

## My Soul is Very Strong: Art, Medicine, and Lessons from Indigenous Healers



The Western art tradition has long held a fascination with medicine and the human body. During the Renaissance, da Vinci and his colleagues conducted dissections on human cadavers to discover the secrets of anatomy<sup>1</sup> and more recently, Gunther von Hagens has exhibited fixed corpses in the great art institutions of the world<sup>2</sup>.

It is less often, however, that the practice of medicine concerns itself with the visual arts. The medical eye

is trained to analyse the body for signs of dysfunction, not signs of beauty. Where the Western art tradition is obsessed with the young, healthy body, the Western biomedical tradition is concerned only with the diseased one.

But is this mutual exclusivity of art and medicine a good thing? It is certainly not pervasive across all Australian medical cultures. Indeed, the first physicians of this country, Indigenous medicine men and women, are prepared to engage deeply and thoughtfully with the visual arts in their role as healers.

Jan Billycan (Djan Nanundie), for example, is not only a renowned marparn (medicine woman), but also an exhibiting artist at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA)<sup>3</sup>. In her piece *All the Jila*, Billycan depicts landscape as a metaphor for the human form. Eight panels of deep black plyboard are streaked with rich ribbons of colour that curve into shapes at an oblique angle, and are overlaid in many places with white and bone-coloured paint, echoing the contours of a chest X-ray.

The compositional elements in the painting are stacked neatly together like pieces of an anatomical model, and shades of colour bleed into one another like the topography of a well-perfused organ. While the white and beige palette is most distinctive in the bottom

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<sup>1</sup> Paluzzi A, Belli A, Bain P, Viva L, 2007, 'Brain imaging in the Renaissance', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Dec; 100(12): 540-3

<sup>2</sup> Singh D, von Hagens G, 2003, 'Scientist or Showman?', *BMJ*, Mar 1;326 (7387): 468

<sup>3</sup> The National Gallery of Australia, 2007, Australian Indigenous Art Triennial: Culture Warriors, *National Gallery of Australia* (website), available from:

<http://www.nga.gov.au/Exhibition/NIAT07/Detail.cfm?IRN=163095&BioArtistIRN=31101&MnuID=2&GalID=31101>

panels, slithered strings of scarlet red and deep burgundy dominate on the right hand side of the work, connecting one element to the next, as if by a network of fine capillaries.

Connection between medicine and the visual arts has been an important part of Indigenous culture for thousands of years<sup>4</sup>. During body painting ceremonies, flesh and art literally interact as messages about law, spirituality and land are marked out on the body in coloured ochre. Bangarra Dance Group member Djakapurra Munyarryun tells of paint-ups, “when I am there it’s like my soul is very strong and I watch the audience. The paint makes me more older”<sup>5</sup>.

Recently, the NGA has established a program in conjunction with the Australian National University Medical School to promote visual literacy among medical students and to encourage future doctors to draw on the visual arts as a resource in their practice.

I hope that by healing the wound between art and medicine, gauged sometime since the Renaissance and never properly sutured, we can start to engage in a more three-dimensional, community-oriented practice of medicine. Similarly to the work of medicine men and women in Indigenous communities, by learning about the body from art, and by expressing our knowledge of illness through art, we can participate in a broader community discussion about the nature of health and disease.

On a personal level, visiting the gallery as part of my medical degree makes me feel something like what Munyarryun describes about body painting – “when I am there it’s like my soul is very strong”. Looking at art, talking about art, and thinking about art, makes me feel connected with my culture, with my community, and with my ideas about medicine. And surely that has to be good for my patients.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Museum, 2009, ‘Paint Up – Aboriginal Dance’, *Australian Museum* (website), available from: <http://bodyart.australianmuseum.net.au/painting/paintup.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid