



CREATURE  
**COMFORT**

# CREATURE COMFORT

Humans have an important and timeless relationship with animals. Whether it is an appreciation for majesty of wild creatures or the unconditional love of a furry companion, animals can be a wonderful source of support for our mental wellbeing.

Artists across the millennia have shown their appreciation for animals - ancient Egyptians honoured cats through painting, mosaics, sculpture and more, while the famous Lascaux Cave art in southern France gives an insight into how essential animals were the Palaeolithic culture. Devotion to our four-legged friends is abundant in modern art, with Picasso, Andy Warhol, and David Hockney all dedicating many hours to portraying their beloved 'sausage' dogs.

The Cunningham Dax Collection's rich source of animal imagery shows that many artists with lived experience of mental health issues also found animals to be deserving of their artistic attention. *Creature Comfort* is our way of saying thank-you to our non-human supporters for their love, companionship, beauty and inspiration.

COVER: Rehana Dowler, *Untitled* 2008, gel pen on paper, 42cm x 29.7cm

# Barbara Joyce

The Chook Project was a community-building and healing project that sprung from the ashes of the Black Saturday Bushfires in 2009. The project was initiated by Barbara Joyce, who had first knitted a chook cushion back in 2004 with fiber from an alpaca named 'Cocoa', owned by Joyce's Strathewen neighbours. The neighbour, as well as the alpaca herd were unfortunately lost in the fire. Barbara took the cushion to the funeral and from that action, The Chook Project was born. Strathewen was seriously impacted by the Black Saturday Bushfires and had the most greatest loss of life on a population basis of any community in Victoria. Most properties and the local primary school were destroyed. Many of the children lost their homes, friends and family members.

After knitting a second chook for a young boy, Joyce approached the school with a proposal. Each child was invited to colour their own nesting hen on paper and from there each design was translated by a team of volunteer knitters within the area into a chicken cushion. The project was then extended and the cushions were offered to other bushfire affected people in the area. The community got on board and the established group became a place for sharing grief, laughter, hope for the future and connection. The project started as a gift of healing for one child which then became a collective healing process for the whole Strathewen community.

*"This project brought children comfort, nurtured close friendships between the women, fostered connections within the community, assisted the recovery process and reminded us that we could laugh again. I see the hen as an ancient symbol of regeneration and rebirth and when our world turned black, the humble chook found its way into our hearts."*

-Artist statement, quoted from Barbara's story, published in Barefoot Magazine.



IMAGE ABOVE: Photographed by Barbara Joyce

# Rehana Dowler



Rehana Dowler, *Untitled* 2007, gel pen on paper, 27.9 x 35.5cm

Rehana Dowler's work can be seen as documentation, or a reflection, on her life: family, friends, animals, landscape, spirituality and a revitalisation of herself. Born in South Africa, Dowler spent most of her childhood in Cape Town. Dowler started her creative journey in 1993 and completed a Diploma of Arts at Box Hill TAFE during 2000 to 2004. The subject of animals became a vital part in Dowler's creations. The animals referenced in her artworks are an acknowledgment of the importance of her upbringing and her childhood life in South Africa. Having immigrated with her mother when she was eight years old, she never went back to Cape Town even though she always had the intentions to. The nostalgia in much of Dowler's work illustrates the connections between her present and her past. The subjects of her artwork are both real and imaginary, drawn from Dowler's memories and creativity. Exploring imagination and the reality of the world around her, Bruce Dowler has said that "her imagination was her own expression."

Creature Comfort presents a series of work from Rehana which depicted the subject of animals. The animals - most of which have been depicted in the format of human portraiture - are not only reference to her childhood but are symbols of Dowler becoming powerful and strong. They present how she was finally fully able to become comfortable with herself, and feeling as though she was no longer constrained by her mental illness.

*"I love to do abstract because of the various motions experienced in the real world and soul searching for inner true beauty, which emerges when being creative. I like to connect to the Unseen World which relates to my past experiences, such as grief and the love for life. I would describe most of my work as relating to various feelings of the Soul Child within me and depicts a touch of misery and pain. So other people can grow and feel a releasing touch seen in these works." - Artist statement*

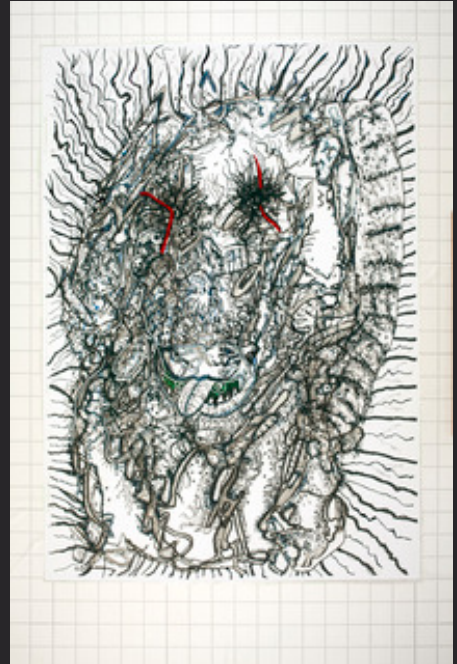
# Graeme Doyle

Graeme Doyle was born in 1947 and was a Melbourne based artist, poet, musician and performer. He experienced schizophrenia from the age of eighteen and described his experience of his first episode of mental illness as a "beautiful crack up at Swinburne Technical College."

