

ON
THE
VERGE
OF
BLOOM

NICOLE BARAKAT
WITH BANKSTOWN
LOCAL RESIDENTS

COMMISSIONED BY URBAN THEATRE PROJECTS

ARTIST STATEMENT

On the Verge of Bloom is a collaborative artwork lovingly created with members of the local Bankstown community. Over a period of six weeks we came together to transform everyday discarded materials into a luscious garden of hand-made flowers and plants.

The project took inspiration from the beautiful flowers and plants growing in the garden of local resident Frances Panopoulos. In October 2013, I had the pleasure of taking up residency in Frances' backyard as part of Urban Theatre Projects' *Practice & Participate*. For two weeks, her backyard became my studio and I spent time drawing the garden and creating material responses from the daily refuse of the Panopoulos family.

From these drawings and small material explorations, we developed a larger scale collection of plastic plants. We worked intensely over twelve workshops to transform Bankstown residents' rubbish into objects of beauty and wonder.

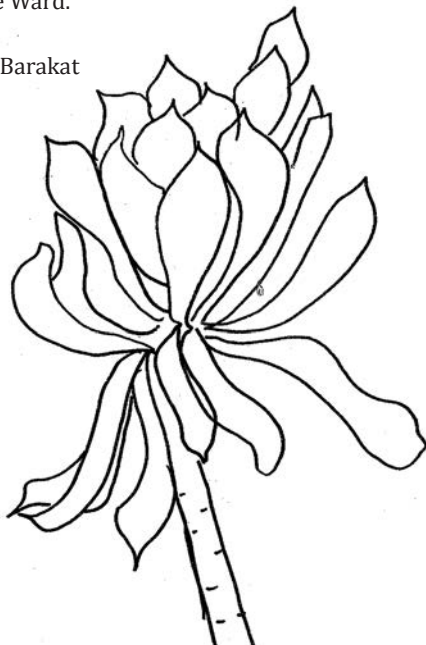
With great enthusiasm, hand crafting skills, aesthetic sensibilities and commitment from participants we made the

garden grow! For an artwork to be realised on this scale, it needs many hands, much patience and true collaboration.

I am delighted and grateful to have worked with such an amazing group of people who so willingly scouted interesting bits of rubbish, offered their knowledge and expertise to the creation and installation of the work and left a part of themselves in each piece.

Much gratitude to Kevin Bala, Barbara Barakat, Liane Beattie, Cheryl, Sunila Dass, Sarah Dorofaeff, Beverley Ellis, Hanh Ly, Frances Panopoulos, Glenda Rawlinson, Joe Roche, Josephine Roche, Tian Sisak, Victoria Sisak, Amanda Thompson, Jocelyn Vyse, Leanne Ward.

Nicole Barakat
Artist



CURATOR STATEMENT

Setting up a studio space in a stranger's garden is not every artist's idea of the ideal environment to make art. Working outdoors, getting to know the family who own the garden, unpredictable weather, all make for less than familiar circumstances for many contemporary artists – making a (usually) private process public. However, this was the offer we made to Nicole Barakat mid-2013.

Nicole has a strong interest in repurposing everyday discarded objects and materials and transforming them into something beautiful. *On The Verge Of Bloom* is a great example of this – the contrasting colours and shapes of each individual piece set against the rusty coloured façade of the building instantly speak of joy and celebration whilst poetically referencing waste and excess in relation to plastic packaging and consumerism.

It's been wonderful to observe the project develop from simple line drawings of lavender, kangaroo paw and succulents and grow into *On The Verge of Bloom*. It's also been an absolute pleasure to see Nicole working in collaboration

with local residents, all of whom have been integral in making and shaping the final artwork. Special mention to the Panopoulos family who generously opened their home to Nicole and Urban Theatre Projects to make this work and whose garden was the initial inspiration for the *On The Verge of Bloom*.

On The Verge of Bloom is the first of many small seeds planted by Urban Theatre Projects in the local neighbourhood. We're hoping that projects such as *On The Verge* spark curiosity and ignite conversations and connections with local residents.

Rosie Dennis, Artistic Director
URBAN THEATRE PROJECTS



NICOLE BARAKAT INTERVIEW

BY GAELE SOBOTT

Gale Sobott: Do you think our attitudes to consumption will change?

Nicole Barakat: I do see a shift towards the handmade, the locally grown, but is it happening everywhere? Not really, but it is catching on. Growing your own vegetables, being self-sufficient and looking at what our grandparents did. They didn't have plastic bags. Some people think but what am I going to line my bin with? Well put your food scraps in the compost. Line your bins with newspaper, that's what people used to do. I just think people did keep things and save things and reuse them. Every bit of plastic that was ever made still exists in some form, which is not biodegradable. That is a scary, scary thought. I get very anxious about plastic and if I go to the grocery store here in Bankstown I say, oh no I don't need a plastic bag!

