

Healing Country – The Five Elements

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with
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This paper provides an example of the painting/sculpture hybrid craft of mosaic revealing how the re-telling of cultural knowledge through the act of making is an intrinsic way of *Healing Country*.

Mosaic is an art/craft with ancient origins. The practice of making mosaic entails a gradual, meditative process. Like many other crafts, it is practiced in slow time — cut by cut. Each colour is chosen and each tessera cut, both in terms of what has already been laid, and in anticipation of what is yet to be laid. And like many other crafts, large mosaics are often made by more than one person. This shared, methodical collaborative craft practice naturally becomes a part of a social wellbeing and a cultural exchange process. Sometimes it is also a form of participatory art. It is also a process for the layering of ideas.

To homo faber, the process of assembling many small pieces to make a larger single whole is an intuitive act that is both primal and ancient. It is also a way of making sense of the world, a type of activity that American anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake calls 'making special'. Dissanayake describes 'making special' as being at 'the biological core of art, the stain that is deeply dyed in the behavioural marrow of humans everywhere'(Dissanayake, 1992).

Kirrae-Whurrong Lee-Anne Clarke of the Eastern Maar people of South West Victoria and 5th generation Anglo-Australian, Helen Bodycomb, have entered a unique space together through the act of making *The Five Elements*. Across many months — either working alone or in the studio together — the shared silence of deep immersion and subsequent yarnning has become fertile ground. Millennia old Greco-Roman mosaic techniques have been humbled and dwarfed by immeasurably more ancient cultural knowledge.

Keywords: craft; mosaic; making; materiality; new materialism

1. Introduction

This paper connects Aristotelian theories of Theoria/Poiesis/Praxis (Thinking/Making/Doing) with threads of ancient and contemporary indigenous thinking, exemplified in the collaborative practice of artists Helen Bodycomb and Aunty Lee-Anne Clarke.

Aunty Lee-Anne Clarke is a Kirrae Whurrong woman of the Eastern Maar people of South West Victoria, working in collaboration with 5th generation Anglo-Australian, Helen Bodycomb. Together, Lee-Anne and Helen are working on the creation of a large series of five public art installations called *The Five Elements*¹.

This 21st century public artwork installation uses glass smalti and unglazed porcelain (mosaic) to share ancient cultural knowledge with an ethnically diverse post-modern urban community, users of an inner suburban pocket park.

1.1. Practice-led submission

We begin by slightly skewing the question ‘Can craft play a meaningful role in the human responsibility for ensuring that life flourishes on earth?’ We shift the focus to *How* can craft play a meaningful role in the human responsibility for ensuring that life flourishes on earth? So it’s not a question of can (because craft *is* meaningful and a positive contribution towards sustainability), but rather how. What are the means, the methods by which craft can play not simply a creative role, but also a curative role? The answer lies in reviewing what we believe matter is, how and why we engage with it through craft and other creative endeavours focused on societal health and the protection of Nature, of which we are all an intrinsic part.

This *How* question has emerged intrinsically and organically throughout a two-year artistic collaboration between artists Aunty Lee-Anne Clarke and Dr Helen Bodycomb. The pair have developed an umbrella concept for their public artwork commission, *Healing Country*. Their work together has been paralleled by the emergence of renewed global warming evidence and the failed Voice to Parliament referendum.² In the wake of both outcomes resulting from devastating social failures, the artists have sought to reflect on the meaning and intent of what they do, their collective capability and the importance of focusing on positivity and resilience as they move forward to a more respectful and unified future. Their partnership has been seeded by vastly different cultural backgrounds and life experiences which warrant some explanation.

Lee-Anne Clarke is a Kirrae Whurrong woman of the Eastern Maar people of South West Victoria. Raised amongst many kin, siblings and precious extended family, Lee-Anne highly values her ongoing connection to country and her community (in and around Framlingham mission in western Victoria). Helen Bodycomb is a 5th generation Anglo-Australian, descended from Cornish miners, Congregational Ministers and English lacemakers. Raised between the rough and tumble of Elizabeth, South Australia and the academic enclave of Melbourne University, her 35-year journey as a career artist has been primarily focused on the contemporary practice of mosaic as an art form.

