



## Collaboration for healing

View of Dark Side Gallery, Blue Oyster Art Project Space

An inspirational art project breaks down the barriers to recovery from mental illness.

In July this year an elaborate grid of painted wooden panels wrapped the upstairs walls and part of the ceiling of Dunedin's Blue Oyster Gallery.

The work of 215 artists, painting alongside each other for eight months, the 718-panel mural is a testament to the way art can help break down social barriers, develop dialogue and provide a platform for recovery from mental illness. This collective project, called *Life, the Universe and the 420 Centre*, brought together people recovering from mental illness and artists, both professional and amateur, from Dunedin and elsewhere.

Over 200 people contributed to the artwork and the professional artists found themselves painting, drinking tea, talking or working quietly alongside members of the 420 Centre. Run by PACT Otago, the 420 Centre is as an activities centre for people recovering from mental illness

and the project was a structured encounter between members of the 420 community and the participating artists. Clearly celebratory, the mural resonates with reds, golds, blues and pinks set against dark figures and graffiti-like commentaries acknowledging difficulty and struggle.

Centre co-coordinator, Adam Douglass, who initiated and directed the project says, "I'm interested in the artist's role and status in society, art as a therapeutic activity, a language and a vehicle to develop dialogue and the creative process. I hope to bring artists together who have different objectives, status, mental states, genders and sexualities. I want to document an aspect of social consciousness, and in the process, eliminate some of the stigma and develop a dialogue in the community, creating a platform for recovery."





Left: painting session at the 420 Centre in May 2007

Below: an artist working on one of the panels in December 2006



Weekly art sessions were held at the 420 Centre, every Tuesday for eight months, and also inside the Blue Oyster Gallery during the exhibition, encouraging audience members to paint a panel and add their own dynamic to the growing mural.

Participating documentary filmmaker, Sally Williams, remembers, "Every Tuesday tables were covered with paper, the paint came out and whoever felt like creating art on a panel would do so – no boundaries. There were afternoons full of participants and afternoons with few; afternoons where the patrons were the majority and times when they were the minority in their own space; raucous days, quiet days, days of wall-to-wall shenanigans. Negativity and animosity didn't feature."

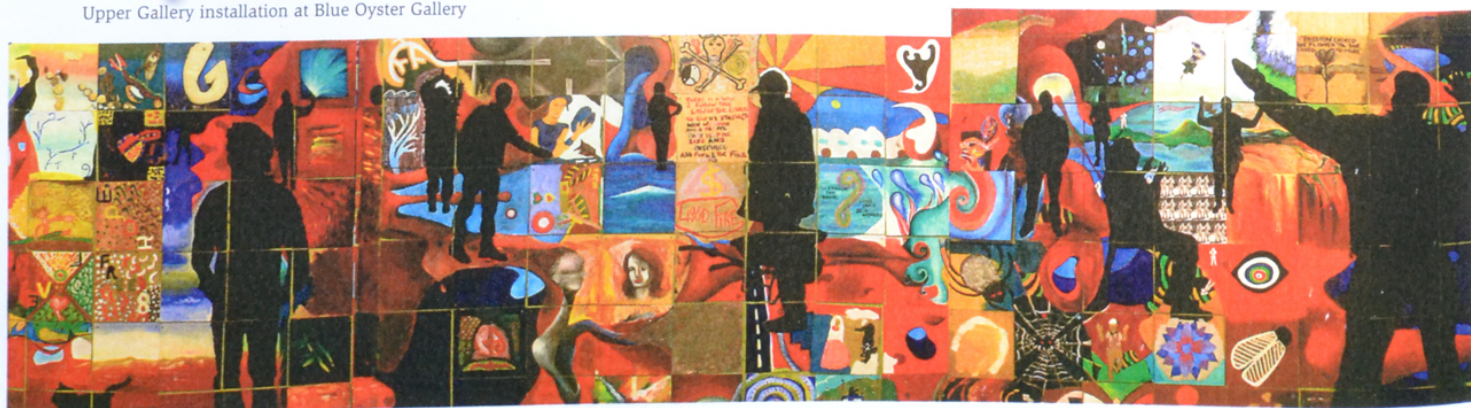
Douglass explains how he was able to facilitate the project and get so many people involved. "As art coordinator at the centre I'm employed to facilitate an atmosphere where patrons can create. I've found collaborative projects are really positive socially, creatively and in terms of hastening recovery. This is the third collaborative project I've worked on with the 420 patrons and it's the first to actively involve the wider arts community and to be viewed in an art space context.

"As the idea for the project developed I quickly became aware of its potential. I grew up in Dunedin, went to art school here and have been a practicing artist for the past three years. I've developed relationships with artists and have access to a range of people in the arts community. I found a personal invitation was the best way to get people involved, so I made a lot of phone calls and visits. Because it was a contemporary project

in a respected art space it wasn't hard to get artists from the wider community interested. The project gave them access to an important part of society who're often overlooked and yet offer so much. Profit wasn't involved – all the funds raised went back to the community – art networks could potentially develop and the participating artists had the opportunity to inspire others."

Participating artist, Simon Kaan, highlights the therapeutic aspects of the project. "It's often hard to communicate; it's hard to say something out loud for fear of being ridiculed or being wrong. This place was different; the work was already talking when I walked in; some pieces I related to and others I wondered at. On these panels I felt free to speak and so it seemed only polite to pick up a brush and say hello." Kaan's observations make clear the aim of a project like this – to create an

Upper Gallery installation at Blue Oyster Gallery





Art session at the 420 Centre, January 2007



Above and below: Upper Gallery at Blue Oyster Art Project Space

open, egalitarian environment and to provide a foundation for awareness of mental health issues and the stigma related to these. Though therapy was provided in many forms, artist Jeffrey Harris enjoyed his involvement for a different reason.

"It was a pleasure to contribute to the project – so far away from the endless hype and self-promotion of the so-called official art world where 'style over substance' has been the norm for so long," he says.

Bridie Lonie, Head of Otago Polytechnic's School of Art, comments on the project's relationship to contemporary art, saying, "Contemporary art theory is concerned with a movement away from the view of 'artwork as commodity' toward the sense that it's a collective, shared project in which encounters between people, objects, values and beliefs occur.

"The project also worked to extend the group's experience and way of being involved in art making. Professional artists, filmmakers, secondary school students, teachers and people involved in the wider art world participated. The wider art world was not simply acknowledged but overlapped and intersected with the project. The participants' histories have all been altered

to some degree by this participation and the community of artists in Otago has been extended."

These sentiments are shared by artist and patron, James Haines, who observed, "United as one we have achieved a lot more than anyone could have dreamt. Art comes in all different forms, just like those who create. Art comes from the heart with mystery and emotion."

Participating artist Mike Cooke's poem, *Healing Poison*, captures the essence of the project:

Scratch the surface then start digging  
There's no destination in these visual portals; tales told forever.  
Destruction, erosion, the blue buzz of sadness, pointing  
fingers, a kicked heart, all yield to one, two, seven colours  
and the dust in between becomes a hug to the face.  
Escape. Escape and bring something back. Escape and have  
something to give.  
Communicate, unite, combine, sing.  
A chorus on stilts

/Adam Douglass, Michelle Armistead

Sections of this work are currently installed at The 420 Centre and PACT head office in Dunedin and it's hoped the work will travel to other centres.

