



Resilience in Regional Creative Arts Communities CASE STUDY: **Helen Fraser**

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HELEN FRASER ARTIST

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Macedon Ranges

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Helen Fraser at the *THE JEFFERSON GRID* exhibition 2020 Hume Global Learning Centre, Sunbury (photograph Karen Le Rossignol)

### Personal Vision and Background

‘I make art as a symbolic act of healing a scarred earth and mending the fragments in my inner world. ....’

Helen lists herself as an artist and psychologist, and this strongly suggests the breadth of her twinned hands-on practicality and eagerness for connecting and learning, as she says, ‘...shedding my tendency to impose logic and order onto my true nature’. After completing degrees in psychology, Helen worked through a range of mediums and experiences, finding her true creative voice in textiles, history, nature and human nature.

Her tools are also twinned. She likes to be social, knowing the importance of searching out networks, mentors and masterclasses. One of the most influential programs she discovered was working with the ‘arts whisperer’ Crista Cloutier, in The Working Artist masterclass online program (<https://theworkingartist.com>). She also loves the commitment to her studio where she spends at least two hours per day. She needs to give herself the space and time, to trust that the artwork will evolve, to be patient with her arts practice.

### Personal engagement with community resilience building in arts practice

Resilience has, for Helen, a duality of the internal and external. She has been inspired by history, and is concerned about this country which hasn’t matured, which has fractures that need healing. She wishes to draw the fragments together with thread and line, to transform and heal the country. Her role in resilience is about healing the fragments within herself, inspiring others to heal themselves, then finding ways to integrate the whole nation.



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One of Helen's recent examples of transformation is her work on the United Declaration of Human Rights Quilt Project, which was exhibited at the Museum of Australian Democracy in Canberra during 2019-20. During Canberra's Enlighten 2019, her quilt block was projected onto the front of Old Parliament House, which led her to further research into Australia's slave trade history and the Australian South Sea Islanders Port Jackson. In 2019, Helen ran a workshop Yumi Olgeta: Crafting a More Inclusive Democracy, working with community to develop threads of connection through chain stitch embroidery for a commemorative quilt. She now has an ongoing partnership with ASSIPJ.

Helen maintains a series of personal connections and strong networks, and knows the importance of giving back to others. She works with groups such as The Embroiderers Guild, Victoria in Bendigo, and sees other artists as colleagues, not competitors. She works to achieve the discipline and planning required for success, building social interpersonal skills, joining groups and teaching others.

'I love the idea that textiles are a metaphor for the human condition. As a psychologist and artist, I often use motifs like knots, frayed threads, fabric fragments, warp and weft, lace knitting and stitching in my work. I believe we are all imperfect and flawed and our psyche is pushing us towards greater consciousness throughout our life cycle.'

### **Identification of issues and gaps in regional creative sector**

When considering what is needed in regional arts, Helen focuses both on the psyche and skills of the artist, and the public presentation of that artist's work. There are not enough artist-run spaces, she feels, partly because these require business or entrepreneurial skills and lead to conflicts in the expectations of the artists themselves.

Her sense is that the lack of artist spaces requires funding in the regions to go directly to the artists, so that they can take ownership of the whole process: the setting up of their studio; painting, framing and preparing provenance of their work with photography of the process; the exhibition event/launch catering and transport; the intellectual property and its maintenance.

Part of the issue is the need for sales. There need to be more online/studio sales, joining the online marketplace, where artists are able to build an audience and viewers. Flexible spaces are becoming more important, with the need for travelling galleries which could broaden relationships and networks, and engage the wider public. These should work in unexpected ways, to broaden perspectives of both the artists and their buyers/viewers. There may also be a workable model for galleries to mount small exhibitions for three months with six to eight artists in each.

Above all, Helen reiterates that regional arts is centred on personal care and interest, responsive and personal networks, with support not only in funding but in establishing personal connections that generate careers which broaden access to markets.

### **Potential strategies for building regional creative sector resilience**

When asked for ideas or strategies, Helen hits her stride quickly. There's ideas for developing community hubs as learning centres, for instance at libraries where a community can build connections. Learning centres could also include historic buildings, spaces that provide a grounded sense of history or connection to then face the disruption, uncertainty and chaos implicit in an artist's career in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



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Helen wants to move beyond the pockets of where she can feel comfortable, to develop communities where threads are brought together: the art forms, expectations of artists themselves, and different regions and skills, demographics and histories. This connection acknowledges that ‘no-one can make art like you’, but it’s a reciprocal process when we put effort into other people.

**Digital stories in art...**

In a recent solo exhibition (Helen’s sixth at time of writing) THE JEFFERSON GRID focused on the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 in mid west US. This is the area that became known as the Dust Bowl during the 1930s Depression. Helen’s perspective from her plane trip was of a quilt-like manmade landscape of squares and crop circles, imposed on the natural landscape by President Jefferson, who created a system of surveying land from a distance on paper.

By adding the water to the graphitint pencil drawings, or stitches to the embroidery and quilts, Helen is symbolically healing her inner landscape and gently suggesting we discover our inner joy, protect our true nature and nurture our natural environment.

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The Jefferson Grid 1

I decided to create a woven paper border around them to add more depth and play around with the idea we are all woven into one great big global quilt, just like that landscape.

*Graphitint and Graphite on Moleskine Paper, Gesso and Acrylic on Brown Paper, Thread.*

*24 x 16 cm. Framed size 47cm x 38.5cm x 3.7cm.*



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*The Healing Power of Water*

By adding water, the work came alive in a symbolic act of rejuvenation which was deeply satisfying. ...I was thinking about how water heals the drought-stricken landscape but also our tears can heal our inner landscape.

*Graphitint pencil and graphite on BFK Rives paper*

*77cm x 77cm. Framed size 80cm x 80cm x 3.7cm.*



*Jacket of Life's Mysteries*

This textile artwork was inspired by the poem with the same title that I wrote on the airplane between Denver Colorado and Shreveport Louisiana in September 2018 after my profound encounter with the Jefferson Grid. I love that in life there is so much we don't understand. It's pretty mysterious. I love what I do as an artist and this love keeps me going. The inspiration I felt through seeing the Jefferson Grid landscape from the plane that day is a mystery to me.

*Vintage Ralph Lauren jacket (US size 2), vintage and new fabric, wool and cotton thread, vintage buttons*

*70cm x 60cm x 0.5cm*





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*Breathe in Peace, Breath out Love*

This quilt is a complete labour of love and I have created it to look as close to the original landscape I saw from the plane window.

*Vintage and new cotton fabric, cotton thread, cotton batting, acrylic paint, fabric medium*

*120cm x 80cm*

*Squaring the Circle; Fire Transforms*

Carl Jung believed that the circle in the square represented transformation and enlightenment. This particular work was created while I was visiting Leeton NSW in January at the height of the bushfire crisis. I was thinking about the power of fire and how its destruction kills off life and inevitably transforms whatever it touches. Fire is the symbol of transformation and its power is awesome. If we dream of fire, then it often symbolises change and an inner shift.



*Vintage and new fabric, thread, button, cotton batting, wood panel, fabric glue*

*33cmx33cm. Framed size 35cm x 35cm x 5.4cm.*

This Case Study researched and written by Dr Karen Le Rossignol, Deakin University, June 2020