

# Making Visible the Invisible

## How Combining Autoethnography with Visual Arts Practice Unearthed More Than I Imagined

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Résumé de l'article

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## MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: HOW COMBINING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY WITH VISUAL ARTS PRACTICE UNEARTHED MORE THAN I IMAGINED

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**Abstract:** This article documents how I came to combine autoethnographic accounting with visual arts practice. I developed this mixed methods approach for my PhD study which explores the interdisciplinary possibilities offered by combining visual arts practice with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Visual arts practices as narrative forms tend toward the non-linear (Anae, 2014), whilst autoethnography offers self-reflection. Writing an autoethnographic account for an artwork has the potential to generate a wealth of data, some of which are visible, some of which are not. The invisible data become available only when the artist speaks to/writes about the artwork. If some content/context of a visual artwork is only visible through background

information provided by the art maker, this discovery troubles another issue concerning our notions of what a good visual artwork is. Finally, I test this article's autoethnographic authenticity against Adam's four characteristics of autoethnography.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; visual arts; STEM; positionality; invisible data

## Background

In my PhD study I seek to contribute to interdisciplinary knowledge by exploring art's relationship with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) through the visual arts. I do this by exploring geometric form in visual arts practice. Data generation relies on the artworks themselves, and on autoethnographic accounts associated with the artwork. These autoethnographic accounts are created by writing about the artwork, the artwork process, and the subject matter. They were written during and after the art-making process to document my observations and reflections. These accounts generated both visible and invisible data. The data concerning the PhD study are what I call the visible data; for example, in my painting *A Seat at the Table*, visible data refers to the geometric forms contained within the painting. These data relating to geometry are relevant to STEM.

The invisible data revealed through the autoethnographic account concern the non-physical personal and emotional associations evoked for me during the painting process. Whilst these invisible data are secondary to my PhD research, the mining of such invisible data through autoethnography is the subject of this paper.

Arts-based research is undertaken in many different disciplines, particularly education, the social sciences, and health. My PhD is auspiced by Education, with my formal training being in the arts. As a visual artist undertaking an arts practice-based PhD, I needed to find a methodology that would help me identify the data generated in visual artworks. Whilst much arts-based research uses visual artwork and the arts to explore issues (e.g. educational, social, and/or health) (Sullivan, 2010) and inform research (Knowles & Cole, 2008), there are limited examples in the literature that discuss visual arts practice from the perspective of the artist seeking to use their own art as a data source. Notable work in this area include Rita Irwin's development of A/R/ Tography (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Irwin et al., 2006). Whilst autoethnography is very much about exploring personal experience in relation to the collective, it is a literary methodology, so I didn't initially consider it. For my PhD study, the focus of the painting exercise was to give examples of STEM content in visual arts. I selected the subject matter I captured in *A Seat at the Table* because it contained many geometric forms. By telling stories about the purpose and processes of the painting-making, I came to realise the depth, breadth, and potential for data generation through art practice. The relevance of the data solely depends on the research focus. To ensure the account could be considered autoethnographic, I reviewed it against Adam's four characteristics of autoethnography (Holman Jones et al., 2013).

The capacity to capture invisible as well as visible data through an autoethnographic account was an unintended outcome. This discovery of combining visual arts research practice with an autoethnographic documenting process enhanced my own art practice and my knowledge of qualitative research. It provided me with a deeper understanding of the interdisciplinary entanglements that arise out of lived experience and learning by doing, and better equipped me to articulate how art practice contributes to research. It has resulted in my developing my written language skills to both probe and reflect more deeply on the content and processes of my visual arts practice. In addition, it has the capacity to be a pedagogical technique for engaging both STEM and art students in interdisciplinary experience.

What follows is an account of the data I have been able to retrieve from undertaking a painting and autoethnographically documenting its creation. I believe this example of incorporating autoethnography into visual arts practice can contribute to the methodologies available to visual arts practice researchers. The elusive or ambiguous nature of visual artworks is often promoted as a mark of the unique nature of the visual arts. My application of autoethnography seeks to probe this perspective. A visual artwork may have multiple meanings or interpretations but, as a visual artist, I am interested in providing an audience with ways into my subject matter. Using the painting *A Seat at the Table*, I argue that much of the vulnerability I am interested in sharing is unintelligible without this literary contribution. Whether the painting stands alone as a work of art is hard for me to judge. What I do know is that the painting has become a critical marker in my life because of my scrutiny of it autoethnographically.

## **My Interdisciplinary Experience**

I discovered drama at school, and attended the National Youth Theatre before leaving to study drama and art at a technical college. I found a job working in London's West End at the time, and apprenticed myself to the performing arts. After arriving in Australia, I eventually found work with what was then the Australian Social Welfare Workers Union whilst attending art school in the mid-1980s. Since that time I have tried to maintain my visual arts practice alongside working. Throughout the years, I spent time working in women's and youth refuges and had ongoing involvement in various political struggles. Working to sustain myself financially whilst sustaining myself psychologically through art practice and activism would become the pattern of my adult life.

