

Jumping on the Skills Caravan

AGAC Artist-in-Residence Jacqui Malins reflects on our first Skills Caravan, 3 April 2022 at Gorman House

Clouds cruise overhead, but the sun cutting into the Gorman House courtyard is hot. Voices murmur and there is soft rustling as we form loops and pull our strands of raffia through. We are sitting on Ngunawal country. For most, it is our first attempt at this weaving technique. Gamilaroi Yularoi artist Sarah Loynes describes how she learned to weave by sitting next to an Aunty and observing for three days, with no instruction, producing a basket not much bigger than a 50-cent piece. Now Sarah is an accomplished weaver and emerging artist, currently a [Creative Recovery and Resilience Program](#) (CRRP) resident at [Ainslie + Gorman Arts Centres](#).

Sitting on rugs among wallaby and possum skins, coolamons and bundles of coloured fibre, we are making bangles. With the benefit of Sarah's careful demonstration, we use the same stitch used in fishing nets and mesh bags. The growing popularity of native grasses such as *Lomandra longifolia* in gardens and public space means that traditional weaving materials are becoming more visible in our urban environment. Today we are using raffia, cultivated and dyed for weaving.

Sarah describes the kind of place weaving would have once occurred, perhaps a riverbank close to where the grasses grow and by the water used to soften them. The Gorman House courtyard is not a riverbank, but is idyllic in its own way this afternoon. The weaving circle is a gentle, embodied start to this Skills Caravan.

I am fortunate to be undertaking a CRRP residency too, as a creative facilitator of spoken word and poetry events. I am investigating how I can deepen my community engaged practice, particularly in support of young people. It has been hard to let go of my tightly held expectations of how I should work and what I should produce. Sarah mentions that our emotions become imbued in our weaving, and I see that my bangle, slowly forming from a rough circle of raffia, is surprisingly loose. Am I finally relaxing into this process of research, learning and conversation?

We move slowly inside for the rest of the program. I look back out to see that the clouds have closed in. I feel settled and calm, and turn my attention easily to the front of the room.

Arts administrator Ketura Budd asks, what pressures arose for the arts during the pandemic, which of them continue now, and what strategies have helped us to deal with them? We canvass the bonds that can be found in facing shared problems, the challenges of isolation and lost social connections, how to maintain motivation and 'mojo' as the world becomes more threatening and volatile, and the way delays and cancellations erode energy. As people share their experiences and coping strategies, feelings of solidarity and companionship grow in the room. One artist vividly paints the overturning of the usual structures as a chance to 'rewild' the arts, to bite through the fence and run away!

Hybridity is a thread running through the afternoon: now we straddle the worlds of live and online audiences, often at the same time. Today, while we are together in the Gorman House main hall, several presenters, including Ketura, join us on-screen. I feel sympathetic relief when the technology works smoothly, familiar with those stressful times when it doesn't.

Arts marketer and producer Julia Boyd takes us through possibilities and benefits of storytelling in producing practice. Julia outlines how story can build connection with audiences and be an effective communication tool. She encourages us to consider how stories can share our inspiration, intentions, backstories and why our work matters.

I struggle to articulate why my work matters. It can feel overblown and self-indulgent, that I am trying to invest it with hubristic claims of significance. But I suspect my enthusiasm and passion convey themselves effortlessly when I tell the story of stumbling across poet Candy Royalle performing at a folk festival, how this sparked a compulsion to write and perform, and the joy I experience, watching other people find their voice.

Around the room, hands are busily weaving circles of raffia. The fibre's susurrus accompanies the voices and the familiar shuffles, sighs and scrapes of the small crowd.

Dance artist Liz Lea whirls us through her delivery of the recent [BOLD](#) dance festival, another hybrid production. She reflects on how she curated the mix and balance of live and digital events, with production that is fit-for-purpose and professional, yet not sterile. Liz prompts me to think about value, what do we value, why, and how do we enact those values? BOLD valued and centred excellence, age and experience, diversity and access.

For example, the [I Dance Festival](#), a mini dance film festival, curated and created by artists with disability, delivered each film with some or all of: closed captions, AUSLAN interpretation, audio description, low-sensory and audio-only versions.

My looping and threading has become more fluid as the afternoon goes on. This bangle is rough and lumpy, but is taking shape. I reflect on my relief as live events have returned, with their easy conviviality and relative simplicity to produce. But I know this has left people behind, including some who could only access events online and are now again locked out. I chose yellow raffia, my niece's favourite colour, but now I wish I had included more colours. And I see I have misjudged the size: this will be a bangle for a giant! As my hands keep moving, I know I need to keep working on accessibility.

Kath Papas joins us on-screen from Melbourne for the final session. Kath produces projects ranging from robots to butoh to shadow-puppet theatre, and works part-time for the [Australian Performing Arts Market \(APAM\)](#). Kath describes a shift in the arts from transactional to relational models, reflected in a trend away from touring finished products and towards 'mobilising practice'. Residencies, online engagement, and 'concept' or 'process' touring, where a work is remade afresh in each new location or community, can be woven into this approach. And it resonates: the pandemic has given us nothing if not a heightened sense of our interconnectedness and the value of relationships.

As this Skills Caravan wraps up, I am glad to hear there will be more opportunities to digest this rich material through regular producer gatherings. Chairs are stacked, screens switched off and we go out into the shockingly early post-daylight-saving dusk, newly-woven bangles encircling many wrists.