

Outsider Art in Australia: Artists' Voices Versus Art-world Mythologies

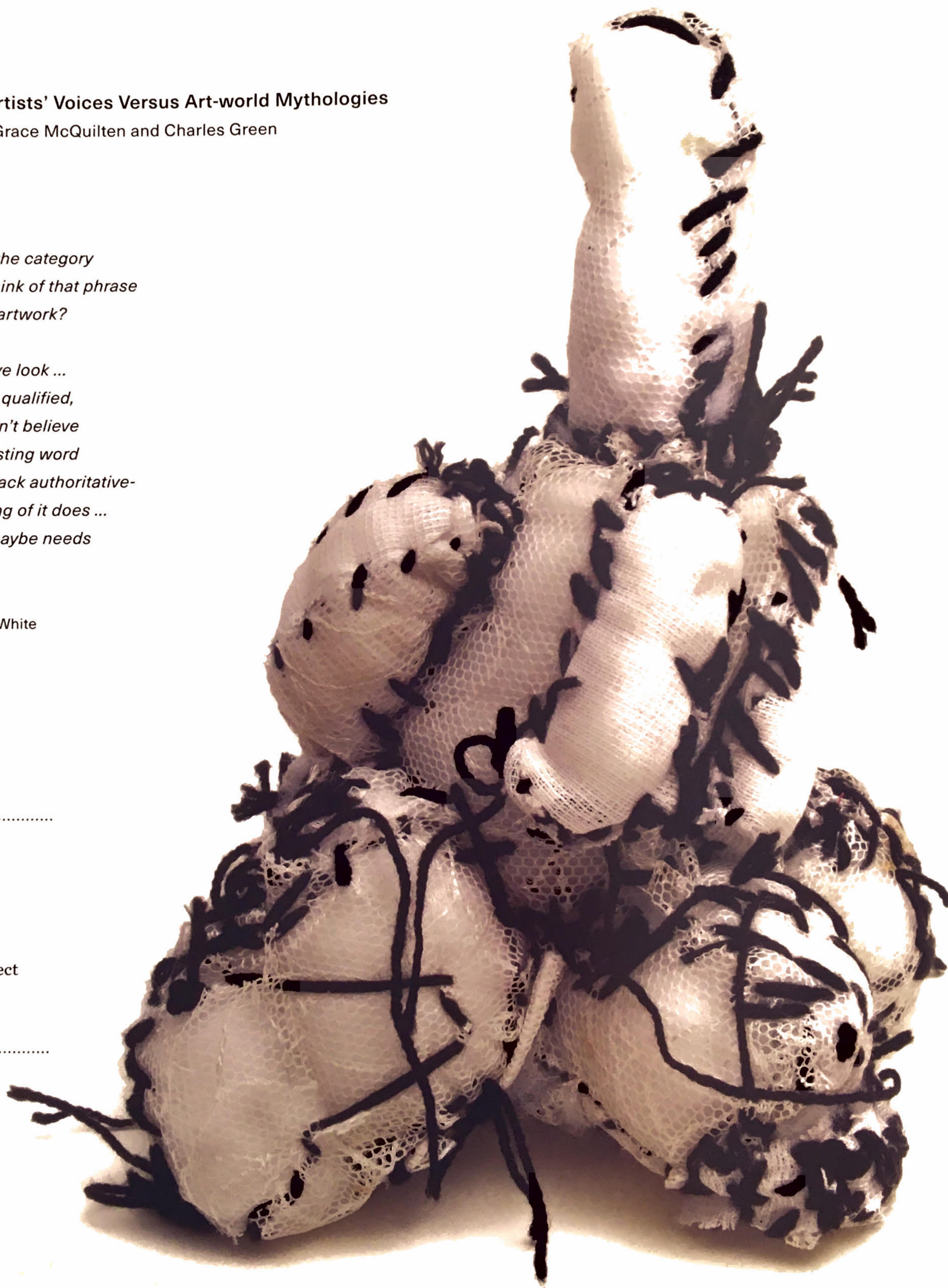
Anthony White, Anna Parlane, Grace McQuilten and Charles Green

Q: Have you ever come across the category 'outsider art'? ... What do you think of that phrase in terms of a way of describing artwork?