Drawing on these vastly different backgrounds, Clarke and Bodycomb’s fertile alliance has grown through recognising in one another a corresponding resonance of values, of attitudes to craft, to

¹ Originally commissioned in 2019 by The City of Brimbank in Naarm (Melbourne), Lee-Anne Clarke first developed designs for *The Five Elements* with Mandi Barton (Yorta Yorta/Barappa Barappa/Wemba Wemba). *The Five Elements* is a series of five symbolic firepits to the traditional Wurundjeri culture within Brimbank, the continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander connections to Brimbank and the connection to all the diverse cultures that make up Sunshine and the wider community. The original painted works suffered irrevocable damage from a park dweller suffering mental illness during the covid lockdowns of 2020-2021. In 2022 the work was re-commissioned to be re-made using mosaic.

² ‘In late 2023 the *Voice to Parliament* referendum returned a resounding No, meaning that the majority of Australians rejected the right for Traditional Owners to advise parliament on matters pertaining to their own peoples. The emotions that Aunty Lee-Anne experienced on the night of the referendum are hers alone to relate. For our purposes it is enough to point to the deep wounding that the No result delivered, one that echoes the assault and destruction of the original *Five Elements* some three years earlier. As Aunty Lee-Anne and Helen continue with the work of re-making, of re-establishing and re-telling cultural knowledge from the oldest continuous culture in the world, its amended title *Healing Country: The Five Senses* seems not only poignant, but incredibly generous. I am left with a sense of immense gratitude to Aunty Lee-Anne, whose grace and fortitude is so remarkable that I feel hollowed out’. *Listening and talking about mosaics, middens and that which is bigger than all of us*, Francesca Bussey, for *Garland Magazine* (2023-4.)

meaning and to making. Their extended and committed process of mosaic practice has illuminated this *How* question of means and method. Together, Lee-Anne and Helen are working on several projects, the first (and the focus of this paper) is the creation of a large series of five public art installations using glass smalti and unglazed porcelain (mosaic) — *The Five Elements*³.

The Five Elements is a 21st century public artwork installation, sharing ancient cultural knowledge with an ethnically diverse post-modern urban community, users of an inner suburban pocket park.

'Stories have always been here. Sharing them is important.

We are visual people, our visual senses are heightened.

Attachment to Country is beyond physical appearance.

It is within our DNA and the DNA of Country.'

Lee-Anne Clarke

2. YUNKAPORTA, ARISTOTLE AND NEW MATERIALIST THINKING

Tyson Yunkaporta's multi award winning and insightful work *Sand Talk*, poses multiple insights and provocations into the realm of indigenous 'pattern-thinking process' as a means of critiquing contemporary global systems. Yunkaporta begins by delineating the animate/inanimate divide explored by Aristotle, while reaffirming the sentience of stone (Yunkaporta, 2019). Belief in the perdurant, animate characteristic of stone also sits at the heart of Clarke and Bodycomb's shared practice, underlining and ensuring both respect for material, and respect for making.



Dr Helen Bodycomb and Auntie Lee-Anne Clarke, working on EARTH, from The Five Elements. Photography: Richard Orjis, 2024.

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New materialist thinkers Karen Barad, Tim Ingold and Jane Bennett offer perspectives that both revise and affirm some of the salient observations of classical philosophy concerning the act of making. These include both affirmations concerning the ongoing fluidity of matter and emphasis on enhancing our cultural relationship with the natural world through our physical, multi-sensorial engagement with it. To aid this exploration of *How* can craft play a meaningful role in the human responsibility for ensuring that life flourishes on earth? – through the lens of *Healing Country* – we will pause momentarily to explore some terms of reference, beginning with mosaic; a sometimes misunderstood hybrid art/craft with ancient origins.

Mosaic is simultaneously a process and a phenomenon which uses composite parts to create a single whole. Each single part possesses its own inherent material history and agency (Bodycomb, 2019). To homo faber, the process of assembling many small pieces to make a larger single whole is an intuitive act that is both primal and ancient. It is also a way of making sense of the world, a type of activity that American anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake calls ‘making special’. Dissanayake describes ‘making special’ as being at ‘the biological core of art, the stain that is deeply dyed in the behavioural marrow of humans everywhere’ (Dissanayake, 1992). She contends it is an essential part of what it is to be human. So, to the *act of making* mosaic ...

The mosaicist’s action using the hammer and hardie involves a somewhat violent striking action, a sharp blow with a sharp, weighted implement. Each strike releases a visible cloud of stone dust into the air. Akin to a long awaited exhalation, this dust is part of the material exchange between maker and material which continues with the maker’s, (or stone-un-maker’s) inhalation. Maker and material, if only incrementally, become one another (Bodycomb, 2019).



Video still from Attrition, Helen Bodycomb 2018, Videography: Jessie Boylan

Let us break down the process of enquiry by returning to Aristotle and his teachings about *theoria* (thinking), *poiesis* (making) and *praxis* (doing), the three types of activity enacted by free people during the classical period. Some 300 years after Aristotle, the Roman architect Vitruvius in his *Ten Books on Architecture* augmented the concept of this tri-union, emphasising the importance of unifying theory (*ratiocinatio*) and practice (*opus*), in which learned concepts are combined with manual skills and underpin practice (Bodycomb, 2019).

1.1.1 THEORIA (thinking)

As well as being a means of creating regulated patterns or pictures using small cubes of stone, mosaic entails organising individual fragments of information; each of them an ontological scrap of memory encapsulated in matter, entangled in time (Barad, 2003). Although Aristotle regarded these as lifeless, Yunkaporta shows us how indigenous Australian thinking perceives not only stone as sentient and living, but also self-organizing systems such as galaxies. He describes how while the ancient Greeks ‘viewed space as lifeless and empty, our own stories represented those dark areas as living Country, based on observed effects of attraction from those places on celestial bodies’. Yunkaporta goes on to demonstrate how indigenous thinking has eclipsed that of the (substantially less) ‘ancient’ Greeks for whom theories of dead matter and empty space delayed recent revelations that ‘dead and empty space’ actually contain most of the matter of the universe’ (Yunkaporta, 2019).

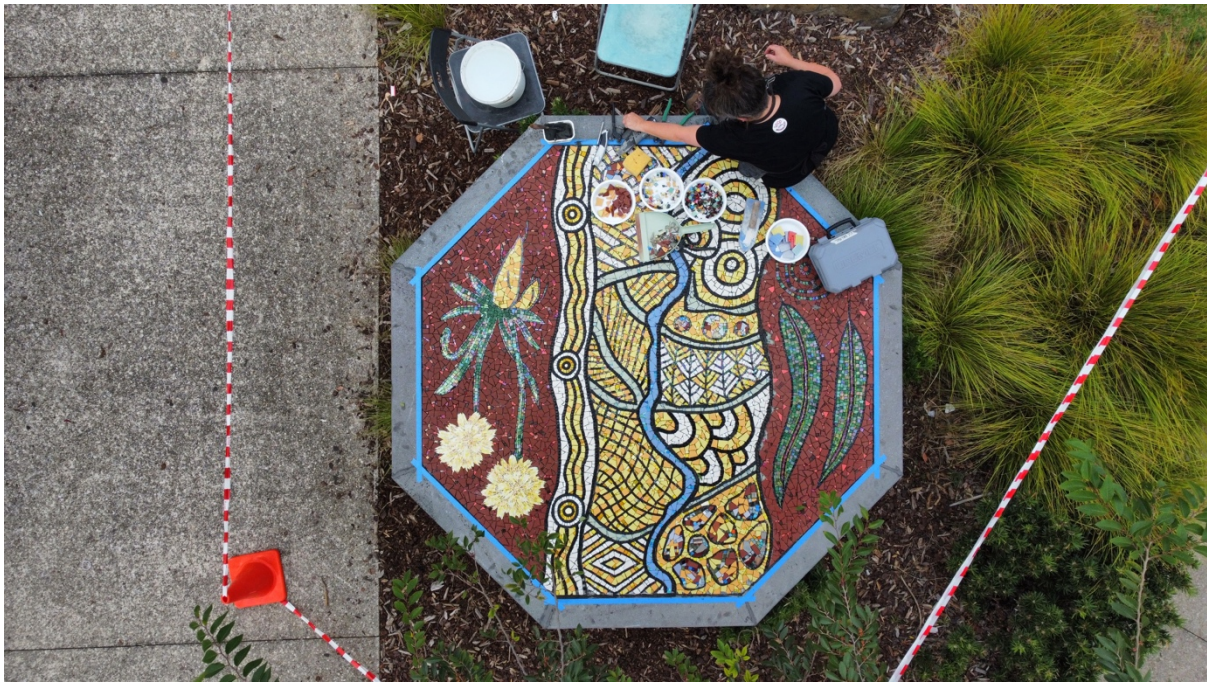
Returning to mosaic – and the practice of thinking through and about materials, and materiality – although mosaics are largely intended to result in a high degree of physical permanence, they remain subject to constant change. Mosaics are perpetually fluid, four-dimensional assemblages of matter arranged both by nature and by people to create strata and territories. Through nature they are depositions of carbonized life forms and ocean-bed slurry cemented together by excessive pressure and heat, to be disgorged incrementally over millions of years and returned from sea to land in solid states. Sometimes these materials are found by people, who use them to create a (mosaic) language to convey deeply held cultural convictions or to affirm or sway political beliefs, or simply to hygienically seal a domestic floor that would otherwise be dirt. Mosaics are not passive nor fixed entities, nor *tabulae rasae*. They are stardust, as are we.

