

## A Living Quilt: The Journey of a Cohort of Emerging Arts Therapists in Aotearoa

MAAT Year 3 2018: Allie Manners, Arijana Ruznic-Beyer, Ayaka Shima, Beth McGuinness, Brett Harrington, Carrie Leigh, Danielle Mitchell, Eve Cunnane, Istvan Csata, Judy O’Byrne, Julie Dobson, Louise Morton, Mary Weir, Naomi Pears-Scown, Renee Barker, Rosa Heney, Ruth Foulkes, Sarah Moore, Scarlett Jeong, Serena Corless  
Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, New Zealand

---

### Abstract

This article traces the collaborative creation of a final gift—a symbolic weighted quilt—recently given by a cohort of third year trainee arts therapists to their faculty and fellow students. The article uses poetry and narrative to present and explore the process of this group of emerging arts therapists being woven together via their experiences of creativity, uncertainty and trust during their time on the Master of Arts in Arts Therapy program. It notes the interconnectivity between the singular and shared identities found during this journey, and explores the precious, expansive, and universal nature of the arts therapy experience and profession. This creative collaboration is a representation of the experience of student arts therapists who, having been soaked in the heavy liquids of creative encounters and felted together as a community, are now on the cusp of taking this deep fluid identity and experience out into the wider community.

**Keywords:** quilt, weighted blanket, emerging arts therapists, Aotearoa, poetry

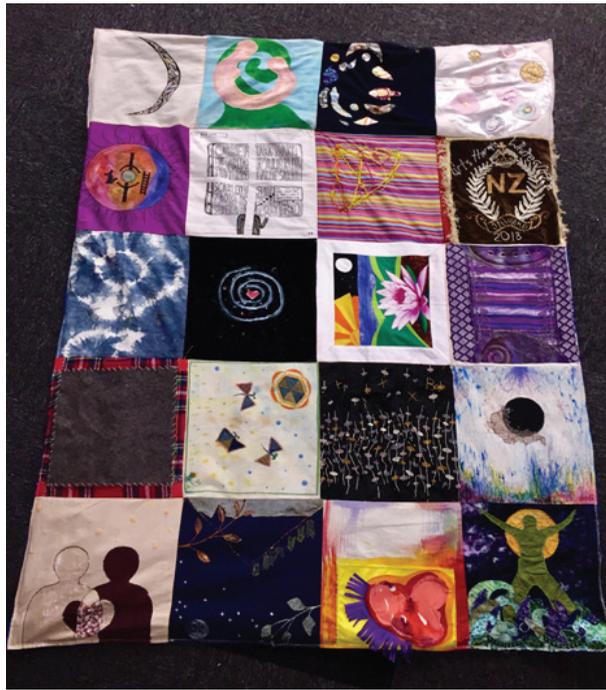
The heavy blanket lies at the centre of the room, occupying both physical and emotional space. Its eight-kilogram weight is spread out over an area of 1.5 metres by 2 metres; its great back is covered in a quilt of vivid colours. This patchwork top consists of 20 squares of robust fabrics – velvet, denim, polyester, calico, wool – each with a unique pattern or image stitched, painted or embroidered upon its fabric. It sits upon a blue liminal layer of a custom-made calico blanket, filled with tiny river stones that have been sewn into evenly-balanced sections. This weighting is designed to be around a tenth of a person’s body-weight and provides a calming layer of protection as they prepare for, or rest in, or recover from one of life’s journeys. A final layer of soft blue polyester sits where the blanket touches the body. This is our weighted blanket.

~

*Be Longing*

*Kōwaiāhau? Who am I?*

*Where do I belong?*



**FIGURE 1** | 'The Quilt' (MAAT year 3, September 2018)

*To longing,  
connection,  
people, earth, water,  
creation or creator?*

*Not knowing  
creates a space for you to teach me  
in rich detail,  
to trust and take risks.*

*When I'm all at sea I can float.  
Your story, my story, their stories,  
our stories are connected.  
Be still, be quiet, breathe  
Tihei Mauri Ora!  
There is life.*

~

*Can we offer  
find, make a home  
here with art  
amongst the gorgeous  
and dangerous  
shadows cast  
moving and still  
beings  
You hand me  
a brush  
You lend me  
your colours  
I paint beside  
with, within  
tears stitched finely quietly  
transforming  
into wild birds  
skwarrk!!  
wings creak wings sing  
wings joining in creating  
a strong and beautiful  
formation  
  
and then  
the sky changes...  
  
