World War II prisoner of war visual art: investigating its significance in contemporary society

Eileen Whitehead

Edith Cowan University

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World War II prisoner of war visual art: investigating its significance in contemporary society

Eileen Whitehead

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the Bachelor of Contemporary Arts Honours

Submitted to the Faculty of Education and Arts
School of Communications and Arts
Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.

Submitted 31 October 2009
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

This study examines closely some of the artworks produced by Howard Taylor, Ronald Searle and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack while they were interned as prisoners of war (POWs) during World War II (WWII). It examines the significance of their POW and post-war artworks in the context of their experiences in WWII, the institutional representation of WWII POW art generally and, more broadly, the context in which wars shape the creative output of imprisoned soldiers and civilians. It further examines how POW artwork has influenced the choice of subject matter for some contemporary artists.

I discuss a certain invisibility of POW artwork in public institutions and examine the neglected status of POW artwork in institutional culture, with the intention of reinforcing its significance in contemporary culture as an ethical tool for avoiding war and informing my own visual arts practice.

The research deliberately circumvents ‘official’ war art, which is art commissioned by political representatives, executed by professional artists and intended for public display. I argue that official art is commonly associated with propaganda, victorious or heroic events, serving to illustrate concepts of nationhood. I explore the reasons why and how some POWs produced visual art and find that POW art has in the main memorialised events, and serves religious purposes and economic purposes such as the exchange of goods for food, and also functioned as a means of secretly passing on information. Art making was also a way to alleviate boredom by providing occupation and mental stimulation.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education.

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1. **Introduction**

People cannot be judged by their precarious situations. Their culture, spirit and will to express themselves in creative thoughts and deeds are stronger than any limitation to freedom. (Chiocchetti, cited in Saunders, 2003, p.197).

My reason for choosing this subject is personal. My first conscious memory (aged 18 months to 2 years) of ‘ack ack’ searchlights illuminating the night sky over London, and of seeing a space at the end of my street where once a house had stood, remains quietly in the archives of my mind like a museum specimen. The ramifications of WWII on my own family were the disruption caused by the evacuation of my three older siblings for most of my childhood years, which led me to believe I was the only child. After the war the family experienced further turmoil due to my father’s health problems caused by the war, problems which eventually led to his early death. We were, of course, only one of many close-knit families destroyed by war. Without realising it until much later in life, my experiences have given me an intense compassion for the plight of those civilian refugees who still lose everything through brutal aggression. For many years I have kept a scrapbook of collected newspaper articles which relate to the effects of wars on civilian populations. From these personal experiences and research into POW art I extrapolate ideas for my artwork.

Figure 1 Eileen Whitehead, installation detail, 2009. Transfer monotype on newsprint.
This paper investigates the importance of artistic pursuits – particularly visual arts – in the lives of those men, women and children who found themselves imprisoned during World War II (WWII). What inspired creative activity and did it aid their survival? My proposition is that the very act of visually expressing personal thoughts and ideas in an otherwise dehumanizing and totally restrictive environment, served to strengthen the resolve of POW artists to survive.¹ Carl Jung’s term *Weltanschauung* indicates a link between consciousness and the unconscious which produces a harmony with our internalised, historical knowledge, which Lucas (1980, p.18) maintains is achieved through the act of creation providing an understanding – a confidence to live through daily life.

Specifically, I am examining artworks produced by three artists when they were POWs, each of whose work shows different interpretations of their predicament. Howard Taylor, an Australian, and Ronald Searle, an Englishman, were both combatants, while Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, a German and pacifist Quaker, had been interned as an enemy alien. How did imprisonment shape their individual artistic production? For instance, what was their individual choice of subject matter and what might their choices in composition, figurative representation and style of mark-making reveal about their predicament? These three case studies lead to further reflexive analysis and consideration of links between WWII POW art, institutional public representation of WWII POW art, subsequent POW art and contemporary anti-war art.

There is a great deal of literature about ‘official’ war art in which mention is made of the few officially commissioned war artists who became POWs, such as Murray Griffin and John Worsley. But my research has discovered only a few books which study POW artwork, and that only in passing when covering the life of the artist because of his later fame². Literature mentioning unofficial POW war art is minimal. POW art is most often incorporated in books former POW artists produced themselves or books written by other ex-prisoners, such as Edward Dunlop, Laurence Van der Post, and Russell Braddon, who used their POW artworks as illustration. Many non-POW writers (such as Brian MacArthur in *Surviving the Sword*) have researched the

¹ "The universal and absolute need out of which art, on its formal side, arises has its source in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, i.e. that he draws out of himself, and makes explicit for himself that which he is ..." (Hegel, 2004, p.35).
daily lives of POWs but not specifically the role art making played in their lives. Still today very little POW art is represented or displayed in gallery collections.

So why does POW art have such a small arts industry and academic profile?

Lack of representation of POW artwork immediately after the Second World War was often due to the fact that prisoners from the Far East sometimes did not return home until well after the War had ended. Additionally many of their artworks were hidden or buried at camp locations and not recovered until years later. Furthermore, The War Artists Advisory Committee\(^3\), which had held exhibitions of war art during and immediately after WWII, had been disbanded by 1946, and many ex-POWs felt compelled to keep their visual recordings private for many years, even from family members. It was simply too painful to share the atrocities and losses endured. In addition, many POWs who may have recorded POW conditions would not regard themselves as artists or their works worthy of exhibition.

Another reason for lack of visibility could be that POW art was censored as being too explicit and regarded by political and cultural custodians as an uncomfortable reminder of the underside of war.\(^4\) An attitude that held sway at the time is expressed by Max Weber, “the authority of the ‘eternal yesterday’, i.e. of the mores sanctified through unimaginably ancient recognition and habitual orientation to conform” (1948, pp.78, 79).\(^5\) This in part may account for the lack of recognition of this art, which confirms my Marxist perspective that “the very subject matter is ideological through which the ruling class secures and legitimates its domination” (Witkin, 1995, p.88).