In my mid-thirties I moved to regional Australia. It was after this move that I relinquished the idea of making a living from my artwork and found my way into educational research. I learned the research trade not by becoming a higher degree student but, rather, by working on educational research projects in a regional university. I made reluctant progress in learning this research trade. It was like learning a new language. There were qualitative and quantitative data, methodologies, and ethics. There were variables, validity, and triangulation of data. This world was far removed from art, but I realised if these new skills were to bring in an income it might be wise to undertake a Master's in Education. This hands-on experience of educational research led to further project and research work. Most projects had a three-year life span, at the end of which I would follow the work, moving states on a number of occasions. Throughout these shifts in location and direction, I remained wedded to art practice and learning by doing. Working in either project management or educational research became the pattern for more than twenty years.

When I was awarded a PhD scholarship, it felt like the path back to working more fully as an arts practitioner was becoming possible. I encountered an arts educator committed to encouraging arts-based research who became my supervisor. My time in educational research had exposed me to what I now term traditional research (Beswick et al., 2016, 2017; Crowley et al., 2002; Kilpatrick & Crowley, 1999), and I had been under the misconception that this was the only way to research. Part of my PhD process has been realising that there are many methodologies, some more suited than others to my approach to learning. My supervisor introduced me to A/R/ Tography (Springgay et al., 2008) and autoethnography, and six months into the study, I attended the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). It was at this conference that I began to comprehend autoethnography; I was learning by doing/ seeing/participating.

ICQI is a forum that promotes innovative research methodologies. The day prior to the congress proper is dedicated to workshops specifically focussing on these methodologies. Physically attending ICQI made it possible for me to attend a number of very powerful autoethnographic performances, which reminded me of my early theatre experience. They contained all of the power of theatre, but felt even better than theatre because contributions from the audience were encouraged, and the focus was not on valorising the performer; rather, it was on the sharing of experience and learning through story. The performers and their intimate stories were accessible. In that accessibility, there was a profound connection, reminding me of the importance of storytelling, of how one's own story is also the story of many. Or, as we second wave feminists put it, the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969, as cited in Arrow, 2019).

Immersed in the ICQI autoethnographies, I began to understand the methodology. But I am a visual artist, and autoethnography is primarily a literary-based genre (Leavy, 2018a). How might I use it to reveal the data arising from my visual artworks? My PhD study is practice-based and investigates geometric form. This exploration is driven by my lived experience of working on STEM education projects whilst maintaining my arts practice. It is all about interdisciplinarity and the transferability of skills and experience (Hager et al., 2002). Surviving financially and personally has not been discipline- or specialisation- focussed. It has been opportunistically driven, with my art practice as the thread of continuity. The pragmatics of this survival has meant that I do not experience any division between art and mathematics or science as articulated in the disciplines of education. Part of my PhD work has involved disentangling the academic meaning of discipline that a PhD study evokes, from my lived experience as an opportunistic interdisciplinary learner. For example, in my art or work practice, if the desired outcome requires a particular intervention, such as a mathematics intervention, then I learn it. Once I understood that autoethnographic accounts can arise from my *lived/immersed* experience, I began to write about my interdisciplinarity and about each artwork. Much came tumbling out, and, like most PhD candidates, at the beginning, I felt everything was important and had to be included.

This article contributes to the data refining process. With the painting *A Seat at the Table* as the focus, I separated the visible data (i.e., that relevant to the PhD research question) and realised a lot of invisible data remained. These invisible data only become visible through my written account, showing how much additional data are generatable through visual art, with the data's relevance depending on the research focus. To be confident that the written accounts are not merely personal but autoethnographic, I decided to apply Adam's characteristics of autoethnography (Holman Jones et al., 2013). In the literature review I discuss the possibilities offered by arts-based research (ABR) and autoethnography. Because this research involves the "I" as data, methodology, and interdisciplinary experience, all of which are to some extent defined by our position or where we stand, I also explore the notion of positionality.

## Literature

### Arts-based Research (ABR)

Leavy suggests that art at its best "has the potential to be both immediate and lasting. It's immediate insofar as it can grab hold of our attention, provoke us, or help to

transport us. ...Our response may be visceral, emotional, and psychological, before it is intellectual” (Leavy, 2015, p. 3). My interest in the arts and in ABR has arisen out of the way I learn, which is by doing; working with my hands, eyes, and mind. As McNiff (2018, p. 31) puts it, “Artists work with physical materials and processes, together with consciousness.” I am particularly interested in what I call the not knowing of art practice. This not knowing is the sense of unknowing I often experience when embarking on an artwork. I have something I want to articulate in a visual way but am not sure how that articulation will unfold. As I have mentioned, the artwork that is the subject of this article, *A Seat at the Table*, was selected because the photograph on which it was based was full of straight lines that give rise to geometric forms. It was a simple visual manifestation of some of the geometric forms available in an artwork. I also knew that I was going to paint it with oils on canvas. I did not know (until the painting was underway) that I might introduce circles and arcs to counterbalance the straight lines. I did not know how much emotional content this painting would actually embody for me. This is what I mean by the not knowing of art practice. In a sense, this not knowing is the “before it is intellectual” that Leavy (2015, p. 3) refers to. Making art is a form of problem solving and it oscillates, for me, between the concept and the question of how to implement meaning; various ways to create may be considered, and the making may involve a number of iterations before some creative resolution is achieved. Being before it is intellectual does not mean the artwork does not have intellectual content. I take Leavy’s “before it is intellectual” to mean, before you, the maker or viewer, step back and try and figure out what a particular artwork is doing/saying. As the artist, I often do not know. I cannot yet articulate all possible meaning or intention a particular artwork may contain upon completion. Leavy is suggesting that art can hit us between the eyes, and it is only later that we may understand why. The *why* is the intellectual bit. Before the intellectual is the “visceral, emotional and psychological” (Leavy, 2015, p. 3). Much of art’s potential for data generation lies in the period before it is intellectual, the period of not knowing what the outcome, or indeed the process, will entail.

ABR involves exploration and an acceptance of not knowing what the research is going to reveal. A fundamental premise of this type of research is that the end cannot be known at the beginning (McNiff, 2018). This not knowing involves risks and crossing borders into unknown territory. There is a risk that the inexperienced researcher may become swamped in the potential and plethora of data (Siegesmund, 2014). ABR is an umbrella term for a wide range of research methodologies that involve arts-based practices (e.g. Leavy, 2015, 2018a; McNiff, 2018). ABR is transdisciplinary in that it may be practiced across the various art disciplines and sub-disciplines, and it is utilised by various social science disciplines including education, psychology, and health. Because of its transdisciplinary nature and capacity to impact viscerally, emotionally, and



psychologically, ABR has the ability to remove prohibitive jargon and limiting structures, giving it the power to reach wider audiences. Stock language and stereotypic forms are not the provenance of art (McNiff, 2018), rather they are characteristics of more traditional research practice (Leavy, 2015).

The arts involve multiple non-verbal ways of knowing including sensory, kinaesthetic, and imaginary (Gerber et al., 2012), and these ways of knowing and working have the capacity to facilitate exploration, revelation, and representation. Working in the arts is a form of continual learning and can bring about awareness, both of the self and of others (Leavy, 2018b). Importantly, using an ABR methodology has, for me, brought about the merging of my scholar-self with my artist-self (Ikpe, 2018; Leavy, 2015; Phelan & Welch, 2021).

## Autoethnography

Autoethnography is identified as a literary genre (Leavy, 2018a). My early feminist activism made me very aware of how the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969, as cited in Arrow, 2019), and I gravitate toward autoethnography because my understanding of the world is filtered through my (auto) experience. It allows me to access the data of my experience to stimulate reflection on the broader social context (Butz & Besio, 2009). It has an evocative-emotional aspect (Poulos, 2020), and the performative connection autoethnographic accounting sometimes has with the performance of theatre appeals to me. As I progress deeper into the world of my PhD, I have come to the realization that the storytelling aspect of autoethnography and ABR is critical to communicating my interdisciplinary explorations. My experience, which informs the research design, crosses disciplines. It crosses borders. At the 2019 ICQI, I watched a performance of *I'm Sorry My Hair is Blocking Your Smile* (Alexander et al., 2019), a story of how nothing is culturally neutral; even hair can be laden with racism and othering. Thus, autoethnography can be a call to activism (Holman Jones et al., 2013; Poulos, 2020), setting me to wonder what type of activism might be revealed through an exploration of geometry through the visual arts.

In the 2013 *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Holman Jones et al.), Adams identifies four characteristics that differentiate autoethnography from other kinds of personal writing. He states that autoethnography:

1. *purposefully comments on/critiques culture and cultural practices,*
2. *contributes to existing research,*
3. *embraces vulnerability with purpose, and*

4. *creates a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response. (p. 22)*

In the analysis section, I will use these four criteria to assess whether my painting in combination with my written account can be considered autoethnographic.

## Positionality and the Self as Data

Everything is set within a cultural context. There is no such thing as neutrality, whether in the sciences, the arts, or any other discipline. The methodology for this research combines two art forms, the literary and the visual. This means combining the self-reflective potential of autoethnography with the non-verbal storytelling of visual arts practice. Combining the two provides greater depth, with a visual arts practice challenging the linear, unified, permanent story that words often suggest (Anae, 2014). The two processes also expose my positionality: that of an arts practitioner with expertise in traditional research.

In learning autoethnography, I move to and fro between my personal experience and how it might contribute to the bigger picture. I feel a need to justify my life experience. In a sense, I feel the need to demand a seat at the table. My lived experience has been a stand for equity and justice in all its forms, but this is invisible to any audience of strangers. How do I (or others) know my invisible experience is enough to qualify me? This need to justify demands personal storying for me to feel credentialled. I suspect these feelings relate to the notion of *imposter syndrome* (Wilkinson, 2020) and may never be laid to rest. This also contributes to my positionality. In this study, I become the data and the methodology (Arnold, 2011). The self is a mine awaiting exploration, and mining the self for data is much more than mere presentation or storytelling. The data are analyzed in order to seek new knowledge and/or new understandings of existing knowledge, with the exploration of self becoming an attribute of knowledge construction (Arnold, 2011). The researcher becomes the instrument (Janesick, 2001). Feminism has challenged the patriarchal positivist foundations of scientific objectivity (Arnold, 2011). Any researcher positing that they are neutral and objective, without bias or political agenda, is merely unconscious, suggests Namenwirth (1986). At the commencement of a research project using an autoethnographic methodology, Schroeder (2017) asked himself why he feared that subjectivity was somehow unworthy of study. His answer was that he struggles to legitimize his research focus on personal and societal transformation because it might

be perceived as unscholarly or inferior. Perhaps research that requires researchers to be objective is really requiring them to conceal their own subjectivity.

Using the self as data is an attempt to disrupt the binary of science and art (Ellis et al., 2011). It introduces the personal story and relates it to the cultural. Rigour is not the province of only the sciences. If researchers are to use the self as data, they have to become the finest instruments they can be (Bresler, 2018), and this includes cultivating a more intimate, friendlier relationship with ignorance and its companions. Using the self as data allows one to develop intensified looking and seeing, skills, and mindset useful for qualitative inquiry (Bresler, 2018). So much focus on the self feels self-indulgent, yet running counter to this is the push to set out in the public arena the observations arising from an extended and intensive period of reflection on one's own experience. This self-indulgence may be real, and, simultaneously, a manifestation of a cultural prohibition regarding self-reflection. I find the intertwining of observation and reflection with art practice an experience of enrichment that unearths new as well as re-discovered knowings. Besides, the research discourse is not an engagement by a lone person (Boote & Beile, 2005). It is an engagement through the literature with the experiences and findings of one's peers. Such engagement with others' findings contributes to our collective understandings.

## Data

### The Painting

This photograph (Figure 1) is taken in the Dún Laoghaire public library. Dún Laoghaire (pronounced Dunleary) is part of South Dublin and was my mother's local library. In 2019, I had begun my PhD programme and decided to go to Ireland for an extended period to be with my mother whilst studying. Most days I would cycle down to the library, and I usually sat in the same seat with my back to the view, the seat pictured here in the photograph. I took this photograph on my last visit. A memento of my time there.

**Figure 1**

*My Seat in the Library, photograph, 2019. Artist: S Crowley*



After my return to Australia and confirmation of my candidature, I set up a folder of images containing geometric form. I was looking for ways into my study. It seemed that the simplest place to start was with images containing geometric form. The most obvious geometric forms in this image are those made by straight lines. These are created by the architectural form of the library which frame the external scene. What can be seen of the outside is also very much shaped by straight lines: the Georgian windows of the building framed on the right, and the seascape framed on the left containing walls and a house, with the horizontal line of a pier jutting out into the Irish sea just below the horizon.

