

## Aesthetics of Change

### Multiculturalism and the street art of Footscray

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#### Abstract

Street art is considered by many as a cultural practice, which like all cultures, has its diversity within it. Through the analysis of three case studies, this article demonstrates the value in using multiculturalism as a framework for developing street art. This study is situated in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray in Australia, from 2014 – 2018 which has been undergoing urban development and gentrification. Each case study features artists that have created a street art piece in the suburb during the research period. There are varied opinions about what constitutes street art and how to define a street artist. In order to contain our research, the article focuses on artists who create legal murals. Through an exploration of their work, techniques and intent behind their art, the article presents an understanding of the diversity that exists within the street art community. Culture and multiculturalism have broad interpretations and this research suggests understanding multiple perspectives from a lived experience to political forms of management and integration. Theoretical literature, are reviewed to explore how they are at work in contemporary discourses of government, arts and community. The setting for this research, Footscray, is known as a culturally diverse inner-city suburb, that has been reportedly going through the process of gentrification. We examine gentrification's impact on social diversity and also explore the role of street artists as both gentrifiers and activists against gentrification. This article intends to prove that the application of multicultural theory to street art projects can create community resilience during times of urban transition. Through this research, we investigate street art as a manifestation of the cultural diversity of the community. As such, it demonstrates how an understanding of multiculturalism from different perspectives, can provide a framework for the development of future street art projects by artists, communities and organisations.

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Gentrification, Community, Culture, Street Art

#### Introduction

Since 2014, street art has changed the landscape of the Melbourne suburb of Footscray in Australia. One such work was my own street art project, the Footscray Animated Wall Mural project. However, most were created through participation in the local council's street art program, StreetWORKS. Footscray is often described as a multicultural suburb that is undergoing gentrification (Brown, Hunt, 2014). The definition of multiculturalism is explored through multiple perspectives from the lived experience of the Footscray community to the management approach used by government organisations. This article examines three case studies of street artists who have created work in Footscray. They are Rosie Kilvert, Larissa MacFarlane and artistic duo, Creature Creature. An understanding of the suburb's history,

urban development and current demographic is presented to give context to where the works are situated. Then, multicultural theories such as recognition, self-determination and egalitarianism are applied for analysis of these artists and their works. Through this analysis, this article will demonstrate the understanding different approaches to multiculturalism to develop sustainable street art projects that not only enhance but also strengthen the community.

#### 1. Street Art

Defining street art is complex due to the blurred line between criminality and art. Consent, style and intent of the practitioner, all play a part in whether a work is considered art or vandalism. In order to limit the scope of what this article refers to as 'street art,' the following approaches are used:

**(1)** The works in this article only cover street art murals, where a mural is defined as a piece of work created on a wall. This could be a painting, paste-up or other form of art.

**(2)** The terminology of the artist or creator is used. For example, if a practitioner calls themselves an artist and their work as art, then those are the terms used by this article.

**(3)** For ethical purposes, all the works in this article were created with permission or were commissioned works. Therefore, there is no issues regarding criminality.

Before undertaking an analysis of Footscray's street art, a knowledge of its history is required. This history provides a basis of understanding the artists and works in the case studies of this article.

## 2. Footscray

### 2.1 A History of Footscray

Footscray is an inner-city suburb in Melbourne, Australia, which lies within the municipality of Maribyrnong along the Maribyrnong river. It lies only 5 km from the Melbourne CBD and has a major train station that provides access to the western suburbs. In 1803 the first European settlers came to the area ('Footscray, Victoria,' 2018). According to the Maribyrnong Council website, the Footscray area was home to the, "Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung tribes of the Kulin nation for more than 40,000 years" (Maribyrnong Council Website, 2017). The Kulin nation represent the first people of this area and comprises of five Indigenous Australian Tribes.

