

## VCE ART: The Personal Framework with Darcey Bella Arnold

**Siobhan:** Hi, I'm Siobhan, Gallery Coordinator at Gertrude Contemporary. I'm here today with Gertrude Studio Artist Darcey Bella Arnold and we are going to talk about her practice and the VCE Art framework of 'The Personal'. So, The Personal Framework is used to reveal how artworks can reflect an artist's personal feelings, thinking, circumstances and experiences, and how the viewers interpretation of an artwork is informed by their own experiences.

We're going to look at Darcey Bella Arnold's body of work '*me say edit be*' which is soon to be shown at ReadingRoom, in The Nicholson Building, Melbourne. We will focus on a couple of key artworks:

- Journey-ed-it's  
2019  
Acrylic on canvas board  
120 x 90cm
- we be ed-it!  
2019  
Acrylic on canvas board  
125 x 95cm
- Jenny by the sea  
2019  
Acrylic on canvas  
102 x 126cm

So, Darcey, please tell me about you and your artistic practice?

**Darcey Bella Arnold:** I am a Melbourne artist who is currently working from Gertrude Contemporary studios. I went to the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) and did a drawing degree [after high school] in Fine Arts, and then I went on to do an Honours at Monash University. I have primarily worked in drawing for a long time, for about 10 years, and then switched to painting, which has been in the last few years. Drawing, I guess, is still the foundation for all of my work, but I've found a freedom in painting recently that's been really exciting, and which has sort of led into the change in my work moving more into the personal as of late.

**S:** And what relationship does the artwork have to your life and your experiences?

**D:** It's a very close relationship. I guess I make very personal work now, which I have been doing for the last few years - since 2017. I am making works which tie into my role as a carer for my mother who has an acquired brain injury. I have been her carer since 2004, which is when I was at art school, but it's only been recently that I've started to make work speaking about that experience, which has been really difficult but also very rewarding, and I think there's a certain amount of vulnerability and honesty that people relate to and connect to which is why it's been a success recently to talk about that, even though it is difficult.

**S:** What is the visual evidence in the artwork that points to this experience that you've had caring for your mother, Jennifer?

**D:** Visual evidence I guess would be my source material. So, I appropriate my mother's written word and put it into paintings; however, if you weren't sure of the back story, I don't think that's explicit. It's through tools like personal essays and writing that go along with the artwork that I've added that further information, so if people want to know more about the works, they can take that extra step and delve deeper into the story. I do feel it's important for the works to be broad and be appreciated on a few different levels, or have a few different entrances to the work, so that it's not tied in to one expression.

**S:** What is the specific process that you follow in creating and conceiving the artworks? You said that you appropriate some source material from you mother.

**D:** Yes, that's been sort of the starting point for all these new works – is this written material that I have and that we've been collecting for a long time. She had her acquired brain injury in 2004 and we've collected her writing since that. She was a teacher, so writing is very important to her and language is very important to her. So, I appropriate her written work but also drawings that she does in art therapy and things. For example, in *'Jenny by the sea'*. That work is originally a painting she did in art therapy, and then 10 years later I've taken that as a base and made it my own by changing the colours and giving it the context of the title. I titled it Jenny by the sea because she grew up by the sea and the colours are beach themed. I've also taken a visual language of a painter I love, who's also a Melbourne painter, Robert Rooney, and tied them all in together.

**S:** And so, by taking your mother's drawings and corrections as source material, do you see your mother as a collaborator in this process?

**D:** That's an interesting question that I get asked a little bit when you're appropriating things. I don't see her as a collaborator, I feel like it's very much my work, and that is for two reasons: one, because I guess she's my mum and I want to do my own thing and have my own voice; and secondly, because she has an acquired brain injury there becomes an issue of consent, particularly in her situation - she's only got seconds and minutes of memory. I do have these conversations where I say, "I'm making this work and I've taken inspiration from your writing" and she'll get excited about that, but that information isn't retained. So, it's very much my own work appropriating the things around me, and at the moment it is my Mum's labour. So, my labour and her labour interwoven.

**S:** Do you think your work is reflective of any larger personal beliefs or cares?

**D:** Yeah absolutely, I think like I just said with labour it's definitely talking about that and the importance of her work and what she's taught me and our relationship; and I guess they're all really grand themes in that way. Also, the visibility of disability, because I think she's fascinating and so I feel like to share that story is really important. Because a lot of times if you've got a severe disability you're not always in the public, so having someone to share your story can be really important and really good for a community and things like that.

**S:** Definitely. Your mother has an ABI (Acquired Brain Injury) so do you think, as well, that you're trying to understand cognition, or address the theme of how we as individuals understand cognition?

