



## Chapter 20

### Getting the picture

In this book I have tried to get some insight in to the society I am part of via reflecting on my own lived experiences. It has been a very useful exercise for me to clarify and sort out my thinking. I have been slowly starting to ‘get the picture’. It has helped me take stock and think about what I can do to encourage a ‘good’ society.

There are a number of ideas in the book that I would like to keep pursuing. First, I want to keep looking for recursions between my experiences and societal processes, but to also look for this in other people’s experiences to help others develop their own insights from their own particular standpoint. Second, I want to think more about the emotional transactions in society and the way one group ends up carrying the emotional burden for another group and how this can be overcome. In particular I want to look at how guilt is transferred on to First Nation’s people to relieve settlers of their own repressed guilt. Third I want to experiment with lifeboats like LOCO, Balaangala and yarning circles exploring what a more ideal society might look like. Fourth, I want to see how I can paint in a way which also is useful for this process. How can painting contribute to a ‘good’ society?

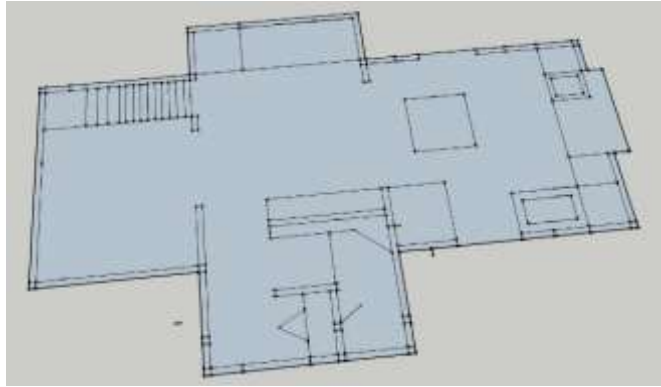
I want in this last chapter to make a beginning on developing some thoughts on this fourth area. I want to take the discussion from the last chapter to understand paintings as a form of communication and how I could paint in a ‘better’ way. This will be to try to say more on the connection between art and social change. I will finish this book by sharing the paintings that will be part of an exhibition planned for February 2022. This will provide a visual summary of the book, of my insights into society.

### A picture paints a thousand words

Like all communication, all paintings have a content and relationship message. The physical surface of a painting is fixed but what viewers can see will change over time. The content evolves through communication with the viewer. Over the years the painting can make different statements, and ask different questions and provide different reflections. All of this could have been what the painter was trying to communicate but it could also be completely unintended. The relationship between the painting and the viewer could be understood using Tomm’s categories, as linear, circular, strategic or reflexive.



While 'linear' talk is very common, few paintings could be considered linear. One examples of linear work would be architectural or technical drawing where one can imagine from the drawing what something will look like and from these drawing a house or engine could be built with exact



precision. This is not to diminish the tremendous creativity in creating the plan, but rather to highlight that the blueprints seek to communicate in a way where everyone will understand it in exactly the same way. The Photographic Realist style is the most linear of painting traditions. I think over time my paintings have become more realistic and in a sense more linear. I am wanting to capture the image I have in my mind as accurately as I can so that the viewer sees what I have intended, whereas when I was less skilled my images were less precise and so much more open to interpretation. However even in a painting with photographic realism the viewer is still searching for an understanding of what the painter is trying to say. Why have they chosen this image?

By and large most paintings held both in gallery collections or done by hobbyists seem to embrace a circular sensibility where the focus is on beauty, relationships and feelings. The artist tries to find the beauty in a particular scene and or convey something about the emotion in a particular situation or relationship. A landscape may seek to take the viewer in to a location to capture some beauty or to convey a particular mood. I will often begin a painting because I like the mood or the feel of a particular scene, hoping the viewer will have a similar circular experience as they communicate with the painting. However with a circular intent the focus is not for the viewer to experience what I experienced (a more linear communication) but rather the hope is that they will develop their own meanings by imagining themselves in a similar situation. The hope is they will explore their own feelings rather than to understand the artist's.