watch them  
swooping, diving, seeking  
defining drawing  
into clear and open  
spaces*

~

*Whilst climbing up and down the ladder of my life I became intrigued by the process of giving birth to things from nothing and I started to realise that whatever art I created by my own hands was basically a response to the general human condition, to our mutual terrain, similarly to the quilt where we shared every inch of thread and turned personal into communal. I feel*

*magically connected to these creative warriors who are dedicated to respond with art to suffering and inspired to perceive what is broken and fragile as wholesome and beautiful.*

~

*Patches sewn by another  
for me to fill  
with my own creation  
I wonder how to fill the empty space  
with its neatly stitched borders  
it's up to me  
to decide  
what happens right now  
I don't want to sketch out every  
detail or  
define every object in soft neat  
erasable pencil  
before I begin  
I pull out a black pen,  
permanent, and  
I just begin*

~

We gathered in a high room one evening after class. With churning emotions, we spoke about the fast-approaching end to our time as student arts therapists and began to discuss a way to show our tutors our deep appreciation for their guidance during these enshrining years. This discussion vacillated between gestures of gratitude and pragmatic gifts until the two coalesced into our final offering – a weighted blanket; a quilt of many colours.

A custom weighted blanket-maker was contacted whilst measurements were divided, lists were written, and plans were developed. We looked around, nodding: over time and distance, between the layers of our lives, we would do this.

We exchanged countless emails over the following months. We agreed: in our separate spaces, we would source and create our individual squares before tucking them away, ready to be brought back out when we would meet again.

~

*Our creative threads  
A Wit(h)nessing*

*An honouring  
Side by side  
As one  
Like a pride of lions, awakening from a deep sleep  
Us!  
Hear us growl! Hear us howl!  
Celebrating!  
Humbling...  
Grieving...  
Gratitude.  
A chaotic creative metamorphic force  
Raw resonance hemmed together*

~

*Fabrics that reference me as part of an us  
An us of strength and warmth  
An us that has shrouded me and held my vulnerabilities  
And my emergence  
I note my beginnings and roots  
A tartan that warms the wearer  
Rustic stitches  
To a soft woollen centre  
The centre each have helped form  
And I am stitched to you, as you are to me  
Our borders touching  
Our colours complementary  
The stories of our journey together held  
In one piece*

~

*Starting as a seed, scared fragile and small  
we arose.  
Fractals weaving to form one,  
among a galaxy that is limitless  
three stars flicker for the years flown by.  
Together traversing this mountainous range*

*strengthening our ties travelling across rocky tides,  
a mesh of co-existing light and dark, dark and light.*

*A forest of rhizomatic trees  
And fledgling birds about to take flight,*

*We are both and...*

*A tapestry of holding, wonder and shared delight!*

~

*Our layer of trusting makes miracles happen.*

~

The day came when we gathered once more in the high room to reveal our creations and begin the process of connection. A pause.

‘Here’s mine’, ‘Here’s mine’.

Our pieces were delicately placed upon the floor to create a variegated field of coloured patches. A deep, collective breath was drawn before an exhaling of pride, surprise and joy.

And then back to it. Some of us stitched our last-minute shapes to our squares whilst others measured and chalked outlines. Some trimmed and pinned, some ordered food, and some drove the dim murmur of the sewing machines.

‘Where does each piece sit?’, ‘What still needs to be done?’, ‘Where are the pins?’, ‘Can I borrow that thread?’, ‘Pass me the scissors please.’, ‘Does anyone want snacks?’, ‘Did you notice the moon tonight is exactly like her moon sewn here?’

Separate pieces were stitched together in twos and threes, laid out, pinned, sewed again, more and more, until the last pieces were finished. This layer was complete; all squares were now connected. Our quilt was bundled, gleaming, into a backpack; prepped and ready to be attached to its weighty counterpart.