A: Automatically it has a negative look ... because you think if they're not qualified, they're not a true artist. But I don't believe I'm not qualified ... It's an interesting word because it doesn't necessarily lack authoritative-ness in the word but the meaning of it does ... I think it's good to use it but it maybe needs a bit of an explanation to it.

Mark Smith, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, 2019¹

Terry Williams
Not titled, 2018
Material, stuffing, wool
30 x 20 x 20 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project
Australia, Melbourne





Monica Burns

Not titled, 2012

Work on paper

39 x 38 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne



Steven Perrette
Not titled, 2003
Pencil on paper
50 x 66.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne



Cathy Staughton
James and Cathy Juggle Big Ring, 2010
Acrylic on paper
35 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne



Brigid Hanrahan

Disney Princess and Pocahontas in the Garden, 2017

Acrylic and marker pen on canvas

29.5 x 31 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne



Monica Burns
Not titled, 2017
Pencil and ink on paper
56.5 x 55.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne

With the rise of outsider art institutions, exhibitions and markets internationally in recent decades, it has become apparent that the romanticisation of artistic difference that is endemic to discussions of the field is misplaced. While so-called 'outsider artists' are conventionally typecast as pristine cultural isolates, in fact they are not only deeply engaged with the social, political and artistic worlds around them, but are often also aware of the terms being used to describe their work.



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Monica Burns
Not titled, 2011
Work on paper
56 x 38 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
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The highly contested term 'outsider art' has historically been adopted by scholars, curators and critics—as well as some artists—to encompass the work of people with disability, those with experience of mental illness or incarceration, non-tutored or naive artists, and visionary artists. While such art was commonly viewed during the 19th century as evidence of 'degeneration', in the 20th century it received a more positive interpretation by the likes of Jean Dubuffet and Roger Cardinal for being free of conscious artifice, bypassing culture and producing a documentation of inner life. Regardless of whether outsider artworks were denigrated or romanticised, their categorical segregation from mainstream art resulted in misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Recent studies of the work of the Mexican-born American artist Martín Ramírez, for example, have challenged the presumption of early commentators that his work was primarily a manifestation of his schizophrenia, pointing out the references to vernacular Mexican architecture and folk Catholic imagery that 'should have been obvious from the start'.² Furthermore, as is evident in Mark Smith's comments above, artists who have been categorised as 'outsiders' often have a critical perspective on the idea and category of outsider art and are aware of both its limitations and potential usefulness. A major gap in the discourse around outsider art has been, and continues to be, the voices and agency of artists who have been given this categorical definition. How might the views of artists inform, and potentially transform, a contemporary understanding of outsider art?

As many critics have noted, there are a host of problems with the concept of outsider art. To begin with, according to Adam Geczy, 'The "art world" is too much of a disordered, discordant mass to have an inside let alone an outside', and what is commonly referred to as the art world is in fact a 'system of fluid and constantly redefining demarcations'. Furthermore, he argues, 'there have always been outsides to art, and these outsides are multiple and exist according to many categories'.³ Indeed, for James Elkins, different modernisms engender different conceptions of outsider art: 'If you subscribe mainly to a high formalist modernism, then the art of the insane might seem most interesting to you; but if your modernism is more CoBrA and Scandinavian expressionism, then Dubuffet's choices might be more apposite'.⁴ Like many other writers on the topic, Chris McAuliffe has argued that outsider art represents a conceptual 'other' to a mainstream art world. However, rather than conceiving of this 'other' as an untamed

threat to an establishment order, he suggests that such art in fact represents the aspirations of mainstream contemporary art: 'the outsider is defined from the perspective of the viewer. The incorporation of outsider art into global contemporary art has more to do with the needs of the centre rather than with the claims of the periphery.'⁵ The perceived difference of outsider art—as it appeared in Massimiliano Gioni's recent Venice Biennale, for example—promises an 'elsewhere' which acts as 'a surrogate for the renewed utopian aspirations of the contemporary'.⁶