*colin peile 2009*

Some artists are explicitly political or strategic wanting to lead the viewer to a particular conclusion. A lot of my work is like this, the big tree paintings have a clear environmental agenda. My political still life exhibition had a circular



dimension in that they were seeking to capture something of the relationship between different political positions, but they are also strategic in encouraging and promoting my own political orientation and offering a criticism of opposing positions. For the viewer they may just like the look of the painting and or it may lead them on a circular emotional journey. The strategic intent can be strengthened by having other similar paintings so that the viewer can build up from each work a greater awareness of the artist's strategic intent and so looks for this in the next painting. While I would like the viewer to see my criticism of contemporary society in a strategic way, I am also very happy for them to like the painting in a circular way and then perhaps years later to see the strategic intent. Hopefully that will be a nice surprise. I like the idea that painting can keep communicating different things over time.



Abstract artists often have a reflexive agenda leaving the meaning more to the viewer, encouraging them to come up with their own new ideas and theories about what the painting is about. Much abstract art is also very circular seeking to convey and express a feeling or mood. I have done several abstract paintings with this goal but I seem



to be more focused on capturing the way things are in a realist way, but realistic paintings can also be reflexive. I try to do this by being clear I have an agenda but by not being too explicit about this and hoping to encourage the viewer to find their own. Reflexivity is also encouraged by having more than one story or idea happening in a painting. I like to have one story at a distance from the work and then other stories apparent when viewed closely. I want my work to encourage the creativity of the viewer.

Whether circular, strategic, or reflexive I would like my paintings to be enjoyed. I would like them to communicate something and for the conversation to keep



taking place over time between the viewer and the painting. I want them to be beautiful, meaningful, challenging or thoughtful, preferably all at once.

Like any communication the receiver may interpret what was communicated in a very different way. One example of this was a friend who saw my painting of the red enamel mug as a critique of Communism as it was old battered and chipped, while for me it was actually the reverse. I liked its hard commitment and idealism. It was a hardworking, well used cup that had survived despite being bashed around.



Like any other form of communication a painting can intentionally or unintentionally support the existing system and its values or it can seek to challenge these. In the future I want to find a 'better' way to communicate as an artist and by this I mean a way to paint which does not support the controlling hierarchical system but rather encourages a mutual, community based environmentally enhancing approach. I want to produce 'good art'.

### Good Art

My idea of 'good' art clearly has a social agenda and it is different to the more conventional idea of good art. For most people, art is primarily about whether people like the look of something. This can relate to the colour, balance and structure of the painting and the mood it generates. For the viewer it is pleasing to the eye and or their own imagination in some sort of way.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond its shapes and colours people might think a painting is good if it creates some emotional or intellectual connection with the viewer. It gets them thinking or feeling in a way that they appreciate.

A further reason for deciding a painting is good can be a result of an admiration for the skill involved. This is often the case for people who are also painters. Typically they will get up close to a painting to study how the artist achieved a particular effect

For the professional art critique all the above is relevant but perhaps they will also be considering where the painting fits within historical art movements, whether it is derivative or whether it offers something new and different. For them the

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<sup>1</sup> Someone purchased one of my paintings because it matched their curtains. While initially feeling a bit demeaned by this that my work was not being fully appreciated for its artistic quality, I realized however this person was looking at their whole room with an artistic eye trying to balance the overall harmony and colour of the room. It was becoming part of their own art work, their own interior design. I was pleased to become part of their art project.



painting is seen in the context of other paintings and whether it is good or not might depend on whether it connects to a broader art movement which they value.

For me all the above is relevant. I want my paintings to be what I consider good art but personally I want to now define “good” in a much tighter way. My own work will be “Good” if I think it is contributing to a ‘good’ society.



