

HANGING AROUND; THE ARTIST AND THE INMATE

G'day. I'm Judy McDermott and I teach at the Metropolitan Medical Transit Centre, part of the Long Bay Hospital. I've been with the Department almost twenty years, most of them teaching pottery.

We get our students in a variety of ways. Some work out for themselves that they want to do pottery and sign up. Also interested blokes are welcome to hang about a bit just to see what goes on. Often this encourages class participation. Often the older men, non participants themselves, bring along a youngster they consider should "have a go" and be kept out of the constant drama of the yard. Others get interested because they see people using stuff they have produced. In our gaol students may use a minimum amount of domestic ware in their cell; and they can send work out - to visitors or, if they want to and the work is of sufficient quality, to the "Boom Gate" gallery for sale. When someone is interested, I show them pottery - the finished thing. They see the clay as it comes from the bag, or from the reclaim bucket, and sometimes it is possible to show clay au natural in the ground. Inmates meet the wheel, hand building, sculpting, drying, kiln packing for the first bisque firing, decorating, glaze firing, and after the pots come from the kiln they need to be finished off, bottoms ground etc.

I aim to teach the blokes how to use their time happily and maybe even constructively. In gaol their pottery keeps them off the streets and out of the pubs.

It is semi-vocational. Anyone who can stick at pottery through to the finished product has probably got many of the very basic skills you need to hold down a job in the outside world - getting out of bed at the right time day after day, respecting equipment and workmates, and so on. These are skills many would never have had; and if they did

they have been unlearnt in gaol. Many will probably never get “real” paid jobs, but pottery is something satisfying they can do with their time. A simple pot shop can be set up with minimal money, and there are community groups with accessible pottery facilities. And the end products are satisfying, admired, and can be sold with a little profit at markets. We hope a busy, creative bloke can fill his time and get his kicks with clay, or somesuch, rather than racking about after drugs and such things.

Most gaol inmates are not well educated and functional literacy is, I reckon, much lower than the figures suggest. Many of my students have had awful school experiences, thus learning and teachers are in very bad odour. Hanging about the pot shop can soften their feelings to both learning and teachers. Many are “sucked into” joining in, or at least attending, the class; and very often this leads to a suspicion that teachers and education may be OK, and that learning may be OK too. These men can learn to learn. Often my students are not crash hot at pottery, but they leave with confidence enough in themselves, their environment and the gaol teachers to move on. To the art room, basic education, D&A courses, or what ever else is available at the time and takes their fancy. Inmates take to looking at books (we have a small pottery library), and at pottery on television - so learning to use books and other research tools. Pottery can be simple, or it can be as hard and as complex as one wishes - the student chooses for himself, probably unaware a choice has been presented, let alone made.

Sometimes one gets a “racer”, a bloke with a talent, usually unrecognised, for clay. A super student. This is a buzz for me, for education, both staff and students, and for the bloke. Among my ex students I have several “real” professional, exhibiting potters who have completed the 3 or 4 yr course at East Sydney (or somesuch), and many more who teach for community groups and also sell their wares.

Then there are the horror “students”, like the blokes who scoff and jeer at the other students. If they don’t pull their heads in I boot them off. Usually the rest of the class are embarrassed by their behaviour.

Pottery classes in gaol teach other life skills. Pottery does not work if you can't cooperate and relate sensibly and profitably with the rest of the class. One needs to look and listen attentively and learn to be able to communicate with both teacher and classmates, not so difficult when you want to. The very real need to communicate makes for swift learning; the work dies if it lacks constant and maybe boring housekeeping; it takes a long time to get from a lump of clay to a finished piece and lots of work dies on the way. It can't be sensibly hurried, so the student must be patient. Learning is a real revelation to the inmates. They need to be calm to make pots, and this new skill can help them identify angry feelings and perceive that it is the individual's best interest to deal with this anger (distress, frustration etc.) without alienating either their peers or those in authority. Many inmates need to learn that alienating authority is not a profitable behaviour, and that not fighting authority is neither weak nor gutless. Many of the men don't know how to relate to women. I think it is a positively "good thing" that they meet with a variety of strong women (you wouldn't last if you weren't). In teaching men I, for example, may tell them what behaviour I find offensive, and it is often a revelation to them, they didn't have a clue, and it helps them nut out how to be less offensive to, and more aware of, women.

All these practical skills and, more importantly, life skills teach self-empowerment.

The majority of these men are from highly dysfunctional families, and are usually much more vulnerable than one would glean from their commonly confrontational manner. I avoid being confrontational in return and choose to coax instead. As a teacher I must remember their vulnerability. I reckon pottery is the perfect vehicle to teach coping skills.

Now, how has gaol influenced my work? I no longer use clay for my major artworks. As pottery became more of a paid "job" I needed a change. I took my creativity to cloth, and am now a quilt maker (rarely functional, rather art works for the wall). Cloth

is not as far removed from clay as it at first appears. The fluidity of both materials is my main love, and in both the artist can be directed by the material. I have made a large body of work about gaol. Like my inmates, I too was "Hanging Around". But I was showing my work "Hanging Around" on the walls in a large one person show at Object Gallery in 1999. This body of work, The Big House - Go to Goal, was about me and gaol. I'm showing you slides of this collection. My most recent work is about an artists residency I was awarded for parts of 1999 and 2000, in Hill End, just an hour up the track from here. This work was shown at Bathurst Regional Gallery in August-September just past, and the Gallery bought the largest and most significant piece for its collection. I'm stoked.

Slide show of The Big House - Go to Gaol