The current population of Footscray is the result of the movement of migrant groups into the suburb since European settlement. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2016) census data of Footscray reveal that, "The most common ancestries in Footscray (Western Metropolitan) (State Electoral Divisions) were Vietnamese 13.3%, English 12.9%, Australian 11.6%, Chinese 8.3% and Irish 5.1%." When responding to the question of ancestry, respondents were given the option of choosing two. Under half its residents were born in Australia at 45% and only 20.9% reported that both parents were born in Australia. English speaker who don't speak a second language at home consisted of 39.7% of the population (ABS, 2016).

### 2.2 Footscray and Gentrification

Gentrification is a term made popular by, Ruth Glass, who defined it as the displacement of working class due to urban development and an increase in property prices. Footscray has been reported in the media as going through the process of gentrification. This has been observed by the rising cost of property in the area (realestate.com.au, 2018) and even the rising price of a bowl of Vietnamese pho soup (Hinchliffe, 2018).

A 2011 Australian study on gentrification and displacement investigated its impact on community members using Maribyrnong, Footscray's municipality, as one of its locations for analysis. Some of the effects found by the study were a reduction of social diversity and community infrastructure for those who stay, and access to employees, employment and education due to high rent and displacement (Atkinson, Wulff, Reynolds, Spinney, 2011).

In his article, *Complexity, Aesthetics and Gentrification: Redfern/Waterloo Tour of Beauty*, Lucas Ihlein (2009) describes the role artist play in this process. "Artists are seen as key gentrifiers. We are able to invest energy into architectural waste structures, creating a connection between beauty and utility where there previously seemed to be none." This in turn, "allows the broader property market to wake up to their potential for intensified commodification."

Part of the gentrification of Footscray has been the buffing of illegal street art, particularly from 2015. Also, many new commissioned works were created through the local council programs by professional artists during this time. Our case studies will further explore how street art has contributed to the suburb's change but also can be a form of resilience for the existing community.

### 3. Multiculturalism

Before conducting an analysis of multiculturalism, an understanding of its root word, culture, is required. Culture is a complex term that has been used to describe shared characteristics such as ethnicity, race, gender and religion. Kymlicka (1996) writes, "If culture refers to the 'civilization' of a people, then virtually all modern societies share the same culture." Parekh (2006) describes culture as a, "system of

beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives”.

Multiculturalism as the plural of culture, is a word that has been used by politicians and theorists to describe a range of societal interactions. According to Kenan Malik (2012), multiculturalism has, “come to have two meanings that are all too rarely distinguished. The first is what I call the lived experience of diversity. The second is multiculturalism as a political process, the aim of which is to manage that diversity.”

By examining the history of multiculturalism in Australia, one can find examples of Malik’s (2012) two meanings. The, “political process,” is evident in how Australia’s laws for Indigenous Australians and migrants have changed over the years. When the first European settlers arrived in 1788, Australia was considered *terra nullius* or unoccupied land. Until the High Court’s decision in the Mabo case of 1993, Australian law failed to acknowledge the Indigenous peoples and their cultures (Augoustinos, 1999). The *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, or the *White Australia Policy*, limited immigration from non-European countries. It specifically targeted Asian migrants, and those that were already in the country were, “expected to assimilate into this white, British society,” (Mann 2016). “Australia adopted a multicultural policy in the late 1970s to replace integration as the basis of its approach to migrants,” (Mann, 2016). The aim of this shift in policy was to improve social cohesion.

The introduction of multicultural policies would have had an impact on what Malik (2012) described as the, “lived experience,” of multiculturalism. Over the last few decades, many new migrants have come to Australia to escape war, find work, undertake studies or to just start a new life. According to Healey (2016), multiculturalism in contemporary Australia is, “simply a term which describes the cultural and ethnic diversity.” The Scanlon Foundation’s studies on social cohesion found that 83%-86% of survey respondents in the across the years 2013 – 2017 consistently agreed that, ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia.’ Since these studies were conducted across a national sample of Australian residents, these results can be interpreted as their collective, “lived experience,” of the country’s diversity.