### Art and Social Change

There is nothing intrinsically wholesome about art. Some may like to think art is about beauty and truth, but history shows us that art can be used for totalitarian propaganda purposes. It can be very conservative supporting the powerful interests of Church and State. It can be encouraging of hierarchy and controlling behaviour. It can be racist. It is just another way of communicating, and most art simply reflects the internalized dominant values of society. If artists want to challenge such values it requires a conscious considered effort.



Of course there is a long tradition of artists challenging the dominant values. As artists are often at the margins of society, they have a unique vantage point to critique society and many have taken on the strategic role very explicitly in their art or have used their celebrity or popularity to call for change. Some artists have very bravely done art works which place themselves at serious risk from totalitarian regimes.

So art can play a role in social change but it is also important to not overstate its potential for change. It is hard to believe any social change could come about from a painting or even a thousand paintings. Words and talk will be the main vehicle for social change, and art at best can be a supporter of such change processes. While accepting a supporting role, art does offer some different ways of communicating that can add to social change actions in ways where 'talk' has limitations. As a way of communicating art does have some advantages in particular areas and I will now explore some of the benefits of artistic communication for social change compared to talking strategies.

### Non-directive

Firstly, art can connect in ways where 'talking' fails. Its strength is in its nondirective nature.

In a discussion people can quickly work out that the other is undermining or challenging in a forceful way what they value. When challenged like this, some people will quickly close off and stop properly listening and get angry at the controlling feel of the exchange. Activists will often repeat a mantra about the need to challenge injustice and to speak openly, but it is important to also be aware of how such an approach may actually harden the opposing views of some people.

While some art is explicitly confrontational, most tends to be much less directive than talking and can connect across differences. The reason for this is that the power is actually with the viewer. The viewer will interpret a painting from their own perspective. In this way it is more non-judgemental and less threatening. While the artist may have intended a particular message that if spoken, could be confronting, the viewer is always in charge. Over the years the viewer may begin to appreciate the artist's intended message but that will happen when the viewer is ready. So while talking may push someone to be more oppositional a painting allows people to (perhaps) understand the message over time. This is also supported by the circular reflexive nature of art in general which can on occasions gently remind people of their own creative capacity. Their own capacity to think for themselves and to change viewpoints. In this way art can potentially prepare people to be more open to challenges and alternative view points and to properly consider them. In summary, some well-intentioned activist talk can be experienced as oppressive and actually affirm and harden opposing viewpoints.



A painting on someone's wall however can encourage a more creative mindset and lead to a change of ideas in a more gently nondirective way.

### Change is possible

Secondly, paintings and art in general remind the viewer that creativity and change is actually possible. Often change is resisted not because people think the objectives are wrong but rather because they think it's just not possible, that they have no power to make things better. This belief is a very rational response to the experience of so many where their attempts to bring about a change are continually thwarted and is encouraged by those in power, as it entrenches their position.

Trying to convince someone via words that change is possible is not easy. In fact to be convinced about this by someone else, actually confirms that their own views are always shaped by someone else. In this context talking can be self-defeating. The painting on the wall however is a constant reminder that creativity is possible and that they can imagine new things. A belief that creativity exists in one realm also helps to encourage a belief creativity is possible in another area of their life. Maybe wishful thinking on my part.

This message is greatly strengthened by helping people to learn how to paint. Everyone can paint and be creative, but such a belief has often been knocked out of people as more powerful people have undermined their efforts as children or adults, deriding and laughing at their efforts or attempts to draw or paint. Even though many people will say they are not creative it does not take long in exploring their hobbies to find an area where they are clearly being creative whether that is with gardening, knitting, woodwork or cooking. Once people have their creativity affirmed in one area it is easier for them to imagine being creative in another. The more people realize their creative potential the more likely they will see the possibility of being part of creating a 'good' society.

