



Interview with Sue Davis: Art Club

What is Art Club?

Art Club is a multi-session visual arts program that I run at ArtPlay and in my home studio.

Why did you create Art Club?

I started Art Club in my home studio in 2011 for my two sons and their friends to supplement their primary school Art curriculum which I felt was lacking. I was very influenced by a book called 'Art Club' by the amazing Danish artist Anna Marie Holm about the wonderful art classes she ran in Denmark.

I have a very varied art background, working with different media and in many different contexts. I spent some years on Community Projects with large public art outcomes engaging many people. I really enjoyed the design and logistics of these events which can be a gateway that leads to interest in a deeper more engaged experience, but I was frustrated by the superficial personal interactions and the limited self-expression for participants. My favoured way of working is with the same children over a prolonged period of time, to nurture them artistically and see them grow and mature. Anna Marie told me that most of her students didn't become artists but that she hoped she taught them 'courage' and I hope I do the same.

Who comes to Art Club?

In my home studio I run six classes for 6-15 year olds. One of the classes is a secondary school class which started when some students reached high school and didn't want to stop. My oldest students have been in year 11 but coaching students through VCE art isn't for me and goes against the fun and experimentation that lies at the heart of Art Club. I tried running an adult class because some parents insisted that they really wanted to do the same projects as the children but I seemed to spend a lot of time getting them to be less self-conscious. I felt I was better off sticking with classes for children as I love their energy, enthusiasm and bravery.

At ArtPlay, Art Club runs on Saturdays during the school term for children aged 7 to 12 years. I think of it as an alternative place for children to call their own in Australia's sports crazy culture. Not that all kids who come to AC don't play sport - one mother told me that her daughter loved coming to Art Club and that it was as important to her as netball.

Art Club at ArtPlay is a great opportunity to reach a different audience. Children come from as far away as Bacchus Marsh (60km) and Dandenong (40km). Working on my own in my studio, I find it important to be connected to ArtPlay to see what amazing things go on here and to keep my finger on the pulse of the most progressive art workshops in Melbourne.

What did the early Art Club projects look like?

The initial Art Club experiences drew on works that excited me and that I thought children would like. The first artist we looked at in ArtPlay's Art Club was Paul Yore, inspired by his wonderful exhibition 'The Big Rainbow Funhouse of Cosmic Brutality' (Heide Gallery of Modern Art) in which he created a shrine to consumerism from plastic junk. I laid out lots of plastic toys and junk on a blue plastic tarpaulin and when the children

entered the studio they knew they were in for an unusual art workshop. The environment of the studio has always been important at me. As the Reggio Emilia philosophy says, 'the environment is the third teacher'. I also always have lots of reference materials showing the artist's work as inspiration.

We briefly discussed Yore's work. I asked:

- What is made from?
- What does it look like to you?
- What do you think of it?
- Do you like it or not? Why?
- What do you think he's trying to say?
- Why has he used these materials and not used paint?



The children collected objects and created their own towers of junk. We used glue guns to stick them together which children like as there is a perceived, but actually low danger (I get them to wear gardening gloves and we use low melt guns). Most children love this project as it is fun and the artworks look great but some find destroying toys disturbing. One child hated using plastic – he found the garish images too much and couldn't even bring himself to use it to critique the culture that produces it.

In the first seasons of Art Club we also explored: Tracey Emin's use of textiles and words to express what it is like to be a woman today; Rachel Whiteread's plaster casting of the inside of a house; Banksy and Invader's street art; and Helen Nodding's enchanting tiny sculptural worlds.

How has Art Club changed over the years?

When I lived in the UK I was very inspired by the ideas of the Young British Artists such as Tracey Emin, Rachel Whiteread, Julian Opie and The Chapman Bros. I was keen to show children that that you don't need to go out and buy expensive art materials; that art is about expressing your ideas and reflecting the world around you. I always want them to feel that their lives are unique and a worthy subject of art. Using artists as inspiration was useful for exploring different materials and ideas. It also legitimised what might appear daft to the children because I could always say, 'Well look, that artist has made a respected career out of that!' Over the years, though, children have changed my ideas about teaching art. Initially I avoided drawing because I wanted to introduce them to other ideas and I assumed that they could do drawing at home but I found that they were hungry to improve their basic skills. I now explicitly teach traditional art skills such as drawing, painting, printmaking and clay modelling whilst emphasizing the importance of developing their own ideas. I

buy the best art materials I can afford as they are so much easier to work with. To reflect this change of heart, I now name each session by the material we explore such as 'charcoal' instead of the artist we are looking at. I have found that parents and children relate to this a lot more and it allows me to compare different artists and their approaches to the same materials. For example, in one painting session we looked at Jackson Pollock and action painters, and then German Expressionism and the use of complementary colours in portraits.



Tomorrow we are doing watercolours of autumn leaves where I will teach traditional botanical watercolour techniques of painting. We will also look at the work of John Wolseley who tries to make his artwork both about nature and part of nature by exposing it to natural forces such as water, wind and decomposition. I will show the children a video of John Wolseley half submerged in a dam printing a dead pelican onto a sheet of paper which is hilarious and eccentric but also shows his serious pursuit of art. We will bury sheets of damp watercolour paper in boxes of leaves and unearth them in a week's time to see what nature has drawn on them. Once they have dried we'll add our newly acquired watercolour skills to this surface.

What are some of the challenges that you've encountered in Art Club?

There's always a balance between self-expression and skills development. Children want to learn drawing before they become self-conscious teenagers and get frustrated by their abilities. Drawing also teaches you to really look. Grayson Perry tells a story about hearing a child describe the role of a contemporary artist as 'someone who notices things'. Ideally, I try to introduce the skills when the kids are ready and not squash or devalue the wonderful expressive unselfconsciousness of youth.

There is also a balancing act between responding to what children want to do and what you know from your years of experience would be good to expose them to. If given free choice, groups of children will often draw the same, very gendered thing, influenced by the dominant culture. I like to think that I add a healthy dose of confusion to those influences .

The other challenge is dealing with disruptive behaviour. I try to counter it with humour but every situation needs its own solution.

What are the Art Club exhibitions?

Each year we spend a term creating an exhibition for the ArtPlay Gallery. It can be hard to:

- choose a theme that will interest the children,
- keep everyone engaged in the five week process leading up to the exhibition,
- create something that the children can take home,
- include an interactive element for visitors,

- make an exhibition that is robust enough to withstand families visiting for a month or two.

We have done five now and I don't think I've ever got all the factors working equally together! I think the best experience of creating the exhibition was last year's 'Fascinating Fungi' where we explored Australian Fungi and were influenced by the American design couple Chiaozza. I created a slideshow of the five week Work in Progress, which we showed alongside the colourful papier maché sculptures. It was interesting for visitors to see the process as well as the product.

I think 'Habitat' (2016), a futuristic plastic landscape inhabited with hybrid creatures, was a better exhibition because it transformed the gallery space into a play space with cubbies, but it wasn't as interesting for the children to create.

Where is Art Club heading now?

This year I am trying something new by engaging the children in the exhibition design process. I visited an ArtPlay 'For Kids By Kids' session to see how the adult artist (Alex Walker) generated ideas with children by talking about 'content' (likes, topics & passions) and 'form' (materials, format). First we will discuss ideas and make drawings and models. I will then work out how the concept can be realised in a five week project and how to manage the hurt feelings that arise when an idea doesn't get voted for in a democratic process. I am looking forward to the challenge.

Another change is that other artists will facilitate sessions at Art Club to expose the children and me to different approaches. I am forever on the lookout for new ideas to try out at Art Club so I am sure things will keep changing and hopefully improving.