Multiculturalism across the world is still contentious. European politicians such as UK former Prime Minister David Cameron (Taylor, Wright, 2011) and Germany’s Chancellor, Angela Merkel (Weaver, 2010) state that multiculturalism has, “failed,” in their respective countries. They both talked about the need for immigrants to integrate into the majority culture. One of the problems of this approach of integration is that it ignores the complexities of identity. These complexities can be further examined through interculturalist and intersectionality theory.

### 3.1 Interculturalist and Intersectionality

According to Charles Taylor (2012) multiculturalism is the recognition of difference whereas interculturalist focuses more on integration. He believes Quebec has an intercultural story because of its long line of ancestry and integration of its two languages, French and English. However, Taylor (2012) describes the rest of Canada as more multicultural where there is a recognition of difference. This recognition addresses the complexity of identity, whereas integration policies can ignore these complexities, for example being part of the majority ethnicity but having minority religion.

Intersectionality theory can be used to understand the connections between gender, race, class and religion. For example, Hancock (2016) explored intersectionality through a, “black feminist approach.” Werbner (2013) observed that, “Intersectionality has become an increasingly important framework for analysing multiple forms of disadvantage.” She argues that this intersectionality creates negative identities, and explores the counter idea of, “*multiple identities* as a positive politics of recognition.” This idea of multiple identities aligns with multicultural theory in that there is recognition of diverse cultures within individuals and society.

The following case studies further investigate multicultural theory and identity through the stories of three artists who created work in Footscray. Through this study, this research presents a link between the development of street art and multicultural theory, and to some extent, social cohesion and resilience.

## 4. Case Studies



**Figure 1:** Part of the *Footscray Animated Wall Mural* showing the story of Bunjil by Rosie Kalina Kilvert.

#### 4.1 Case Study 1 : Rosie Kalina Kilvert

As the author of this article, I want to acknowledge that I am not of Indigenous Australian heritage so I needed to be aware of Rosie's culture and beliefs as well as that of her mentor, Uncle Larry Walsh. The reason why she is introduced first in this article, is to pay respect to the fact that they are the first peoples of Australia. Also, as the researcher, I acknowledge the literature used in this research is by non-Indigenous theorists. However, as an artist who creates work on Indigenous land, this article seeks to provide insight into the process of working with Indigenous communities.

Kilvert is of Indigenous Australian (Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmarra) and European heritage and was selected to participate in this study through her involvement in my project, the *Footscray Animated Wall Mural*, a stop motion street art project along a 67 metre wall. The project was a collaborative community one and most of the contributors were community members with little or no experience with street art. The project was created over 9 months in 2014 and Kilvert designed a portion of the wall as a young Indigenous representative of the Kulin Nation. With guidance

from Indigenous elder, Uncle Larry Walsh, she animated the story of Bunjil the eagle, the creator of the land, rules, people and animals.

Uncle Larry Walsh is the Elder in Residence at the Footscray Community Arts Centre. His contribution to the wall mural proved invaluable to Kilvert as a young Indigenous representative. Kilvert did not want the responsibility of representing the Indigenous community, so it was also important to have an elder that supported her. He narrated the Bunjil story over the stop motion footage.

At the same time that Kilvert was painting her Bunjil, another Bunjil was being painted only a few streets away by a non-Indigenous artist who was commissioned to create the piece by the local council. The artist involved in the second Bunjil is a professional street artist. His work was created at a greater height and incorporated elements of graffiti writing at the bottom. The design of the work and the fact that it was a council commissioned piece, protected it from vandalism and it still remains at the time of writing this article.

However, our project was mainly on ground level, and

over the 12 months after the project completed, there was significant tagging over the work. It was around this time that the council buffed (painted over with solid colour) the wall clean of the mural. For Kilvert, the destruction of our mural without notice, and the fact that the other Bunjil, commissioned by council, is well maintained, represents the continual fight by her community since colonisation.

During the interview, Rosie and myself made the decision not to name any other artists directly as she did not want to direct blame away from the council. Instead she used her interview as an opportunity to express frustration at a government system that does not allow her and members of her community to express themselves their way. She also saw the act of removing the mural as an example of gentrification. As she said in her interview (Widiarto, 2018), “the council prefers one aesthetic to the other.”

