



Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination
installation view.



Acknowledgements

I want to thank Konii C Burns, Mic Eales, Jessica Raschke and Baden Offord for sharing their stories, time and talents. I am honoured to have worked alongside you to curate *Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination*. Dr Ermina Colucci, thank you for inviting me to take part in this project, and for your trust and support as co-curator.

Thank you to Dr Eugen Koh and The Dax Centre staff who have invested a great deal of time and expertise in the development of this exhibition. Thank you for having the courage to explore such a complex subject in your workplace.

I would also like to thank Anna-Marie Russell, Deidre Harrison, Mark Bateman and James Middleton for helping me see the value of sharing the joy of living with others. **Amy Middleton**

This is an exhibition for artists and arts lovers. First I would like to thank Mic, Jess and Konii for sharing their talents and their stories. I owe a special thanks to Mic, my companion in several 'adventures' in the field of arts and suicide; it has been a life-changing experience for me as well. My deep thanks go to Amy and The Dax Centre staff for making this possible, and to all of those who have supported our efforts. A final thank you to all of those people who have 'spoken' and to all of those who have 'listened'. **Dr Erminia Colucci**

I wish to acknowledge and thank the numerous people who have openly and courageously shared their stories of suicide with me. Their voices are included within the numerous artworks that have been created and those that are in a process of gestation. These creations will be continuously published and updated on www.toofewladders.com, the art of healing suicide website.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my wife and daughters who have stood by my side, encouraging me, listening to my ramblings and ideas, and providing me with the inspiration to carry on.

Southern Cross University has been hugely supportive in helping me with my PhD research. Special thanks must go to Kyogle Council, Maslen Bros Earthmoving and fellow artist Dawn Thirlaway for their generous support and encouragement in this project. Many thanks also to The Dax Centre for having the mettle to exhibit our work. Without Amy Middleton, I doubt that this exhibition would have ever taken place. Thanks also to my friends Erminia, Jessica, Baden and Konii, hopefully our efforts will go some way to curbing the tragic waste of life that is suicide. **Mic Eales**

Foreword:
Dr Eugen Koh



Mic Eales in collaboration with Baden Offord
End of statistics, 2012
Timber, steel, acetate, ink, coffee cups
Size variable

In my 10 years as Director of this organisation, I have not launched or opened any exhibitions of our own, but I have chosen to open this particular exhibition. I have chosen to do so for a number of reasons. All exhibitions at The Dax Centre are important exhibitions and this exhibition, *Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination*, is no different. However, the issue of promoting a more open discussion about suicide is something I feel strongly about. I also recognise that open discussion about suicide, as this exhibition encourages, causes considerable anxiety, and the hosting of this exhibition has certainly increased anxiety among us at The Dax Centre. I feel that it is important that I, as Director, take some lead in hosting this evening.

Even though I am faced with the issue of suicide every day in my work as a psychiatrist, this is not a subject that I take for granted. Suicide is a very difficult matter to talk about, even in clinical settings. I don't think that this difficulty is simply a result of suicide continuing to be a taboo topic in our society. Thoughts about taking one's life often come from a place where there is a great deal of psychic pain, often deep, unbearable pain, and sometimes suicide is seen as a way out of such unbearable suffering. Talking about suicide therefore takes all of us to a most vulnerable place in ourselves.

When we are faced with such a painful reality we would usually withdraw or retreat to protect ourselves, to survive. The space that can be created by art can help us to move out of our psychic retreat to find the courage to embrace our vulnerability, and confront the painful reality of trauma, loss, death and grief.

The art of Konii C Burns and Mic Eales and his collaborators Jessica Raschke and Baden Offord, in this inspiring exhibition can, I think, create such a creative space for us to find the courage to confront this difficult topic of suicide. These poetic works are deceptively beautiful, as we are easily drawn in to contemplate their rich aesthetics. Only gradually we become aware of the painful significance of the underlying personal symbolism and meaning. These are powerful works. They are emotionally challenging works. They challenge us to explore the many aspects of suicide.