This emboldens me to suggest that large official war museums are unsuitable venues for the intimate, personal drawings of POWs. When in Stratford, North Island, New Zealand in the Nineties, I walked into a small arcade to find it was being used as a memorial to the town’s fallen soldiers from the First World War. Sepia photographs lined the walls. Seeing these placed within a communal context had a most powerful effect on me: a fitting result for a memorial. I believe POW artwork should be seen in

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\(^3\) This was formed early in WWII and chaired by Sir Kenneth Clark, to administer the commissioning of official war artists to cover the war effort.

\(^4\) John Worsley, an officially commissioned war artist before his capture, had marched 80 miles at the end of the war, carrying most of his drawings in containers he made from salvaged milk tins but even he (on discovering his work had not been entered) was obliged to write a strongly worded letter (8.10.45) to curators of an exhibition of war art held at the National Gallery in London in 1945.

\(^5\) Even official WWI artwork by well known artist Wyndham Lewis painted in the Cubist genre and which was part of the Beaverbrook collection, was discovered locked away in the cellar of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Ross, 1983, p.36).
small venues within communities. For example, a small exhibition held in 2007 at the Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria, showed the WWII POW art of Ray Parkin. According to the curator, Sandra Allan, fellow Victorians responded very positively. In response she attempted to borrow the POW drawings of another Victorian ex-POW, Jack Chalker, which are held by the Australian War Memorial. Her efforts proved unsuccessful even though there was obviously a great deal of interest from the public to see these works. Why did the AWM refuse to participate?

Another reason for lack of visibility was the limitation of quality art materials POWs had at their disposal and their choice of subject matter. Consequently sketches produced by POWs may not be aesthetically pleasing and may not fall into the category of 'great art'. Importantly, however, POW art, regardless of aesthetic or artistic merits, directly portrays conditions of war which are too often underrated and ignored. Nevertheless, the decades following WWII have seen a liberalisation in the attitudes of many institutions. The Imperial War Museum for instance now exhibits art expressing more contemporary attitudes to war, even anti-war protest art, but POW artworks still languish in museum archives.

A primary reason why POW visual art is important today is because there was an absence of photo-based opportunities in the camps during WWII. Technically simple to produce, drawings were a means for individuals to record details for posterity.

The gathering of such historical visual documentation of POW conditions is proving to be invaluable. POW artworks provide a different perspective from written documents in that they transcend language barriers and depict (graphically and aesthetically) universal sensations. For example, illustrations of camp conditions were subsequently used as evidence during the War Crimes Trials held at The Hague after WWII. The drawings made by Philip Meninsky, Jack Chalker (Figure 2) and others, recording the improvised prosthetics and hospital equipment ingeniously manufactured by POWs in Japanese camps, not only serve as historical record, but they also reveal the harsh reality of survival under such conditions. In my opinion, many simple drawings made by POWs contain a poignancy that is seldom captured with a camera.
Other drawings found hidden at Terezin concentration camp and made by civilian prisoners depict frightened Jewish children being herded to their unknown fate by enormous armed soldiers. Such images, whether made by POW soldiers or civilians, remind the viewer of the stark reality of war and confront and offend our democratic and humanist sensibilities. POW art introduces an ethical dimension to the way the viewer perceives war. It does not comply with military heritage. Collectively POW art certainly fuels the development and direction of my creative practice as a form of anti-war art. Wars are fought both for physical (oil, gold and water) and abstract (God, honour, democracy and culture) resources. Herbert Marcuse (1978) states "...the more the exploited classes, 'the people' succumb to the powers that be, the more will art be estranged from 'the people'". He goes on to say "Art cannot change the world, but it

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6 Refer to drawings by Otto Ungar, Leo Haas, Bederich Fritta and Karel Fliesmann.
7 "Heritage projects are generally history constructed for the present. This is not necessarily what the past was like" (Blackburn, n.d., p.9). Even the Changi murals were seen as part of the military heritage of the British armed forces and misrepresented in a nationalistic way in a pamphlet handed to visitors long after WWII.
can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (p.32).

Why did POWs make art? Imprisonment causes a sudden and complete break with past existence, and a POW could feel subjugated, humiliated and have no comforting knowledge of the future. In this instance artistic creation can prove to be a form of self-expression and individuation, strengthening resolve. In extreme circumstances, this activity produces a sense of identity and re-evaluation. It brings together “the separate fragments of mankind” and produces a sense of order “based … on the realization of that involvement and communication in which our freedom finds its true expression” (Duvignaud, 1967, p.19). I believe the production of artwork was vitally important to the POWs themselves, providing therapy through an occupational pursuit and helping to maintain a sense of self-worth, identity and purpose. A creative and visual outlet was a means of communicating what was happening to them against their will, providing a record for posterity and giving them hope for a future.

The fact that some POWs risked death to produce these works shows a positive act of defiance, through which they managed to retain their sanity; defiance of oppression strengthens the will to live and provides personal empowerment (Ursano & Blundell, 1995, p.434). Resistance is an essential ingredient for maintaining self-respect in a situation of enforced captivity and is implied eloquently by the Italian POW, cited by Saunders, in the opening quotation to this chapter. Because keeping visual records could be a death sentence if caught, this supports my contention that the artist considered it an act of defiance - a form of life-affirming protest art which inevitably questioned the futility of war.

I believe much of the provocative war imagery produced by WWII POWs, such as Jack Chalker, Ronald Searle, Philip Meninsky and others, has been selectively contained within the museum and gallery system and subsequently forgotten. In my experience, the only horrendous event from WWII that has been regularly exhibited is the Holocaust: its horror kept alive by the Jewish nation as a reminder to later generations. The high proportion of Jewish participation in the film industry ensures cinema is used as a vehicle for constantly reminding the world of this genocide. Perhaps other episodes of POW experience should also be kept in the forefront of our memory? My visit last year to the Imperial War Museum coincided with an exhibition by a Polish artist, Roman Halter, who was twelve years old when the Nazis invaded Poland. The trauma of his survival is explicit in his paintings, done twenty five years
later. Although these cannot be classified as ‘POW art’, they successfully conveyed the ordeal he suffered. In my opinion, such visual social commentary can help keep the evils of war in the forefront of human consciousness.