In a separate interview with Uncle Larry, he recalled his experience with another street art project in Footscray. The local council had commissioned a non-indigenous artist commissioned to create a mural representing the Indigenous community. This was initiated without consultation from the local Indigenous community and the image that was selected was of a desert child. Uncle Larry and other Indigenous community members felt this image was not suitable for an urban landscape as urban Indigenous people do not resemble that representation (Widiarto, 2018).

According to Duncan Ivison (2008), while some countries may use the term, ‘multicultural,’ to include their Indigenous societies, it is not usually used to apply to Indigenous Australians due to the conflict over, “the legitimacy of the state.” This is evident in Kilvert’s belief that urban development in Australia was constructed without permission as, “there has been no treaty.” Another example of the debate around the legitimacy of state is the argument surrounding Australia Day. The current date, 26<sup>th</sup> of January, marks the arrival of the first fleet from Britain on Australian shores in 1788. It is considered a day of mourning by many Indigenous Australians and continuing to celebrate Australia Day on this date is seen by many as a disregard of the injustices that Indigenous Australians have faced since that time (Roe, 2018).

However, Ivison believes that this conflict can be overcome

through some form of reparation such as recognition of those injustices. Enabling Indigenous Artists to mark spaces by creating street art can be a form of reparation. Rosie argues for more street art to be employed by the Indigenous Australian community to decolonize urban spaces, such as the ‘no pride in genocide’ tags. In the Justice for Elijah march in Melbourne, she observed that political statements such as the red paint spilled on the ground, are met with arrests. This conflict of space and ownership still exists because of the lack of atonement for historic injustices. “Whether it be a small tag, an engraving of the Aboriginal flag in wet concrete, or a large-scale mural cascading down the side of a city building, it will always be a reminder to the viewer that they are on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land, that sovereignty was never ceded, and we always have and will continue to fight” (Mokak, 2017). Indigenous Australians have employed street art and graffiti techniques to decolonize, such as the, ‘no pride in genocide,’ tags seen around Sydney in the lead up to Australia Day in 2017 (Mokak, 2017).

However, there can be further issues where the reparation comes solely from the governing body. In Uncle Larry Walsh’s story of the commissioned mural was a form of recognition for the Indigenous Australians. However, the recognition came from a government body without any consultation, and therefore can be interpreted as a form of oppression. Citing the case study of the Dene people of Canada, Glen Coulthard argues for self-determination as a way to empower people of Indigenous cultures. Self-determination is recognition that comes from within the group, and is acknowledged by the dominant authority such as a government body. If the dominant culture is to one to determine how a culture is recognized, this can be seen as another form of oppression. Coulthard examined the politics of recognition through the case study of the Dene peoples of Canada in their *Agreement in Principle between the Dene Nation and Her Majesty the Queen, in Right of Canada, 1976*. In this agreement, they outlined a set of principles for recognition, self-determination and self-governance over their land, economy and way of life (Helm et. al, 2000). Coulthard uses Fanon’s view of self-determination to argue, “the colonized must initiate the process of decolonization by first recognizing themselves as free, dignified and distinct contributors to humanity,” (Coulthard, 2007). By instigating the recognition in themselves first, this empowers them to demand recognition in others.

These theories for reparation, recognition and self-determination can already be seen within Maribyrnong's policies. Within their Indigenous Policy (2013), there is a strong focus on participation and self-determination. Within 'Relationships,' one point is to, "Encourage Indigenous Australians to participate in public consultations". In the section for 'Opportunities,' several points start with, "Support Indigenous Australians to express and share their culture....". These points reflect to the self-recognition that the Dene people of Canada asked for. As with the Indigenous Policy (2013), The Reconciliation Action Plan (2016) states as one of its points, "Increase participation and representation by Indigenous people on Council committees and other decision-making structures". However, in order for these policies to be effective, the council must ensure that they are actively applied to all components of their governance, including the development of public art.