~

*Across the black material is a row of lines, each strung with variously tilted disks that suggest levels, stages or a progression of beads. Each strand stands alone but form an overall pattern. Each of us as students in the Arts Therapy Masters programme, stood together seminar after seminar, and yet so much on our own, achieving our differing but similar stages of development, pushing past the beads of one milestone after another, towards realizing ourselves as creative arts therapists.*

~

*We are walking with mountains and moons,*

*A dark gracious landscape, flapping, growing, breathing,  
Booming deep oceans, and still light all around.  
The seasons, chaos, play, change – these living creatures, I have been  
introduced to them.  
These mountains hold hands, and bend to visit us who live on and around  
and inside their wings,  
We move on their shoulders, gather snippets of their conversation, and  
breathe their aroma,  
We expand, and my body moves on and on to their gracious booming.  
We are here, each with a bag of whispers, tools for play, and our own tatters  
and ribbons,  
We learn to dive, to notice, to receive, to share this breath.  
We have felted together the first page of our story,  
And we walk with mountains and moons.*

~

*Being, together*

*I put my heart next to yours.*

*Mine is embroidered with moments from my life.*

*Yours is embroidered with moments from yours.*

*With needle and thread, we gently weave our two pieces together.*

*I fold my edge and give one of them to you.*

*You fold your corners and pass one of them to me.*

*Together we assemble our rough edges and mend our broken hearts.*

*One stitch forward,*

*One stitch backward,*

*A step forward, toward each other*

*A step backward from each other.*

*We create a mindful spacing.*

*With sincerity, you and I connect.*

*I don't ask you to resemble me.*

*You don't force me to be like you.*

*Over time we become, each other, side by side.*

*Me as I am, you as you are.*

*United, and stitched loosely together.  
And now willing to share our unique edges with others.*

~

*We created, we moved, we felt, we challenged, we wept, we broke, we breathed, we stretched, we laughed, we absorbed, we acknowledged, we observed, we shared. Each patch of gratitude is holding the learning that was abundant, weaving together with a thread that contains each of us. I am part of the whole, rich in memory, understanding what we came with, has been transitioned.*

*..... We see who we are now. We listen. Be*

~

An ill-timed courier crisis caused a commotion of texts, a late evening drive, a gentle meeting at a quiet doorway, and a hefty wrapped box sitting on the car seat. Then again in a high room a handful of sewers, energized with determination, gathered with their lunches. The body of the blanket was unboxed and draped over the table. The quilt was then laid over, and pinned. We pulled at it, tacked corners down, and discussed thread colours and strengths. With every tug we came to feel more and more at home with the heavy, beautiful creature that we had created. Sewing machines were fired up once more and it seemingly all-at-once came into being – our beautiful weighted blanket.

~

*Shifts and stitches, in time  
Under and over, through and within  
Emergent from a shadow, past  
Leaning into the Onward future  
My peace with pieces, in process  
A conjurer of the old and the new  
From my Pākehā nationality (of strife and ...)  
An honouring of bicultural practice  
Whakapapa, emergent  
I lean into others  
Sharing and threaded, alongside  
My bricoleured felt sense  
Forming a collegial whole  
Of the magic, to come  
A collective energy, unmatched*

*And a Korowai for others yet to arrive*

~

*weaving in  
round  
through  
i don't know  
what's me  
and you*

~

*Stitch these squares into the folds of your belly,  
remembering how once you were frightened to  
begin  
threading these into the pleats of  
your memory  
of time and tears  
tumbling into the night  
Seams sewn  
into the fabric of your exalted  
being,  
cultivating the blessing of square miles crossed  
to arrive, annihilated,  
only to be created.*

~

*We walk our singular journeys together.  
A powerful tribe.  
And finally we place a small part of us.  
Gathered in person  
Gathered in creating  
To gather as unique spirits in unity  
Together a whole  
Sewn with threads like the net of Indra.  
Creating something new and beautiful  
Poiesis*

*For ourselves  
 For future students  
 And clients we have yet to meet.*

~

Our blanket is our way of honouring the connections that we have formed within and between ourselves, our tutors, and our profession. It is a recognition that we are who we are through our relationships with one another. This gift is both colossal and contained; robust and delicate; weighty and gentle. It is the result of heartfelt gratefulness, communal co-dependency, gumption, dialogues, and the act of simply *being* together. Our blanket is our cohort: who we are, who we were, and who we hope to be.

~

*soft-bodied soul  
 albino skin (pockmarked, but porous)  
 oozes from the tepid pond to  
 collapse upon its cool clay embankment  
 quivering  
 (softly ribbiting)  
 gulping in the sweet morning air  
 of the new day's still dark dawn*

~

*We carry a golden thread in our beaks  
 Stitch it between and through the layers  
 Up, down, up, back, down –  
 It's the work of patches  
 A patched work  
 Patched lives and stories  
 Patched possibilities  
 We create new layers to strengthen the old  
 This patch, my patch, your patch, Our patch –  
 Each patch a piece of me and of you  
 Stitched together, a piece of Us*

*Now we fly,  
 In the same direction  
 and in different directions*

*Wearing our colours like victory flags  
Up, down, up, back, down –  
Each carrying the golden thread in our beaks  
To stitch into our next patched masterpiece.*

~

*Emerging  
the ruru\* ruffles comfortable feathers  
on the brink of the elements.  
her korowai\*\* wrapping her  
a campfire blanket  
lingering she sways between  
comfort and the groans of the ngahere\*\*\*.*

*Raindrops roll off feathers, she  
collects the drops  
drinks deeply  
bitter sweet  
offering to share in colourful communion  
nods and smiles through tears*

*Flies by night, dreamtime  
curious creatures flock  
bizarre, wonder-ful souls  
play and sigh and breathe and build and paint  
their way home  
or perhaps it's somewhere new.*

*\*Ruru – TeReo for New Zealand's native owl*

*\*\*Korowai – a type of Māori cloak*

*\*\*\*Ngahere – TeReo for forest*

*Descriptions retrieved from: <http://maoridictionary.co.nz> 17th September  
2018*

~

*Someone says “A gift!”  
“A patchwork quilt”  
follows hot on their tail.*

*We are [re?]making our-selves...  
The snipped and stitched,  
bits and bobs,  
harmonious  
and hard edged.  
There is chaos for a while,  
Can this be made?  
Will it be made?  
The uncertainty sits in the space between.  
Us. And still we cut and glue and mould.  
Something resembling an identity.  
A therapist.  
Someone to sit with the tangles,  
the tattered or torn, to breath in  
the pieces and say;  
“it might be made into a whole,  
and if it isn’t,  
I love it anyway”.  
This patched and zigzagged creation*



**FIGURE 2** | The Quilt; Gifted (MAAT year 3, September 2018)

*is a sign pointing to therapist-born.  
A gift found, made of me-ness and you-ness.  
And given to whoever needs warm.*

~

## **About the Authors**

Allie Manners: Back straight, feet in the earth...kinda wanderer.

Arijana Ruznic-Beyer: Soulloguer.

Ayaka Shima: Trainee Arts Therapist, Japanese Society of Certified Clinical Psychologists, and cheeky bird.

Beth McGuinness: Arts Therapist, teacher, art lover.

Brett Harrington was working as an ADHD coach and counsellor when she decided to gain Arts Therapy skills. She is now also working creatively with children with autism.

Carrie Leigh: BVA, GradDip (Art History), PGDip (Arts Therapy), almost MAAT, quiet collage-maker.

Danielle Mitchell has a background in primary teaching (BEd) and almost MAAT, and dabbles in illustration.

Eve Cunnane: Cert (Media Arts), BA (Philosophy & English), PGDip (Arts Therapy), Trainee member ANZACATA.

Istvan Csata: open sky istvan, art worker.

Judy O'Byrne: BN PG Dip Health Science (CBT), PGDip (Arts Therapy), Member NZAC and trainee member ANZACATA.

Julie Dobson: moon cherisher, artist and MAAT student.

Louise Morton: BA, PGDip Tchg (Primary), PGDip (Arts Therapy), arts adventurer.

Mary Weir: PGDip. Art Therapy, BA Circus and Physical Theatre, Adv. Dip. Fine Art, Cert. Adult Education, Cert. Disability and Aged Care, Yoga Instructor and general philosophical coddiwomple-er.

Naomi Pears-Scown: BA, nearly MAAT, stepping softly, creating gently.

Renee Barker: BFA, PGDipEd (Secondary), PGDip (Arts Therapy), trainee member ANZACATA, creative fun-lover.

Rosa Heney: Supporting communities through creative practice, BFA, Dip Adult Ed, Dip Teaching (Secondary), PGDip (Arts Therapy).

Ruth Foulkes: MA(Ed), BA(Hons), PGDip (AT), PGCE, Trainee Arts Therapist. Primary trained teacher, teacher educator, mentor, coach and facilitator.

Sarah Moore: BFA (Photography), PGDip (Arts Therapy).

Scarlett Jeong: BA, GradDip (TESOL), PGDip (Arts Therapy).

Serena Corless: BMA (Photography), PGDip (Arts Therapy), soon MAAT, passionate creative being.