Mosaic is both action (verb) and object (noun). More than a series of individually existing objects bound together with adhesive, the mosaic object is at the same time a method, a medium and a metaphor for a multitude of other behaviours or possible observations. Sometimes mosaic is a phenomenon in which pre-existing material characteristics exhibit agential behaviours in conjunction with their environmental encounters. The evolution of all mosaics extends well beyond the agency of the artist/craftsperson who made them.

Constructed from an intersecting network of dissected fragments of matter (*tesserae*), mosaics are an interconnected mass without clear beginning or end. And despite most having been constructed with ambitions of permanence, together with our perceptions of mosaics as being ‘fixed’ and ‘permanent’ at least relative to our mortal timeframes, mosaics remain fluid, evolving and responsive entities. Each *tessera* is constantly changing; losing or gaining characteristics exchanged with its environment, yet continuing to possess its inherent traits of mineral origin; from the genealogy of its emergent evolutionary path, to the distinctive and unique odour and sound released when cut.

Both individual *tesserae* and the mosaics they are assembled to create remain open-ended. When traditionally cut from marble or other stone, they are themselves remnant parts of larger wholes, solidified slurries of distant parts. When knapped, chipped, cleaved, split from larger wholes to smaller selves, multiple pasts and multiple futures are cleaved also. ‘When you make erasures, you leave traces in the world’ (Barad, 2003), and as Yunkaporta notes, ‘In the first law of thermodynamics, energy is neither created nor destroyed – it only changes and moves between systems’ (Yunkaporta, 2019).

Barad also describes how all forms of material engagement leave traces and in the case of mosaics, all these traces and erasures continue to change through multiple interconnecting paths of post fabrication process. As these minute material exchanges occur constantly, through indivisible increments, mosaics endlessly lose and gain matter until eventually they are no longer a mosaic, rather a dispersal of matter that perdures in multiple other evolving forms. To acknowledge this fidelity as a maker is a humbling and potent realisation, and is a vital part of mosaic theory that can only enhance one's engagement with both the material and the act of making, poiesis.