In an important study which has provided a new perspective on outsider art, Timothy van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen identify two ways that outsider art—which initially seems like it should lack art-world prestige—paradoxically attains a high level of prestige. Outsider artists gain art-world prestige *because of* their lack of social prestige: 'Undeniably, what gets outsider artists attention from the artworld is an accumulation of things that marginalize them socially. From a curator's point of view, an artist's poverty, mental illness, and lack of training validates the work.'⁷ Moreover, van Laar and Diepeveen argue, it is outsider art's association with 'the unself-conscious, the authentic, the sincere, the naïve' that elevates it to a position of prestige in an art world that values self-consciousness above all else.⁸ This is because outsider art's supposed naivety—the artist's apparent absence from the art world's discursive economy—provides an opportunity for the art world as an interpretive community to recode the art on his or her behalf:

The artworld brings a level of awareness—even in something as small as a subtle shift from authenticity to thinking *about* authenticity—that it doesn't believe outsider artists have. That shift makes manifest a slippage between the intentions of the artist and the way the artworld uses the work.⁹

Van Laar and Diepeveen's conclusions are in broad agreement with those of McAuliffe. The appreciation and interpretation of outsider art is not only an opportunity for members of the art world to display their sophistication and accrue prestige, it is also a way for the art world to express a repressed desire for sincerity and innocence. Like the distorted, romanticising perspectives of earlier enthusiasts such as Dubuffet and Cardinal, however, such tropes and stereotypes constrain, segregate, misrepresent and even ghettoise the work of outsider artists.

Among the possible solutions to this problem are several strategies. It is crucial to recognise first of all that outsider art is embedded in, not categorically distinct from, mainstream culture. Lynne Cooke's important, groundbreaking exhibition *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* (2018), which showed how the relationship between the margins and the mainstream has changed over the years, demonstrated that outsider art, or what she prefers to call 'outlier' art, has always been engaged with and responsive to the mainstream. Many outsider artists, particularly in Australia, have emerged from supported studios that focus on and actively facilitate this kind of engagement.



Monica Burns
Not titled, 2011
Work on paper
56 x 38 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne

As Josie Cavallaro and Kristina Tito have argued, supported studios work to dismantle the barriers that prevent outsider artists from participating in the art world and that differentiate them from mainstream artists: 'The rise of supported studios and the evolution of access to artistic exchange and networks have provided artists with scaffolding to engage conceptually with the art world and it is time to value that recognition'.¹⁰ Supported studios connect their artists to artistic networks and support them in their professional development and career trajectories. This is a long way from the image of outsider artists as isolates or outcasts, separated from the mainstream art world. However, it remains the case that supported studios are funded on the basis of their identification of the artists they work with as non-normative, which can serve to maintain the stigmatising separation that distinguishes these artists and their work. Furthermore, artists are rarely granted the power to define themselves but are instead defined within the terms of the mainstream art world. One effect of opening art-world discourse to accommodate outsider artists' insights into their own lives and work—as told by the artists—would be to contribute to the diversification of the cultural field and the erosion of a simple binary distinction between mainstream and margin. It would also address a systemic structural problem of power and agency by providing artists with the ability to determine their own position as artists in the contemporary field.

With that in mind, we have recently embarked on a research project to narrate the history of Australian artists who have historically been considered 'outsiders', which involves gathering the voices of outsider artists through interview to inform a new art historical perspective on this tradition and what it means in the contemporary art world. In the first stage of the project, we have interviewed several artists from Arts Project Australia, a supported studio in Melbourne providing services to artists with disability. We also interviewed an artist with a long association with the outsider art label, Anthony Mannix, from New South Wales. The findings, although preliminary at this stage, are revealing. Firstly, we will share insights from the artists that dispel some of the myths of the 'outsider artist', before considering the artists' perspectives on the category of outsider art.

Rather than working in artistic isolation, many of the artists who we spoke to have drawn inspiration from the work of modern painters, have a strong sense of art history and are often very conscious of the work of other artists and the potential influence such artists have had on their works. Names such as van Gogh, Picasso, Bacon and Munch were mentioned as important inspirations, along with the work of the Australian artists John Brack and Vera Möller. Michael Camakaris, for example, in speaking about the environmental themes in his work, told us that:

I was working on the bull because I found that an interesting subject, I don't know if that was an environmental thing but I was interested, I love Picasso's stuff and his Minotaurs and I saw the exhibition of the etchings. But working on that as a motif has been something that's a comment on humanity ...



