: 13), that I employ as 'visual gags' to targeted audience. As an artist, when addressing social issues, it is imperative to use strategies to inform, motivate and challenge the viewer, to go beyond a passive reception of the visual construction as part of the objective. I align with a humanist approach in my creative production and thus have responsibilities to uncover human rights issues. This includes the need to convey embedded rhetoric and to reach uninitiated audiences beyond the mere aesthetic within the creative product. The imagery or creative product must have some personal significance or appeal to engage an audience in a tangible way. The visual research embedded in my artwork deals with how an individual life has been constructed through the process of *looking*. The research investigates the extent to which structures exist in the Indian culture, to scaffold the way the gaze operates from my experience.

Using self (I) as subject in this research, I construct my identity using the narratives in my life, strengthened by the feminist ideology of 'personal is political' (Webster, 1992: 121). I explore these areas through myself and through my eyes (self gaze) as the most accessible subject. My 'culture, race, age, sexual orientation, ability, and class privilege may influence (my) readings by placing me in certain positions in relation to any narrative' (Goodman, 1992: 67). While the research orientation is from my personal experience (hybrid position as a migrant from Malaysian/Indian heritage) and thus includes Eastern perspectives, it is necessary to examine issues from Western psychoanalytic frameworks in literature for positional analysis.

This exploration, through memories, begins through my gaze as a child and then moves into adulthood where I probe female identity and analyse the layers of cultural veils that exist; the continued negative impact upon the lives of women I know is maintained by society. Using feminist frameworks to question the politics of power, I am able to uncover human rights violations that occur in the name of culture. It is a primary hypothesis of this research that the objectified gaze turns women into artefacts for the benefit and survival of patriarchy. The research uncovers powerful evidence that mechanisms of control over women exist across a variety of cultural frameworks and demonstrate that these covert patriarchal structures exist solely to manage, control and dominate the lives of women. The need to control, direct and manage the lives of women either by blatant or by covert methods, leave women vulnerable to creating a collective consciousness that rejects and invalidates their position in society. The research examines the way control continues to be exercised through psychological restraints and even physical violence on parts of women's bodies under the sanction of religion, culture, fashion and expression of style and art.

Gaze as Metaphor for Power

It is argued in this research that the *gaze* epitomizes both the reality of and the metaphor for inequalities in power given that the gaze is instrumental in acquiescent acceptance and, in some cases, resignation by women in passive and benign roles. The gaze is situated within both Eastern and Western frameworks as a strategy for uncovering the politics of the representation of women and the awareness of the institutional framework that determines the reading of the role of women. The self is created through a number of gazes as the artefact of multiple layers in looking. Thus, the research aims have both personal and universal dimensions in order to scope the problem at two levels, to explore the extent to which external gazes through a variety of players in my life, construct my self-identity and reality and to use art making as a strategy for visibility and to defy the gaze by uncovering visual artefacts of power and control in culture, religion, media and fashion.

From the literature, relational sets of values have been derived to identify the object and the subject of the gaze. The analysis of the gaze in a methodological framework is problematic; I am the person who is doing the gazing at myself, at the conditions around me as the spectator, and I also placed myself as the object of my own scrutiny. Thus within this work I am the protagonist, the narrator and the object in a valid, complex, dialogical relationship as *child*, as *adult*, as *object*, as *subject* and also as *protagonist* and *narrator*.

Early painters have investigated similar themes using various strategies for example the use of reflections in mirrors in Van Eyck's (1434) *Arnolfini Marriage*, to a more contemporary post modern visual analysis of looking in Peter Tyndall's (1997), *A person looks at a work of art/ someone looks at something*.

Power of persuasive imagery

Historically, art has played a definite role as an agency for change in which artists have overtly or covertly played a significant role in raising awareness of political, social and environmental issues, but solely within male *gaze*. Feminist art reveals heavy bias and attempts to redress the existing imbalance through art practice. By taking on cultural production, feminist artists have been able to shift the politics of representation and the internal dialogue locked in by the gaze. Subversive art is an effective, covert tool to keep alive the discourse against patriarchal control, to reclaim the gaze and to continue 'the challenge of imaging women as subjects who claim political rights and visual representation' (Cherry, 2000: 2).