Producing art played a vital part in Doyle's life. Art making was central to managing his mental health, stating that "to work is therapeutic." He saw art as his vocation and completed his formal training, including a Bachelor of Fine Art and a Graduate Diploma in Fine Art (painting) from the Phillip Institute of Technology in Victoria in the 1980's. Doyle defined himself as an "outsider artist" who produced artworks outside of the traditional canons of the mainstream art world. The words "outsider artist" was initially used to highlight works made by people with an experience of mental illness. It was also applied more broadly to include certain self-taught or naive art makers. The term gave Doyle a tremendous amount of freedom which did not constrain him into any particular style.

From an early age, Graeme discovered an interest in art and greatly enjoyed copying comic book images. The works that Graeme has displayed in Creature Comfort started from a print with animals outlined and comprised with dense, graphic lines. His highly detailed drawings often contain a rich proliferation of images within images, where the artist often reworks a composition multiple times to achieve a dense and complex design. He describes his highly concentrated sessions of art making as a way of "exorcising the demons" and acknowledges that some of the results can be quite 'disturbing' for viewers.

*"My work is full of happy misery and funny tragedy. Life is a mixture. Sometimes it ends up a mess, but somehow, I don't drown in it completely and bob to the surface again, give a wave for help, or just to say 'hello'. I used to love to paint until I had a series of breakdowns and was put on lithium. Now I smile a lot and move very slowly. Ever seen an unhappy caterpillar?" - Artist statement*



Graeme Doyle, *Dog 1 (Dog series)* 2017, digital print and ink on paper, 100.5 x 130.5 cm

# Leslie Holding



Leslie Holding, *Horse and Cart* 2007, acrylic on paper, 29.5 x 42cm,

Leslie Holding was born in 1952 and lives in Melbourne. Holding experienced his first breakdown in 1997 on his 17th birthday. Holding has a strong relationship with Prahran Mission's Art Program, through that he has exhibited his works several times. The artist describes that some of his works are about the images that he sees when his eyes are closed but also when he is still conscious. The scenes in his paintings are created through the moments just before falling asleep. Holding's subconscious phase before sleep is highly active and reveals things even though we are not consciously aware of them.

Holding describes his artworks as "modern-casual abstract" with "no one particular style". It reflects in the diversity of themes and approaches found in Holding's paintings which range from tranquil landscape scenes of the Australian outback to more abstract compositions that capture the energy of cricket matches or a game of footy.

*"I do my art to seek enjoyment on how others find my works pleasing. To satisfy the beholders of my works is the motivation I have while I do art. Most of the time when creating works I ask others of what they think of my works. After some time, I also ask how does my artwork makes them feel? I hope good."*

- Artist statement



# Bruce Doyle

Bruce Doyle was a prolific artist who did not receive recognition during his lifetime. Doyle passed away of natural causes in his fifties in 1992 but also lived with schizophrenia since his twenties. Beginning his painting journey in 1985 with a six month drawing course with Alan Sumner at the National Gallery Art School, Doyle used his drafting skills as he was a mechanical engineer to explore his creative side.

Many of his works were painted in his home while he was an outpatient at the Hawthorn Mental Health Clinic. Doyle's family have given permission for his works to be reproduced.

The Dax Collection holds thirty-two of Doyle's works. Many of Doyle's works feature birds, an animal he strongly identified with, especially parrots. Often his works are painted from the bird's perspective, from inside cages or from above.

*"I am a free soul when it comes to my art" - Bruce Doyle*

*"Doyle's paintings are characterised by an exuberance in content and style. His love of the world around him and his enthusiasm for painting radiates from each picture. Expressionist may be one way to describe his works. Doyle himself describes them as abstract realist." - Press release of the Doyle's 1990 exhibition at the Caulfield Art Complex.*



Bruce Doyle, *Morning Stroll* 1994, ink on paper adhered to board, 22.5 x 18.5cm

# Renee Sutton



Renee Sutton, *Untitled* 2004, watercolour on paper, 29 x 21cm

Renee Sutton has been making art for over fifty years, having no formal training. Sutton began her career as a professional nurse in 1953 after training in nursing and midwifery. Whilst working in London, Sutton explains that she had "overworked" herself and was treated at the Bethlem Royal Hospital for twelve months, after treatment, she returned home to Melbourne and continued nursing. In 1958 she was admitted to the Larundel Psychiatric Hospital where she was treated for two years.