And when we do, we are faced with many questions about the human condition, about love and about hate, about courage and about cruelty, about hope and about despair, about guilt and about shame, about narcissism, about ourselves.

I am grateful to the artists for their courage to face some of these questions themselves and, having done so, they invite us to do the same. I am also grateful to the artists for sharing their art, and themselves, with us, so publicly, so generously. Such an offering is nothing less than a gift, and in that spirit we will accept it.

It was more than four years ago when Erminia Colucci first approached me with her thoughts about an exhibition that explores the experience of attempted suicide. I am glad she did. I am also very glad that she found Amy Middleton to co-curate the exhibition with her, and these artists who were willing to be part of her dream. Amy has played a major role in curating this exhibition and has shown enormous courage in persisting with it despite much anxiety and resistance along the way.

At The Dax Centre, we are familiar with tackling difficult and painful subjects, and this exhibition has perhaps challenged us more than any previous exhibitions. Amy has been steadfast and persevering, and she has delivered a remarkable exhibition. Thank you, Amy.

I would like to thank all of my staff for their efforts as well, for working together to work through their anxiety about this exhibition, in particular, the anxiety about the possible adverse impact on some visitors to this exhibition. Our anxiety, I should say – and yes, I have been anxious about it too – reflects the anxiety in the broader community about talking about suicide.

I think that it is vital that we overcome our fears because many more lives are at risk when we as a community don't talk about suicide. Suicide is often the desperate endpoint of a very lonely journey of much unspeakable inner pain, a loneliness that is only exacerbated by a feeling that those around them are not willing or able to face it.

In my mind, the question is not whether we do or don't talk about suicide, but how do we talk about suicide. *Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination*, I believe, has shown us a way. That is, to talk about it carefully, courageously and creatively.

Abridged transcript of exhibition opening speech.



Mic Eales in collaboration with Jessica Raschke
Paradoxical spiral, 2012
 Lead, oil stick
 Size variable

Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination
Amy Middleton and Dr Erminia Colucci

Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination shares the original voice of suicide survivors. It reveals the deeply personal experiences of individuals who are working through their struggles, finding inspiration, and taking steps towards healing.

Below curator Amy Middleton (AM) and co-curator Dr Erminia Colucci (EC), unpack the exhibition *Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination* through a written conversation.

What are the themes explored in *Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination*?

AM: The phenomenon of suicide is complex; it is taboo and shrouded with silence. *Inspired Lives: Discovering Life in Imagination* breaks this silence by providing a space for the story of suicide to be told from the perspective of artists who have experienced suicide themselves.

The exhibition moves away from medicalising suicide by trying to understand how it feels and what it means to be suicidal. It reveals the fragility of the human condition while at the same time illuminating its strength and endurance.

Survivors' stories give hope; these are individuals who battle against suicide and choose to live.

I respect people who feel suicidal. I respect the struggle and don't want people to be alone in this struggle. The exhibition creates a space that acknowledges and respects the deeply personal narrative of the artists, as well as the stories of any other people, family members or communities affected by suicide. Beyond being works of art, they are works of courage.

EC: While the cathartic value that can be experienced through creativity is to be greatly respected, it undermines the journey of each artist to suggest that a creative outlet is the sole antidote for a suicidal ideology. The journey each artist has taken is very personal and, in some cases, the battle against suicide is ongoing. This exhibition aims to capture 'frames' in the journeys of four individuals who have been dealing with suicide at one point, or at several points, in their lives. Through the exhibition, and the book we plan to write at its conclusion, we want to offer insider perspectives of 'what it feels like' to be dealing with

suicidal thoughts or an attempt. Also, as the exhibition title suggests, we want to offer insights into what it feels like to be alive.

We chose to include four artists who had a few things in common: they were people who travelled into the deepest part of pain, emptiness and darkness, who used the arts to explore, express, give sense to and/or heal those feelings, and who have chosen life over death. Each has managed to find the inspiration to live. And it is this inspiration that we want to transmit to viewers, together with a deeper understanding of suicide.