The combined military and civilian death toll in the Second World War has been assessed as possibly 60 million or more\(^8\) with military deaths exceeding civilian deaths by some 1.5 million. These statistics cannot convey the human suffering, which is impossible to comprehend in these terms. I maintain that individual suffering seems more powerful when depicted via the aesthetics of art, and POW art clearly portrays this pain and grief, addressing human suffering with an emotional impact often lost in ‘official’ war art and photography. Much ‘official’ art, though powerful, can appear posed and lacking the reality found in a sketch made in situ. Murray Griffin was an ‘official’ war artist captured at Singapore who produced a fine painting (on hardboard taken from a camp building roof) titled Roberts Hospital Changi, 1943 (Figure 3). In my personal opinion, however, I find Jack Chalker’s simple pen and wash drawings of the diseases and prosthetics (Figure 1) more powerful in conveying the appalling conditions in the Japanese camps.

Figure 3. Murray Griffin. Roberts Hospital, Changi, 1943 (Keaney, 2003, p.78). Oil on hardboard. 64 x 82.1cm.

Since WWII none of the subsequent wars produced the same amount of POW art, but these later wars initiated an increasing number of social protests supported by anti-war

\(^8\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties
art. It is possible that contemporary anti-war artists have been moved to respond, like myself, to the art (together with photographic images) from WWII camps which present such bleak pictures of life and death behind barbed wire. The positive outcome has been the proliferation of anti-war art and peace movements around the world. This directs my research to investigate several contemporary artists whose social conscience has taken the form of anti-war protest art. My own artwork interprets this critical content of WWII POW visual art to strengthen the anti-war message within a contemporary context.

I seek through the creative component of this exegesis to create an installation that immerses the viewer in a physically constricted, visually confined and discomforting environment: an allegory for the trauma experienced by civilians fleeing or imprisoned because of war. Through my emphasis on the loss of human dignity encountered in the maelstrom of war, the installation is intended to provoke the viewer's appreciation of our freedom and the fragility and uncertainty of life. I aim to link the figurative content of my images to war-time events more familiar to contemporary audiences, and seek, through my interrogation of this subject and my own life experience, to validate humanism through such humble historical messages from WWII POW artists. Hence my praxis is a method for advocating peace.

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9 These pictures were in complete contrast to the propaganda perpetrated via Pathe News and The Illustrated magazine during the war.

10 For example, Anselm Kiefer, Christian Boltanski, Alfredo Jaar, Hans Haacke, Gunther Uecker, Nancy Spero, George Gittoes, Mona Hartoum and many others.
2. Literature Review

Most of the literature on the subject of POW artists is written from a historical perspective, but I have specifically sought references that reveal something about POW art making activities, both in captivity and subsequently. I have read extensively and my analysis of various texts has illuminated the conditions which prevailed for the POW art-makers and provided me with an evaluation of the on-going legacy of their art. All the literature I have read supports my belief that the process of making art served to strengthen the WWII prisoners’ resolve to survive. The psychological role that art played in the lives of POWs is often mentioned in relation to their survival. William Feaver (2000) stresses that the act of drawing requires intellectual processing and recording. He claims that the human value of POW war art “gives something of the smell, the sickly excitement, the disgust, the tedium, the elation, possibly, certainly the waste” (Feaver, 2000, p.2). Such commentary supports the value of POW art in the present and future, as well as its place in history.

2.1 The Role of Creativity in Captivity

I am looking at art by POWs not just as an occupational activity but as a reference to their captivity. I found The Naked Island by Russell Braddon was not only historically descriptive of how prisoners dealt with the conditions in the camps but also gave specific details of the artists. On the subject of Ray Parkin,\(^{11}\) he states “His method of survival was not to think about the future, but to take each day and record it both in diaries and in his artwork. He felt his survival was bound up with his diaries and drawings ... their creation and presence sustained him” (1953, p. 116). Parkin himself says how important his POW paintings were in making him plan for the future: “I place a great store by these things. I feel if I can get them back the experience will not be entirely wasted. Memory is not good enough” (1963, p. 449).\(^{12}\) I believe Parkin’s tenacity to plan for an uncertain future, while experiencing inhumane conditions, displays a mental strength critical to his survival.

Braddon also mentions the importance of creative occupation in the camp and the way POWs used the perspex from cockpits of crashed Japanese aircraft to produce carvings and engravings (1953, p.253). He also emphasizes the importance of humour in plays

\(^{11}\) Parkin had been a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, and was captured after the Japanese sinking of HMAS Perth in the Sunda Strait in 1942 (Bevan, 2004, p.122).

\(^{12}\) The importance of saving these paintings was not lost on Sir ‘Weary’ Dunlop who hid them in a false bottom to his desk when Parkin was shipped to coal mines in Japan in 1944 (Bevan, 2004, p.134).
and revues for boosting morale. Referring to a pantomime, he talks of a “riot of clowning and magical sets by Searle (sets created out of canvas and different coloured muds and crayons)” (p.270). He goes on to describe one of many stage sets designed by Searle: “The piece de resistance was the bow of a steamer, the full height of the stage, which had been designed by Searle on canvas mounted on a timber frame” (p.274).

Brian MacArthur’s book *Surviving the Sword* is a thorough account of the Far East POWs’ (FEPOWs) general experiences. There are several pages about Ronald Searle, Ray Parkin and Jack Chalker, in which their personal comments are noted. The book gives a detailed and broad overview of camp conditions, which provided me with a very clear picture of camp life but, overall he makes little mention of the methods of art production by the POW artists. There is, however, one direct reference to an art exhibition held at the camp at Tamarkan, in which MacArthur states the importance of such activities for the men’s morale (2005, p.86).

Other artists are mentioned in Scott Bevan’s book *Battle Lines*. Murray Griffin, who had been an official artist before being captured by the Japanese at Singapore, felt compelled to paint pictures of the men’s conditions and their ordeal. Jack Chalker produced “exacting, medical drawings, which laid bare the rotting and suppurating flesh, and images of where the decay led. He portrayed Weary and other doctors performing amputations – and miracles – on makeshift operating tables” (Bevan, 2004, p.131).

