



*too few ladders*, 2008, paper, thread, wax & timber, dimensions variable



*3000*, 2009 (ongoing project), mixed media, dimensions variable



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<sup>1</sup> E. Shneidman, *Suicide as Psychache A Clinical Approach to Self Destructive Behavior*, London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993, pp186-187.

<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization estimates that worldwide there are 20 people attempting to suicide for every person who succeeds and that global suicide rates have increased by 60% over the past 50 years 'World Suicide Prevention Day', 2007 (16<sup>th</sup> May 2008)  
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2007/s16/en/index.html>

Cover image: *conversations*, 2009, used takeaway coffee cups, dimensions variable



**Mic Eales**  
*meaning making*



Meaning Making – a visual arts enquiry into the ‘lived experience’ of suicide

Nearing the end of my career in suicidology, I think I can now say what has been on my mind in as few as five words: Suicide is caused by psychache. Psychache refers to the hurt, anguish, soreness, aching, psychological pain in the psyche, the mind. It is intrinsically psychological - the pain of excessively felt shame, or guilt, or humiliation, or loneliness, or fear, or angst, or dread of growing old, or of dying badly, or whatever. When it occurs, its reality is introspectively undeniable. Suicide occurs when the psychache is deemed by that person to be unbearable. This means that suicide also has to do with different individuals thresholds for enduring psychological pain.<sup>1</sup>

Edwin Sheidman

As an artist/researcher trying to make sense of my ‘lived experience’ of suicide I employ an autoethnographical approach to investigate ways in which I can speak about suicidality. Art is my vehicle for expressing what words often fail to do, to communicate what is happening in the psyche, to articulate emotions that are often difficult when using verbal language. My art practice examines and expresses my ‘narrative truth’ using a language that is full of metaphors, analogies and symbolism. The artworks and installations that I create oscillate between analysing and exploring the inner experience of suicide and endeavouring to understand the phenomenon and its implications from a much wider social and cultural perspective.

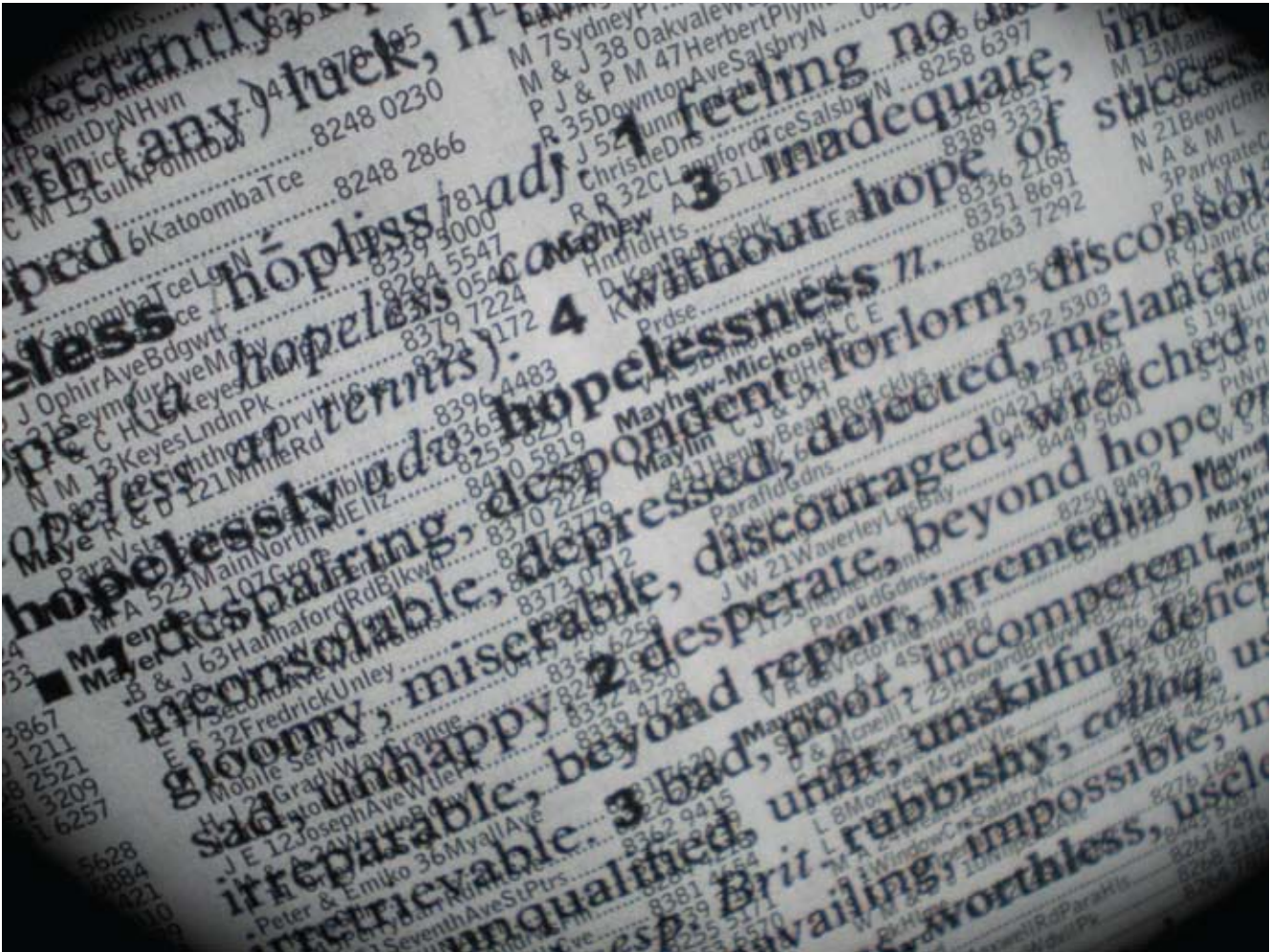
Through a combination of personal experiences and research collected about the worldwide dilemma of suicide I have attempted to avoid the tendency to spiral into narcissism as is so often associated with autoethnographical methodology. Immersing myself in my art practice has not only created a sense of healing and understanding to occur but an acknowledgement that my past can be used as a strength rather than as the failure that I had previously viewed it. Since first attempting to take my own life as a teenager, suicide ideation has been an integral aspect of my being, one that resulted in a subsequent suicide attempt, several self-harming episodes and the experience and grief of a brother who ‘successfully’ suicided. His death brought to the surface a deep underlying sense of failure that almost concluded in a further attempt upon my own life.