My fantasy is that as people realize their creative potential they will begin to see that nothing is determined, that everything is in a creative process and we are all a part of that flow of creativity being created and creating at the same time. This means we can change direction, we can go against the flow.

Such a belief in creativity could also help activists in avoiding controlling behaviours and communications. It leads activists to recognize everyone involved as being in a creative process and so encouraging mutual (non-controlling) relationships with everyone involved. It helps to avoid hierarchical control structures and encourages consensus decision making. It encourages variety rather than dogma. So in summary art can help unlock a recognition of a person's creativity and with that the creative potential of everyone.



### The existing beauty

Thirdly art plays a role in reminding us all about the beauty around us. Art generally seeks out and wants to share beauty whether in a landscape, portrait or still life of everyday objects. Even in the most critical of my paintings I still want the image to be pleasing to the eye, to have a good balance of shapes and colours.

It is very important for those wanting to change the world to have an appreciation of what is already good and beautiful. We need to protect this in any process of change but more so to build out from what is already good. Rather than imposing some new idea from outside on a community, it is much better to build on the existing strengths and affirm what the community is already doing.

Talk of course can do this but it is much easier for art to provide this emphasis. Talking tends to focus on the particular while reflecting what is good requires a long contextual explanation. Art on the other hand can be critical but the beauty is there in the background, the context is there at the same time. There is a truth to the idea that a picture can paint a thousand words. The beauty of a landscape is appreciated in an instant while an author may take a page to create the same image in the reader's mind.

So in summary art has some advantages over talk. It can be nondirective and gentle and more easily accepted by the other. It can unlock creative potential and encourage a creative view of the world. It reminds us about what is already 'good' and beautiful. Talk is of course still the main mechanism for engaging in social change but talk without art has limitations. Rather than separating both strategies what I am really wanting to promote is talk with an artistic sensibility. This involves a way of talking which recognizes the creative potential of everyone and a way of painting that seeks to protect what is already 'good' and to build on this to make things better. For myself 'good' art encourages people to consider what is working, what is not working and what we can all do together to make things better.

So painting can play a role in assisting all the hopes and strategies talked about in chapters 18 and 19. Just how to do this is still very much a work in progress. I have an idea for a particular project which I think could explicitly bring talking and painting together, building on the idea of the yarning circle. It is untested, but I have some experience with components of the idea. This gives me hope for its possibilities and I would like to try to develop it further over the next few years.





## Painting circles

The idea arises from my experience of painting with others in a group context and with my understanding of Paulo Freire's literacy programs.

Over the last 10 years I have been a part of several groups where people get together to paint. The group enables people to support, encourage and learn from each other. Generally people quietly work away on their own project but will stop from time to time to see what others are doing. There is a very positive non critical atmosphere where each artist will affirm what they like about the other's painting. Occasionally the artist might invite a more critical response or seek out new ideas to solve a particular problem or to achieve a desired effect. Like in a yarnning process everyone is seen as equals in the process and space is offered to everyone to contribute. There are always different styles of painting going on, and the discussion is always about helping people along the direction they are heading. I have found this process to be very enjoyable and helpful to my own painting.

40 years ago I heard about the work of Paulo Freire, who used Literacy programs as a way of conscientising poor peasant farmers in South America. The explicit objective was to empower people by helping them become literate. The implicit radical liberation agenda was to help them understand society and the part they could play in changing things. He used a series of strategic questions to help poor people understand the processes of exploitation. Who buys the fish you catch? How much does he pay you? How much does he sell the fish for? What sort of house does he live in? What sort of house do you live in? Is this fair? Typically education syllabuses are designed to encourage support for the existing political system. Freire was focused on challenging the system with a radical agenda of seeking structural change for poor people. The Women's movement has used conscientisation groups to help women break away from the shackles of a patriarchal society.

I am uncomfortable with the potential for a very directive manipulation of a group of people to take up a preconceived socialist analysis of society. While clearly sympathetic to that analysis I would like a process that is less controlling and predetermined and a more reflexive one where the people themselves build their own analysis in a more creative way.