Thus '*woman*' becomes a catalyst and provides the paradigm to question assumptions inherent in society that worked against women. This paper demonstrates how by using outcomes of visual research an artist is able to embed strategies as an active change agent. The strategy underlying the research is to take active control of the personal narrative to expose the extent to which external gazes have constructed self-identity and the ultimate reality of the artist's life through religious and cultural mores.

How the *gaze* forms the primary conceptual framework that contributes to the visual research and to raise human rights issues for community development is set out below in Table 1, entitled *Global Hangers*.

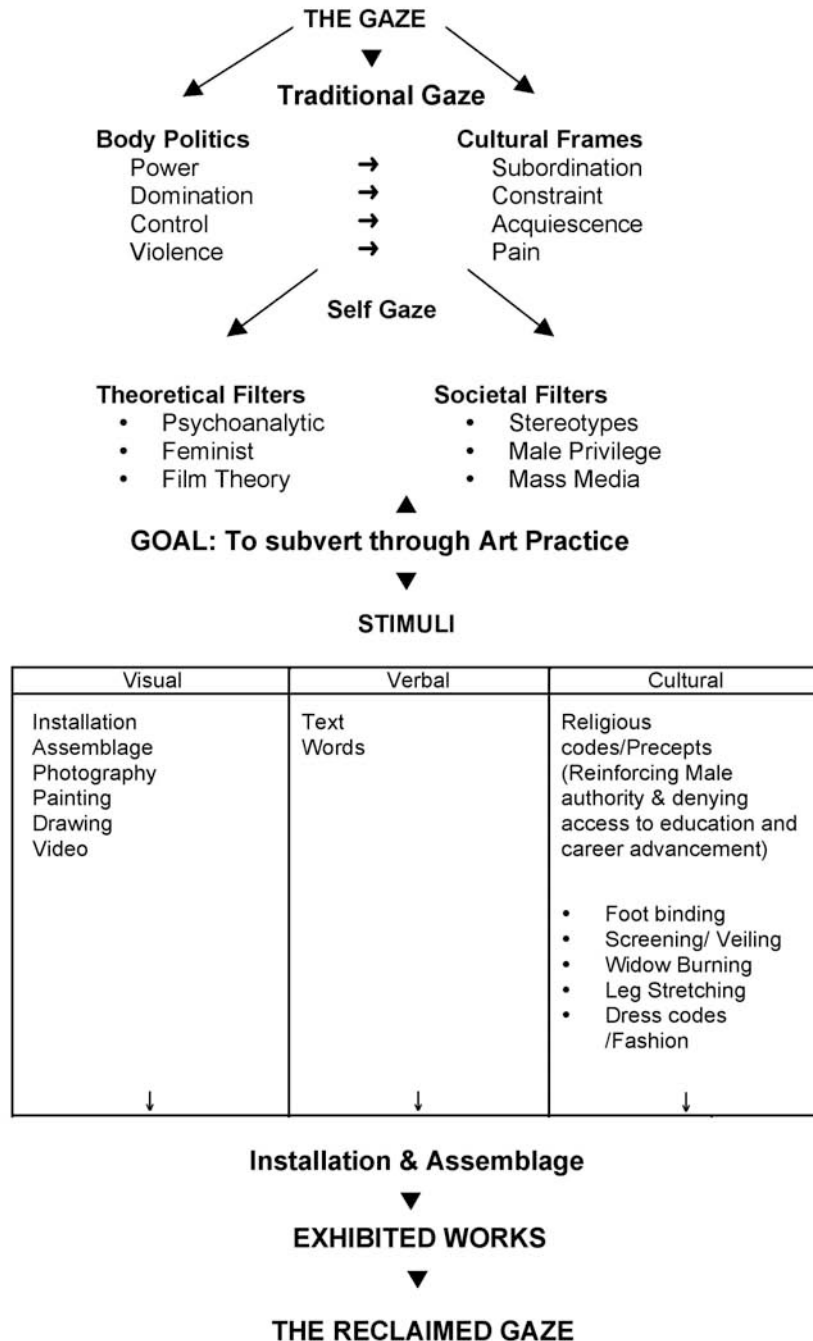


Table 1: *Global Hangers*

For the visual enquiry, analysis of the layers of cultural veils provides the questioning of the politics of power that continue to impact upon the lives of women. It enables the researcher to gather specific subversive data for the

exhibition within the cultural frames and within body politics. The theoretical filters and societal filters in the figure also detect the patriarchal frameworks in society that scaffold stereotypes, male privilege and prevalent attitudes in mass media that impact negatively on women. These are then translated into visual concepts, verbal concepts and cultural concepts for the art making in an exhibition.

Artworks	Agenda	Subversion Strategies
Cultural Windows 1- 4	Oppression of and violence against women in cultural frameworks that serve male privilege	Exposing the role of gaze in cultural and religious frameworks that serve patriarchal agendas
Bollywood Gaze	Complicit behaviour of women through mass culture	Uncovering the role of spectatorship in masculine gaze in erotic/exotic
Con Words	Reinforcement of complicit behaviour in women through censorship and scrutiny	Issues of power relations and body politics
Black/White	Oppression through difference/colour	Exposing power politics
Gaze, Gaze 1, Lower your gaze, Fractured gaze,	Societal oppression and pressure to elicit submissive and subservient behaviour in women	Uncovering role of the gaze as a mechanism of control to serve patriarchal needs
I rested my questioning eyes on my mother, Her eyes created the boundaries for my behaviour, Hope Chest Family values, Virtuous Woman/Sati, Acquiescence	Domination and cultural control through the gaze in family relationships and in personal behaviour	Highlighting role of gaze in family relationships
Religious Gaze, Privileged	Religious precepts and codes that serve patriarchy to harness women's behaviour and to procure compliance for the benefit of patriarchy	Exposing translations and deliberate misinterpretations in religious codes to benefit patriarchy
Glass Ceiling, States of Being, Multiple gaze	Obstacles and limitations placed on women to inhibit their advancement	Awareness of empowerment strategies for economic stability and personal autonomy
Video on forum	Visibility of women's issues	Role of gaze for control of women in society

Table 2: Subversion Strategies in Artworks

The stimuli from these concepts translate into subversive imagery as shown in Table 2 for the iconographic language in the works for the exhibition *Through the Looking Glass*. While studio based visual research is open to normal experimentation and spontaneous discoveries, it is heavily underpinned by goal-oriented concepts that target the inherent social issues.

Investigating cultural frameworks (within Hindu, Christian, Chinese and Muslim contexts), reveal rich visual imagery. Research into issues like foot-binding, screening and veiling, widow burning, the contemporary practice of leg stretching and dress codes in fashion, reveal unquestioned male authority embedded in religious texts where access to advancement for women is denied. It provides the potential to choose and develop imagery that contributes to the aims of this thesis (woman as artefact) and establishes the role of the *gaze* as the conceptual source of the visual investigation.

From the conceptual base, the global hangers form the basis for collecting and sorting. As soon as a concept is developed on both conscious and unconscious level relevant material that inform the rhetoric is fossicked from opportunity shops, hardware shops, second hand shops, recycling centres and antique shops. Found objects are assembled and combined with painting, printmaking or collage to form coherent statements. The final product as an exhibition uses a variety of inventive, collaborative approaches including installations, where photography, mixed media, glass and digital media, enhance the delivery of meanings and messages in the work.

In my role as protagonist, the gaze is analysed within a variety of cultural settings to demonstrate that it is loaded with implications and used as a mechanism of control in society. Religious precepts are probed to demonstrate that women have themselves colluded to their continued detriment and subordination.

For the visual analyses, I investigate them as individual windows using specific colours, rice paper patterns and design to reflect their own cultural style. The windows are shadow boxes divided into sections, each able to be seen as stand-alone work and in compartments to provide insight into the four explored cultures (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Cultural windows

For instance, using the Chinese three-inch Lotus shoes and exploring foot binding provided the visual language for constraint and cultural restriction (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Three inch-Lotus shoes

The concepts are further unpacked by comparing current practices with old customs to collectively bring them together under the framework of the

window (Figure 3). The words, *gaze*, *window*, *body as an object*, *glass*, *mirrors*, *violence*, *widow burning* trigger visual imagery that serve as potential visual cues and windows become an apt metaphor to analyse each cultural framework. Through the interaction with a series of cultural windows the audience is able to make metaphorical connections between the patriarchal structures and to the violence that occurs in the lives of women.

