



Making the Journey

Arts and disability in Australia

Mary Hutchison



Rehearsals for each production involve a 'contract ceremony', in which all the participants look closely at the company's goals as a group and define the agreements between the performers, director and staff for the project's duration.

Conclusion

As an integrated youth dance company, Restless offers a distinct performing arts experience for people across mainstream and disability cultures. In order to reach this potentially wide audience more effectively, the company has developed targeted marketing strategies with the help of a marketing company. A marketing plan for each project now comes into operation three months before the production opens, and strategies such as contacting teachers to bring school groups to performances are used to access a range of audiences.

The distinct Restless style has attracted a number of young performers without a disability. They are keen to become involved because the work is stylish, intriguing and challenging. Over the last 13 years the company has nurtured a group of emerging artists who are now experienced in working with people with a disability and whose whole practice has been influenced by the experience of integrated dance.

The company's impact on the lives and careers of dancers with a disability has been enormous, but its benefits beyond the ensemble are also significant. Restless currently assists ex-members to further their interests in dance and performance. Some ensemble members have gone on to join Tutti Ensemble and No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability, while others have undertaken tertiary study.

We have watched Rachel grow in so many ways as a result of her association with the company. Her developing social skills have opened up a whole new world of relationships for her. She has matured into a thinker and her ability to analyse her feelings and act responsibly has given her a wider range of options in her life.

MIRIAM HIGH, PARENT

* The Australian Festival for Young People: see www.comeout.on.net.



Pinnacles Gallery

Artwork engaging all the senses



Introduction

They were not the usual gallery crowd, wandering sedately through the space, talking in quiet, reverent tones about artworks viewed from a distance. This crowd talked loudly, yelled even, and became increasingly excited at the noises they created, the textures, smells and sounds they encountered, as they engaged with the art.

JACQUELYN MURPHY, *Gallery Messenger*, NO. 13, November 2002 (reviewing *Grapple* 2002)

Pinnacles Gallery is a regional gallery in Thuringowa, north Queensland, which demonstrates a commitment to developing exhibitions with and for the disability community. It has developed a long-term relationship with the disability community in the Townsville region through exhibitions, residencies and community workshops, as well as new approaches to welcoming and informing gallery visitors.

An important stepping-off point for Pinnacles Gallery was addressing the challenge that vision impairment presents for an artform predominantly understood as visual. This has led to exhibitions that encourage interaction through touch, taste, hearing and smell as well as vision – an approach which extends the experience of all gallery visitors.



Inge Kaye, former Pinnacles Director Bronwyn McBurnie (obscured) and Con Lokkers interacting with Stephen Weis's *Toneaphone*, at the *Grapple 2002* exhibition opening.



Stephen Weis, *The Soaring Sole Toneaphone*, 2002 (detail). Metal, plastics and sound equipment, 200 x 130 x 40 cm. Exhibited at *Grapple 2002*.

Approaches to exhibitions with the disability community

In order to draw people with disabilities into the gallery and highlight the work of artists with a disability, Pinnacles Gallery has concentrated on working with communities through exhibitions. Its approaches to these exhibitions have included initiating projects, responding to community interest and developing partnerships with local organisations.

In 1998 Allison Gray, Pinnacles Gallery Exhibition Officer, made an initial connection between the gallery and the disability community when she facilitated *Grapple '98*. Lyn Tyson, a local artist with vision impairment who has an ongoing involvement with Pinnacles Gallery as an artist, played a key role in the project.

Grapple '98 involved people with vision impairment and was based on the principles of inclusive development and community management. Participants were on the management committee and material for the exhibition was created in collaborative workshops led by several artists-in-residence whose work utilises senses other than sight. By all accounts, it was an extremely popular exhibition as well as a rewarding experience. For Lyn Tyson, the two vital ingredients for its success as a collaborative and creative process was time to get to know people and the opportunity to go beyond a one-off exhibition activity.