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 Samraing Chea
Radioactive Gas Tank, 2011
 Pencil on paper
 25 x 35 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Arts
 Project Australia, Melbourne

I'm not sure what Picasso was doing but I was exploring humanity, as being ... something that's beautiful but also damaging. And I suppose that's evolved into looking at climate change.¹¹

Such comments reveal Camakaris's awareness of the work of important predecessors, and also how that inspiration was not simply a source of motifs or themes but evolved into something different and innovative within his own work.

Like most contemporary artists, many of the artists we interviewed were intensely interested in the question of how their work is presented. Rather than being ignorant of or uninterested in the exhibitions in which they are involved, they are keen for viewers to know about their materials, the type and amount of effort involved in making their work, the themes to which their work relates, the personal experience underpinning the work, the broader series of works to which individual pieces belong, and the narratives that are attached to the work. For example, Mark Smith, speaking about the idea of having a themed exhibition, argues that:

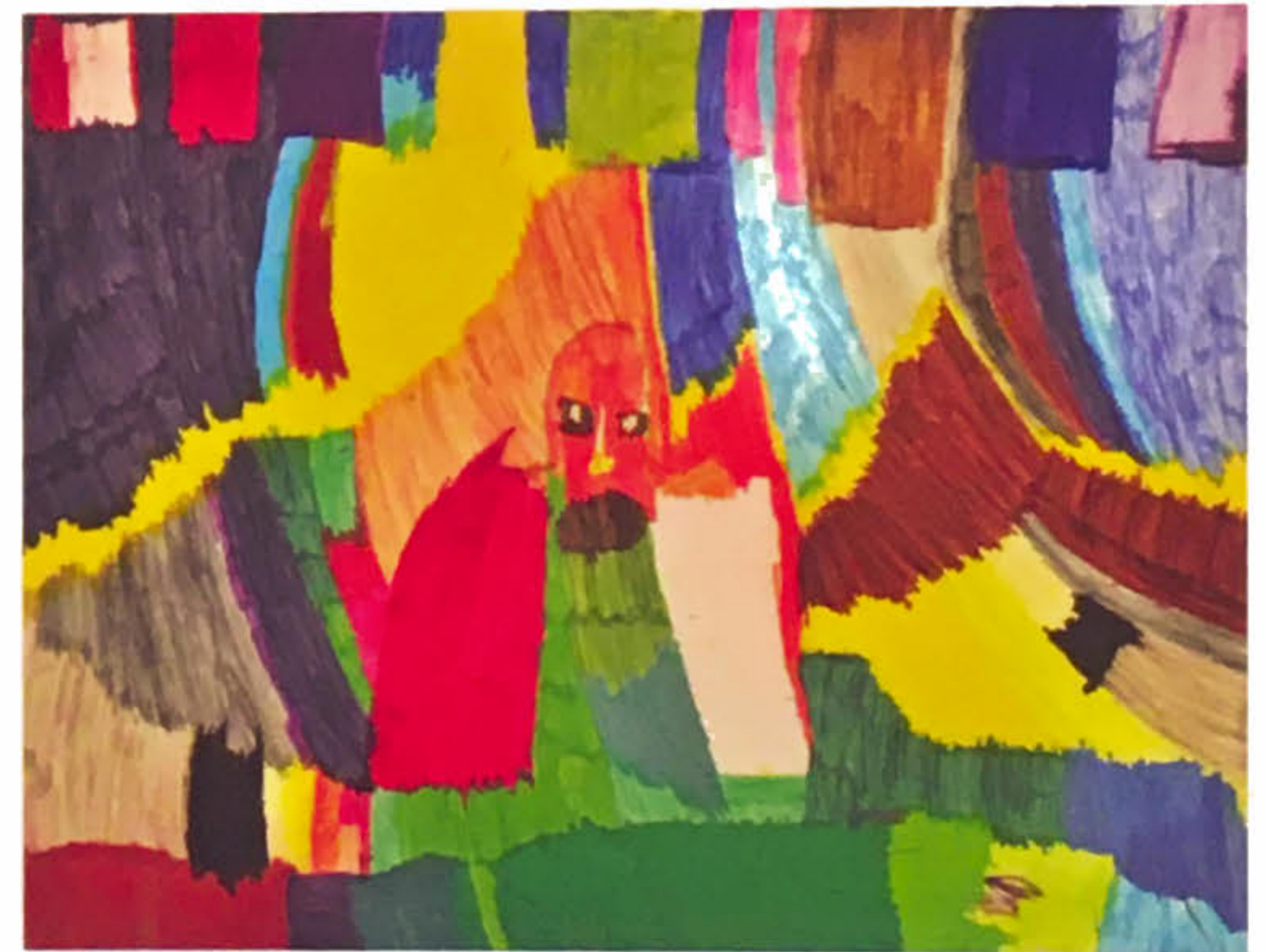
the general public like themes because they'll see one piece and they think that means they'll see another piece ... and that relationship is built onto the attractiveness of that piece. It builds onto it. So, each piece can feed off other pieces, and therefore if this is a themed exhibition you can ... make some more sense.¹²