Installation of Earth, from The Five Elements, with Helen Bodycomb, April 2024, Photography: Andrew Taylor

1.1.2 POIESIS (making)

American Physicist and Theorist Karen Barad exposes the bluntness of language when relied upon to describe ontological or phenomenological principles. For example, 'making' as a translation of poiesis is a poor interpretation. German Philosopher Martin Heidegger regarded poiesis as 'bringing forth' (Heidegger, 2003) as an emergence of form, whether managed or unmanaged. American philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly describe the challenge to willingly accommodate poiesis thus: 'the task of the craftsman is not to generate the meaning, but rather to cultivate in himself the skill for discerning the meanings that are already there' (Dreyfus and Kelly, 2009). The process Dreyfus and Kelly describe is the maker's intent to develop a sincere and respectful relationship with their material, born of seeking, finding and listening to nuance. This capability, be it Aristotle's poiesis, Heidegger's 'bringing forth' or Dreyfus and Kelly's model for 'discerning the meanings that are already there', is integral to the act of making in mosaic. This is no more apparent than when working with primary materials, whose characteristics typically reveal their stratigraphic history. Within that encapsulated memory lie the narratives of each stone's making.

The strike of the mosaicist's hammer not infrequently reveals a fossilized life-form, a locked-in remnant of primeval life, perhaps not even discernibly plant or animal, organic 'life' stilled and kept from air for millions of years. The fossil's presence often provides a weakness in otherwise homogenous compressed material that encourages cleavage at that juncture, regardless of the mosaicist's intentions. In that moment of the act of striking and opening the material, time is collapsed; from the incalculable moment between an organism's life and death, to its corporeal encasement and then the moment of its exposure, dramatically catalysing the next unfolding stage in the organism's passage of material change. Few other art media or art practices are capable of generating such a profound experience of poiesis through this intimate and privileged meeting between maker and material.

Aided by Aristotle, and in concluding these resonances between mosaic poiesis and aspects of new materialist thinking, we might choose to regard time as being simply a measure of change rendered evident through material fluidity. However, disputing the paradigm of linear time, Yunkaporta notes 'The arrow of time is not an appropriate model for a custodial species to operate from' (Yunkaporta, 2019). Material change is no more wrestled between linear and non-linear perceptions of time, than when engaged in praxis, the act of doing.

*Not only do we measure change by time, but time by change,
because they are defined by one another.*

Aristotle

(trans. Waterfield, 1996)

1.1.3 PRAXIS (doing)

This paper began by exploring *How* craft can play a meaningful role in the human responsibility for ensuring that life flourishes on earth, followed by an introduction to Aristotle's theory of *theoria* (thinking) and *poiesis* (making). Continuing the pursuit of this *How* question, now we turn to *praxis*. This is to explore both ancient Greek and indigenous, versus contemporary thinking relating to the doing of mosaic, particularly by self-identified 'vibrant materialist' Jane Bennett. This builds on established arguments from ancient and new materialist thinking relating to the fluidity of matter, as well as echoing Yunkaporta's channelling of salient indigenous thinking into materiality and its meaning. The second part of this focus on *praxis* elucidates those classical principles considered central to the core methodologies of the doing of mosaic, evidenced through *Healing Country* by Clarke and Bodycomb. As this necessitates oscillation between historical and current thinking, we will pause to re-frame evidence drawn from the classical examples.

While there is ample evidence to show that mosaic was used by earlier societies as a means of architectural decoration, the western development of mosaic as a specialised art form took place under the Greco-Roman Empire, seeing the development of a series of design and construction principles integral to mosaic *praxis*. These remain relevant today because of their indisputable effectiveness in lending graphic form to linear, textural or tonal artworks. Nestled within the surface patterns and images of ancient mosaics lie complex strata of cultural and historical meaning, and within the materials used to make them are embedded memory, sequence and components of an inestimably large and complex set of interwoven inter/intra-material relationships.

The application of traditional modes established during classical antiquity and used in conjunction with new materialist thinking can expand the meaning of mosaics beyond appearances alone. This dual approach to *praxis* lends multiple temporal benefits. It enables a mosaic to transcend cultural

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significance rendered in two dimensions, to embody spatial meaning in three and then temporal meaning into four dimensions. The latter is a concept more familiar to ‘non-linear’ indigenous thinking, than western and Yunkaporta’s ‘arrow of time’.

The cultural themes conveyed by ancient mosaics were integral to the specific architectural loci where they were placed, and their means of construction in combination with often incidental environmental protection have enabled the preservation of ancient mosaics in their thousands. In the wake of the failed Voice campaign, the endurance of cultural knowledge and values rendered using mosaic and other forms of communication is even more important than ever. Yunkaporta speaks to the value of interaction, noting it as ‘the principle that provides the energy and spirit of communication to power the system. This principle facilitates the flow of living knowledge ... you must be transferring knowledge, energy and resources. (Bussey, 2024). How then, do these considerations of site specificity, cultural messaging and praxis relate to mosaics in contemporary practice?

The practice of making mosaic, like many other crafts, is practiced in slow time — cut by cut. Each colour is chosen and each tessera cut, both in terms of what has already been laid, and in anticipation of what is yet to be laid. And like many other crafts, large mosaics are often made by more than one person. This shared, methodical collaborative craft practice naturally becomes a part of a social wellbeing and a cultural exchange process. Sometimes it is also a form of participatory art. Making together in this way is also a process for the layering of ideas.



Aunty Lee-Anne Clarke and Helen Bodycomb working on FIRE, September 2023, Photography: Richard Orjis,

The ancient Greeks regarded activities guided solely as end-motivated action to be immoral and they encouraged activities to be engaged in for their own sake (Balaban, 2019). Mainstream contemporary western cultural values are the inverse of this, and art aside, many activities are valued primarily in terms of their time efficiency, end production and financial return. According to Argentinian philosopher and epistemologist Oded Balaban, ‘the Greeks valued praxis more than poiesis, whereas our culture values poiesis ... more than praxis. The understanding of Aristotle’s concept of praxis is

useful therefore not only in order to understand ancient - Greek culture, but also to understand better our own presuppositions.’ In this light, the traditional practice of mosaic entails a virtual suspension of time consciousness, in order to consider and to engage in the intricate making processes and the principles applied through them, because their cost in time and materials can threaten to exceed their commercial market value. Hence, dedicated contemporary mosaic practice requires the maker to submit and listen to the quieter, intrinsic stratifications found within the act of doing.

Like a mode of meditation, the act of doing mosaic frequently conjures deep consideration of matters extraneous to their end-driven artefact purpose, such as consideration of the artefact’s (mosaic’s) deeper temporal relationships with their intended locations, their material origins and their intended future including their site specificity – and is of primary consideration to Clarke and Bodycomb. The adaptation of ‘mosaic’ to denote a concept or assemblage behaviour is further identified by self-professed vital materialist Jane Bennett, who notes 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s use of the term ‘mosaic’ to describe a thing’s existence through the congregated assembly of smaller parts. Bennett shares Spinoza’s belief that ‘everything is made of the same substance’, evoking also the work of Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius who in *De Rerum Natura* called these ubiquitous building blocks ‘primordia’, which Bennett asserts is akin to an ‘ecological sensibility’ (Bennett, 2010). Bennett quotes Lucretius’ professed ontological identification of the way things are, herself identifying them as being encapsulated through *assemblage*.

It is right to have this truth ... surely sealed and to keep it stored in your remembering mind, that there is not one of all the things, whose nature is seen before our face, which is built of one kind of primordia, nor anything which is not created of well-mingled seed.

Lucretius

(trans. Bailey, Dicks & Gaskin 1995)



1.1.4 Conclusion

Clarke and Bodycomb have entered a unique *Healing Country* space together through the act of making *The Five Elements*. Across many hours, days, weeks and months — either working alone or in the studio together — the shared silence of deep immersion and subsequent yarning has become fertile ground. Millennia old Greco-Roman mosaic techniques have been humbled and dwarfed by immeasurably more ancient Australian indigenous cultural knowledge, and further re-framed through new materialist lenses.

The painting/sculpture hybrid *craft of mosaic* has revealed how the re-telling of cultural knowledge through the act of making is an intrinsic way of *Healing Country*, by experiencing through practice *How* craft plays a meaningful role in the human responsibility for ensuring that life flourishes on earth.

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