#### 4.2 Case Study 2 : Larissa MacFarlane

Multiculturalism often refers to ethno-cultures but in Larissa MacFarlane's case, she talks about creating a, "culture of disability," (Widiarto, 2018). Her work as a disability artist and activist started after she overcame a brain injury after a car accident.

Her work is based on her handstand practice, which she developed as part of her recovery process. By transforming her handstands into street art paste-ups, she felt she was creating safe spaces for herself that she could share with others in the community.

She further developed her practice through her community paste-up project, *Snapshots of Seddon*, developed from her desire to give an identity to those whom she felt were unseen by the community. Seddon is the neighbouring suburb of Footscray and is also located within Maribyrnong. The project was a photography contest by local residents of all ages, genders and abilities. She more recently turned the project into a street art exhibition, posting large paste ups



Figure 2: *Disability Pride* paste up wall project by Larissa MacFarlane before it was removed.

of past entries onto walls around Seddon. The idea behind the project was to provide a means for any person to engage in street art despite their ability. She identified the need for this recognition after failing to see any for the disability community in the local *Seddon Festival*.

MacFarlane also had an artist residency in 2017 at Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2017. As part of her residency, she put together a collaborative wall of paste ups called, *Disability Pride*, as part of the, *One Night in Footscray*, arts event. The event was sponsored by the Maribyrnong Council and the work was created to celebrate International Day of People with a Disability (IDPD). The work was created in collaboration with about forty people, most of which identified as disabled. Most of them were not professional artists, and this was a way for them to express themselves in a public space. However, *Disability Pride* was removed by council graffiti removal contractors within a few days. It is unclear if it lasted until IDPD which was a few days after the paste ups were installed. The Maribyrnong Council has since apologized for the mistake. MacFarlane has used the media to bring attention to this incident. In doing so, she puts a spotlight on the lack of visibility by councils to recognize the disability community.

In his work, *"Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition"*, Taylor (1994) discusses the theory of recognition. According to Taylor, in cases of oppression, "misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need," Taylor (1994). This recognition gives them a sense of value or worth. It enables them to demand rights and equal treatment from their oppressors by recognising in themselves, that they are worthy of such equality. He also identifies different forms of recognition such as group recognition and self-recognition.

Misrecognition is one of the driving forces behind MacFarlane's work. In her interview, she talks about how people with a disability are often misrepresented in modern Australian society. She wants society to recognize, "There are many ways to be disabled." MacFarlane's self-expression is through her ability to do handstands that she is able to self-recognize. With each handstand, her resilience to recover from her brain injury grows. Her 'Disability Pride'

wall and 'Snapshots of Seddon' project reflected her desire to give an identity to the disability community who she felt were unseen by the community. This aligns with the need for recognition for her community. She identified the need for this recognition after failing to see any representation for the disability community in her local Seddon Festival. She also sees this self-recognition as a way of understanding her interaction with others. Her practice allows her to reflexively understand her own disability identity as well as her identity as part of her disability community.

In his critique of multiculturalism, Barry (2001) believed that looking at multiculturalism through a process of political management and policy would, "only benefit those who benefit most from the status quo." Instead he suggests an egalitarian approach to multiculturalism where the goal is freedom, equality and liberty (Barry, 2001). Applying Barry's egalitarian approach to the art world, Young (2013) believes that street art and graffiti are egalitarian in nature where the artist may be trying to, "avoid the often exclusive institutions of the art world."

Macfarlane has referred to egalitarianism as one of the reasons they moved from gallery spaces to the street. She said that by exhibiting on the streets, her costs to install the work are lower and she can also share her work with a greater audience on the street. However, while Barry's referred to class systems, MacFarlane's work also transcends both physical and mental ability. Using her skills as an artist, she has enabled people of all abilities to take part in street art. In this way, MacFarlane is also trying to build resilience within her community by standing up for her peers.