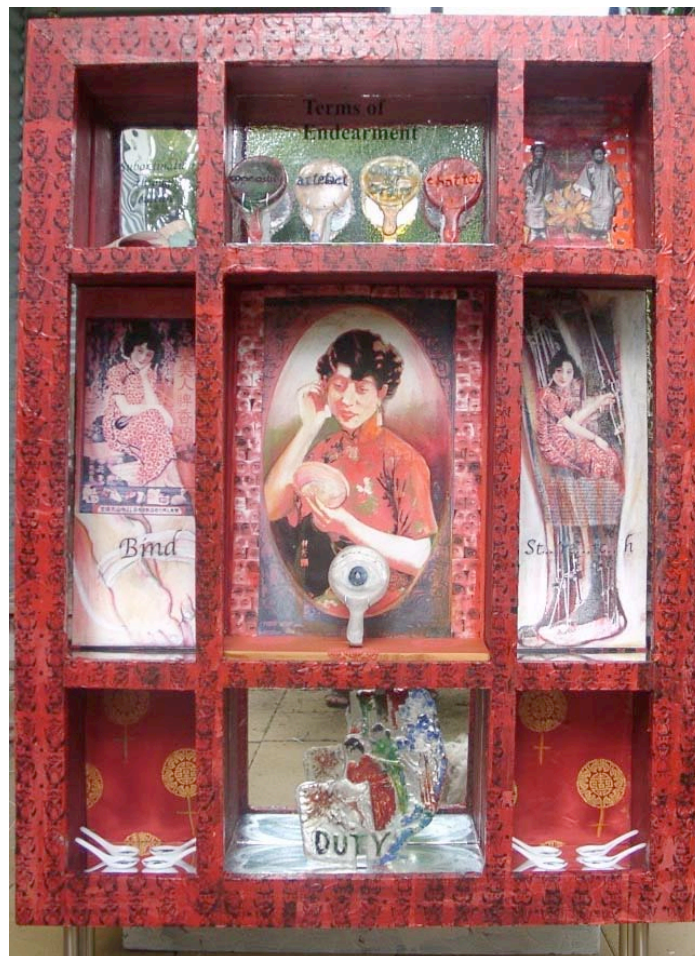


Figure 3: Cultural window 1 (Chinese)

Feminist theoretical principles strengthen the premise on the *gaze* in terms of issues of power relations, and reveal that culture, religion, art and fashion all collude to confine and restrict the lives of women through the process of 'looking.' Investigations into looking *in* and looking *out* convey a variety of meanings to support the visual analysis of the positions to dismantle existing

power structures using text and mirrors to make visible the issues of power and control, heavily disguised in culture, to elicit compliance from the women.

As artefacts, the artworks that emerge from the visual investigation and research further provide the visual link to reinforce the inherent personal, theoretical and political issues. Subtle and covert messages of compliance and control are included as sandblasted text on glass, as signifier of the direction the artist intends to unfold rhetoric. The meanings and semiotics embedded in the words *obey*, *comply*, *control*, *restrict*, all become useful tools to raise awareness of body politics (Figures 4,5,6)



Figure 4: Installations with Mirrors & Mannequins

Figure 5: *Con Words*Figure 6: *Black & White*

By using mirrors to dismantle the word, 'reflections' and by assembling varying thickness of glass the covert nature in the gaze is revealed in the works. Using fusing techniques and by using various levels of opacity of the glass, sharp fragments or shards of glass are assembled to impart degrees of subtleties. They conveyed different states of representation and deflection. To decrease the visibility further and to impart the danger contained in the word, gaze is added at the centre of the slab yet again to provide a consistent visual clue for the audience (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Fractured Gaze, mixed media under slumped glass

As further visual exploration, the theoretical issues that remain embedded in the gaze were unpacked to create appropriate visual imagery in the artefact (Figures 8 & 9).