Sutton began to regularly paint while at the hospital in occupational therapy programs that were devised by Dr Cunningham Dax. Sutton's works reveal scenes from her childhood; representations of concerts and exhibitions she had attended as well as expressions of her innermost thoughts. Painting was Sutton's way of managing her mental ill-health, but the artworks created were seen more as a clinical record and patients were not able to keep their works. It was not until Dax began to exhibit the works for education, the private meanings and intentions of the individuals who created the works were often not represented.

In recent years Sutton has continued to paint and has participated in numerous art classes. Currently, she is a member of Artheat at the Sandy Beach Centre in Melbourne.

*"It has not only been therapy, but it's helped me to solve and realise problems and things I didn't realise when I was younger"*

- Renee Sutton



# About The Dax Centre

We work with emerging artists with lived experience of mental health issues, providing a safe and supportive environment for the artists to exhibit their work, develop their art practice and raise the public's awareness of these artists important cultural contributions.

We deliver education programs to secondary and tertiary students that inspire young people, expand their understanding of mental health issues and break down the stigma.


Through our exhibitions and educational programs we engage, inform and encourage conversations about mental health through art.

We challenge stigma towards mental health issues and start conversations that advance the understanding of mental health issues and build empathy.



We are custodians of the Cunningham Dax Collection of art, one of only four collections of its kind in the world and the only collection of its size and type in Australia.

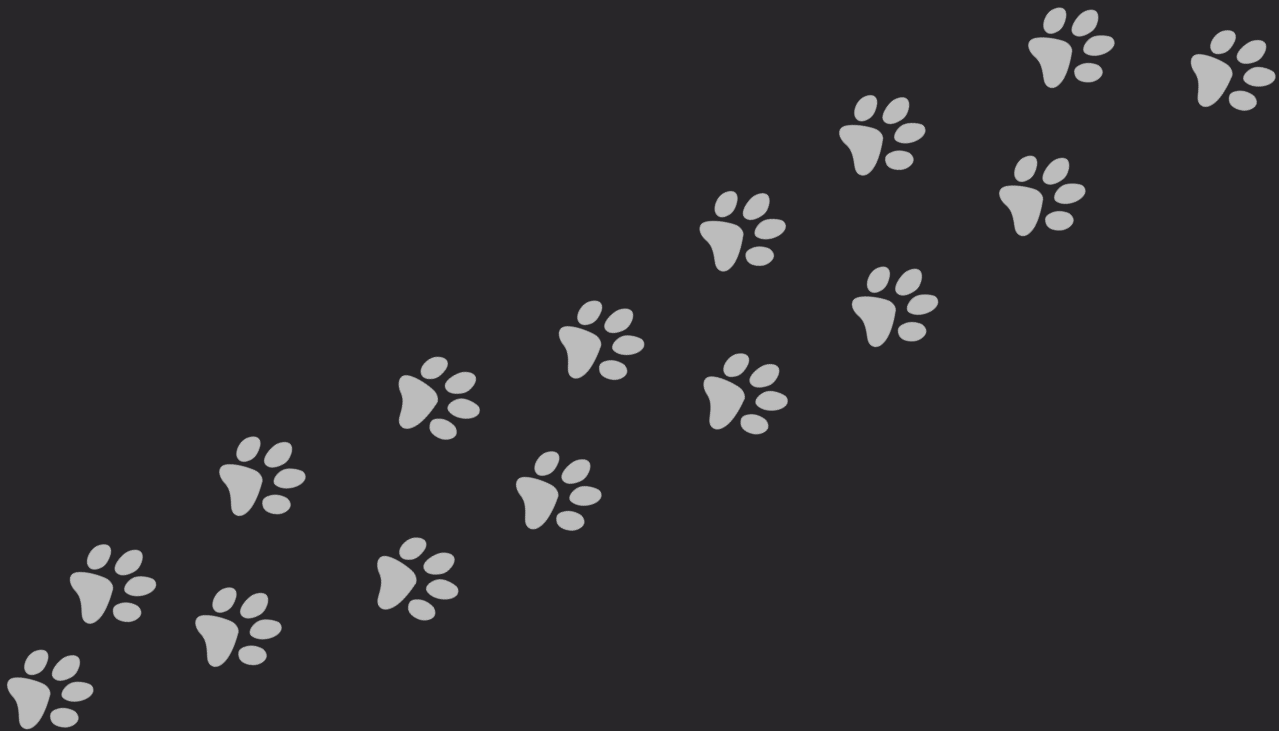
Our mission: to advance the understanding of mental health issues and reduce stigma through ART.



The Dax Centre acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as traditional custodians of the land on which it operates. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and value the rich history, unbroken culture and ongoing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to country. The Dax Centre values diversity. We are committed to providing a safe, culturally appropriate, and inclusive service for all people, regardless of their ethnicity, faith, disability, sexuality, or gender identity.

We hope you have discovered something you love and have learnt something new about mental health.

Your kind donations help The Dax Centre share stories about people's journeys with mental health and reduce stigma.



Gallery open hours:

Wednesday to Friday - 11.00am to 3.30pm

Sunday, every last of the month - 12.00pm - 3.00pm

30 Royal Parade, Parkville