I built ongoing meetings into the process as often we get dropped from projects once the artists or organisation get what they want. The meetings with participants and local artists let the project evolve naturally through shared interests and friendships that led to other exhibitions.

LYN TYSON, ARTIST

In 1999, with the support of local artists Dinie and Marion Gaemers, the *Grapple '98* group held another successful exhibition at Pinnacles Gallery, *Festival*. The exhibition had a dinner-party theme and featured creative dinner settings. *Artability and Visibility* were two further community-based exhibitions which followed *Grapple '98*.

Pinnacles explored another approach to working with the disability community in *Grapple 2002*. This was a touring exhibition designed to highlight the sensory dimensions of contemporary art, engage the disability community as audience and artmakers, and raise awareness of issues for people with vision impairment. Curator Jacqueline Murphy invited a number of established contemporary artists to create work exploring sensory engagement and challenging the idea of the 'viewer' as sighted. The tour included workshops and residencies with the participating artists at each venue.



Candace Miles, *See Stars*, 2002. Installation: woven cloth, papier-mâché, glass beads, mirror, plastic, metal, acrylic paint, silicon and clay. 2.5 cubic metres (variable). Exhibited at *Grapple 2002*.



Alan Valentine, *Sea Gongs*, 2002. Hardwood and metal. 45 x 80 cm (variable). The knob of each gong operates a bell. Exhibited at *Grapple 2002*.

In Thuringowa, some of the people from the original *Grapple* were part of Candace Miles' *Grapple 2002* residency. The result was a mosaic of ceramic tiles called *Interconnections* which was displayed in association with *Grapple 2002* and later installed as a public art piece.

Caloundra hosted a residency with Ross Barber, which led to the establishment of a website to connect local people with disabilities. This prepared the way for a residency with another artist, Bonnie Jenkins, in the following year. Caloundra Gallery also exhibited work by local artists with disabilities alongside *Grapple 2002*.

Grapple 2002 was also a catalyst for *Touch Tour*, an exhibition developed with the Townsville Community Learning Centre (TCLC). *Touch Tour* featured selected fabric artworks created by local textile artists and Special Education teacher Linda Cameron. It was made for and with children and adults with physical, intellectual, vision or multiple impairments.

The experience of *Touch Tour* led to further partnerships between Pinnacles Gallery and the TCLC. In 2003, Linda Cameron played a key role in the initiation and implementation of *The Treasure Within*. This exhibition involved three local artists working with TCLC students to create a variety of artworks displayed at Pinnacles Gallery in Disability Action Week.

In 2004, Pinnacles Gallery decided that its annual youth exhibition would specifically

involve young people with disabilities. Pinnacles Gallery staff liaised with Special Education teachers who organised the production of collaborative artwork from ten local Special Education Units.

Taking visual art beyond the visual

Imagine a room full of artworks engaging all the senses, intoxicating the visitor with a sensorium of sights, smells, tastes, textures and sounds.

JACQUELINE MURPHY, FORMER DIRECTOR, PINNACLES GALLERY

The work I did for *Grapple '98* was based around a sea cave structure with textured insides, shells and a continuous tape of sea sounds and spoken word based on poems and stories I had written. I did three mermaids of papier-mâché and fabrics in different textures like feather boas. The mermaids had no faces – they were blank as faces aren't too important. The mermaid created by a sighted artist had a face.

LYN TYSON, ARTIST

In *Grapple '98*, the artists and workshop participants created collaborative pieces which explored materials, sensory responses and the experience of vision itself. For example, Marion Gaemers' workshop group used natural, found and recycled material to create a series of woven and beaded screens. Pickled and

preserved foods, sheets of braille script, fruit and leather were the components of the piece made with Liz Woods.

The eight artists who contributed to *Grapple 2002* were selected because they had already developed a distinct body of work that engaged senses other than sight.

Inclusive gallery practice

Pinnacles Gallery has always had a community focus and our exhibition and public program are designed to be varied and inclusive.

