

THE SYNERGY PROJECT

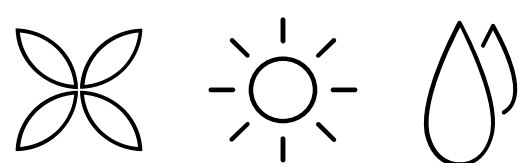
*"It's hard to imagine, but sometimes being
makes people even more determined to do*



***forced to be separated
things together"***



During 2020, a group of eight Victorian artists worked together on an ambitious large scale mosaic project under lockdown conditions. Two large collaborative installations resulted and were exhibited in April 2021. Amanda Tattam and Helen Bodycomb explain this unique project.



SYNERGY and THE SYNERGY SISTERS

L-R: Judith Watson, Christine Nixon, Amanda Tattam, Ruth Maclaren, Chris Baines, Helen Bodycomb, (Penny and Bella), Louise Marson, Rhonda McGuinness

April 2021

Photography: Julie Millowick



*THE SALON: BANDS by Louise Marson
marble, dimensions variable, 2019 - 2021
Photography: Julie Millowick*

Pandemic life has many unpredictable twists and turns.

It's hard to imagine, but sometimes being forced to be separated makes people even more determined to do things together.

This was the case in April 2020 when a group of Victorian mosaic artists decided they wouldn't let COVID stop them from making mosaics and getting together. Many had been to Italy together with Helen Bodycomb on mosaic study tours in 2017 and 2019, so they already shared a special bond.

By March 2020 and the first Victorian lockdown, everyone was seeking ways to cope with the dislocation and isolation of the pandemic.

Mosaic courses had been cancelled and people were starting to miss regular sessions at Helen's studio. So, Helen suggested Zoom catch ups for the open access studio days regulars - Christine Baines, Rhonda McGuinness, Ruth Maclaren, Louise Marson, Christine Nixon, Amanda Tattam and Judith Watson.

After the first few sessions, Helen identified this digital online studio as offering a unique opportunity to work differently. She encouraged the group to focus on developing a collaborative mosaic work that could be made remotely across multiple locations. The artists brain-stormed individually and together, and started making prototype components for a large collaborative mosaic artwork. Each artist brought her own special style, ideas and technical approach to the concept development and ultimately to the making.

By mid 2020 the group felt inspired and motivated in the knowledge they were achieving something wonderful together – indeed that the whole group was stronger than the sum of its parts. They had decided what to make and how. Then came the second hard lockdown.

Spring felt like winter, even when it was warmer. Restrictions dragged on and strict stay-at-home and curfew orders continued - for some - almost five months. By now The Synergy Project had become central to many people's lockdown lives. The group ploughed on meeting via zoom, emailing one another photos and sharing suggestions via SMS and email, staying focused on something positive. Finally, the Christmas gathering was the first time the 'Synergy-sisters' could be together in person and see the growing assemblage of what they had been making.

Judith - an accomplished doll maker and potter had made hundreds of tiny kiln-fired hand-painted ceramic arms, legs and bodies. Rhonda, a keen gardener and nature lover had made two hoverflies to go over the sunflower. But in true collaboration, every artist worked on virtually every part of Synergy, making and sometimes un-making each other's work.

450 individual cells comprising the sunflower-like arrangement were made across multiple state-wide locations before being assembled in Castlemaine. Some cells arrived by mail, lovingly packaged and sent by long term lockdown members in Melbourne. Others were brought by group members who could travel to the studio, to work in small groups of just two or three. In this way the mosaic cells were painstakingly made and assembled, tweaked and resolved to function together as one work, Synergy.



THE UNSWEPT FLOOR

Collaborative installation: Judith Watson, Christine Nixon, Amanda Tattam, Ruth Maclaren, Chris Baines, Helen Bodycomb, Louise Marson, Rhonda McGuinness

glass smalti, marble, dimensions variable, 2020 - 2021

Photography: Julie Millowick

Synergy is a wall installation of 450 discrete cells. It expresses the joy and humour from the experience of being alone, together. Synergy also celebrates resilience and the place of humankind within a greater, more powerful Mother Nature. The group is hopeful that Synergy will be part of another exhibition and will eventually find a permanent home so that it can be enjoyed in an enduring way. It is currently under consideration for a major public acquisition.

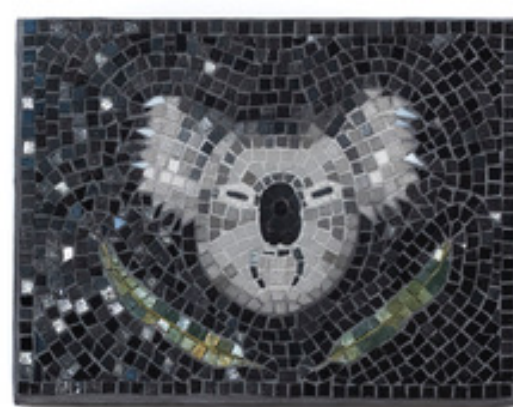
But Synergy was just the first of two collaborative works made for exhibition. The second was The Unswept Floor, a multi-panel floor installation depicting foods and objects associated with eating. Inspired by the Greco-Roman genre of Asaraton (meaning The Unswept Floor), it depicts items associated with dining as though they have been randomly strewn from a dining table. Each artist chose their own subject, ranging from a mouse nibbling cheese to sections of nuts, fruit and fish. A discarded face mask lent a 2020 twist on this mosaic tradition attributed to the second century Greek mosaicists Sosos.