### 4.3 Case Study 3: Creature Creature

Chanel Tang and Ambrose Rehorek who form the artistic duo, Creature Creature, were involved in Maribyrnong Council's StreetWORKS in its third year. They are the only artists who have not lived in Footscray and are also not originally from Victoria. Rehorek moved to Melbourne from South Australia and Tang came from New Zealand. Rehorek's sister started a gallery space in Footscray and the pair had an artist residency and studio space there for a time. Being a partnership, one of the key themes of their work is dualism and the balance between opposite forces. They talked

about wanting to explore this theme more in their work.

When developing their work *Nest*, for StreetWORKS, Tang and Rehorek were asked by council to acknowledge the community in their concept design. Initially they did come up with an idea involving images of residents of different backgrounds. However, after some consultation with council, they decided to go with the more abstract concept of 'migration,' represented through several foreign birds being drawn to a waratah flower. This is because they viewed migration as one of the factors that developed the community. The group of birds juxtaposed around the flower also reflects their concept of duality.

This piece, *Nest*, was created on the wall of the Milking Station Cafe. Overall the couple had a positive experience with many community members complimenting them on their work. Any tagging by graffiti vandals of StreetWORKS pieces has been removed by council cleaners but the

piece has also rarely been tagged. This may also be due to its proximity away from the Footscray CBD, whereas Kilvert and MacFarlane's work were both located within it.

Homi K, Bhabha (2012) wrote that art and literature can be used as an exploration of culture and difference and can be used to navigate that space between differences in a more fluid way. Bhabha (2012) believes the, "interstices of culture," is what fosters creative invention. That in-between of the classifications of race, religion and gender are being constantly redefined in modern day. His approach is the acknowledgement of our differences rather than our grouping. Trinh (2013) also sees difference as something that, "should be understood within the same culture, just as multiculturalism as an explicit condition of our times exists within every self."

Creature Creature's exploration of duality looks at that fluidity and difference between cultures described by Bhabha



Figure 3: *Nest* mural by Creature Creature, created as part of the StreetWORKS Program

(2012) and Trinh (2013). Their creativity comes from both within themselves, but also through their collective identity. Their inquiry into the space between cultures is evident in the subject and themes of their work where, east meets west and creatures come into conflict but also harmony.

The idea behind *Nest* is also a form of recognition. With gentrification being a risk to Footscray's diversity, this work is a celebration of how migration has shaped Footscray. In this example, the council was able to guide the artists to choose a better representation of the suburb over the initial suggestion of selecting certain faces. Although the birds they painted were from certain countries, they determine the countries based on migration statistics, and in doing so, provided an overall representation of the demographic of Footscray, rather than focusing on individuals. This work's success in recognising how the community has contributed to Footscray, may also build resilience as new residents move into the area.

### Conclusion

Through the case studies presented in this article, this research argues for the value of using multicultural theory in the development of street art projects. The application of multicultural theory to these case studies has magnified their significance in a wider societal context. Kilvert's case study shows us how street art can be a form of reparation for past injustices. MacFarlane's case study demonstrated how an egalitarian approach has allowed her to develop a culture of disability that overcomes misrecognition. Also, Creature Creature's exploration of duality shows how art can explore that space between culture and be a celebration of multiculturalism through recognition.

As discussed, culture is intrinsically linked to so many aspects of our lives that multiculturalism as the plural of those cultures is part of our everyday reality. Understanding multiple perspectives of multiculturalism is needed to fully appreciate its value in the development of public art. The works presented in the film embody the role each artist plays within their culture as activists, educators and storytellers. Consequently, not only does street art contribute to the aesthetics of the neighbourhood, but they are also manifestations of the community's cultural diversity. This understanding of how multicultural theory can provide a framework for street art, can assist artists and organisations

to develop more meaningful work that engages, inspires and emboldens their community.

This article has shown how street art can build resilience through recognition, self-determination and community engagement. By applying multicultural theory, street art can provide a deeper understanding of the community beyond the aesthetic. As such, this research can also assist organisations in developing a community engaged framework for sustainable public art programs during times of social change. For arts facilitators and artists who are engaged in public art, this study provides an understanding of how different perceptions of culture and multiculturalism can affect how their art is received, interpreted and celebrated by the wider community.

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