How did the *Inspired Lives* exhibition come to be and why is it so significant?

EC: *Inspired Lives* originated from a shared interest between artist Mic Eales, poet Jessica Raschke, and me, a lecturer and research program coordinator at the Centre for International Mental Health, University of Melbourne. It started with an email that Mic, at the time an honours student, wrote to me after reading one of my articles on spirituality, in which I had written the following: "We have pushed away art, fantasy, stories,

traditions and spirituality from our books and our clinical rooms, thereby giving way to formulas and rationalism. In doing so, we have deprived science of its human experience and our research participants and patients of their true soul.” Sharing a common interest and perspective on suicide and suicide prevention, Mic and I began to organise arts-based initiatives about suicide. It was during one of those events that we met Jessica, who had recently completed her PhD, and who also had an experience of suicide. We decided it was time to break the silence around suicide and (re)present the voices of suicide survivors using art as a medium of communication, exploration and inspiration. In 2009, I invited Amy to join the project as curator.

AM: When Erminia invited me to curate *Inspired Lives*, I was actively involved with communities affected by the Black Saturday bushfires, coordinating post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide prevention seminars. I was painfully aware that people found it difficult, myself included, to talk about suicidal thoughts or behaviours in a formal seminar setting. My background in visual arts and arts management has shown me that the arts can facilitate conversation when words often fail us.

The first step in developing the exhibition was to look for other contributors to the project. In one month we had 30 expressions of interest from artists working in various mediums and art forms, including writers, actors and musicians. We felt this was a substantial

number of people willing to share their stories about suicide. We included the work of Konii C Burns. We felt that her artwork connected aesthetically and thematically to Mic’s artwork. There was a beautiful synergy between the personal narrative of two regional artists and their large-scale, installation-based artworks. From there it was a long journey that involved approaching art galleries and applying for funding. We were turned down time and time again; on occasion we received offers of support that were contingent on diluting the focus on suicide or on presenting suicide using a medical model rather than the subjective approach we were advocating.

In 2009 I approached The Dax Centre. Given its collection [the Cunningham Dax Collection] and exhibition program, I knew it was a unique space where difficult emotions are acknowledged and not suppressed. I felt it would be best placed to grapple with the complexities of the exhibition. It also had a track record of an incredibly high standard of public programming. This was a deciding factor for us since our intention was to facilitate discussion about suicide with members of the public. After thorough consultation with the Director, Eugen Koh, and the exhibition advisory committee, we were invited by The Dax Centre to exhibit *Inspired Lives* as part of a pilot access gallery program.

Inspired Lives is significant because it is a challenge to a society that does not talk about suicide. The exhibition does not offer advice or solutions to this com-

plex and often overwhelming phenomenon. Instead it aims to acknowledge the moment/s when people feel suicidal.

EC: The significance of this exhibition is also in the audience it caters for. It is an exhibition by and for mental health ‘consumers’. It also caters for carers and the general public, from the young to a more mature audience, who desire to reach a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that affects – directly and/or indirectly – many of us in our society. It is also an exhibition for academics and researchers who are open to a different medium for the exploring and sharing of knowledge, including first-hand knowledge.

Why is The Dax Centre best placed to host *Inspired Lives*?

AM: We felt The Dax Centre was best placed to host this exhibition for two reasons. Firstly, The Dax Centre should be viewed beyond the Cunningham Dax Collection and the gallery space. It should be considered as a hub where expertise can be harnessed through collaboration. Secondly, The Dax Centre has pioneered ethical principles in relation to the display of works by people who have experience of emotional trauma and/or mental illness. This model acknowledges that there are many different dimensions to creative works by people with an experience of emotional trauma and/or mental illness, including, but not limited to, the medical, aesthetic, historical, social, personal and moral. The various attributes of the model are activated through a series of



Konii C Burns
Atrabilious: Depression of the Spirit, 2008
Charcoal on paper
160cm (h) x 20m (w) or parts thereof



public programs and forums that accompany the exhibition. Each event brings experts and the public together to foster discussion and a greater understanding of suicide.