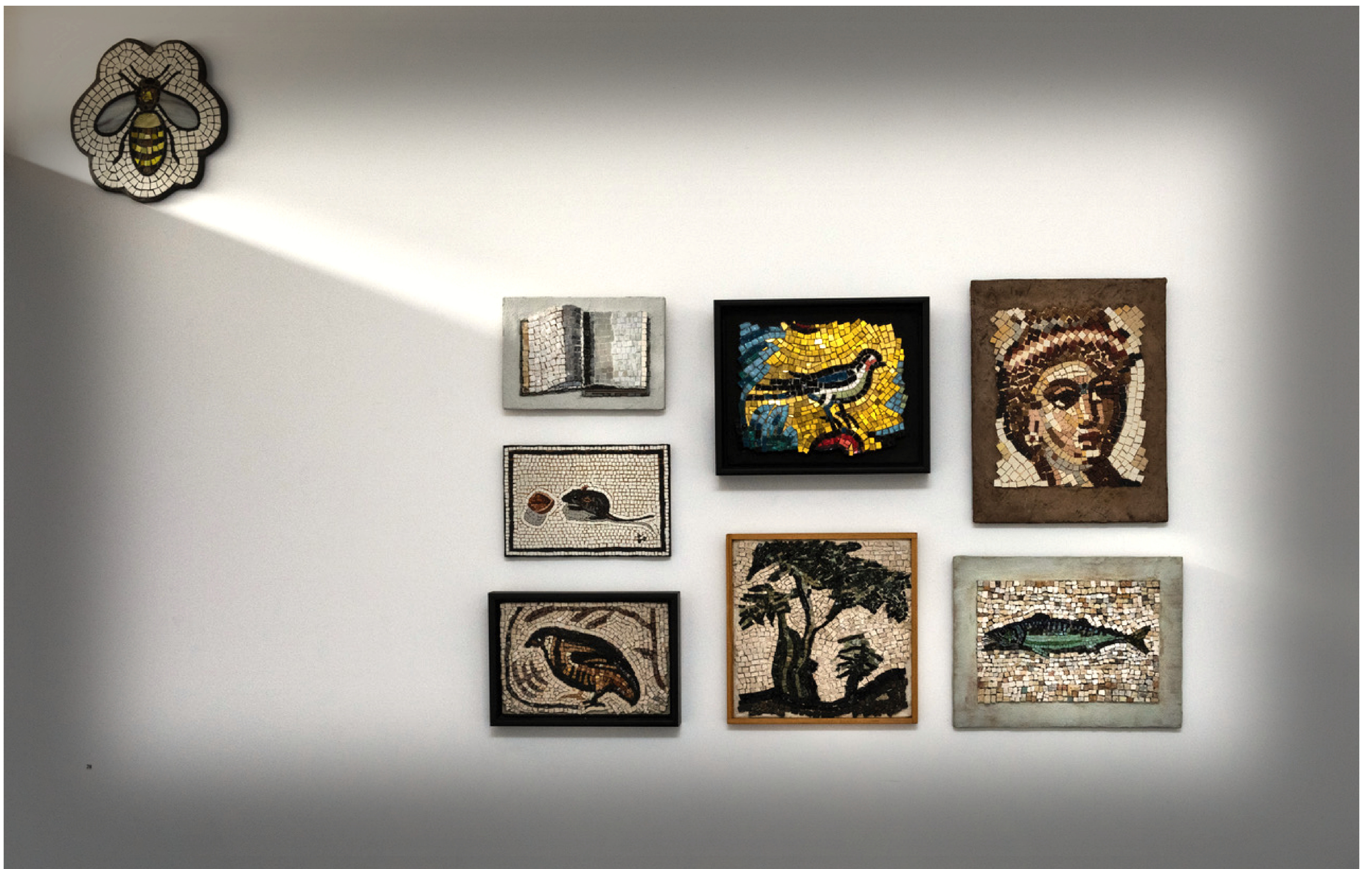
And so each item was made in the artists' own studios, with plenty of consultation with one another. In the final installation, they were convincingly presented as though recently unearthed sections of the same ancient floor.

The final part of the exhibition was a salon hang of recent works, many of which were for sale, and were sold. This four-week exhibition drew more than 500 visitors from across Victoria, and even interstate.

The Synergy Project was led by Helen Bodycomb. It was enabled through Helen's receipt of a Sustaining Creative Workers Grant from Creative Victoria and the exhibition was supported by a grant from the Regional Arts Fund, Regional Arts Victoria.