Contrary to the myth that outsider artists are not familiar with or are uninterested in the experience of exhibiting and selling art, several of the artists we spoke to see it as an extremely positive experience and actively seek it out.

The artists we interviewed challenged the romantic idea that outsider artists give expression to internal impulses in an unselfconscious manner; rather, they are highly aware of the nature of their own work and the changes it has undergone over time. For example, Lisa Reid described how 'it was good looking back at all the old pictures' when she had a retrospective exhibition, and also noted that 'The older work was different to the new work'. She observed, 'I've ... changed my style of work' because 'I take more time on it now'.¹³ Paul Hodges noted that:

I stopped being into the modern contemporary side because I got more interested in landscape, and I think the actual skill that landscape artists have. It's a bit like you want to dare yourself to be as good as, say, a professional landscape painter. So, I wanted to be more landscape than, I think, abstract. And I found abstract painting was too 'in your mind', which I think it is.¹⁴

Another important consideration is that the artists are highly aware of the importance of the institutions within which they work. Christian Hansen spoke about



Rebecca Scibilia
*The Lion, the Witch
and the Wardrobe*, 2013

Marker pen on paper
28.5 x 38 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne

coming into Arts Project's supported studio, and participating in that organisation's Northcote Penguins professionalisation program—which assists the artists in building their practices and developing their careers—in the following terms:

What's good? Social contact, because I'm a bit of a homebody. Access to a lot of experienced artists that are [doing] professional work. If you can't get access from one person, you get [it] from somebody else ... It's great. I find myself a quiet little corner. I normally go against the windows, because I like the natural light. I always have the natural light on my painting ... Now that I've just started with the [Northcote] Penguin group, we can bounce ideas off each other ... we can ask questions or anything.¹⁵

Paul Hodges noted that one of the benefits of working in Arts Project's supported studio is that he is given professional guidance while also having freedom to make his work. He also was critical of the ways in which mainstream art conventions can influence an artist's practice:

I feel like I'm not just coming here [to] sit down and do this drawing, but actually coming to work and being in the professional way ... they're good at getting my art out in the world and representing my art. They're good [at helping you learn] how to do your art without being too critical ... coming here, there's freedom in how to be and how to do your art ... I mean if you have a painting that's at, say, Flinders Lane or any of the other big modern galleries, you would have to be actually good but also [it would have to be] done a certain way.¹⁶

As Hodges demonstrates, artists have a strong sense of how their work is received. He has a refined consciousness of the reception of the work, and is well aware of what is popular and what isn't.

Michael Camakaris also demonstrated a strong engagement with contemporary art theory and criticism, and spoke about conveying a message in a calculated way. He is very aware, for example, of not being too didactic in the way he communicates political messages:

I'm trying not [to] be 'in your face' ... it's just finding certain motifs ... to explore the issue; I want to explore without stating the obvious, without preaching, because I've probably heard that through art criticism, that you don't want it to be propaganda or so obvious, like 'don't do this'.¹⁷

One of the most important questions of our interviews addressed the concept of outsider art itself. This provoked ambivalent reactions on the part of the artists. Wary of the stigma of delegitimation which comes with being cast out of the mainstream, many of the artists were nevertheless aware that their work is in many

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Brigid Hanrahan
Butterfly on Disney Frozen
Princess, Two Pocahontas
Characters and a Disney
Princess from Frozen, 2017
Acrylic, marker pen and pencil
on canvas
30.5 x 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne
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ways distinct from mainstream art practices. While Anthony Mannix once identified with the idea of the outsider artist as expressed in Cardinal's monograph, he commented that:

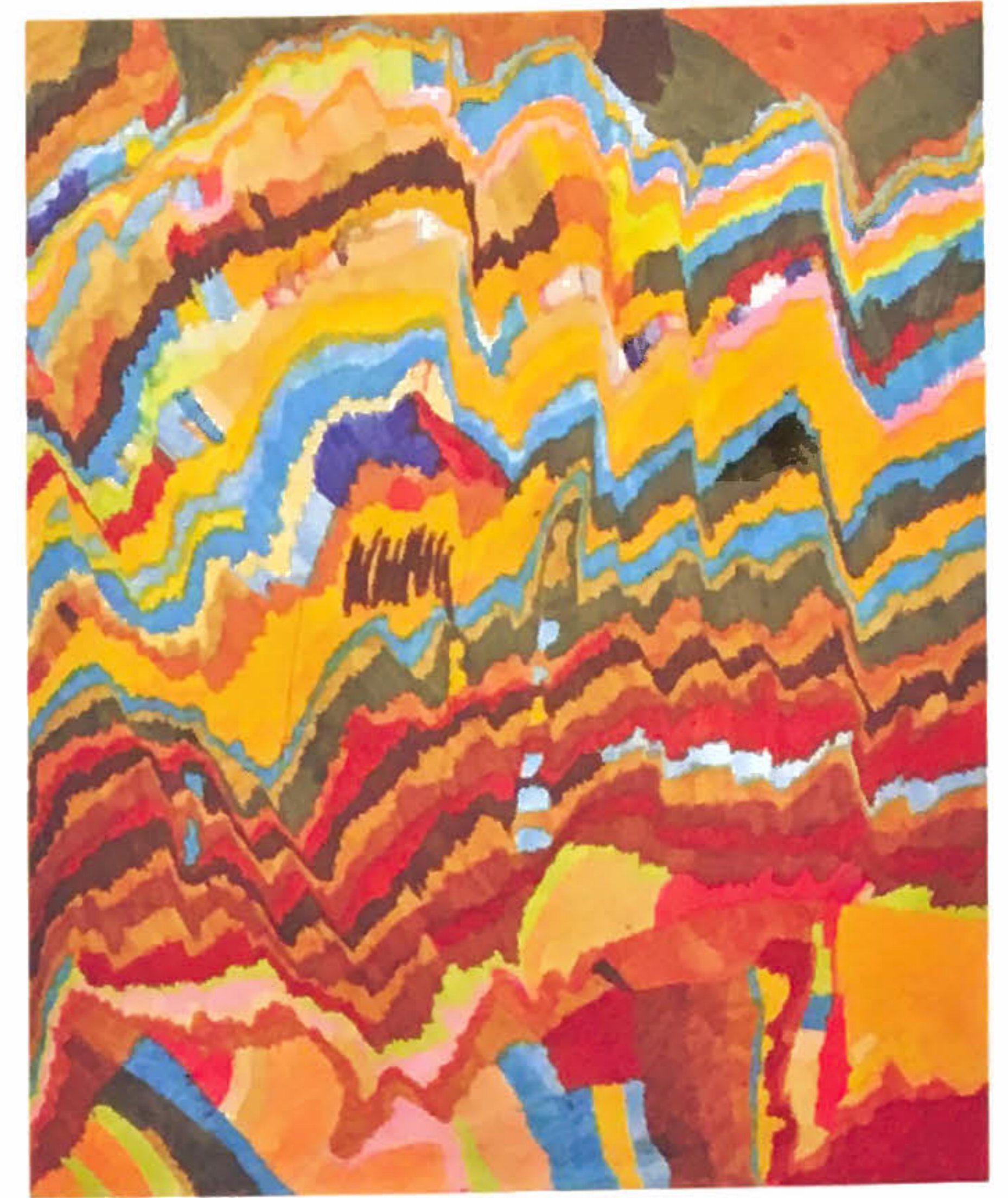
I don't consider myself really 'outsider' now, you know, not physically or environmentally. 'Outsider' meant to me, back in the '80s, fighting to survive the very thing of existence. And not only that, doing your artwork as well and building your cosmology. So, I seem to have changed from 'outsider' because I seem to have built so much of that cosmology. It's like actually constructing a house or a dome or something.¹⁸