Figure 8: Gaze 1, mixed media under slumped glass

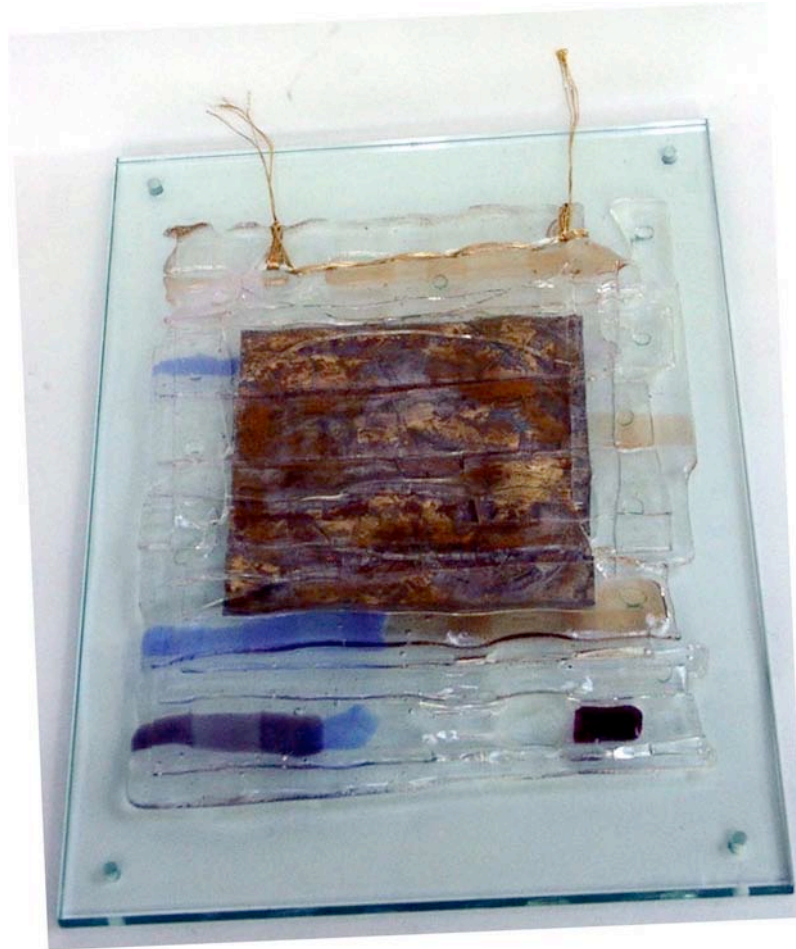


Figure 9: Religious Gaze, mixed media under slumped glass

As a strategy for inclusion, consistent with feminist ideology, a video presentation of a forum involving comments of diverse women of the North Queensland was added. This forum gave a local context, created interaction and developed awareness for a dialogue towards visibility and empowerment. The women from diverse ages, background and levels of society fulfilled the ethical considerations for data documentation collecting, and recording and voluntarily signed the consent agreement before participating in the forum. *Eyes as an image*, represents the *gaze* most effectively. Many of the women were also included in a final piece of work for the universal *gaze* where only their eyes were photographed and included in *Multiple Eyes*. (Figure 10)



Figure 10: Multiple Gazes, digital photo on canvas

To defy the gaze, the deliberate reinforcement of empowerment strategies are included in the artefacts to promote women's growth and wellbeing thus fulfilling the researcher's human rights goals. (Figures 11 &12)



Figure 11: Glass Ceiling, installation

As installations, *Glass Ceiling*, (Figure 11) and *States of Being* (Figure 12) uncovered visually the restrictions placed on women and also the need for empowerment strategies. Birdcages were mediated as 3D drawings to highlight, visually, caged women in societal traps, victimised in patriarchal environments. Individual cages include text to serve as apt metaphors for levels of restriction in the lives of women. They were positioned in an interesting rhythm, stepping them up in ascending order with the doors on the last three cages left open, reflecting positive outcomes that signify freedom and growth.