EC: While the arts and sciences are usually seen as opponents, history has taught us that this is not necessarily the case. Mic, Jessica and I are passionate about the arts; we are also dedicated to academia and research. The Dax Centre is an ideal setting for this exhibition because it represents a space that fosters a greater understanding of the mind and mental health/illness through art.

What are the barriers around talking about suicide and how are the arts a means for breaking these barriers?

EC: I strongly believe there are a number of barriers to be broken. These include the barriers of the 'experts' who do not listen to what people with first-hand experience of suicide have to say about suicide. These people do so by their own means, in their own language. Bringing Mic and his work to international conferences certainly has been an important step in this regard. We are thankful to leading scholars such as Lanny Berman (from the International Association for Suicide Prevention), Harry Minas (Movement for Global Mental Health), Michael Dudley (Suicide Prevention Australia), Goffredo Bartocci and Kam Bhui (World Association of Cultural Psychiatry) who have offered us the space to present and share our work, and to challenge the mainstream paradigm. But there is still

a lot of work to be done to give the arts and personal stories the legitimacy they deserve in academic discourse.

Barriers to talking about suicide are widely present in the community. They extend to being barriers to hearing and listening to the arts and exhibitions of this kind. There are also barriers among policy makers and in government and funding bodies to giving the necessary attention to suicide and suicide prevention, and to looking at suicide in its complexity rather than using a reductionist approach (for example, suicide = mental illness = genetic/biological factors). The arts are important here because they can help raise awareness and provoke a reaction.

AM: In my opinion the barriers to talking about suicide stem from the complexity of the phenomenon – a crisis of self is not a simple concept to make sense of, and even less so in a public arena. For me the beauty of *Inspired Lives* lies in the personal narrative of the artists who have a lived experience of suicide and have shared their story. Their survival and continuing choice to live is ultimately a triumph of hope. The arts, and more specifically this exhibition, offer viewers the opportunity to hear the collective voice of several individuals and experience the transformative value of creativity. Along with warning information about the sensitive content, and wall texts that provide context, viewers can make an informed choice about

whether to engage with the artworks. The gallery, while a public space, is also a safe (as possible) environment that can foster reflection and understanding.

What next? What happens after the *Inspired Lives* exhibition?

EC: People who know Mic and I also know that our ideas and dreams are as big as the resources for realising them are small. Yet this has never stopped us from believing in them and, sooner or later, making them happen. With the support of other people who believe in our work and our mission, we are confident that we will continue to offer a point of reference to others who are personally involved with suicide, the arts and creativity. This is already happening through our website, www.toofewladders.com, which was developed in collaboration with Tony Gee and Sally de Beche. We also plan to publish a book on the arts and suicide, which will focus on the works by Mic and Jessica, including a chapter on their collaboration for this exhibition.

Our dream is to tour *Inspired Lives* (and facilitate arts-based workshops and seminars) in other parts of Australia and overseas. We want the exhibition to be seen in public spaces and art galleries to spread the message as much as possible. This message is one of listening, understanding, empathy, communicating and inspiration: the inspiration to live and to live an inspired and inspiring life.

Artist's statement

Mic Eales

My brother's suicide in 2002 was the catalyst for me to begin expressing, in a creative way, what being in a suicidal crisis feels like, and, later, to address the question, 'How does one move on from a suicidal crisis to live an inspired life?' I didn't realise that this was what I was doing at the time, but something within the core of my being knew that I needed to communicate and express my feelings. Yet, for a variety of reasons, words simply failed to achieve the depth of emotion that I wanted to express and articulate. I became suicidal. As I had already attempted to take my own life on two separate occasions as a teenager, I began to fear for my safety. With a desire and in an attempt to understand what drove my suicidality and that of others, I immersed myself in my art practice and began to create visual representations of my inner dialogues. It was also apparent that, if I was going to continue living and embrace my life, my artistic expressions would need to have a life-affirming character to them.