### 2.2 The Role of Creativity as Psychological Support

There is an extensive body of literature which considers the therapeutic value of art, and some of this addresses the context of captivity. The book *Artists in Group Therapy*, by Xanier Lucas, provides a conceptual framework for my conjecture that the discipline of life drawing for the purpose of recording POW experiences was a necessary psychological support in maintaining a sense of identity during an uncertain existence. Lucas maintains that making art provides a sense of personal focus and confidence which enables a distancing from adverse circumstances (Lucas, 1980, p. 18). POWs’ artworks confirm their identity: the artists are not reduced to a mere statistic or a number printed on a forearm, as was the case with Holocaust victims. Edward Adamson, in *Art as Healing*, on the subject of art as therapy, states it is “the
opportunity to realise what lies within himself – and to discover inner resources and give them form in outer reality” (1984, p.1).

My own artwork seeks to highlight the loss of identity caused by forced mass migrations and imprisonment, linking what occurred historically in WWII with similar war-induced events today. At this moment there are thousands of political prisoners in detention all over the world. One such prisoner, Antonio Guerrero, (one of the imprisoned ‘Cuban Five’ detained in America for infiltrating a Cuban [anti-Castro] terrorist cell operating in Florida) who began to learn to paint in prison in 2003, states: “What is most important is that I have overcome imprisonment with a healthy and useful activity like plastic arts. Each work expresses not only my human essence but that of the Five, united as we are by unbreakable principles” (Guerrero, 2007, p.3). It is interesting that the need for art in captivity transcends place and time. Paintings are positive because “they express the powerful creative energy that we all possess but may not have released” (Adamson, 1984, p.3). Adamson also goes on to quote Winston Churchill: “that visual arts … can be a vital form of self-help which allows Nature’s healing powers to restore balance and harmony to the troubled mind (1984, p.5).

Scott Bevan writes that Ray Parkin’s method of survival was not to think of the past or wonder about the future, but to take each day and record it both in diaries and in his artwork. “His … survival was intertwined with the fate of his diaries and drawings. Their creation and presence sustained him, but if they were discovered, he would be in peril” (2004, p. 116). I maintain that because the act of life drawing and painting is a very demanding practice and concentrates the mind to the exclusion of any other consideration whilst the artist is involved in such creative activity, the daily ordeal is temporarily put out of mind.

2.3 Howard Taylor, Ronald Searle and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack: art-makers in captivity

Both Gary Dufour and Ted Snell have written incisive commentaries on Howard Taylor’s life. In Howard Taylor: Phenomena by Dufour, I found that the transcription of an interview with Taylor in 1986 furnished me with a solid portrait of the man. I gained an understanding of his artistic prerogatives, i.e. the way he approached his later sculpture, painting and drawing. This, together with Dufour’s descriptions of his work, provided a basic insight into Taylor’s POW drawings.
In *Howard Taylor: Forest figure*, Snell’s opening sentence (1995, p.13) “Howard Taylor is a very private man” and later on the same page an actual remark made by the artist: “I do my best not to look back and to be not introspective” were both instructive in my understanding of Taylor’s POW sketches. Later in the book Snell also makes an interesting observation that many of Taylor’s drawings at this time “record eerily vacant buildings, empty watchtowers, fences and uninhabited assembly grounds” (1995, p. 22). My interpretation of these drawings is that, in this way, Taylor escapes reality and enters a private studious space imperative for an artist. Snell interprets this as an “unconscious attempt to secure the isolation he so desired” (1955, pp 23, 24). He also enlarges on Taylor’s interest in the problem of “establishing a three dimensional form against a flat plane using only monochrome colour” (1995, p.102) which Taylor began to explore in his POW drawings (see Figure 6). Snell’s book, although written some eight years before Dufour’s, ends with *Triptych: Still Life with Black Figure*, 1994, which in my opinion epitomizes Taylor’s continuing search for minimal representation of light on form.

There are many WWII historical texts touching briefly on POW artists in which Ronald Searle is mentioned, but I found the Russell Davies biography of the artist a most thorough investigation of his personal history. It is a serious academic study of Searle’s artistic output over the past sixty years, and has proved invaluable. The seeds of Searle’s ambivalence towards the British class system with its noblesse oblige attitude were nurtured and sown during WWII by the officer caste and their ridiculous attempts at maintaining their status at Changi. Later satirical work, such as *Merry England, Etc.*, *The Illustrated Winespeak*, and *The Great English Songbook*, containing Searle’s enduring mockery of British class attitudes, sold thousands of copies: proof that he was not alone in his opinion.

While there is no existing published biography of Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack covering his internment, I have been fortunate to have been put in touch13 with two academics who have produced a slim volume about his time teaching at Geelong Grammar School, titled *The Bauhaus Legacy*14. They are currently working on his biography and, hopefully, will be publishing within the next twelve months. This new publication will fill an unfortunate gap in the history of this eminent artist.

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14 He remained Head of the Art Department from 1942 until his retirement in 1957.
2.4 On-going Importance of POW Art in Contemporary Society

Saunders' definitive book *Trench Art* explores the historical and cultural importance of the many different forms of art fashioned from the detritus of war and produced by combatants as well as POWs. The book mainly covers art objects made by soldiers on the front lines and provides little reference to POW art. However, Saunders does give two examples of POW visual art under the categorization of 'trench art', which I found most important to my research and reference in this paper – St. Luke's Chapel and The Italian Chapel.

For my purposes an important component in this text is Saunders' analysis that creative outcomes act as symbolic vestiges of the human response to the atrocities of war. Creativity transcends the prevailing conditions and the outcomes – as in the case of St. Luke's Chapel in Changi\(^\text{15}\) becoming almost a shrine to those who died, with tourists making pilgrimages, and forging links with the past. The chapel has become a site of remembrance for ex-POWs recalling this dark episode, but also serves to link the temporal changes from war to peace, providing a powerful catalyst for the transference of experiences and emotions.