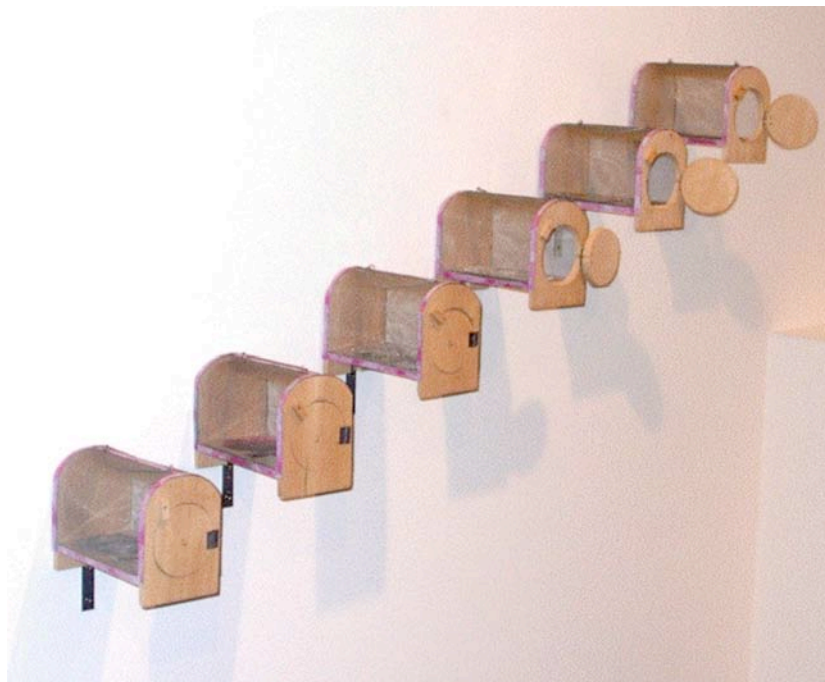


Figure 12: *States of Being, Installation*

Outcomes of research

By using imagery as its strategy, the exhibition successfully uncovers the politics of the representation of women and creates awareness of the institutional framework that determines the reading of the role of women. The outcome of the exhibition was measured by the traditional feedback from audiences through entries in the visitors' book, e-mails, phone calls and the resulting reviews within traditional gallery environments. The exhibition tours in Queensland created a series of unexpected outcomes that acknowledged the significance of the visual imagery in the exhibition. This was the ability of

the visual imagery in the exhibition to connect with diverse audiences, targeting both women and children from non-English speaking backgrounds experiencing domestic and/or sexual violence.

I was invited by Immigrant Women's Support Service to be a keynote speaker and present the exhibition work in November 2006 at their forum. The forum was entitled *Moving Beyond Rhetoric to Diversity in Practice: a Human Rights Framework to Address Violence Against Women*. It was seeking to find new solutions to violence by sharing information with other key agencies, including policy makers, service providers and academics. The feedback received from the forum has strengthened the value of visual interpretation through the recognition of art as a unique interventionist strategy to communicate social issues. Another outcome was the invitation to contribute to the publication of *Kasama*, the newsletter of the Solidarity Philippines Australia Network with an article on the value of visual imagery, entitled, *The Power of Persuasion in Visual Imagery*. As a result of the exhibition, I continue to discover more interest from non traditional audiences, the latest being at the *International Feminist Summit, Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era*, to be held in Townsville, Australia on 17–20 July 2007.

The acknowledgement of the role of artist as change agent to contribute to real solutions suggests that there is potential for issue-based work to extend beyond traditional sites and also strengthen the value of art in society and the effectiveness of visual imagery to reach a wider target of audiences in a variety of environments.

Art has subversive currency elevate the role of artist in society by contributing meaningfully to debate and discourse. Artists are able to develop new ways to access new audiences, to reveal political and social agendas, encourage human rights elements in artwork and create exciting collaborations that can contribute and influence government policies for the advancement of society. Thus the artist as witness, through the artefact or creative product, is able to document, exchange knowledge, disperse information and communicate alternative positions by challenging existing notions in support of social/human rights issues with clarity, courage and forthrightness. This

enables practice-based research in art disciplines and the resulting innovative creative product to be used in challenging new ways as a knowledge-based, collaborative tool when placed together with academics, researchers and policy makers.

Contributor Biography

Dr Sasi Victoire is a graduate of the School of Creative Arts, James Cook University, Cairns Australia. She is a visual artist, works in education, in arts and community development. She resides and exhibits extensively in Cairns and tours widely in regional Queensland. Her latest exhibition, Through the Looking Glass highlighting women's issues on violence against women, toured regional centres from 2004-2007.

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