It's about refusing to believe the myth and actually going back to our roots and the old way of doing things - looking to the past to find solutions for the future. First and foremost, learning that Indigenous people lived here in harmony for thousands and thousands of years and it was about taking only what you need. That attitude is what we have to adopt to survive but I don't know if we can.

Part of this project is about the environmental aspect of reusing but also the idea of transforming things that have been discarded. It's about the idea that you can transform things into something beautiful. It's not about rubbish but more about the conceptual idea of taking things that are not valued and revaluing them and also transforming things from within us. Flowers and beauty are really important to me as well. I feel that flowers are symbols of growth and they are part of a cycle. You plant a seed and then it grows and flowers and sheds its seeds, regenerates and keeps going. That organic process informs my art process. It's a circle, not a beginning and end. The fruiting is what I make and that then sheds its seeds and that leads to other things, but also beauty is a metaphor, an opportunity to heal.

I don't know if you're familiar with bell hooks but she wrote this great essay called *Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary*. She talks about the way her mother's generation sought beauty and luxury in material objects but her grandmother's, her grandfather's generation found it in the objects they made, their gardens, the quilts, in the furniture her grandfather would find on the street and





make up to be really beautiful. She talks about beauty as a balm to a depressed and wounded spirit and encounters with beautiful objects being opportunities for healing and transformation.

GS: Doesn't it depend on who defines what beauty is – the power relations involved in the definitions of beauty?

NB: That's true, but I think there are also things that we connect to on an intuitive level that make us feel good. That's how I define beauty – things that make us feel good, things that make us feel, full stop.

GS: Do you think the appreciation of beauty is natural in human beings?

NB: Yes, but we are not thinking about it on an intellectual level, things that we feel, things that move us. I haven't actually thought this through to this extent in terms of how I define beauty. For me making work that is beautiful is about putting positive thoughts and positive energy into the world. Artists do have a responsibility to actually contribute positively because we can comment on things that are wrong with the world, but then are we just reinforcing those stories and narratives? How can we tell new stories and how can we change and transform ideas that we've learnt?

GS: Do you come from an artistic family?

NB: There is a strong textile

connection in my family and also a tradition of making things. My great grandmother and great grandfather were involved in textiles. My great grandfather was a hawker in the USA and he sold clothes and textiles and his daughters continued that business - I think they might still do it today. They moved from Lebanon to the US in the early 1900s and sold clothes and garments. My great grandmother crocheted. And we have things she made and she also made garments and my mother's mother also crocheted and made garments as well and my mother makes garments but she doesn't crochet. My sister crochets.

My Dad's mother also crocheted. I didn't meet her. She passed away before I was born. I did an artwork last year where I drew her two crocheted cushion covers that she'd made. Those two covers were the only things I had that belonged to her. I became obsessed and connected to these objects because she had touched them. She had made them. So I copied them, scanned them and printed them. Then I traced all her stitches on to a piece of cloth – an embroidery tablecloth that I unpicked. I transferred her crocheted cushions onto the tablecloth with carbon paper. I traced the stitches and redrew them. For me that was about tracing her work and also rewriting the story of what women's work is. The fact that there was a pattern on the tablecloth meant I was rewriting that pattern

with her story.

The pattern was very English, very western floral pattern that I unpicked. My grandmother's crochet was religious imagery from a church in Lebanon so very specific.

My work is very repetitive, and it comes back to love and patience: they are the two things that drive my arts practice and drive a lot of traditional textile practice. The labour intensive nature of it and the repetitiveness and the perfection in the execution of it is about love, passion and dedication.

We can't always express things verbally or with words, we need art and materials to communicate on another level. I find that with other people's art they are speaking with me on an intuitive level. That's why I love being an artist – to feel on that level.

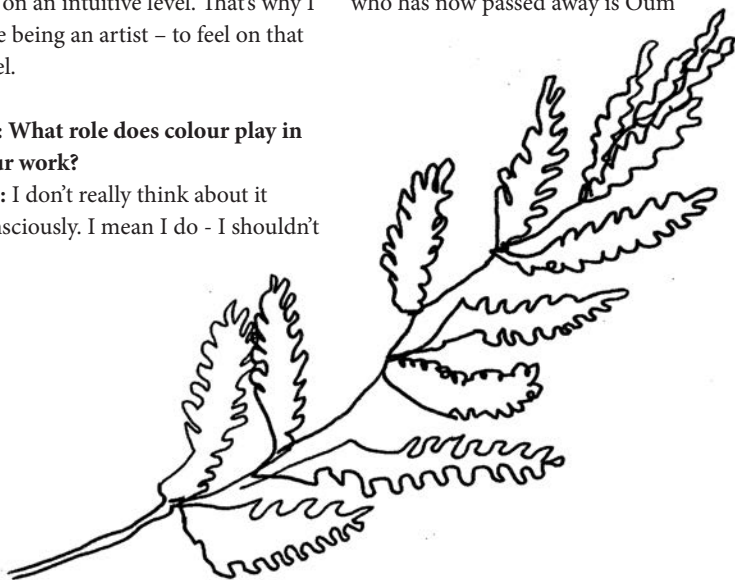
GS: What role does colour play in your work?

NB: I don't really think about it consciously. I mean I do - I shouldn't

say that. I don't think of the role of it but I'm very attracted to red. I often work with red thread. I'm also very interested in unusual combinations of colours and how certain colours that come together can really trigger certain emotions. Sometimes it's just the bringing together of colours that can spark a whole story of its own. When I'm making my artwork I use colours but when I'm making products I find that is a place where I can play with colour and texture and bring unusual things together that make me feel uncomfortable in a good way. Like the music I listen to, I'm really attracted to music that challenges me and makes me feel uncomfortable.

GS: What Arabic music do you like?

NB: I really like the old traditional stuff. One of my favourite singers who has now passed away is Oum



lavender

Kalthoum. She was so popular. She is someone I feel very connected to as an artist because she has these moments and I don't understand it enough in Arabic music but it's where you reach a height or a moment of perfection. It's called tarab. You can hear it in her music.

GS: The audience can reach that point.

NB: Yes exactly and they did. It was funny the other day I was on Northam Avenue and this car drove passed and he was playing Oum Kalthoum and I knew the song. It just wafted past and I thought, Oh wow! For me it's really emotional because my dad used to play her every Sunday. He'd be working in the garden. He'd be doing the barbeque and playing it through speakers out of the garage. For me that sound of her voice and the composition of the music is just exquisite. My dad always says that the composer who wrote her music is a genius and the best composer ever. When I hear her voice and that music it takes me right back to my childhood and those roots and that connection to culture.

GS: Who are your favourite artists?

NB: The person I often think of is Khaled Sabsabi. He's a fantastic artist who works outside the commercial space. I feel I can relate to his practice as I do work a lot with community and in spaces that aren't necessarily defined as strictly art spaces. I love working with the everyday and engaging with people

through art, through this medium. As a workshop facilitator I never go into a workshop and think that I'm teaching someone something new. It's an exchange and I'm always learning from people, from children, because I work a lot with kids and I'm always learning new things. There are so many people in the community who are artists who are making things, are producing art and are creating new ideas who don't even call themselves artists and I find I am attracted to them when I come across them.

GS: Looking at your work I see colour and shape are important and they are very tactile. How would you audio describe this work in terms of making it more accessible for say a person who is blind?

NB: Interesting because I had to do this with a website that I was creating because I had to write descriptions of all the images which I loved but it was really challenging. I guess I would say that this one is made of clusters of spiky parts that are splashed with remnants of commercial print, pink, yellow, blue and a bit of text. When you hold them up they have their own movement, their own life. As pieces they remind me of shadows because they are just outlines, silhouettes.

GS: Is there anything else you would like to say about your work here?

NB: What I love about these opportunities is that they're open

to things happening. I've worked with Rosie [Dennis] before in Minto, and I really love that she allowed me to have a starting point and I didn't have to worry about an end point and it's all about process. So working here I've had a very loose starting point but that has been a facilitator of other things happening.

I loved that stories unexpectedly emerge that would not have otherwise happened. The work itself – I don't have a plan for these things but they will grow. So I love the openness of the project and I think it is so important for artists to have spaces to do that. It is becoming a little more common but it is rare for us to have that. One of the things I love about my practice, even though I love labour-intensive work, is the work that is quick, simple, very intuitive and feels right. I feel I can do that in this space without over thinking it. I think those things are real and connected and not over processed. They speak to people.

Extract from an interview conducted during *Practice & Participate*, October 2013.

ABOUT URBAN THEATRE PROJECTS

Urban Theatre Projects (UTP) is an award-winning theatre company with over 20 years' experience of creating work from Sydney's west. Our mission is to re-imagine what theatre can be and who it can be for.

UTP plays a vital role in Australia's cultural landscape with a history of creating vibrant work that reflects and explores the issues that shape contemporary Australia.

UTP's work has been presented at festivals and venues nationally and internationally to critical and audience acclaim – from Sydney Festival and Belvoir St Theatre to South Africa's National Arts Festival and the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto.

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Image credits: Nicole Barakat, Antonia Seymour and Jagath Dheerasekara