Saunders cites another striking example of POW trench art, which he admits is "of a surprising nature and scale" (2003, p.196): the Italian Chapel, created by Italian POWs at Lambholm, Orkney. Originally a Nissan hut, it was transformed, using scrap, into a beautifully ornate place of worship still standing today and is the last relic of Camp 60 which housed several hundred Italian POWs during WWII. It is a reminder of the spirit and faith which flourished in adversity and as a memorial to the ingenuity of those craftsmen.

I contend that the powerful immediacy of POW art transcends aesthetic considerations. A comment by Lawrence Langer, writing in the National Jewish Centre for Learning and Leadership, Encore Archive site (1978, p.1), on the power of art, asks us to connect "the humiliation of man ... with an attitude that somehow transcends the humiliation." Betty Churcher's choice of artwork in her book *The Art of War* predominates with work showing the categorical death and misery caused by war. It ranges from the work of master artists to those only able to record scenes with a pencil: but all document the horror of war. My interpretation of her book is that it is

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\(^{15}\) The chapel, St. Luke's, occupied one end of a ward in the POW hospital set up in the Roberts Barracks. It was decorated by a British POW – Stanley Warren – who painted five near life-size scenes from the New Testament on two of the chapel walls (Blackburn, n.d., p.1).
intended to convey a plea for peace. It relays to me the message that what those artists witnessed in the past still has relevance in contemporary society. Churcher (2008) makes an insightful reference to the influence of Expressionism which emerged after WWI (p.91), which leads on to her description of Bernard Slawik’s drawings (particularly the one Showing a pile of shoes with a group of figures, Janowska concentration camp, Poland), “They are drawings made in the grip of an anger so strong, so over-powering, that passion seems to take control of the pencil. This did not feel like grim reality moderated into an art form – it was reality straight up, unmitigated by craft or aesthetic considerations” (p. 93). In my opinion, only a witness to such a scene could portray such raw emotion, and no-one seeing this drawing could remain indifferent to war and its atrocities. Searle’s simple line drawings produce the same powerful effect.

2.5 Summary

My extensive review of literature has strengthened my conviction about the importance of art-making for POWs. It benefited not only the artists themselves but was also beneficial to other prisoners.16 The importance of art as therapy in psychiatry has long been established as it concentrates the mind through the creative act, giving respite from the existing circumstances.

It is difficult to find literature which directly makes connections between the art made by WWII POWs with any significant influence it may have had on contemporary artists, but I maintain it may have a subsequent effect upon later generations of artists who have been fortunate to see it. Art produced by POWs is of immense historical importance as a means of protest against war. If WWII POW art were to be exhibited, would it extract an emotional investment from the viewer such that it might achieve cultural habitus (Eco, 2006, p. 11) and help shape a more peace oriented future?

A history of the 20th century will record it as one of enormous technological advances, not only for improvements to our quality of life, but also for the scale of advances in mechanised modes of killing. The outcome of these technological advances reverberates globally today. Millions flee wars fought on three continents, as they did during and after WWII.

16 Ray Parkin’s ardour for the beauty of the jungle and his drawings of its flora and fauna “helped relieve other minds as well. Many of the prisoners started collecting butterflies ... Even Weary Dunlop would bring beetles and lizards for Parkin to draw” (Bevan, 2004, pp. 129, 130).
The inspiration for the creative component of this exegesis comes from a small drawing, titled *Transport to the East* made in 1941 by Leo Haas, showing a sorry line up of exhausted Jewish people, all bearing labels around their necks, being herded along to whatever fate awaits. My installation artwork deals with some of the effects of war on civilians and refers to the traumatic disruptions causing thousands to seek refuge. The concept of visual art as witness to events as they happen is an important therapeutic tool for the artists involved. Eye-witness visual art is also essential in educating forthcoming generations, and my choice of literature validates and supports this assertion.
3. Analysis and Comparison of Three POW Artists: Howard Taylor, Ronald Searle and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack

This section examines the Second World War more specifically as experienced by three, in my opinion, unique men – the Australian Howard Taylor; the Englishman Ronald Searle, and the German Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack. Each of these men experienced incarceration under totally different circumstances. Taylor and Searle were combatants who became POWs, while Hirschfeld Mack was originally interned in Britain as an ‘enemy alien’ before being transported to Australia.

3.1 Howard Taylor

I chose to research Howard Taylor because he is a well-known and widely collected Western Australian artist. His local professional profile has gained me access to the collections of his POW work held here at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Curtin University of Technology. Two incisive books about Taylor were written by Perth-based experts Ted Snell and Gary Dufour, with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing my research.

Howard Taylor was serving with the Royal Air Force in the U.K. when he was shot down over Alsace, Lorraine, in 1940 (Snell, 1995, p.21). He was to spend the rest of WWII in several POW camps in Germany and Poland, during which time he began to take drawing more seriously and plan his future career as a professional artist.

Previously, whilst at Perth Modern School, he had shown skill at drawing by producing caricatures for the school magazine. Dufour makes a valid comparison between Taylor’s caricatures and his later POW drawings, “the exaggerated attempts at figure representation in the early caricatures has been replaced by an interest in anonymous figures…” (n.d., p.12). Taylor’s incarceration gave him time to reflect on the direction of his life and he is quoted as saying “My five years in POW camps was the most important time of my life artistically because that’s when I did accept the fact that I might head that way and I got deeply involved in it” (Snell, 1995, p 19).

Taylor’s circumstances as a POW were relatively comfortable compared to those experienced by Ronald Searle as a prisoner of the Japanese. Many POWs in Europe were provided with basic lodgings and food, and these more favourable conditions enabled Taylor to pursue his drawing as a highly focused personal academic pursuit.

17 An interesting comparison with Ronald Searle’s interest in cartoons at this time.
Dufour (2003b) comments that Taylor’s POW drawings “provide the first concrete record of the intensity of his study” (pp.35, 36). Primarily as a means of gaining knowledge and understanding of his POW surroundings, drawing remained an integral daily pursuit, his preferred medium being pen and ink.