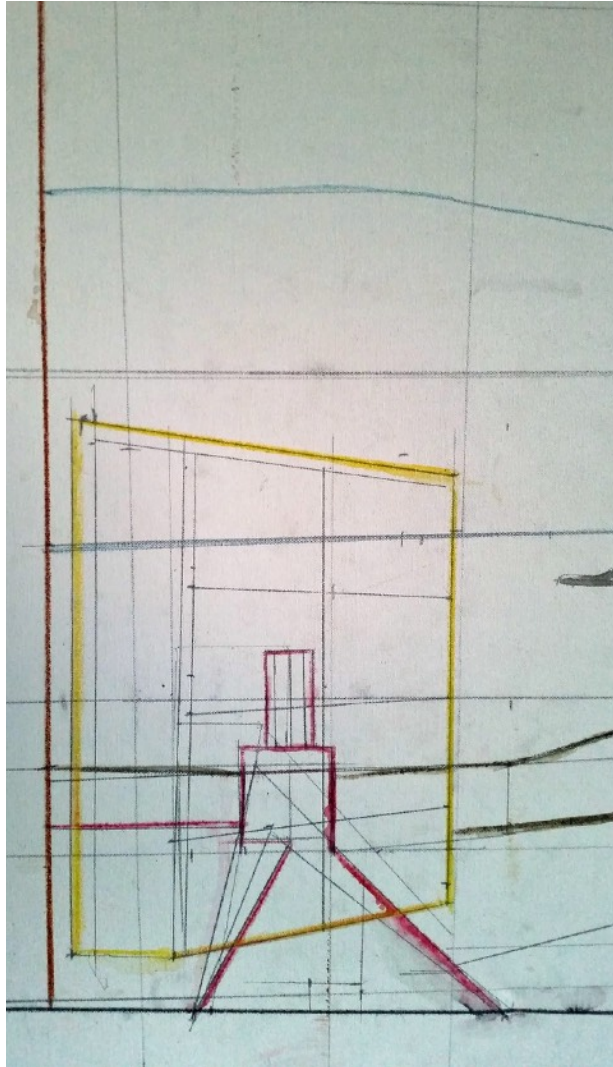
**Figure 2**

*A Seat at the Table, first sketch*



**Figure 3**

*A Seat at the Table, drawing detail, 2020*

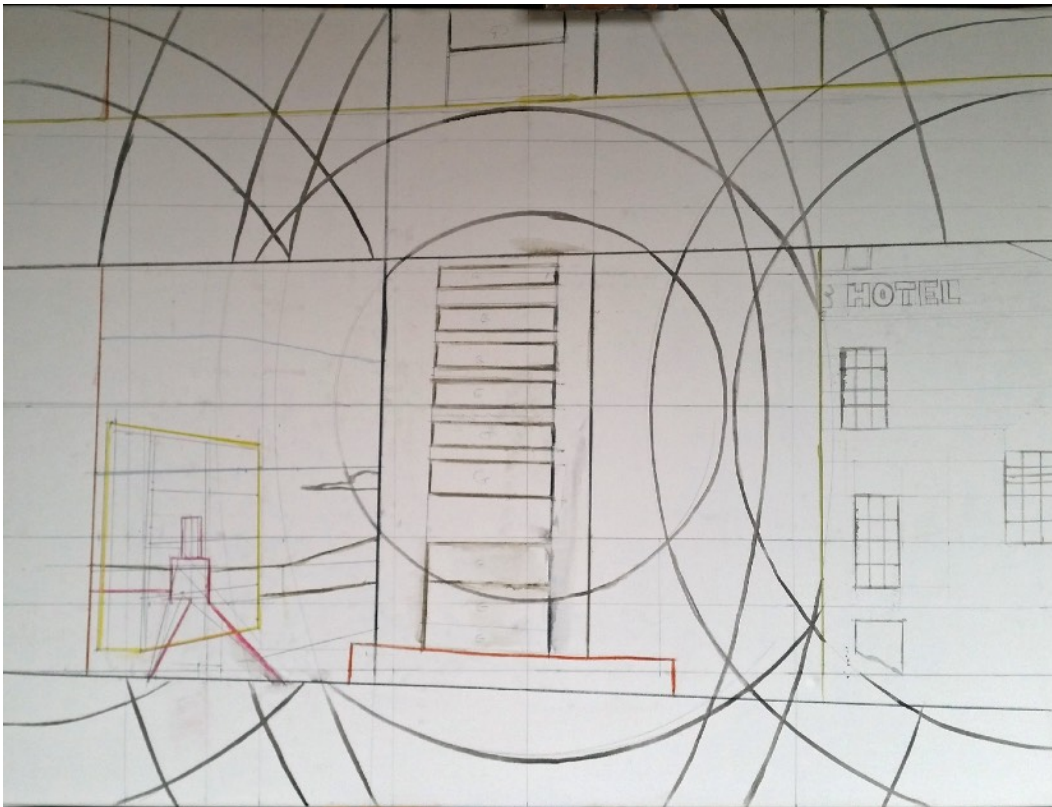


The first sketches (Figures 2 & 3) capture these straight lines and highlight the straight-sided geometric forms of the subject matter. These forms are rhomboid, combining rectangles, squares, and parallelograms. The only curved lines are those of the clouds, the land/pier formation jutting out into the sea below the horizon, the back of the chair, and the letter “O” in “HOTEL.” I selected this image because of these lines and forms, but also because the subject matter appealed to me, although at that time I did not know why.

Despite the lines, I prefer curvilinear forms, and I thought I might incorporate circles and arcs into the painting in a reference to the work of modernists like Swanzy (Kissane, 2019) and Cossington-Smith (Smith & Hart, 2005) . Swanzy experimented with geometric forms in her paintings (Leach, 2018) taking a naturalistic scene and imposing straight and curved lines onto it, thus cutting up the image and creating a kaleidoscope effect. Figure 4 shows my introduction of circles into the painting sketch. As I began to paint (Figure 5), I considered where the arcs would be visible and where they would be invisible.

#### Figure 4

*A Seat at the Table, drawing plus geometric form, 2020*



**Figure 5**  
*A Seat at the Table, underpainting, 2020*



In Figure 5 I have completed the first layer of painting; the underpainting.



**Figure 6**

*A Seat at the Table, second layer, 2020*



During the process of painting the second layer (Figure 6), I began to have doubts about the circles. I felt as though I was trying to do too many things and had a choice between two directions. Either I experimented, which the artist in me was interested in pursuing, or I remained faithful to the subject matter with its lines and rhomboid shapes, which seemed to be related more closely to my researcher self.

Coincidental to my commencing this painting, I was sharing studio space with another PhD candidate whose work explores edges and precarity. In her practice, she uses masking tape to create straight edges. This was a new technique for me and I was eager to try it out. I played around with this technique, and found that I painted with more finesse. Figure 7 is the finished picture and is full of the evidence: straight lines

induced by masking tape. In the later stage of painting, the circles disappear although, when I look at the painting, their phantom remains.

### Figure 7

*A Seat at the Table, third/final layer, 2020. Artist: S. Crowley*



### Process – Art Making

Painting is a form of focusing. My experience is that I form an intimate relationship with the subject matter as I draw and, later, paint. I begin to view subject matter differently during and after painting it. As an example, when I was painting trees, I noticed that, for quite some time after I had set the paint brushes aside, I would see the trees in my neighbourhood differently. I paid more attention to the way limbs develop from trunk, the shape of leaves, the shape of the negative space created by the tree's crown against the skyline, how light and shadow bunch as colour patterns. This experience feels like an altered state—an altered state evoked by the intensity of focus that painting involves.

Similarly, with *A Seat at the Table*, as I painted, I became immersed in the subject matter. The painting captured the scene of my time sitting in the library. The experience of sitting there was one of incredible comfort. Having lived most of my life as someone never quite at home as a migrant in Australia, the painting is a record of an extended period of time living at home in Ireland. The home country was literally at my back. It also represents the critical event of embarking on a PhD degree, as well as one of the last times I spent with my mother. By taking the photograph, I captured a place, and perhaps also provided myself with evidence of a particularly important time in my life. By painting it, I was able to extend and savour that moment.

### **The Painting – the Data**

The data that I have noted, generated by this painting, fall into two categories: the visible and the invisible. The visible data are the geometric forms created by the straight lines in the painting, and are the original reason I selected this subject matter. The invisible data are the people, places, and events that I, as the artist, associate with the image, but that only become visible to the viewer through my account. This makes me wonder what subconscious forces might be guiding my selection of subject matter, leading me into this autoethnographic exploration of my artwork.

These invisible data are generated by the Georgian building in the right window frame, the horizontal line of a pier jutting out into the Irish sea just below the horizon in the left, the Irish sea itself, and the pitched roof and white walls of the house, along with the overlaid image of books on shelves. In addition, as I have mentioned, there is present the non-physical. This includes my personal and emotional stories, memories, information about my identity—for example, time spent in Ireland, time with my mother, time in a place where I feel I belong, my sense of gaining a seat at the table by undertaking a PhD—and a visualization of how data can be generated through visual arts practice. The painting becomes a mnemonic for multiple memories and associations (Kelly, 2015), and, because of these associations, becomes very valuable to me.

### **An Autoethnographic Excerpt**

*Queen's Hotel, the building on the right, fills the right-hand window. Only the word "HOTEL" is visible. The side of the building is known as a ghost sign, an historical advertising artefact. The building is no longer Queen's Hotel. Having a hotel once named "Queen's" speaks volumes of the history of this seaside town, for, prior to Irish*

*Independence (from England), Dún Laoghaire was known as Kingstown. Personally, this building type is redolent with memory because of the colour and texture of its façade. Buildings in this part of Dublin and of the same era, have thick granite walls rendered with a grey concrete wash. This gives the building an ugly, plain, utilitarian look. Because this is the façade of my mother's family home, to me it is as beautiful as skin and just as evocative. Georgian buildings, square and solid. Filled with rectangular windows and square glass panes.*

*The white house with the dark pitched roof (bottom left of the left window panel) did not really enter my consciousness until I commenced painting. I do not know what this building currently is, whether residential or commercial; however, its form reflects another classic in Irish architecture, because it echoes the iconic Irish cottage. Such a cottage is usually set somewhere on the West Coast with steep majestic treeless hills as the backdrop, and breath-taking views of the sea. I carved such cottages from turf when I was a child. It is the cottage of possibly every Irish person's fantasy. A place of idyllic beauty, of holidays, and now it has popped into my painting, unintended.*

The above account makes visible some of the painting's invisible data. The invisible data generated by this visual artwork could facilitate discussion about:

- i. recent Irish history,
- ii. Irish migration and its continuing effects, and
- iii. family (dis)connection.

This visual artwork also has the capacity to trouble notions of

- iv. what makes for a good painting, and lastly,
- v. whether combining a literary account with visual arts practice can be considered autoethnography.

## **Autoethnographic Analysis**

For my PhD research, I proposed attaching an autoethnographic account to each artwork. The initial purpose of this autoethnographic accounting was to capture the artmaking process and any data that arose before, during, and after, giving consideration to:

- the construction process of the artwork, including materials and size,
- the type of geometric content,
- artworks that transform into critical artworks,
- critical events associated with a particular artwork or stage of making,
- construction and/or installation constraints,

learnings relevant to interdisciplinarity.

This process of making and accounting has been iterative as I come to better understand what I think is of significance. At first, I wanted to include all of the discovered data generated by the account; it was only because of the research process of refinement and reflection that I realized the data fell into the two sets I now describe as visible and invisible. The initial account was redrafted to suit the requirements of my PhD process, and then again to explore the subject matter within this article.

## **Recent Irish History**

Ireland became independent in 1921. Many of the buildings in Dún Laoghaire date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The library, however, is a symbol of Ireland's recent economic boom, when Ireland began to reap the benefits of being a member of the EU (European Union). The library is large and modern in its design, which is intended to express the place books and learning have in Irish culture. My parents grew up in this town by the sea. They were both born before Ireland won its independence from England. They also lived out the consequences of modern Irish history by migrating to England in the 1950s because of the poor employment prospects in Ireland at that time. As a family, we returned each summer to be with our extended family. This meant we lived as migrants in England and visitors in Ireland. I could talk about the impact of the Easter Rising followed by Independence. I could talk about the stranglehold the Catholic Church had on Irish culture, and particularly its impact on women and LGBT+ community. These are just a few examples of the invisible data this painting has the capacity to reveal.

## **Migration and its Continuing Effects**

As I reflect on the external landscape of the painting, I come to recognise a repetitive interaction between what I see, how it affects me, and what reflections that leads to. These interactions evoke connections, relationships, political stances, rebellions, and childhood sensations. I took the picture because I knew that soon I would not be there. It becomes a way to extend the temporary nature of re-visiting. The ordinary, drab landscape revealed by the library windows is probably of no interest to a disinterested outsider. Yet, for me, it is a reminder of where I am not. It activates the sensation of running my fingers over the cement rendering of grey buildings. It reminds me of being welcomed by my aunts each summer. It reminds me of the place I learnt to

swim. It reminds me of the end of summer, and buying pens and exercise books for school, and the return to England.

## Family (Dis)Connection

All of these different topics are entangled in me. They do not exist independently within, or in the landscape portrayed. The personal experiences of me and my family are a result of the political and cultural. I live this entanglement. The economic circumstances in post-war Ireland drove my father to seek employment elsewhere. This made us migrants and disconnected us from family. We children grew up in the more liberal society of England but, in this process, we also became dislocated. We grew up knowing of a huge family network, dipping in it, but we were not of it. We had different accents; the accents of the colonizer. So, the painting reminds me of my intimate familiarity with this location, whilst simultaneously reminding me of my separateness from it. It is hard to disentangle the buildings from the history they represent and the personal outcomes driven by historical events— family connection from the oppression of Catholicism, the oppression of colonisation, and my missing of a place that represented a never lived in home.

There is not the space here to do anything more than touch on the accounts that this painting could reveal. What I have touched on above indicates the magnitude of invisible data a painting can hold. I explore more fully the experience of migration and family estrangement in Crowley (2022).

## Troubling the Good Painting

In this article I identify the different questions that have arisen for me after painting *A Seat at the Table*. The original intention was to generate data on the interconnections between the visual arts and STEM. The proposal is quite straightforward: how/can I make visible the understanding of STEM an artist needs in order to create a visual artwork? My aim was to reproduce the subject matter of a photograph through the visual arts. In a sense, being able to faithfully reproduce the subject matter of a photograph should provide evidence of both my artistic skill and the necessary STEM skills required to execute a painting in this manner, as I demonstrate in Figures 1 to 7. At the midway point of painting, when I decided not to pursue the arcs and circles, I made a choice to keep my visual example simple and easy to understand. Perhaps if I wanted to be more artistically adventurous, I would have pursued the arcs

and circles. In this painting instance, I chose a painting outcome that suited my requirements as a researcher. Setting my PhD research objectives aside, it turns out that this painting is riddled with a plethora of data, largely to do with my Irishness and experience of migration, but none of this is visible without being accompanied by an account. The question this then raises is, how much other art remains invisible to the uninformed viewer? How much are we really encountering in a visual artwork if we know nothing of the artist? Can knowing more about the artist and the motivation for the artwork make the artwork a better work of art?

If I put *A Seat at the Table* on display, the viewer will only be able to decipher what is literally before their eyes. A chair, a desk, two windows looking out on a sea- and cityscape. I suspect they will pass it by. I suspect they have every reason to. But what does this tell us of the place of art in society today? How many works of art have you passed by because you haven't found a way in? Should we be challenging the notion that a painting speaks a thousand words? This knowing what is invisible troubles my notion of art.