In trying to understand and explore my experience of suicide I began creating numerous artworks, in a variety of media, that focused on various aspects of the issue. In a sense I embarked on a quest to comprehend suicidality through both a deeply personal perspective and one that haunts the wider community also. The introspective nature inherent within practice based research projects such as mine provide opportunities for ideas and thoughts to become transformed into concrete expressions of the inner workings of the artist and thus allows for a sense of understanding to occur.

The Works

My work attempts to humanise the issues around suicide and allow for insights to occur through both macrocosmic and microcosmic perspectives. Family and friends bereaved by suicide was the starting-point for the installation *too few ladders*. It is a multi layered work that incorporates the ancient Hindu game of snakes and ladders, used to teach children about the ups and downs of life, whilst additionally examining the narratives and artifacts left behind by the 1.1 million people who worldwide are reported to suicide, each year.

Statistical information about the 60% rise in suicide over the past 50 years<sup>2</sup> inspired the work, *all the king’s horses*. It simply asks the question “with all of our knowledge and affluence why has suicide increased so dramatically?



The used takeaway coffee cups represent conversations that we could or should have had. Simply called *conversations*, this ongoing collection has been gathered and kindly donated to me by a variety of people who have in some way been affected by suicide. *A portrait in mourning* examines the issue of loss when suicide occurs. The large empty timber frame pail of water under the brass tap alludes to the extreme depth of emotional confusion and sadness that befalls the bereaved family and friends of a suicide.

3000, is the beginning of a work that began through the workshops, Surviving Suicide - The Art of Introspection, which were conducted in conjunction with Dr Erminia Colucci from the University of Melbourne, Centre for International Mental Health. The workshops looked at how art, in its broadest forms, could be used as a tool for understanding suicide and other psychological conditions. Participants were asked to create a six (6) page biography on A4 photocopy paper. The pages were then folded and bent to create a type of interlocking cube as a representation of their lives. This is an ongoing project with the intention to collect 3000 cubes – the approximate number of people who commit suicide each day worldwide. The aim of the workshops is to remind us all that we are more than just a body and a mind and that our humanness/soul/spirit needs to be heard, nurtured, (re) considered and acknowledged so that real healing can take place.

Biography

Mic graduated with Honours in 2008 and was the 2008 winner of the Windmill Trust Scholarship award for regional artists and is currently undertaking a visual arts based PhD research program into the personal, social and cultural ramifications of suicide. Mic has also been invited to present his installation *too few ladders* at next World Association of Cultural Psychiatry congress (Italy, 2009), where he will also give a presentation titled “Stitching the pieces together – a visual art enquiry” in the symposium “Art-based therapy and research in Cultural Psychiatry” organized by

Dr. Erminia Colucci (CIMH) and Dr. Jacques Arpin (Switzerland). Since beginning his research Mic has given several seminars and workshops on suicide and his art based research.

Dr Erminia Colucci

Mic’s and my path’s met some time ago...he was looking for a suicidologist who might be interested in discussing his Honours project, *too few ladders*. Through our conversations we discovered a common passion for arts, suicide prevention, spirituality and culture/ethnicity...and a curiosity for how all those things could be put together.

I have read a great amount of literature on suicide, presented at numerous conferences and met many people working in the area - all essential elements to build my knowledge and help make me an “expert” on this topic. With few exceptions, I felt this scholarly knowledge was too distant from “what it feels like”. Mic however, intuitively has been able to express through his art the experience of suicide through conveying what often words cannot say, or do not need to say. Thanks to Mic and together with him, we are now embarking on a project which can bring together other people that have expressed the “what it feels like” about suicide through their chosen art form: poetry, drama, music, visual arts and so on. I believe in the power of engaging and understanding through imagination. I know why. Mic is showing me, with his skilled hands, how...thanks Mic. And thanks to you for listening.

Above: *too few ladders* (detail)