THE SALON
works by Chris Baines and Amanda Tattam
dimensions variable, 2019 - 2021
Photography: Julie Millowick





THE SALON
works by Christine Nixon, Chris Baines,
Ruth Maclaren, Rhonda McGuinness and
Judith Watson
dimensions variable, 2019 - 2021
Photography: Julie Millowick

THE SALON
works by Chris Baines, Ruth Maclaren and
Rhonda McGuinness
dimensions variable, 2019 - 2021
Photography: Julie Millowick



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Helen Bodycomb

Helen Bodycomb has been a full-time artist working in mosaic for more than 30 years. She trained in fine art in Australia and Italy and has been teaching mosaic for 20 years. She loves the history and art form of mosaic and helping other people to advance their knowledge and practice of it too. Up until COVID Helen has been leading annual mosaic study tours in Italy, which she hopes to do again in the COVID-safe future. In 2019 Helen completed her practice-led PhD, exploring 'Mosaic: Classical Principles and the Act of Making in Contemporary Works'. Helen is delighted to have recently formed the Victorian MAANZ Steering Group together with colleagues Bev Plowman and Barb Uhlenbruch.

www.helenbodycomb.com.au

Christine Baines

Chris trained as an art and craft teacher majoring in metalcraft. She taught art, technology and visual design in a variety of educational settings, including in Tonga for three years. Her interest in mosaic art practice was first sparked 15 years ago when she began taking classes. Christine developed her skills more through advanced workshops with Helen Bodycomb and travelling to Italy on a mosaic study tour in 2019. Chris lives on a farm at the foot of Mt Cole in Central Victoria with her husband Bill, two alpacas and a sheep.

IG: @cbaines_mosaics

Louise Marson

Louise is an emerging artist living with a disability from an acquired brain injury and mental illness. Based out of her studio at Collingwood Yards, Melbourne, Louise works primarily with mosaics, having been taken with this medium during her travels through Barcelona in the 1990s. Louise's projects often deal directly with her experience of mental health and disability - giving form, texture and colour to the unseen and unwanted. Her art practice is both her voice and her mindfulness. The Synergy Project was an opportunity for Louise to work collaboratively whilst in isolation during COVID.

www.louisemarson.com

IG: @louise.marson

Ruth MacLaren

Ruth has been making mosaics for over nine years and has participated in many workshops and courses in Australia and Italy. She believes mosaic is absorbing and meditative, and is an effective and healing therapy. The Synergy project has been a joyous and thought-provoking piece of work to be involved with. Ruth is in her second year of a Bachelor of Creative Arts at La Trobe University in Bendigo, and this is allowing her to extend her artistic practice and creativity in many directions.

Rhonda McGuiness

Rhonda has always loved learning about culture, art, science and nature. While she has studied the old masters, her main focus has been textiles and design. Since retiring from the workforce, Rhonda has found that mosaic art brings all of her creative interests together and it has opened up a new world. She works with abstract forms intuitively and has attended many courses and workshops with Helen Bodycomb and other teachers in Australia and Italy. Rhonda finds the process of making mosaics inspiring and restorative.

Christine Nixon AM

Christine has long been drawn to creative pursuits and has found making mosaics to be an absorbing activity. She enjoys depicting nature in her works and using materials that provide rich textures and colours, and has been making mosaics for 15+ years, twice studying mosaics in Italy. Christine is well known in public life for her role as Australia's first female police commissioner, then Victorian Police Commissioner (2001-2009). Since her retirement from policing she has held many prominent board positions and is a sought after mentor, speaker and consultant on women's leadership.

Amanda Tattam

Amanda is an emerging mosaic and mixed media artist who enjoys scavenging for treasures with curiosity and creating something new from every day upcycled items. Amanda started making things with broken items when she moved to Castlemaine in 2000. She has attended many courses and workshops and also took part in the life changing mosaic study tour to Italy in 2017 where she gained skills in traditional mosaic techniques. Amanda who is also a writer and editor, now lives in Melbourne and loves working on mosaic projects with children and community members.

Mosaicmaker.com.au

IG: @Amandatattam_mosaics

Judith Watson

Judith began her artistic life as a potter in the 1970s and in the 1980s launched a successful dollmaking and china painting business running workshops Australia-wide. After moving to Ballarat in 2016 Judith began studying contemporary and Roman mosaics. Judith completed the Arts Pathways course in Castlemaine and Certificate IV in visual arts at Oxygen College Ballarat in 2018. Studying mosaics in Italy in 2017 and 2019 had a profound impact on Judith's arts practice, with short courses at the Scuola di Mosaicisti del Friuli in Spilimbergo and Koko Mosaico in Ravenna, as well as a workshop with Arianna Gallo in Sicily.

A serious car accident in 2019 has not dampened Judith's commitment to mosaic practice. She lives in Castlemaine with her husband John and four rescue cats.