

Members Circle (online), 17 August 2021: *How can the arts inspire and sustain us in this time of existential challenge?*

Art is a way of thinking and feeling as well as creating.

Sally Blake

We had an enjoyably informal August online Members Circle, with our Integrating (or more precisely 'Reintegrating') the Arts Circle convenor and visual artist, Dr Sally Blake, Membership convenor, Lyn Stephens, Congress founder, Dr Janet Salisbury, and women from around Australia, including other visual artists and musicians.

The circle was opened with a recording of A Chorus of Women singing 'Acknowledgement of Country' with words by Canberra poet Hazel Hall and music by Glenda Cloughley. Sally started the conversation by showing images from her current exhibition, *Place Markers* at CraftACT. Her work begins in the wonder and flourishing of life in the ACT's eucalypt forests, in the beautiful dye colours she obtains from the leaves and barks of local eucalypt species. She draws creatures from these forests and uses eucalypt-dyed fabrics and threads to create stitched drawings and baskets, in works such as *Eucalyptus Mantle*. There is more on Sally's work at the end of this article.

Other artists present including Toni Hassan, Kuweni Dias Mendis and Dido Dunlop also shared information about their artistic response to the challenges we face.

An interesting conversation followed. We talked of arts purposes in public discourse and its capacity to help us express our deep emotions and grief as we face existential crises. We look for ways that art may bubble up our kindness, compassion and empathy for each other, Earth and all living things. Through art we might remember our deep connection and relationship to nature and place, remember our place in an interconnected world. Some comments from participants reflect this:

The failure to act on climate change is a failure of imagination. The arts can bring us to the imagining of a renewed future.

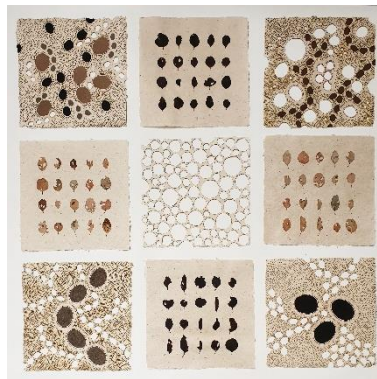
The arts are not just a bit of fun, but our responsibility to express deep realities, high stories, even confrontations and horror.

Amid a culture bedded in scientific facts and dry journalism, the arts move us emotionally to that other immense realm of feeling which drives much of our behaviour and expression. As women, this is our familiar realm, and the arts can join us wordlessly together.

We wondered also about the creative ways in which artists think, and how their benefit to the Congress extends beyond the works they make. The conversation seemed nourishing for all, especially the 're-integrating the arts' group and other practitioners as they continue to grapple with the purposeful role of artists as humanity faces climate change, a global pandemic and threats to human rights such as the unfolding story in Afghanistan. It was good to be in conversation with others, thinking and feeling how artists and arts can strengthen the Congress principles and purposes.

More about Sally Blake's work

After she completed her dye research at the Australian National Botanic Gardens, 80% of Namadgi National Parks eucalypt forests were burned in the 2019/20 fire season. The fires throughout Australia were so devastating that they marked a place in history where climate change undeniably declared itself. Sally worked with burns, ash, drought-affected burnt leaves and weaving techniques to create works about this huge loss and destruction. Renewal feels tentative, unsure after such catastrophic fire, but new life is sprouting in the forests after gentler seasons and replenishing rains. *Regeneration* celebrates this. See more here <https://craftact.org.au/blogs/exhibition-catalogues/place-markers>.



1. Sally Blake, *Eucalyptus Mantle* (ACT), 2020. Eucalyptus-dyed wool, silk and linen stuck to paper, 106 x 60 cm.
2. Sally Blake, *Requiem for the Forests*, 2020. Drought-affected and burnt eucalyptus leaves, ash, burns, pinpricks and eucalyptus-dyed wool stitched to handmade kozo/abaca paper, 41 x 41 cm each.
3. Sally Blake, *Regeneration*, 2019. Patinated copper wire, 75 x 50 x 50 cm.