As an artist I see myself primarily as a storyteller. My motivation is to provide an alternative awareness and discourse around the issue of suicide to help reduce the stigma and taboos associated with the phenomenon. My studio/art-practice places a heavy emphasis on experimentation through play. When I enter my studio I revert to being a big kid, allowing myself to play with different forms of media, materials, shapes, designs and alternative methods of representation. The multilayered nature of my work is infused with a blending together of symbols, metaphors or analogies. Vigorous engagement with the imagination and a belief in serendipitous occurrences are essential ingredients in the creation of each of the works.

Each of the installations contained within *Inspired Lives* began with a conversation about suicide.

Paradoxical spiral (2012), a collaboration between poet and artist Jessica Raschke and me, was conceived over a coffee at Mr Tulk Café at the State Library of Victoria. As Jessica and I spoke of our shared experience of suicide and our attempts to use art as a means to create debate, discussion and awareness about the issue, it seemed only natural that we should combine our talents and experience.



Mic Eales
Beyond the 7th month, 2012
Porcelain slip cast lotus pods, red thread,
black umbrella
Size variable

Mic told me that, on the way to our coffee meeting, he had an image of a spiral come to his mind's eye. I was struck by this revelation. I have a tattoo of a spiral on my right shoulder, which I had tattooed as a reminder to myself to always work towards positive transformation. A reminder that, while there might be moments or phases when life feels it is progressing down the spiral, it only takes another moment or phase to find it moving upwards again into a positive future, only this time equipped with a little more wisdom. It seemed like a fated meeting and it made perfect sense for Mic and I to collaborate on an artwork. And so the collaboration began between like-minded artists with similar life experiences, and a personal quest to live a meaningful life guided by imagination, inspiration and improvisation. – JR

Paradoxical spiral consists of 13 sheets of lead with text cut out of them and beaten into them. Jessica's poem, *The Howlings*, was the inspiration for this work and some lines from the poem are featured in the work. The materiality of lead was chosen to represent the ebb and flow of toxic thoughts that occur during a suicidal crisis. Beaten into the lead sheets is text from the children's story, *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch, one of Jessica's favourite books as a child. The story is a reminder of a time when life was free and possibilities were limitless, even to the point of outsmarting a dragon. The cut out text lies at the base of each sheet, ready for the audience to reinterpret.

The Howlings was written by Jessica years after her own suicide attempt:

The Howlings is searching for answers to universal existential questions: What is my meaning? Where is my meaning? It was not consciously written in response to my own suicide attempt at age 24 (I was 32 when I wrote the poem), but certainly reflects on some of the conflicted thoughts and emotions that can possess a person when contemplating life's meaning. How can I fill that sense of emptiness? Who created all of this? How can I resist the comforting feeling that darkness – perhaps the infinite darkness of death – can offer? How can I shake off my attraction to the void, that homely place where I started? – JR

End of statistics (2012) resulted from another café interlude. Baden Offord contacted me after viewing my Meaning Making exhibition at Next Gallery in Lismore, New South Wales, in 2009. As we chatted on that Sunday morning, Baden spoke of the horrendous prevalence of suicide within generations of his family. Numerous coffees have been consumed since then. As our friendship has grown, so have our insights into the complexities of suicide. *End of statistics* speaks of how suicide has framed and marked one man and his family – past and present – deeply, completely and profoundly.

My father rehearsed his death throughout my teenage years until he finally achieved it on my 19th birthday in 1977. My sister and I both attempted suicide preceding him. My younger brother did end his life in 2007, at the age of 42. There were



Mic Eales
Be a right good pal..., 2012
 Timber, charcoal, military bugle, steel, lead,
 nylon, bronze, music sheet stand, canvas
 Size variable

other relatives, too, who took their own lives. My family story is one that is indelibly caught up in the complexities and silences around, of, and ensuing from suicide. – BO

In creating *End of statistics*, our aim was to capture the complex nature of suicide when it appears to run in families. Making sense of Baden's story is like piecing together an impossible jigsaw puzzle. Together we journeyed into the past via memories, photos and journal entries. Reinterpreting these conversations resulted in the printing of six distinct images onto acetate that were then cut and folded to form 117 columbus cubes. The three-dimensional nature of the cubes means that only one completed image can be seen at any one time without dismantling the entire work. Achieving a completed image is made even more difficult due to the transparent nature of the acetate. Juxtaposed against the fragility of the cubes is a solid steel and timber sawmill tram trolley. On one level the trolley represents Baden's father and his family's life. On another, it represents the journeys Baden and I took in travelling backwards and forwards into the past and present, taking the time to listen with empathy to each other's story.