I would like to bring aspects of Freire and my painting groups together, within the framework of a yarnning circle to create painting circles where people are invited to paint together and explore their views of society and change at the same time. The focus would not be to develop one analysis but rather for the group as a whole to help each person explore and build on their own ideas and further to help each other develop paintings which capture elements of these ideas.



Yarning here would involve painting and talking together. It would seek to build on what people are already doing and to affirm and encourage their creative capacity as painters and members of society to create ‘better’ paintings and a ‘better’ society.

### Conclusion for this chapter

By ending the book with a focus on painting I have risked creating an impression that I think painting can lead the way with social change. Hopefully I have stressed that talking is really the main technique for change but that painting can enhance the process. More particularly I see talk imbued with an artistic sensibility as the key to effective creative change.

This will involve firstly building out from what is already ‘good’ and protecting this from further incursions of controlling hierarchy. This involves a focus on supporting the mutual relationships between people and between people and the environment and in particular embracing and building on the rich cultural, political, environmental management of First Nations people that existed here for thousands of years and which has still survived despite the clear objectives of colonists to obliterate this orientation.

Secondly it will require resisting and undermining the increasing controlling hierarchical relationships and structures dominating people, their communities and the natural environment. These 2 goals are the basis of this book. This has been represented as a battle between the circle and the triangle.

### Epilogue

Finishing a book is like finishing a painting, it can be hard to stop. There is always some detail or bigger idea that could be explained more clearly, or some other ideas that could be incorporated. The writing and rewriting has been very helpful and I want to thank again all the friends and family who have attempted to read earlier drafts and provided encouraging feedback and sometimes polite silence. Part of the hesitation about finishing, (as with a painting) is a nervousness about how it will be received, so we keep trying to improve things. But it has to stop as it is only then that it can be shared with others and it is only then that communication is possible.

The writing process has produced a considerable amount of paper but from the outset I have always had the idea that just as the paintings have formed part of the content of this book, the book would become a sculptural item in the exhibition of paintings. For it to play a secondary role to the paintings. Further I have turned the earlier drafts in to sculptures. The text becomes part of the art. Not surprisingly the sculptures are also focused on the tension between the