ANNE DONOHUE, EDUCATION OFFICER,
PINNACLES GALLERY

As well as creating new opportunities for people with a disability as artists and gallery-goers, Pinnacles Gallery has also explored ways of making the gallery and its exhibits more accessible. Education and public programs for *Grapple 2002* included an audio catalogue, sensory trail activity and the opportunity to put on goggles to simulate different types of vision. The media launch featured a performance by a signing choir whose members use sign language to sing. In *Grapple 2002*, all wall texts and labels were presented in large non-serif fonts on non-reflective paper, and much of the written material, including parts of the catalogue, were presented in braille. Audio tapes and players and vision-altering devices were also part of the exhibition touring package. In addition, the Royal



Sebastian Di Mauro, *Curl*, 2002. From *Shimmer Suite*. Stainless steel pot scourers, aluminium. 50 x 70 x 30 cm. Exhibited at *Grapple 2002*.



Ross Barber, from *The Rope: a reply to Charles Baudelaire and Edouard Manet*, 2002. Installation: 8 cast polyester braille-embossed tablets on perspex plinths, rope, text, audio player and speakers. 80 x 40 x 500 cm (variable). Exhibited at *Grapple 2002*.
See: <http://users.qld.chariot.net.au/~barberr/>

Blind Foundation provided a workshop in each *Grapple 2002* venue for gallery staff and the wider community interested in finding out more about communicating with the vision-impaired.

As a wrap-up to *Grapple 2002*, Pinnacles Gallery sought community feedback. A focus group identified the importance of personal liaison between gallery staff and people with a disability. Suggestions ranged from activities such as morning teas to being aware of language usage when describing people with disabilities in promotional material. Lead-time for community contact and some transport support were also highlighted. The issue of exhibition layout was a major area of discussion with debate swinging between a preference for people support – provided by gallery staff or individual carers – and physical aides such as guide ropes.

As well as exhibitions developed with and for the disability community, Pinnacles Gallery has looked at ways of making its general exhibition program more accessible. For example, AUSLAN (Australian Sign Language) presentations to go with the exhibition program over an 18-month period were made possible with funding from Disability Services Queensland.

Conclusion

An important aspect of Pinnacles Gallery's work with the disability community is the exploration of the non-visual dimensions of the art gallery experience. It has encouraged the work of artists with vision impairment, supported artists working with a variety of media and invited audiences with and without disabilities to 'see' with all their senses. Outcomes include the development of new audiences and community relationships and a greater awareness of disability issues.

Pinnacles Gallery's experience with the *Grapple* exhibitions demonstrates the value of working inclusively, building ongoing relationships with the disability community and making room for community feedback. Lyn Tyson makes the point that people without a disability can't unlearn their everyday sense experiences to reach a point of 'not knowing' – and it is the 'not knowing' that needs to inform inclusive creative collaborations and gallery practice. Creating effective collaborations takes not only time but a willingness to confront assumptions and learn new ways of doing things.

Tutti Ensemble

Making music with our glorious selves

Introduction

Tutti Ensemble is a fully integrated choir including people with disabilities and members of the wider community in Adelaide. It has become known for its non-stereotypical music-theatre productions for the main stage and community events.

Tutti began in 1997 as a recreational singing group at Minda, a residential institution for adults with an intellectual disability. Over the next few years, the Holdfast Community Choir – as it was first named – grew from 11 to 60 members and in 2001 was incorporated as Tutti Ensemble. The founding Artistic Director of Tutti, Pat Rix,* has been part of the choir's development since she was first asked to lead the singing group.

The musical term *tutti* is itself a representation of inclusiveness – it translates as 'everyone will now perform together after only a few have been allowed to play'.

Performing Tutti

In Tutti you are accepted for where you are at and what you can give now. You are valued for your life experience, abilities and capacities.

TUTTI WEBSITE, WWW.TUTTI.ORG.AU

The ingredients of a love of singing, acceptance of difference, willingness to learn and a sense of community are reflected in Tutti's repertoire and