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Page 1 of 4

# A LIGHT IN THE DARK

Can art help soothe anxieties and help people make sense of mental turmoil? The work of two young artists suggests it can

**WORDS SARAH HENDER**

**T**here's no doubt art can be therapeutic for the artist — but what about others?

The work of two Adelaide artists who painted in Glenside's country mental health inpatient unit is helping explore the question.

Thomas Readett and Ashton Boyd were artists in residence as part of the SALA festival, in a joint program from Country Health SA and the University of South Australia.

The Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Research Group at the University of South Australia is researching the effects of such programs on inpatients and staff of mental health units. Lecturer Dr Amy Baker, who conducted interviews with inpatients as part of her research, says: "One person said to me that their interaction with the artist made them feel less like a monster and more of a human."

## **ASHTON BOYD, abstract visual artist**

Ashton Boyd drew nothing but black and white drawings when she was in the depths of depression. When her boyfriend at the time asked her to do a poster for him in the same style, she realised that her work might have value to others too.

"These paintings came from a really dark place and it was therapeutic for me to make them," she says. "I never thought people would find them therapeutic to look at. That was my light bulb moment."

That was the end of 2015. Since then, Boyd's art practice has grown from personal drawings to holding exhibitions at retailers around town and selling her paintings online. The 29-year-old describes her genre as

abstract expressionist. Her work deals with issues of her own identity, relating to her late discovery of Tongan heritage, that triggered her earlier depression.

Knowing how valuable art had been to her recovery, an artist residency at the country mental health unit at Glenside was a way for Boyd to give back.

When she brought her abstract paintings to the unit to show the inpatients, it prompted conversation and people started asking how she did them. Boyd offered art classes to show them. Now she holds weekly classes in the unit and numbers are growing.

"What I love is that it (art) puts everyone on an even playing field," Boyd says. "If you're worried you're not artistic, it doesn't matter — because it's not up to you, the paint will do what it wants."

Painting can sometimes reveal what talking cannot, she adds. "Often when you're sick, you've got a lot going on and you yourself don't know what's going on."

Boyd knows she has made a breakthrough when the more reluctant inpatients go from detached observation to picking up a paintbrush. "It's communication without conversation and I think it's really powerful," she says.

While she doesn't describe her classes as therapy, it is clearly beneficial for those attending. The residents will ask her if she's coming in the next day and some even write "thank you" on their work.

Despite increased community awareness about mental health, Boyd feels many people still don't know how to deal with symptoms of anxiety and depression displayed by their loved ones. The residency has shown her that there is a gaping hole between those with anxiety and milder mental health issues, and those who are severely ill.



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Page 2 of 4

“If people can’t get their heads around anxiety, then how are we as a community to help the huge number of people suffering severely from mental health issues?”

Boyd says her works produced during the residency portray symptoms of mental health problems. “The residency has gone far beyond my expectations. It has given mental health a broader context for me and has given me permission to have conversations that I wouldn’t normally have. I’m so grateful.”

#### **THOMAS READETT, portrait artist**

As a child, Thomas Readett loved to sit in the Art Gallery of South Australia and draw. Now 25, his life has come full circle. These days he’s an artist part-time, and still spending a lot of time in the gallery working full-time as education officer for Tarnanthi (the Kurna word for “emerge” or “appear”), which showcases Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art.

Readett’s role is to educate others about these people’s stories. The son of an Aboriginal mother, he knows how important that is – he was taught little about his heritage until he reached art school.

This question of cultural identity has informed Readett’s adult life and art practice but the biggest issue he’s faced was the suicide of a dear friend five years ago.

“Everything I do, especially with my exhibitions, I try to pay homage to him,” Readett says.

Readett has always used art as therapy for himself. It is his way of letting go of things. He wants to use his work to raise greater awareness about mental health, particularly in the areas of depression and suicide. This residency was an opportunity to do that.

He had no preconceived ideas about how to approach the time at Glenside, preferring to see how things developed. Passing chats with inpatients led some to share their stories with him, once he told them what he was about.

“It’s incredible to hear everybody’s stories, because they’re the voices that don’t get heard – especially by the people who are funding and have the power to effect change on the lives of the inpatients,” he says.

Readett translates each story he is told into imagery for a painting. Being a portrait artist with a realist style, the need to protect patient confidentiality might have presented a problem. His way around it has been to get others to stand in for the inpatient so the physical anatomy is taken care of, with the person’s story taking care of the rest.

His plan was to produce 10 paintings, all in black and white. Why no colour? “A lot of my

paintings are very dark, both in subject matter and aesthetically, but there’s always a strong sense of light running through my work, that light representing hope,” he explains.

“It is the one thing I come back to, fortunately, as otherwise they would just be black canvasses!”

Mental health is something that Readett knows he will always be addressing in his work, giving purpose to his art. His experience at Glenside has reinforced that desire.

The inpatients, he says, are flattered their voices are being heard. “Everybody should hear what they’ve got to say,” he says. “That’s why I’m here, I’m merely the messenger.” •

**The SALA exhibition for Boyd and Readett’s residency at Glenside is to be held at Raj House, Hyde St (off Pirie St), Adelaide, from August 1-31. Opening night is August 10.**

**For mental health support, contact headspace 1800 650 890, [headspace.org.au](http://headspace.org.au) or beyondblue, 1300 224 636, [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)**



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Clockwise from top: SA artist Thomas Readett with his self-portrait work titled *Bruises* (Picture: Amber Eyes Imagery); Ashton Boyd in her studio with a selection of pieces from her *Mind Map* collection; Boyd's work for SALA , *Sleep (In your dreams)* (Pictures: Supplied)



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Page 4 of 4