Considering that Taylor drew constantly during five years of internment, there are surprisingly few examples available in public institutions of his early works. There is mention of life drawing studies when prisoners swam in the water tank during the summer months (Snell, 1995, p.22), but none of these has come to light. Of course, Taylor may have considered most of his camp-related works to be merely ‘student’ sketches and of no lasting importance. Only nine pen and ink drawings are currently held by Western Australian institutions, and three are in the collection of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. The three drawings held in the Curtin University Art Collection (Cat. Nos. 04638400, 04638600 and 04638500) are all done at Stalag Luft III POW camp. These are quick pen and ink sketches made on pages - perhaps torn from a small (7” x 5”) index book – which show a thin green, vertical line approximately 2.5 cm in from the right hand edge, accompanied by a page number in the bottom right hand corner. Perhaps this indicates the necessity to use any available paper to pursue his practice.

The remaining nine drawings often contain a distanced, contemplative quality, as though Taylor achieved escape from captivity via his art. For example, two drawings held by the Art Gallery of Western Australia, both titled, POW Camp, Germany (Cat. Nos. 1985/00D4 and 1985/00D6), and the three untitled drawings held by Curtin University are relatively devoid of fellow prisoners and depict what appear to be empty buildings in an idyllic setting of trees and hills. Dufour (2003a) expresses this eloquently:

Each drawing from Taylor’s POW camp series establishes pictorial problems to be solved – modulation of tone, figures in motion, and form created through illumination and contrast. The exactitude of his ink studies, executed primarily

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18 “For five years, the locales he painted were various POW camps in Germany and Poland. The works of art initiated here, often considered exercises, transcend the hardships endured and map out what would emerge as the centre of his mature work” (Dufour, 2003a, p.75).

19 This has been confirmed by Gary Dufour, who mentioned Taylor’s reluctance to show his life drawings in an exhibition held in Perth soon after WWII (personal communication).

20 The Art Gallery of W.A. owns six pen and ink drawings, five titled POW Camp, Germany and one titled POW Camp, Poland. Curtin University owns three untitled pen and ink drawings.

21 The Australian War Memorial collection holds Skaters, Oflag VIB (watercolour), Huts, Stalag Luft III (crayon), and Interior; Stalag Luft III (brush and ink)
as a means of gaining understanding and knowledge of the optical sensations of light defining form, remained an integral daily pursuit throughout his life (p.75).

This peaceful and under the circumstances other-worldly quality emanating from his constant strivings to show the effect of light on form, pervaded his art all through his career. It leads me to theorise that his wartime experience influenced his later art.

In another drawing Skaters, Oflag VIB, c.1942, (ART 28567 in the AWM archives), (Figure 4), Taylor has shown POWs exercising by skating on what appears to be large frozen puddles, the figures are merely compositional groupings. The drawing has been composed using perspective lines created by the roofline of a large hut to the left, which meets the fence line entering from the right. These two lines bring the viewer’s eye into the centre, to the group of skating figures. The figures are treated merely as shapes in a composition showing sky and the hills in the distance which comprise over one-half of the drawing.

Figure 4. Howard Taylor. Skaters, Oflag VIB, c.1942. Watercolour with charcoal and coloured pencils on paper. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART 28567.

In Huts, Stalag Luft III (ART 28571 also at AWM) (Figure 4), Taylor eliminates the barbed wire fence, again concentrating primarily on the landscape beyond. Is this expansive composition and subject matter a way of escaping his immediate predicament? Where camp buildings are prominent they suggest his main preoccupation is with the study of perspective, composition and form. He applies a compositional device of buildings entering the picture from the right at a 45-degree
angle, leading the eye to the centre of the sketch and to the distant hills beyond. The scene is devoid of people. Is this a subconscious yearning for privacy or the beginnings of his love of landscape and the apparent symbolism in later work?

Figure 5. Howard Taylor. *Huts, Stalag Luft III*, c.1943. Black and white crayons on grey paper. Collection of the Australian War Memorial. ART 28571.

*POW Camp, Germany*, c1942 (Figure 6) also in the AWM archive collection, has been drawn using brush, violet ink and pencil on paper. In my view this early drawing relates most strongly to the later techniques prominent in Taylor's work. In the eighties, he studied spherical objects in great detail, still attempting to solve structural problems within a flat surface. Here, in 1942, he handles his human subjects with apparent detachment: there is no recognition of the figures as individuals, they are anonymous and for the purpose of a tonal study. Taylor is looking beyond his human subject and is focusing on solving the problem of presenting a three-dimensional object two-dimensionally.
Another interior scene *POW Camp, Poland,* from the Art Gallery of Western Australia’s archives, depicts Taylor’s viewpoint probably from an upper level bunk looking down. He cleverly uses the curve of the ceiling and windows and the diagonal lines of bunks and table to bring the eye back onto the central figure. This kind of study of light and form was to permeate his life’s work, both in sculpture and paintings. In the sparseness of these latter two drawings, I find an intensity, which strengthens the image and gives the viewer a sharper insight into the daily monotony of camp life: they portray a loss of individuality and identity. The daily ennui is almost palpable.

Many of Taylor’s *POW* works now in gallery collections are predominantly in pen and ink: a difficult medium, showing his dedication to precise and accurate drawing. By using such an unforgiving medium shows a certain confidence, and this trait of fine draftsmanship and finesse continued throughout his long career. These ‘exercises’
from his POW years indicate the direction his mature work would take (Dufour, 2003a, p.75).

Taylor’s POW artworks, although often considered only exercises, were obviously the building blocks on which his mature work was based. Throughout his life Taylor continued his POW practice of carrying small, handmade notebooks, to which he committed notations and sketches for future work. This practice was part of the artist’s methodical approach to his art: it was part of his continual problem-solving technique. Dufour states “… having a problem to solve is quite an incentive. It’s not only an incentive; it’s an aid to creative solutions that have a depth and something profound about them” (Dufour, 2003b, p.63). Taylor himself, much later in his career, stated that his work was “largely non-naturalistic, protracted and designed” (p.15). He was continually solving sculptural and structural problems within his paintings, exploring “movement, light, atmosphere within the flat surface of a panel or canvas” (p.13). This single-minded, methodical approach also reflects Taylor’s teenage absorption with aircraft model-making (Snell, 1995, p.20).