Like Mannix, other artists shared a sophisticated understanding of the politics around terminology. For example, in response to our question as to whether he thought the term 'outlier' used by Lynne Cooke was preferable to 'outsider artist', Michael Camakaris argued that the difference between the two terms is similar to a terminological distinction currently being discussed in the disability sector:

instead of using the word 'disability' use 'diffability' basically because people have a different ability. By having what society views as a disability, we view having that disability [as allowing] you to see the world in a different way, which forces you to see things and to create things [differently].¹⁹

In this way, Camakaris suggested the label 'outlier' may have 'a less negative connotation' than the term 'outsider'. Christian Hansen had a different response. He argued that outsider art was a term that could be applied to his art because 'It's definitely outside. It's definitely not inside the box, it's definitely outside the box', adding furthermore, 'I'm a butterfly, I won't be held down'. Here we can see the stigmatised term of 'outsider' transformed into a position of strength—of positive difference, but on the terms of the artist.

As this small sample of artists' voices demonstrates, the common view of outsider art as the spontaneous outpouring of individuals who are separate from, that is to say, outside the norms of art and society—as has so often been argued—is unsustainable. At the same time, to erase what is unique about these artists, their position and experience of difference from the mainstream, is potentially counter-productive. After all, as Lynne Cooke has noted, 'Removal of classificatory systems based in power differentials does not automatically establish equality of opportunity' and, furthermore, 'being at variance with the norm can be a position of strength: a place negotiated or sought out rather than predetermined and fixed'.²⁰ With the assistance of the voices of artists who have historically been understood as 'outsiders', we propose to open the history of Australian art to the startling and sophisticated worlds that they produce. To quote Anthony Mannix, who compares his entire body of work to a cosmology which he inhabits, 'I'm inside the thing I built ... So maybe you lot are the outsiders.'



Rebecca Scibilia
Five Fall into Adventure, 2017
Marker pen on paper
56 x 76 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne

Rebecca Scibilia
Five Fall into Adventure, 2017
Marker pen on paper
56 x 76 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts
Project Australia, Melbourne



- ¹ Mark Smith, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ² Daniel Wojcik, *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2016, p. 23. See also Victor M. Espinosa, *Martín Ramírez: Framing His Life and Art*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2015.
- ³ Adam Geczy, 'The Solid Fraud of Outsider Art', *Broadsheet*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2010, p. 66.
- ⁴ James Elkins, 'Naïfs, Faux-Naïfs, Faux-Faux Naïfs, Would-Be Faux-Naïfs: There Is No Such Thing as Outsider Art', *Inner Worlds Outside*, exhibition catalogue, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2006, p. 75.
- ⁵ Chris McAuliffe, 'Outsider Art and the Desire of Contemporary Art', presentation at *Contemporary Outsider Art: The Global Context*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 24 October 2014, chrismcauliffe.com.au/outsider-art-and-the-desire-of-contemporary-art-october-2014/; accessed 9 July 2019.
- ⁶ McAuliffe, 2014.
- ⁷ Timothy van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen, *Artworld Prestige: Arguing Cultural Value*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2013, p. 20.
- ⁸ Van Laar and Diepeveen, p. 163.
- ⁹ Van Laar and Diepeveen, p. 166.
- ¹⁰ Josie Cavallaro and Kristina Tito, 'The Outsider Mirage', *Runway*, no. 27, 2015, runway.org.au/the-outsider-mirage/; accessed 9 July 2019.