**D:** Yes Absolutely. I always feel like I'm cracking a code, especially when I work with her language. Because of her memory loss, she mixes language around a lot. She mixes in French and English, and as I'm painting her words it sort of feels like I'm trying to crack this code to get a deeper understanding of how her brain is working and how that changes, and the language is fluid in that way.

**S:** And I know that for your exhibition coming up at ReadingRoom you've commissioned an essay by Matthew Greaves, tell me a little bit about Matthew and the text that he has written.

**D:** So, I commissioned Matthew because he's got an artistic practice and then he's gone into a psychology degree, so he's thinking a lot about the brain. And so, I wanted to get his viewpoint on the works that use text, and he's written about people with bi-lingual language. It's not directly about the work, and it doesn't speak directly to the work, but it does give an example of a way of thinking about language which I think is important. It's a bit of a hint of what the works might be talking about, without telling you directly, so still leaving it quite open and broad. When I commissioned him, I had Oliver Sacks' work in mind, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, that case-study-based writing, which was an inspiration for both of us.

**S:** There is a nice relationship between the textual and the visual qualities of your work. For example, in your work we be ed-it! the text fans out to create a really visually interesting pattern. Was this how Jennifer originally did the text?

**D:** No, in that one particularly it's a good example of the way I've tried to blend my language and Jennifer's language. So I've had, say, her notebook with me, and I've taken pockets of her sentences and then painted them in this painterly gestural way. She's written on quite a few post-it notes over the years, so we have piles and piles of post it notes, so that's where that little yellow square comes from. I used it visually as an anchor for the fanning text so it sort of holds the work and then text fans out. I think it's a good example of the combination of my visual language and her written language. And then, it's a little bit blurry as well because I like playing with layers of paint. The white paint is covering up some of the text, which in real life it's quite textural which you can't always see on the screen.

**S:** What are the symbols and metaphors explored or utilised in the artwork that contribute to the meanings and messages? I'm thinking particularly about the work *Journey-ed-it-'s* where words seem to be erased or rubbed out.

**D:** Yeah, so that's tying again to that textural play and painterly play. I try to be quite playful with the paint and use the text as a base and then come add it in a visual language way. The push and pull of information with layering, which would speak to a loss - you've put down the information there, and then you've covered it up with paint, and that could be a loss of memory in a really direct way. I wasn't so much thinking of that as I was making it, it was more for the visual pleasure of playing with the paint and making it a textural abstract piece, but with that information as a starting point and to highlight the gestural lines, like the red line going through the centre; I thought that was a really nice line.

**S:** Yes, it's a really beautiful work as it has this fogginess about it, but you still do that thing where you try and look at the words because you identify them as words and you try and work out what they say, and you try and construct meaning for yourself.

**D:** Absolutely, like you're picking it out.

**S:** One of the other key areas of the personal framework is how the viewer experiences the art and how their background effect the interpretation of the work. So, I thought it might be nice if I could share some of my interpretations or memories that I have when I view the work as well.

Particularly for me, I look at your work and I really think about memories I have about learning to read and write and I found it quite difficult when I was learning to read and write to tell the difference between words that look quite similar like, thought, through and thorough. And so, one of my teachers would draw boxes around the letter so that I could see visually the different heights of the word and try and identify the words through the height of the lettering.

**D:** Yeah, great trick!

**S:** And the other one that I thought of was playing rhyming games like like duck, luck, suck, buck. And also, memories in primary school of learning French, because obviously there's the French language that your mother has drawn on as well.

**D:** Yes, that all ties in so strongly with her text because she was a teacher, so you can see that word play coming through, I think. Another game would be to create acronyms to remember how to spell words which is what she does a lot still. So that educational side comes through really strongly.

**S:** Did your mother learn French when she was growing up?

**D:** She did in high school, but none of us really know why it's come through now. Her memory stops at about the early 1970's I think, so when she was going through high school. And because she learnt it in high school, I guess that's why it's quite formative now in her memory. She was never fluent or anything like that, so we don't exactly know why. She holds it in high acclaim, and she loves the combinations of things and the playfulness of it. But we couldn't tell you exactly why, which is interesting when you read Matthew Greaves' essay about bilingual brains and how quite a few people who have had brain injuries will speak a different language afterwards.

**S:** Yeah, I know when people get dementia as well they quite often forget the second language they've learnt and revert back to their original language.

Language is very interesting so thank you for sharing your thoughts and insights and trying to explain not just the language but also some of those visual qualities in the works as well, it's really beautiful.

**D:** It's an ongoing process for sure and making work that's personal it's enjoyable and also has its challenges, but it's great to share!

**S:** Thank you!

Darcey Bella Arnold is a current Gertrude Contemporary Studio Artist (2020 – 2022)  
For more information please visit [www.gertrude.org.au](http://www.gertrude.org.au)

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