Be a right good pal... (2012) came about after a phone call from a friend of my daughters', a young woman whose father had just attempted to take his own life. He was a Vietnam veteran and it was his second attempt. Weeks later this particular woman began to have her own fixation with suicide. The burden and trauma of suicide borne by those left behind is often ignored, and with dire consequences. Fortunately, in this case, their emotional wellbeing is in a much healthier state. I too have had many friends who served in Vietnam, and many of them struggled on their return home. They put on a brave front, but some eventually took or attempted to take their own lives.

The starting point for *Beyond the 7th month* (2012) was when I heard about a Chinese tradition in which couples are presented with a lotus pod on its stem when they are married, a symbol of a long and fruitful marriage. My research brought me to an article by Liu Meng about suicide among women in rural China (2002) where the life and death of a woman, known as Fang, was examined.

In Fang's case that relationship broke down, and, eventually, for a variety of complex and culturally significant reasons, she took her own life. Unfortunately the situation Fang found herself in was not an isolated one. Women account for over half of all suicides in China (Meng, 2002). *Beyond the 7th month* is my response to Fang's story.

The combination of white porcelain slip cast lotus pods, red thread and black umbrella in this installation signifies for me the difficulty researchers face in understanding the complexities of cultural characteristics inherent in the phenomenon of suicide. The seventh month refers to the month in which the lotus flower withers.

1. Meng, L. (2002). Rebellion and revenge: the meaning of suicide of women in rural China. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 11(4), pp 300–309

Paper shadows (2010) evolved through a series of internal conversations between my brother, his dog Ralf, and myself. Odd, I know, but this was just one of the strategies I used to come to terms with my brother's suicide and the manner in which he took his own life. Together the three of us relived their last moments, the notes on the table, the music played in the background, and, of course, the pain.

Created from the fabric of an old futon that my brother had slept on and the fibre of a plant known as cottonweed, *Paper shadows* suspends two sheets of handmade paper on top of one another. A few pieces of paper are sometimes the only reminders we have of someone's existence, apart from memories, and even those can be extremely melancholic experiences. For all of our differences in age and in attitude, my brother and I were bound by blood. Yet, strangely, we led such parallel lives.

The video, *Different Voice Different Perspective: The Art of Healing and Understanding Suicide* (2012), is a collaborative effort between Erminia Colucci and me. The silence that surrounds suicide exists, among other things, because it exposes and challenges our humanity. This film is an attempt to breach the silences and talk about the issue with as wide an audience as possible.

The last word goes to Baden Offord in his response to our collaboration and the value and potential of arts-based research into the complex and complicated issue of suicide.

As I said, I think you have helped and inspired me in the collaboration you have instigated and created. One of the most important questions for me about surviving suicide in my family and in my own life has been about how it has absolutely deepened my love of life and shown me how precious it is. Suicide has probably been one of the most powerful narrative currents in my life and has impacted on how I think and feel every day and every moment I breathe. I have survived suicide to live.

Your project has been a remarkable intervention into my family's tragic story of suicide – through our discussions and through the collaboration you brought about, and the way in which you have helped me translate core intimate reflections (both said and unsaid) about how suicide has touched me and in a sense made me as a human being, has made a profound impact. Although I was already sensitive to the transformative nature of suicide in my life, psychologically and emotionally, your work as a translator of feeling, bafflement and loss has inspired me immensely in the way I now approach the story of suicide through my life. You have brought coherence (happiness as defined by Toni Morrison) to this taboo subject. – BO

Artist's statement
Konii C Burns

Inspiration for this installation came from the drought, which has brought about the death of many of Australia's unique waterways and exquisite native trees. *Atrabilious: Depression of the Spirit* (2008) relates not only to the withering spirit of the trees, but to ourselves as residents living through the hardship incurred by the drought – living through the harsh reality of losing livestock, crops, or farms. We battle a depression within ourselves and our world, as we witness an environment in its death throes and our culture in decline.