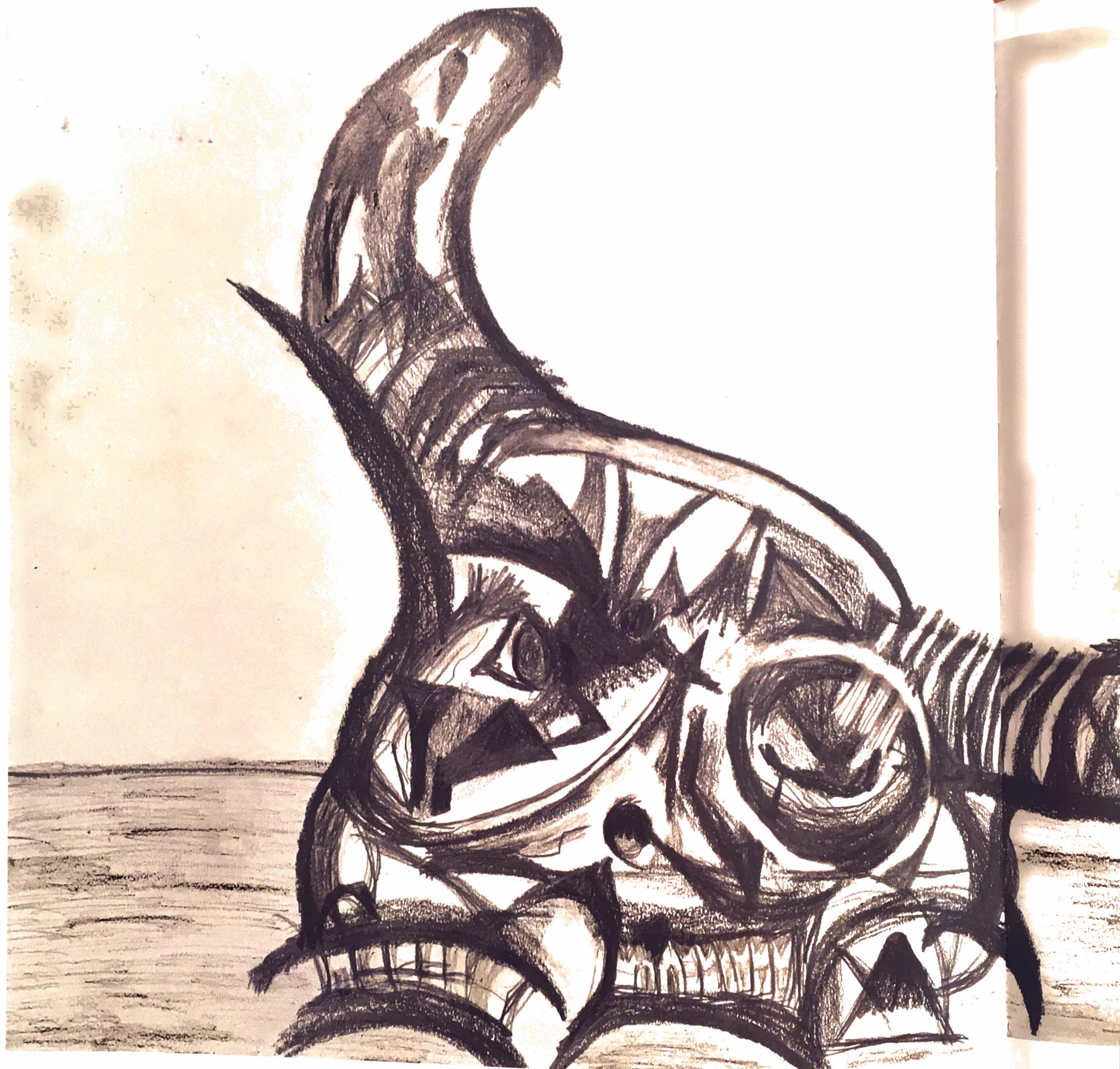
- ¹¹ Michael Camakaris, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹² Mark Smith, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹³ Lisa Reid, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹⁴ Paul Hodges, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹⁵ Christian Hansen, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹⁶ Paul Hodges, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹⁷ Michael Camakaris, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ¹⁸ Anthony Mannix, interview with Anthony White, New South Wales, 24 April 2019.
- ¹⁹ Michael Camakaris, interview with Anthony White and Anna Parlane, Arts Project Australia, Melbourne, 22 May 2019.
- ²⁰ Lynne Cooke, 'Boundary Trouble: Navigating Margin and Mainstream', *Outliers and American Vanguard Art*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and the University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2018, pp. 20, 4.



Paul Hodges
James and Cathy Juggle Big Ring, 2010
 Acrylic on paper
 35 x 50 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne



Cathy Staughton
James and Cathy Juggle Big Ring, 2010
Acrylic on paper
35 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne





Samraing Chea
Radioactive Gas Tank, 2011
Pencil on paper
25 x 35 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne
