

RhED Arts Project

The Sex Worker Exhibition

History of the 'RhED Arts Project' 2016 – 2018

In 2016, sex workers approached RhED with the concept of creating art, to raise awareness in the general community about stigma and discrimination that sex workers experience.

The aim of the art exhibition is to enhance the human rights and workers' rights of sex workers. This exhibition forms part of the advocacy strategy to decriminalize sex work in Victoria.

All art works were created between 2016-18, during RhED art workshops held at different locations around Melbourne. The collection of artworks have all been created by sex workers.

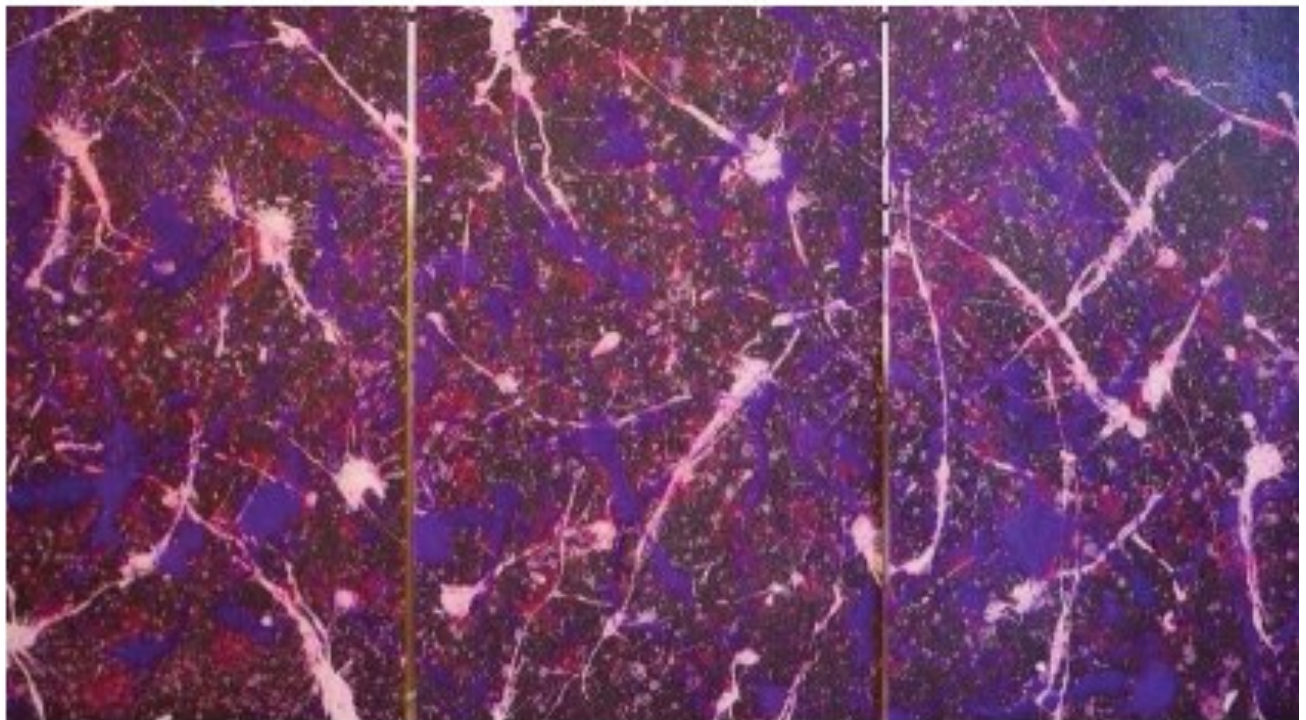
"Many people become sex workers for a lot of different reasons and often get more from it than they ever expected. I thought it was just going to be a job, I never expected to fall back in love with art and meet and befriend amazing people that also had the same passion for it. After sitting around together while we waited for



jobs we would draw and listen to music, laugh, tell stories and share our lives. We were so lucky to be in a safe environment, to be able to buy art supplies and express our emotions and we realised that there are many that aren't in anywhere near the same situation. There are people on our community struggling with their pasts, with work and with their personal lives often with no one to turn to. After reaching out to RhED we realised that we could help bring people of our community together to create and share safely. It was scary not knowing whether it would work but it's two years later and it's still going strong. Some of us may be gone but I will never forget the feeling of community, warmth, love and most of all passion. Not just passion for art but passion for us and all that we stand for, change, integrity, acceptance and pride".

- Kora (Sex worker & Artist)





Kathleen ‘Death of an Institution’

Kathleen was born in Sydney in 1974, to young parents, Bob and Corine. By the time she was eight years old she had seen much of Australia’s outback and cities, which cultivated a love for adventure and travel.

This grew over the years leading Kath to take on challenging work, first as a sailor for the Australian Navy and later working for an international airline. Her adventurous spirit also led her to push the boundaries, particularly regarding traditional gender roles and sexuality.

After years working and living on naval vessels, Kathleen became one of the first female submariners in Australia. Like all of those at the forefront of change, this did not come without its difficulties, but through personal sacrifice and perseverance, Kathleen succeeded.

Kathleen was passionate about removing the social taboo from sex work and the fight for decriminalisation. She

wanted to challenge the stereotypical image represented in popular culture that she viewed as a roadblock to decriminalisation.

She viewed this exhibition as an opportunity to demonstrate that sex workers come from all walks of life and that their choice to engage in sex work, is just that, their choice, no less deserving of protection from violence or exploitation than any other worker.

In November 2016, Kathleen suffered an aneurysm and passed away unexpectedly. She was never able to see her dream come into fruition, but her enthusiasm and spirit exists in the hearts and minds of all of those that were involved.

- Carla (Kathleen’s sister)



'Ugly Mugs' Sculptures

Collective piece

Materials: Coffee cups, plaster, paint



Sex work itself is not inherently dangerous. Some clients make things difficult, though sex workers make sure we keep each other informed and aware – through our own networks and communities. These sculptures reference coffee cups and/or 'mugs' – a space for sex workers to share information and provide support and safety to protect each other.

Art is a powerful medium and a tool for social justice and our art works here are to remind the viewer that sex workers should not be criminalised. Changing the law is the first step in reducing stigma and creating a culture where the work we do, and we ourselves, enjoy the same respect and safe working conditions as any other workers.

All the 'Single Earrings'

Artist statement

Each pair of earrings holds its own history: were the earrings a gift or did you buy them on impulse after they grabbed your eye in a shop window? Once you lose one earring though, you're left with only that memory.

Here each single earring represents the joy of a one-off golden encounter with a client, not forgotten. In the same way that you can't really wear just one earring, a lovely encounter with a client doesn't carry over into your real life, but remains in your memory.

While these earrings (from the collection of a former sex worker) function as literal decoration in this work, they can also be seen as decoration in the old-fashioned military sense of the word.

Every sex worker deserves a medal!



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'The Hustler' Film

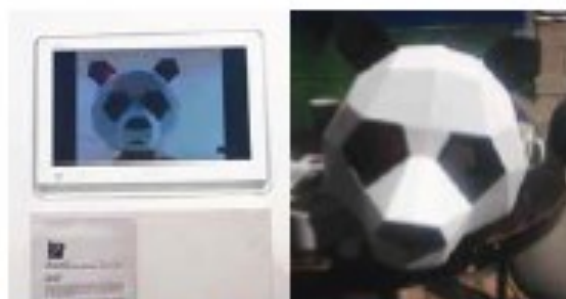
(2 minutes)

This is a video of me singing this song - Hustler. This song shows the soft part of me as a sex worker which most people would not see. The tattoos on my body are my disguise while the panda mask represents the real me, a kind person with a soft heart.

As a sex worker, especially a gay sex worker, I get the least respect from people. They say that god despises me the most for what I do is a sin. but I am happy as a sinner. I am living a life that I enjoy. Being a sex worker does not make me less than any other human being, but even a better person who sees the world with more kindness and generosity.

People share more secrets with me than they do with the Fathers at church. I love those secrets as they make them real people while the fathers tell them the secrets are sins. I am proud of being such a character in some people's lives. I have learnt that people make mistakes for reasons and most of the time, they should not be blamed. Same as the work itself.

Sex work is a real work. Blow job is a real job.



RhED would like to thank the following:

All the sex workers involved.

Community Art facilitator Tamara Desiatov for all of the art workshops, and for documenting and photographing the art projects and exhibition.

Top of the Town for connecting the original sex workers, who came up with the idea of the art project, to RhED.

Top of the Town owner and management for hosting the official launch of the art project on International Sex Worker day June 2nd 2016.

Also for providing a marvellous sex worker friendly art space, 'in the loft' and ongoing storage of art and art supplies throughout the eighteen months of the project.

Laneway Artspace St Kilda founding Artistic Director, Geoffery Williams for providing an art space, storage of art and art supplies.

Gasworks Arts Park Tracey McIrvine and staff in providing a wonderful exhibition space at the Gasworks Art Park for 'The Sex Worker'.



'Reflections'

Collective Piece (2016-18)



Mixed media (Condoms, Paint) on 4 Panels

The artwork 'Reflections' was inspired by 'The Kiss' (Lovers) painted by Gustav Klimt in 1908. The use of different colored condom packets in the artwork recreates the pattern work seen in Klimt's paintings. The myriad of colours in this artwork reflects the diversity and stories of sex workers. The use of repetition aims to reinforce the concept, that 'sex work is work'. The use of condoms as an artistic medium in this artwork also looks at issues such as - health and safety and occupational issues in the work environment. Sex workers are Safe Sex professionals - and have lower rates of STI's than the mainstream Australian population.

Sex workers do not sell their bodies - they sell a service.

This artwork was created during RhED Arts workshops held during 2016-2018, at Top of the Town as well as the Laneway Gallery in St Kilda. The collage project allowed participants to share in informal discussion around sex work as work, and explore issues around decriminalisation of the sex industry, as well as personal experiences through shared storytelling. This collective art piece shares the voices of a diverse range of sex workers artists.



"Sex work is work"

Animation 2.14 mins

Edited by Tamara Desiatov (Arts Facilitator),
 Sound by Charles Kruppay (2018)

The short film/trailer - 'Sex work is work' - is the culmination of all the artwork produced during the RhED art workshops in 2016-18. The film was edited together quite early into the workshops, and was then submitted and screened at the San Francisco Sex Workers Film Festival in early 2017. The animation has been updated to include newer artworks - and tries to represent some of the ideas and artwork produced over 2 years - in a short 2 minute animation/trailer. The film voices a diverse range of experiences and stories, through art that has

WORK IS WORK IS WORK IS SEX

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'Deeply Leisured Wear - A Coat for All Occasions'

Artists: Luna Aquatica and Queenie Bon-Bon

Hair from Queenie Bon-Bon's 2011-2013 collection with additional locks gifted from co-workers at Crazy Horse Peep show.

The magic of hair has long been entwined with spells of bringing forth bountiful bounties and enchantments from deep within the red lights of the office.

These locks have allowed me to journey as another – their power has allowed me to conjure many treasures.

Here I am allowed to play with the notion of transformation itself. Wigs are cultural objects, working their effects not through a suspension of disbelief, but through an engagement with their artificiality. One is not asked to believe the wig is 'real hair', but we engage with it as if it were real all the same. The me/not me – fantasy/reality quality of this play is reminiscent of the space I inhabit.

They are old tales telling of pleasure providers and fantasy makers brushing, twirling and swirfing their manes to enchant patrons.

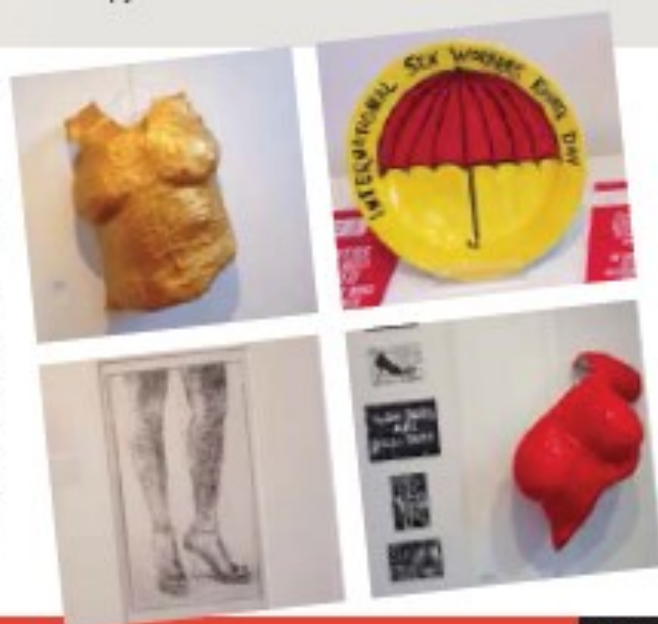
These locks have memories locked deep inside them – each anointed with a unique blend of sweat, hand sanitizer and various bodily fluids.

My tresses stitched together with my co-workers', is both an armour piece with the strength others have instilled in me – a tapestry of their beauty and the spaces we occupy.

been created by sex workers – and from a sex worker perspective.

The artwork 'The Brothel', created during the workshops, is used as the main theme and backdrop to the animation – representing 'places of work' – and helping to tie in all the different artworks and ideas in the film.

The film showcases artwork created by sex workers during the RHED art workshops. The artwork of the building is used as a backdrop to introduce the theme around – 'a day in the life of a sex worker' – in an effort to reduce stigma and promote the idea that 'sex work is work'. The paintings – 'Sunrise' and 'Sunset' – created at the workshops, represent the themes of night and day in the film. By looking through the windows of the building, we are introduced to each of the individual artworks, created at the workshops, and re-contextualised into the animation.





A glimpse into the sex industry from the people who work in it.

How did a Melbourne health service come to support an art exhibition about sex work? It's a long story, but it turns out the sex work industry in Victoria can be a health hazard for those working in it.

In Victoria there is what is described as a "two tiered sex industry," whereby licensing allows people in some facilities to work legally, but many others end up working outside the legal framework. The Sex Worker art exhibition is being held to raise awareness, and to call for a decriminalised system where sex workers to have the same rights and protections in their work as other Australians.

Marie Molnerey writes:

At the heart of The Sex Worker art exhibition now on show in Melbourne is a call for decriminalisation and equal rights – for sex workers to have the same rights and protections in their work that everyone else has.

But the exhibition's magic is in how it gives voice to more than 40 sex workers across Melbourne to talk about their work and lives – the challenges and rewards, the stigma and discrimination.

A unique opportunity to connect

At the formal opening of the exhibition last weekend, we heard how powerful it has been to bring the artists together on this project over the past two years – female, male, trans and gender diverse sex workers from different cultural backgrounds and different parts of the industry, including brothels, escort businesses and street work.

That unique opportunity to connect has produced about 80 works that are as diverse as the artists themselves: funny, sad, heartbreaking, provocative, humble, sharp and nuanced.

For a glimpse, watch this 2 minute video produced by exhibition facilitator Tamara Desiatov: <https://vimeo.com/257080785>.

"We really wanted to normalise what we did"

Kora worked as a sex worker in a brothel for two years and helped bring the exhibition about.

"We really wanted to normalise what we did, to the outside world, outside the four walls we lived in during our work".

Listen to this interview with Kora: https://soundcloud.com/user-550634681/180303_1508a

"Art as cultural resistance"

QueenieBon-Bon is Victorian vice president of Scarlet Alliance, Australia's peak sex worker organisation. She spoke at the opening.

"Criminal consequence for consensual sex is fundamentally unhealthy and harmful and a punitive concept that should be abandoned. These laws tell us to stop what we are doing, not to carry on in better conditions. Sex workers just want same rights as everyone else.

When decriminalisation happens the moral fibre of the land won't evaporate but what will happen is that people who engage in sex work will be able to do so safely.

In Victoria, the frameworks that we work within perpetuate stigma and discrimination against our community and remain a major impediment for workers' wellbeing. This impacts our interpersonal relationships, as well as our access to health care services and how we can interact with the police.

Like so many marginalised groups, sex workers have a long history of art activism as a form of cultural resistance strategy. Arts (are) a way to connect with much larger audiences and connect more deeply than just with straightforward information.

It's such a joy for me to see this amazing work and for other people to be able to gain insights into the lives of sex workers and learn about the sex industry from people who know about it. It's so important for us to be able create work that gives us a real voice, that counters the media representations that perpetuate stereotypes and often try to silence our voices.

