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Cultural healing: Indigenous art as therapy



From sound healing with didgeridoo to art therapy for disabled people, Aboriginal art is proving a powerful tool for helping Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians heal from disease and trauma. Here are four incredible ways Aboriginal art is being used to restore people to good health.

By
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Sound healing with didgeridoo

You might feel relaxed or pumped up by hearing the iconic sounds of a didgeridoo but the instrument has traditionally been used as much for music and ceremony as it has for healing.

Julian Silburn, a sound healer who runs [Sound Alchemy \[http://soundalchemy.com.au/ \]](http://soundalchemy.com.au/), uses the sound and vibration of the didgeridoo, traditionally called a Yidaki, to help people emotionally and physically heal. "When played over the body, the vibration from the Yidaki can pick up where there are energy weaknesses or imbalances, similar to the way reiki healing works when someone puts their hands over somebody's body and feels where their energy is deficient," Silburn tells SBS Life. "I play the instrument over a person and it will be harder for me to play if there is something affecting the person vibrationally."

Silburn says he uses the didgeridoo to help people with stress and anxiety relief. As well as treating injuries, he has also worked with cancer patients.



Silburn has been taught techniques from elders in Arnhem Land, and has been invited to play didgeridoo at a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander festivals. He says the healing effects of the instrument are profound. "Each cell vibrates and resonates with the vibration of the instrument," he explains. "It helps to bring it back into harmony and balance. You are sending a sonic signal into the body and it deeply relaxes the muscle and brain waves."

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Painting for people with disability

A group of Aboriginal people with disabilities are making incredible breakthroughs as a result of the All Abilities art group in Newcastle. The brainchild of local elder Aunty Elsie Randall, the group meets weekly to communicate and process their emotions through painting. "The concept around art therapy is about regulating your emotions by identifying the emotion with a colour and inventing symbolic features within the paintings to represent people, country or incidents," Randall tells SBS Life. "The whole process is about giving balance to your emotions, whether it be positive or negative."

Randall, 49, says she began using art as a way of healing from her own traumas as a child and has developed the program intuitively. "People talk about their experiences and swap ideas on how to best change up their environment so they can cope," she says. "When you take your eyes off somebody it cuts out any indicators of judgement or gestures that could be misinterpreted."



Randall says the program has really built participants' confidence. "When they're there they don't feel like they have a disability," Randall says. "They empty everything out of their head and just focus on the dots."

The results speak for themselves. "One client has been with us for about 12 months and came to us because he does not seem to engage in a normal group because of violent behaviours but he's come with us and has not had one incident for 12 months," Randall says.

Doll making

In Western Australia, Noongar elders got together to make dolls and share birthing stories from a time when Aboriginal people gave birth to babies on reserves, in missions or under the stars because they were not permitted to give birth in a hospital.

The Community Arts Network WA's (CAN) came up with the idea of the [Bush Babies](http://www.canwa.com.au/project/bush-babies/) program to allow elders to share their stories while making dolls and create a photography and portrait exhibition of the experience.

0 We got photographers to take photos of them and we wrote out their stories and then artists did portraits based on the information that was provided," CAN's Michelle White tells SBS Life.



The program had unexpected results, including bringing together feuding families, strengthening family connections and building strength and resilience amongst communities. It also helped open the wider community's eyes to the area's racist history. "The level of ignorance was amazing – [people] thought that the blackfellas wanted to live on the outskirts of town – they had no idea that that's where they were put and that they had to have a permit to move between farms," White explains. "The reconciliation component has been amazing – it's been healing for both sides."

The portraits are now being toured around Western Australia as part of a project called [Art On The Move](http://www.artonthemove.com.au/content/Exhibitions/Bush+Babies+Honouring+our+Elders+born+in+the+bush/) [<http://www.artonthemove.com.au/content/Exhibitions/Bush+Babies+Honouring+our+Elders+born+in+the+bush/>] .

Healing songs

Another incredibly successful CAN program has been the [Healing Songs](http://www.canwa.com.au/project/healing-songs/) [<http://www.canwa.com.au/project/healing-songs/>] project, where locals shared stories and wrote songs with professional musicians. "Amazing local singer-songwriters did one-on-one workshops with the elders to help them produce the songs," White explains.



The songs were then turned into a professionally produced album and the artists played at local music festivals. "The feedback they gave us is that it was so empowering – they could portray quite tragic stories through music [without being] preachy," White says. "It gets the stories out to the wider community to create understanding of the alternative history in these country towns."

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First Contact [<http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/first-contact>] (season 2) airs on 29 November, 30 November and 1 December 2016 at 8:30pm on SBS. ***Across 28 Days***, six well-known Aussies take an epic journey into Aboriginal Australia. Watch the trailer [here](http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/first-contact) [<http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/first-contact>] , and catch-up on episodes after the program airs via SBS On Demand [here](http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/) [<http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/>] .



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