Trees that were once so mighty, standing tall and proud, full of life, were blindly taken for granted. Their strength and endurance provided the air breathed by generations of people, but they are now so fragile that their once vital breath is now a memory etched in the desiccated trunks and limbs that clog our dying waterways. These skeletal figures are a sad indictment of humanity's failed relationship with nature, so much so that one senses the environment has conceded defeat as the vertical becomes horizontal. This same process of mortification is endemic in the human condition and specifically in our relationship to the environment; its physical destruction is indicative of our spiritual inertia and discontent. We, and the trees, are losing hope. This work questions the long-term viability of both natural ecosystems and civilization, and insists that they are inextricably linked.

Over a 12-month period, through much travel and exploration, I sourced these fallen monoliths for their unique textures; for their forms, sizes and lines and expression of the lives they had lived. More often than not I stumbled across these trees by chance throughout the Riverina, along the banks of the once mighty Murray River, and other wetlands in the northern region of Victoria.

I chose sections of each particular tree that evoked an emotional response from me, and then proceeded to take these spasmodic, erratic and seemingly chaotic rubbings of their textures. I used wet and dry charcoal on sections of paper 160cm in height and of varying widths; the paper was laid across the trees for the rubbings to be taken. It was a full body drawing experience, the trees and paper being larger than myself. I then returned to my studio and began to rework each individual piece. I searched through the chaos of marks that each friend had given me, and drew out



Konii C Burns
Atrabilious: Depression of the Spirit, 2008
Charcoal on paper
160cm (h) x 20m (w) or parts thereof

the skeletal formations and symbolic scenes of melancholic desperation. This revealed the nightmare of drought through images and voices that made themselves available to me. Recording each individual tree's markings has ironically evoked a freshness of life, as through death comes rebirth and regeneration. The materials used are intentionally related – tree, paper, charcoal and water. Without the one there cannot be the other. Without the muse there can be no art.

My intention is to engulf the audience in these visually textual images, just as the gallery walls are engulfed, to enable a sense of being 'in' the drawings themselves. This is certainly to challenge, if not overwhelm, the audience. However, the response elicited is not only emotional, for as much as depression is a form of living death, it can and should inspire a sense of revelation, creating light and understanding through tragedy.

With such a large body of work, I very rarely get to see it in its entirety – when I do there is a raw emotional reaction to installing this work, I am overwhelmed. I never see the same images within the drawing twice, every viewing brings to me a new perspective on survival. Its sheer size, its depth, and its presence overwhelm me. For me *Atrabilious: Depression of the Spirit* has a powerful silence. I survived suicide by doing this drawing while very ill – it saved my life.

List of Works

Konii C Burns

Atrabilious: Depression of the Spirit, 2008

Charcoal on paper

160cm (h) x 20m (w) or parts thereof

Mic Eales in collaboration with Jessica Raschke

Paradoxical spiral, 2012

Lead, oil stick

Size variable

Mic Eales

Be a right good pal..., 2012

Timber, charcoal, military bugle, steel, lead, nylon, bronze, music sheet stand, canvas

Size variable

Mic Eales

Beyond the 7th month, 2012

Porcelain slip cast lotus pods, red thread, black umbrella

Size variable

Mic Eales

Paper shadows, 2010

Handmade paper, cotton thread, timber, wax

Size variable

Mic Eales in collaboration with Baden Offord

End of statistics, 2012

Timber, steel, acetate, ink, coffee cups

Size variable

Mic Eales in collaboration with Dr Erminia Colucci

Different Voice Different Perspective: The Art of Healing and Understanding Suicide, 2012

Digital video