It's so powerful to have these bodies of work that can inspire our own lives, and also let so many different voices be heard. These works are a real investment in our community."

"Breaking down walls"

Sisters Rebecca and Carla were at the exhibition to represent their sister Kathleen, who had been a sex worker and was passionately involved in The Sex Worker project when she died suddenly in late 2018 due to an aneurysm.

They described her as a "trail blazer...with a keen sense of adventure", who had started to push gender roles and stereotypes early, to become one of Australia's first female submariners, before later moving into sex work.

She was really passionate about removing the stigma from sex work, passionate about decriminalisation. Basically the choice to work in sex work is simply that: it's a choice, and they have no less right to be safe and protected at work than anyone else and that's what Kathleen was passionate about. She worked hard at every role she was in and she deserved just as much protection in this role as she did in any other.



She was always one to push boundaries, challenge the social stigma around gender roles and sexuality. She was the one to see the person behind the title, behind the label, and influenced me and my sisters and whole family to do the same thing.

She challenged our own prejudices and predetermined view on sex work and sex workers and how we thought it would make her look and how we thought it would make our family look.

These kind of walls could only be broken down slowly through conversation, understanding and our unconditional love for Kathleen.

We are really proud to be here today to honour her and the amazing work she put into it for a cause which is so important."

Watch this interview with Carla about Kathleen and her work
<https://www.youtube.com/embed/ST08uFdhRwI>

"Work in progress"

Lisa Marie took up sex work in her mid-50s and has become a powerful advocate for decriminalisation. With elderly men and men with disability among her clients, she talks about the crucial role that sex workers play in providing relief of 'skin hunger' for those with limited options for intimacy in their lives.

Read Lisa Marie's Op Ed, published in The Sunday Age: 'Time to fully decriminalise sex work' 4/03/2018.

Making the health case

Alan Murnane is General Manager of Primary and Mental Health at the South Melbourne-based StarHealth, which runs the RHED (Resourcing health and education in the sex industry) program that has facilitated the exhibition. He said:

Why would a health service work towards decriminalisation of sex work?

We come from a social model of health and understand the potential ramifications for sex workers of working either legally or illegally in the Victorian system. Both create stressful work situations, and ongoing stress creates health issues.

"Decriminalisation places greater control into the hands of sex workers to operate independently, self-organise in informal cooperatives and control their own working environments."

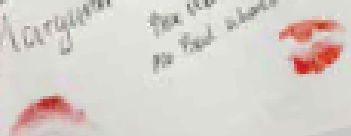
Listen to this interview with Alan Murnane and sex worker/artist Lisa Marie on ABC 774: <http://www.abc.net.au/radio/melbourne/programs/afternoons/the-sex-worker/0486888>

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For the full article please see: <https://croakey.org/a-glimpse-into-the-sex-industry-from-the-people-who-work-in-it/> 0/03/2018

Exhibition Visitors Book

Thankyou for creating a space of
 genuine openness - love
 it is so good to have been a
 part of this amazing project!
 Kaa
 Thank you to all the amazing
 -spring, her mother & me
 on this journey - at the Art
 -facilitator for the RSCPA project
 2012-18. It's been an amazing
 2 years. Love, Lisa Marie, Decriminalise
 Sex Workers Australia

Will love
 your PCV
 founders
 Cheryl Chers
 & Margaret Phoenix
 for what is love!
 for the love that we have!


Thank you to all the artists
 for expressing their unique lives in
 such a creative way. Loved of course,
 thanks to those who organised this
 exhibition. I loved it!
 Sharon Knight MP
 Member for Werribee
 Parliamentary Secretary for Health Services
 4 March 2018
 Safe 11.11.18
 -Judy

It's just so nice to be invited to the show and project
 using my art on display so many to view and
 seeing so many other sex workers display their
 amazing work!!
 Thankyou so much for sharing your art
 & stories with us. You are changing you on.
 All the artwork is beautiful, thank you so much for
 sharing these
 Such a wonderful surprise! Such incredible
 art work, such clever artwork, loved it
 loved it! Congrats to all involved. Love, Judy