

The Artist's Garage

I recall, like yesterday, being a comfortable home to a family car, two bicycles, lawnmower and edge trimmer. You know... all the normal items in a respectful garage in a suburban beachfront home. Then I noticed changes begin to creep in. The car and bikes were relegated out to the lane way. The lawnmower and edge trimmer sold. Other items previously in my loving and protective embrace were given away, even thrown out. Overnight, trestle tables appeared, and over time countless stackable milk crates and cartons filled to the brim with colourful tiles and crockery accumulated. The Artist was visiting op shops. Tiles were bought, salvaged, scrounged and donated.

My owner, The Artist, had a dream to include the local community in creating a massive mosaic mural for the toilet block across the street. The theme was to be connection... connecting people to others, to the local environment and to country. Woven into the project would be working with locals, schools and various community groups including our First Nation people and South Sea Islanders.

On a hot and humid day in February 2019 six brave women arrived for the first mosaic workshop. They wanted to get involved and learn how to mosaic so they could contribute to this looming project. With little idea or understanding of the vision, they cracked and cut tiles and saucers, each creating a little turtle. More workshops followed, a couple each week. Occasionally I would notice a younger person or a male. Suddenly little mosaic turtles appeared as guerilla art on rocks along the Bargara foreshore.

There were some who began to really get the hang of mosaics... the cutting, snipping and shaping, oft repeated terminology like 'tesserae', 'andamento' and 'opus regulatum'. I would wonder at these words I'd never heard before.

The mosaicists began expanding their repertoire and started to create various creatures of the sea... small fish, fun fish, realistic fish, larger and more complex fish, dolphins and dugongs. Whales. I was intrigued! I could sense the enthusiasm growing. Some were naturally artistic, some just worked hard. Fish were rapidly appearing, stored in a large cardboard box in my corner.

I was naturally curious as to why the neighbours would come to my simple abode. What drew them in? I am guessing it was the camaraderie, the satisfaction of contributing to a community project, the opportunity to learn the skill of mosaicing. I would frequently hear how therapeutic this slow art is, how meditative and mindful. To have over 200 people, folk who may not consider themselves arty, just 'salt of the earth' locals from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds, coming together to share in a community project is amazing.

I would notice after a while The Artist became quite comfortable with giving some of the once tentative regulars more complex tasks. They would be hard at it... a constant murmur of tile shaping. Snip snip, clip clip. Nipping tiles, cracking crockery, filing and grinding.

With the Bargara heat and humidity, I was sometimes a little concerned about the comfort of these workers. I would notice people mopping their brow, wetting their T-shirts. Damp face washers appeared. Fans. Lots of drinking water. The Artist erected a shade to keep some of the blazing sun's heat at bay. At times I became quite a sizzling little sweatshop. But workers tried to keep their cool and persisted in their craft with great dedication.

In the winter it was the opposite. Sometimes the cold was fierce, the wind would howl, and the rain would stream inside. People would come dressed in their full winter regalia. And often the weather was perfect and pleasant.

Occasionally there were quiet weekends when The Artist and his wife would go on road trips... anywhere between Bargara and Adelaide. They would stop at every op shop in sight, seeking out crockery with colour or texture. Anything with polka dots or purple was a favourite. These would be carefully stashed in milk crates for me to care for. I have Royal Dalton, Wedgwood, and plates with 'Paris' splashed across them, Heinz soup cups, Dad mugs and other interesting words to incorporate into fish creations.

Of course one of the biggest challenges this year was the restrictions due to COVID-19. For about three months it was very quiet in my abode with only The Artist quietly clipping away on his own. Gradually the others returned, one at a time as restrictions lifted. It wasn't long before the numbers climbed back to 6 or 8 at a session. During that time, I would hear concerns of children and friends, especially in the US, coping with the pandemic. Other tales of locals, sickness and disease found their way into my abode. There were heavy conversations, and there was light hearted banter. There were jokes and there were laughs.

I recall interesting conversations about love lives of children, frantic efforts to get an injured son involved in a motorbike accident home from South America before borders closed. A special deal on French linen sheets at Aldi caused a few to line up for theirs on a Wednesday morning. The Artist and his wife joined the frenzy and bought some for themselves too.

One day music arrived in our midst, lovely background melodies... classical, instrumental pieces, orchestras and opera singers. There was rock 'n' roll from the 60s, haunting Persian tunes and Portuguese Fado, Simon & Garfunkel and Pink. Eclectic!

Often while the studious group worked I would notice sensational smells wafting into my space from the house. The Artist's wife was creating her own art in the kitchen. The group would enjoy and comment, and try to identify the smells... slow cooked beef cheeks, scrumptious soups, and home baked bread. These would stimulate the gastric juices and often signal an early lunch. Occasionally there'd be a sampler plate that would make its way to us. We would enjoy our tea and coffee breaks, and grew a fixation for Stem Ginger cookies, another Aldi product we've grown fond of.

As time went by I watched in awe as various ones began to understand, enjoy and truly appreciate the craft. I would notice growing excitement. I loved hearing about school students who started with reticence but grew to excitement to realise that their little creation would become public art emblazoned across a wall for the next 50 years or so. Every fish creator recorded a tale about their creation. And of course the tales varied from brief and bold, to moving poems and significant stories of family and loss and celebration and meaning.

Some mornings I would still be heavy with sleep when The Artist would arrive to clean, mix glue, cut, crack, snip and grind. Often a neighbour or a passerby would drop in and say good day or enquire about the project; people heading to work, a chap in his budgie smugglers wandering down to the ocean for a swim, another walking their dog or putting bins out. The elderly lady next door may bring freshly baked pumpkin scones. There's the little black convertible Mercedes, the Australia Post van delivering a parcel. I would witness all sorts of early morning activities before I was barely awake. Life begins early in the lane. In time his helpers would wander in.

I remember an incident when Ergon was replacing power poles in the laneway and a curious worker popped in for a quick look. He was so excited about our project he wanted to send his wife to get involved.

I would watch the mosaicing keenly and was educated by the process: the different materials used, glues that dried the skin, tools that calloused hands. I was fascinated by how light reflects off different tiles... some glossy, some matt, some mirrored, some metallic. I sure appreciate why light is so important to artists.

My polished concrete floor, which I once took pride in, is now a chaos of chips and broken tiles and glass and crunch. It's a little humiliating. And I worry when the grandkids come to play, although they have been trained to wear shoes.

At times I would notice some of the fairer sex straining with their compound tile nippers. They would eventually master the tool, but occasionally still pinch their skin in the 'muffin top' region... a cause for a joke when they get home and show their belly bruising after spending time with The Artist.

I was astounded that mosaic sea creatures poured in from interstate and even overseas. The Artist asked for fish through Facebook and 30 mosaicists from around the world responded. Unfortunately COVID meant that only two from overseas made it before the deadline. Interstate contributions were sent from Tasmania and South Australia and I saw a bunch from Brisbane, Rockhampton, Childers and Hervey Bay.

Over the months I have become especially familiar with a handful of regular visitors who have almost become family. Robyn, a loyal volunteer has become extremely skilled and competent in her art; Julie, an expert on cutting circles and the Grouting Queen. Alex and Maria embraced mosaics as a fulfilling hobby after retirement, not only contributing to the project but creating joy for family and friends. Nev who lives around the corner claims he's not artistic, but is always on call to move completed panels in and out of storage.

The Artist recently organised three sessions he called '*Snip and Sip*', grand affairs in this humble garage where invited artists came to contribute to the Wall. There was chatter, lots of snipping and sipping. There were nibbles. And there was work.

I've been part of this mosaic community for many months now. It's become the norm for me and I'm accustomed to my new life in the lane. The project is within six weeks of completion, and people now only come to do the background bits. These regulars are now skilled artists who operate at speed, without much supervision, and I'm confident will deliver a high-quality piece of public art. A few have travelled the journey right from the very beginning, and we share a fond bond.

As each of the 32 panels is completed in my space, they get whisked away, stored in a fellow garage three houses down from where I am. I wonder what they will look like put together. Until three months ago most of the helpers really had little grasp of the vision of this project. They knew they were working on small pieces that somehow would fit together into a bigger project, but they had little sense of what the outcome would look like or how big it will be. I still don't.

In a small corner amongst all the clutter stands a faded yellow vacuum cleaner. It is an unnoticed but invaluable tool salvaged by The Artist when he lived in Adelaide. Owned by a friend and passed on when the friend moved house, it was used to clean The Artist's car, transported to Bargara then relegated to my abode. A faithful worker for over 20 years, it has finally reached the stage where all it can do is suck tiles and grout... held together with duct tape. The life of this Volta could be another story!

I hear that at the end of November the Council will install the mosaic panels on the toilet block and on 5 December there'll be a big party! A hot summer's weekend in a beach setting. Despite restrictions, I'm sure there'll be lots of people in their togs enjoying and celebrating the completion of this amazing MilBi Magic project.

After all this mosaic madness, I sometimes wonder what my future will be. I have grown accustomed, yes even fond of my new life... the volunteers, the sea creatures, the tiles, the snipping and clipping, and the crockery. I guess The Artist will eventually clean up and sort out my chaos. Another clear out and throw out no doubt. The family car and the two bikes will likely reappear. Perhaps I will once again become a respectful garage in a suburban beachfront home.

Perhaps another artful adventure awaits me.

Faye Perry

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<http://www.paulperry.com.au/theartistsgarage.html>