### **Is This Autoethnography?**

Adams has identified four characteristics that distinguish autoethnography from other kinds of personal writing (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 22, as described in "Autoethnography", above). In what follows, I address some of what I learned using this combination of visual arts practice and autoethnography, and link these learnings numerically to Adams' corresponding characteristics. Does the whole:

1. purposefully comment on/critique culture and cultural practices?
2. contribute to existing research?
3. embrace vulnerability with purpose?
4. create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response?

This article outlines my lived interdisciplinary experience, personal, professional, and arts related. In the PhD study on which it is based, the "I" becomes both data and methodology. My early experience as the child of Irish people living in England exposed me to racism and the politics of difference, stimulating my reflectivity. As I matured, this reflectivity developed into critical reflectivity, honed by my immersion in the political struggles and debates of the 1980s, in particular, the equity campaigns regarding gender, sexuality, race, and class. Over the years, this critical reflectivity on culture

became tacit (Fraser et al., 2019), integral to me but difficult to reveal when working and living in rural Australia (Adams' third characteristic).

Undertaking this research process includes making my research experience available to others. The vulnerability in this account is the same as with any artwork placed in the public sphere. It may be welcomed, misread, ignored. The purpose of this vulnerability is to make the process visible, provide an example of the ways in which visual arts can function in data generation, and contribute to the collective knowledge of arts-based researchers. In sharing, there is the possibility of resonance with others. Based in reciprocity, this contributing to and sharing research experience is iterative and ongoing (the second and fourth of Adams' characteristics).

I discover there can be both visible and invisible data in an artwork. This entails a re-adjustment of my view of what constitutes data (the second and third of Adams' characteristics). I consider all the not knowing there is when one is interdisciplinary and learning opportunistically—the not knowing that is art-making, that is a part of my art practice. This not knowing requires exposing one's thinking, one's biases and blind-spots (Adams' third and fourth characteristic) and this not knowing is integral to ABR .

The painting, read literally, offers no criticism of culture but, as a mnemonic for the narrative, it reveals the entanglements of personal with cultural experience. As part of the narrative, the painting records critical events and reflections on Irish history, colonisation and migration, separation from family, cultural conservatism, and equity. The painting's purpose expands through writing, giving it the capacity to comment on and critique culture (Adams' first characteristic).

In this process of research, I bring my scholar-self and artist-self together. This is occurring at a time when research horizons are expanding, and outdated behemoths are tumbling. The purpose of this writing is to open dialogue with artists working in research and with those who understand what the arts can offer research. This account is also a call to the viewer of art to speak up and question, to wonder more about the art before them, and consider the invisible data it might hold (Adams' fourth characteristic).

## Conclusion

For my PhD study, the focus of the painting exercise was to examine STEM content in visual art. I selected the subject matter captured in my painting *A Seat at the Table* because it contained many geometric forms. By telling stories about the purpose



and processes of the photo-taking, sketching, and layering involved in painting-making, I came to realise the depth, breadth, and potential for data generation through art practice. The relevance of the data solely depends on the research focus. To ensure the account can be considered autoethnographic, I reviewed it against Adams' four characteristics of autoethnography.

An unintended outcome has been the realization that writing an autoethnographic account has the capacity to capture invisible as well as visible data. Incorporating autoethnography into a visual arts practice can contribute to the methodologies available to visual arts practice researchers. The elusive or ambiguous nature of visual artworks is often promoted as a mark of the unique nature of the visual arts. My application of autoethnography seeks to probe this perspective. A visual artwork may have multiple meanings or interpretations, but as a visual artist, I am interested in providing an audience with ways into my subject matter.

Using the painting *A Seat at the Table*, I argue that much of the vulnerability I am interested in sharing is unintelligible without this literary contribution. The painting has become a critical marker in my life because of my scrutinising it autoethnographically. This discovery of combining visual art research practice with an autoethnographic documenting process enhances my own art practice and my knowledge of qualitative research. It provides me with a deeper understanding of the interdisciplinary entanglements that arise out of lived experience and learning by doing, and better equips me to articulate how art practice contributes to research. In addition, it has the capacity to be a pedagogical technique for engaging both STEM and art students in interdisciplinary experience. An interesting feedback loop is developing, bringing together my scholar- and artist-self. My experience is at my back, I am uncovering the invisible, and it is much more than I imagined.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. I have capitalised the names of the Tasmanian Aboriginal bands identified for the region in which I live according to Ryan, L. (1996 [1981]). *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd. ; however, common practice in the use of palawa kani naming in lutruwita/Tasmania tends to apply lowercase; <https://tacinc.com.au/tasmanian-aboriginal-place-names/>