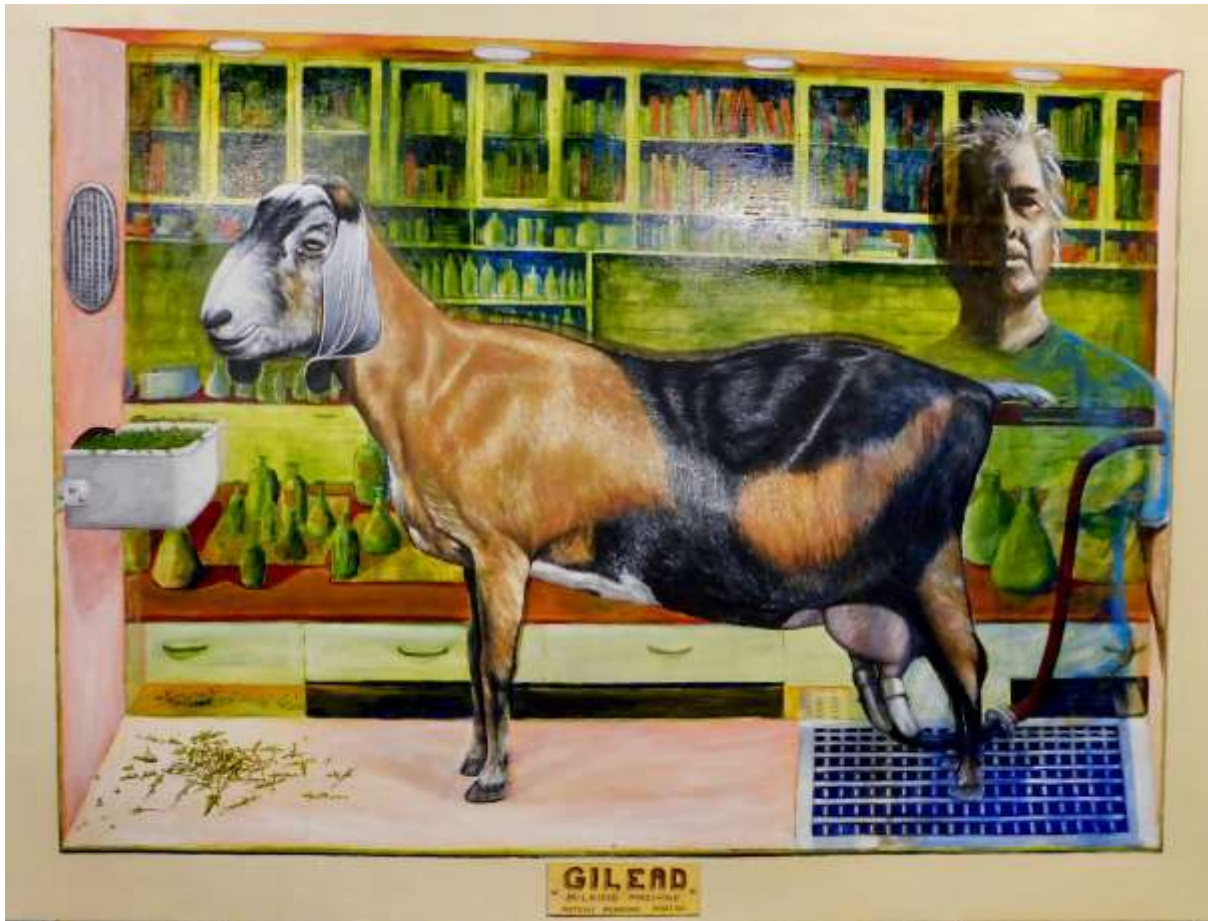
triangle (the hierarchical controlling relationships) and the circle (the flat mutual relationships). Some examples are below.



The second last painting for the book which formed part of the front cover highlights how much I have got from 'The Goat Stand' painting. In a 'tongue in cheek' way this last work highlights how pivotal this painting has been in the production of all the works for the exhibition and in the development of this manuscript and my thinking more generally.



The final painting which occupies the back cover of the book, is a more realist and futuristic version of my original “the Goat Stand’ painting. I found the execution of this painting difficult. It tries to put the goat in a laboratory situation where the audience can look through the glass to the goat and the lab behind. The goat is imprisoned between the glass. Milked and fed for the interests of others. I found it difficult to get the reflections of the goat in the glass and my own reflection as well but the idea was just to remind views that the observer is involved and complicit in the exploitation taking place and that we all need to take action to try to recreate a better world.



I thank you most sincerely if you have managed to wade your way through this bigger than expected manuscript. Part of me hopes you now understand better what I am on about, but more importantly, as with my painting, I am actually much keener on a reflexive response. I hope my explorations have been a stimulus to your own reflections on your life and what insights your experience might have for an understanding of our society and where we are heading. I do not know what you think a 'good' society should look like but I hope I have encouraged your creativity in exploring this.



## A summary by paintings

As a reminder of the content of the book I want to provide a summary using some of its key pictures which will form the exhibition planned for February 2022 at the Brisbane Institute of Art which I have called not surprisingly “the Goat Stand”.



Chapter 1



Chapter 2



Chapter 3



Chapter 4



Chapter 5



Chapter 6





Chapter 7



Chapter 8



Chapter 9



Chapter 10



Chapter 11



Chapter 12



Chapter 13



Chapter 14



Chapter 15



Chapter 16



Chapter 17



Chapter 18





Chapter 19



Chapter 20



The original Goat Stand