Notes Taylor made for his exhibition Light Source: Reverse in 1997 clearly show the life-long interest he maintained with the problems first encountered as a POW student artist in the camps.22

The interest in the Object/Space/Light/Paint materials is complex and has its origins in learning to paint and observe natural phenomena. There was a concrete link to painters of the past. Painting as a structure – an object made. Structure or even sculpture itself appeared. Sculpture steps out of painting. Light problems, found in shaped work, particularly rely on optical contributions. So sculpture steps back into painting where the conditions can be fixed. This gave interesting moments – the realization of the two different disciplines. (Taylor, cited in Dufour, 2003b, p.13).

Clearly Taylor approached his art with scientific exactitude and the titles he gave his works relate to technical processes. However others see mysticism in his work. The review by Nancy Borlase of a solo exhibition by Taylor held in Sydney was headed The Mystic West, hinting at a deeper meaning in Taylor’s work. Taylor himself (cited in Thomas 1995) says: “The more intangible aspects are not encouraged … [they are] suspect – known, [but] kept quiet” (p.44).

22 In many prisoner of war camps, lectures and tuition were given by men who had been professional teachers before the war. Qualifications gained in this way were recognized after the war by UK Universities.
His *Double Self-portrait*, 1949 (Figure 7), shows the artist scrutinizing the world (or the viewer) with his eye predominantly framed by his hands, rather like the all-seeing eye of God. In Snell’s opinion, however, Taylor never liked to talk about interpretations: his explanation for this painting would only relate to the technical considerations of painting from two mirrors set up in the room (T. Snell, personal communication, September 16, 2009). A later work, *Forest Figure* (1977) echoes the shape in *Double Self-portrait* but this time as an abstraction, a winged form. The artist “… when pressed, concedes a symbolic, even Symbolist, role for his art. Higher things are there. They can’t help infiltrating” (Thomas, 1995, p.44). Taylor however leaves ‘higher’ interpretations to the viewer. Through my conversations with Dufour I deduce that flying might have introduced new visual sensations for Taylor and perhaps eventually influenced his later work.23

Figure 7. Howard Taylor *Double Self-portrait*, 1949-50. Oil on composition board, 78 x 85.2 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

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23 Gary Dufour recalled during a conversation with the writer that Taylor mentioned he was never happier than when flying (personal communication September 11, 2009).
All Taylor’s later works, through his relentless examination of light on form, evolve into art of great mysticism and spirituality. I believe his later work, especially his studies with spherical objects, light-infused objects, and locally-harvested wood for sculptures alludes to this. Is it possible that his lengthy incarceration during WWII strengthened his love of nature and landscape, which ultimately led to the sense of peace integral within his life work? Certainly his love of Western Australia’s bush led him and his wife to move a substantial distance from Perth and work in monastic isolation. Snell (1995, p.141) talks of the “quiet, meditative works” the artist produced. I feel this kind of sensitivity and his interpretation of the visual phenomena surrounding him in the landscape brought about a spiritual symbolism in his work.

24 “I believe that even if you work very abstractly, in a minimal sort of a way, you’re still drawing on your experience of life – the physical business of seeing and the more subjective one of feeling” (Dufour, 2003b, pp.65, 66).
3.2 Ronald Searle

Ronald Searle was drawing professionally for income at age fifteen, producing cartoons for the Cambridge Daily News, which paid for his classes at Cambridge Art School (Davies, 1990, p.46). In 1939, having gained a diploma in drawing, he enlisted in the British Army as an architectural draughtsman while still supplying cartoons for newspapers and magazines. Lilliput magazine published his first St. Trinian’s cartoon in October, 1941 – the same month he and the rest of the 18th Division were shipped to Singapore and almost instant capitulation to the Japanese Army (Davies, 1990, p.54).

The lack of decision-making, which led to this rapid surrender, may account for the undisguised cynicism prisoners felt towards the officers. This was manifested in Searle’s cartoons printed in a magazine, called The Survivor, produced in the first few months of imprisonment at Changi Gaol. Referring to this magazine Searle was quoted in The Independent (10th July, 2005) as saying “It upset the extremely conservative mentalities of our own administration [the commanders and the chaplains]. When the time came for the Japanese to say we want groups to be sent up north, [to work on the railway] the English chose the troublemakers.” Of which Searle was considered to be one.25

Illustrated magazines proved immensely important for the morale of the POWs. In the Imperial War Museum (IWM) archives there are four copies of The Double Eight (also known as) The Changi Gunner produced during August and September, 1942. Production was no doubt terminated due to POWs leaving Changi to work on the Burma-Thailand railway. For those who survived and returned in 1944, the magazine Exile was produced until the end of the war in 1945. The IWM has all ten printed editions which I was able to view in November 2008. The topics published were extremely broad, with experts writing articles on their known subjects, together with fictional stories and poems, both serious and humorous. Other POW illustrators of the magazine included the Sydney Herald cartoonist George Sprod.26

Humour was the predominant feature throughout Exile: POWs seem to have had the ability to laugh at their predicament. Searle’s opinion of the officer caste was often blatant in the cartoons I viewed at the IWM (Exile No. 8, March 1945, p.9), and these

25 “A more serious disciplinary consequence of The Survivor’s non-survival came next. Searle and his partners had unwisely attracted attention to themselves, and were considered trouble-makers” (Davies, 1990, p.58).
26 Later became famous as the cartoonist for Punch Magazine.
no doubt found favour with the lower ranks. Art played an important role in keeping morale high and all the illustrators contributed in this way. Even an illustration accompanying a POW’s poem on the subject of death after the heavy human toll of building the railway is humorous: the drawing showing a shrouded corpse with a sign at its head saying “No flowers by request”. Another drawing shows a Japanese soldier with his bayonet pointed at the uplifted rear of a kneeling prisoner holding a frying pan in one hand and spoon in the other whilst trying to capture a snail sitting on a rock. Although reduced to scrounging for food, both the prisoner and the soldier are ridiculed.

In Exile, No. 5 a cartoon makes fun of the scourge of the POWs – malaria. Me and My Malaria shows a POW lying on a bed of nails with a huge, naked demon sitting on his chest holding a club in one hand and a long spiked nail in the other (Nov. 1944). No doubt only someone familiar with the scourge of malaria could find this amusing.

Searle’s humour is testimony to the resilience of the artist and, no doubt, all the surviving POWs. Fit Parade for Work, 1943 (Figure 8) shows a line of exhausted and sick, yet unbowed POWs at the dawn roll call. Searle comments in his notes accompanying the image that when “the order to stand to attention was yelled it was regularly answered with whoops from the families of gibbons that gazed down …” (Searle, 1986, p.110).

In this drawing, Searle’s emphasis on the structure of the three camp tents is particularly strong. The heavy shadows exaggerate the three white crosses of the bamboo supports, suggestive of the Holy Trinity. The stave held by the central POW leads the eye upwards into the exaggeratedly vertical tree branches, which seem to be leading up to heaven. Perhaps the swollen bent leg of the seated POW is also hinting at a heavenly exit. Could this drawing be a cry from his sub-conscious?
Searle had been recording visually since joining the army. Under the extremely adverse conditions imposed by the Japanese, his resolve to keep visual records strengthened because in the absence of camera equipment it was thought the atrocities would otherwise never be believed (Searle, 1986, p.9). Visual records provided evidence, and this sense of responsibility possibly assisted his will to survive. Additionally, the focus of drawing surreptitiously and applying imagination to the task may have provided some form of escapism from the moment. His determination produced the most significant visual account of life as a POW to emerge from the Japanese camps. A feat in itself had the conditions been favourable for an artist, but Searle battled through sickness, exhaustion and intimidation.

Searle’s figurative drawings proved to be powerful evocations of the conditions which prevailed; the semi-naked, gaunt skeletal prisoners carrying huge rocks, hauling wagons of timber and dying of cholera immediately involve the viewer in the horror. Braddon (1953) comments on Searle’s constant quest for improving his drawing through his economy of line (p. 255) and I think this facility is what gives Searle’s drawings their instant, emotive appeal. William Feaver (2000) when talking about Ronald Searle, comments that he “drew not as exercise, not as ‘war art’, still less to exercise the imagination. Drawing was his hold on life” (p. 2). The artist himself says “These drawings were not a means of catharsis. Circumstances were too basic for that. But they did at times act as a mental life-belt” (Searle, 1986, p.10). The other POWs “would have been concerned if he stopped drawing” (Meninsky, cited in Davies, 1990, p.72).

Many of Searle’s published drawings are in pen and ink, while others are crayon and pencil. For his self-portrait, titled Head of a Prisoner, 1942, (Figure 9), drawn one month after capture, he used charcoal smudged diagonally across the face and drew his pupils outside the contour of the eyes to denote what he called “the glazed look of the imprisoned” (Searle, 1986, p.78). This image is of a strong, determined man who is likely trying to come to terms with his predicament. There is also a sense of stunned disbelief possibly at the rapid sequence of events leading to the radical change from his role of combatant to that of a captive in inhumane conditions. Laurens Van der Post (1970) comments that because prisoners had been told they were “only slave

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27 It has been estimated that Searle produced between 300-400 images during captivity. The IWM hold 300 in its collection.
labour to be used at will and disposed of ... This resulted ... in a rather delightful air of detachment” (p.117). I believe this is evident in Searle’s self portrait.

Figure 9. Ronald Searle. *Head of a Prisoner*, 1942. (Searle, 1986, p.79) Charcoal on paper.

One of Searle’s most moving drawings, *Sick and Dying: Cholera - Thailand*, 1943 (Figure 10), has marks so lightly made that one imagines the artist himself hovering
close to death. A dying man is lying propped against a bamboo pole, his head barely supported by his scrawny neck, his mouth open as though gasping for air. His claw-like hands, at the end of match-like arms, are each spread on his thighs, as though in an act of supplication for death. Braddon (1953) comments on Searle’s tenacity “He lay in a coma, but whenever he regained consciousness, he would crawl upright and draw – with his right hand, since his left was useless” (p.255). This might explain the lightness of touch.

Through figurative details and compositional considerations, Searle’s drawings immediately involve the viewer. Unlike Taylor, Searle’s figures convey emotion: one feels the enormous effort to survive physical and psychological confinement.

In *Fit Parade for Work, Thai-Burma Railway: Men with Malaria, Ulcers, Beri-beri and Dysentry*, 1943, Searle composes his figures on a diagonal giving the impression that the viewer could be in the picture standing at the end of the line. In *the Jungle – Working on a Cutting. Rock Clearing after Blasting* – 1943, (Figure 11) this diagonal composition is used again, with POWs carrying large bowls filled with rocks straight towards the viewer into the bottom left hand corner. Via the diagonal line of the rocks, he directs the eye onto the Japanese guard and on towards the seated soldier, then through the bamboo stave of the central figure and back into the line of expendable POWs. This dynamic use of a diagonal composition adds tension to the scene by accentuating the physical and psychological boundaries of a labour camp.

Searle, like Howard Taylor, kept small, handmade notebooks for sketches and diary notes. These were made for him by a fellow prisoner and were small enough to be swallowed if challenged (Davies, 1990, p.67) (Figure 12). He also kept cartoon ideas notebooks throughout his captivity: a sign of his innate optimism and unfailing humour (Davies, 1990, p.67).

Figure 12. Ronald Searle. Notebooks – actual size. (Davies, 1990, p.69).

Searle, after his WWII ordeal, seemingly continues to approach his drawing with the same analytical detachment and wit. 28 He had two books published in the late 1940s, and although these were unsuccessful his cartoons became very popular. Both Punch and Lilliput printed his cartoons and, at this time, there were many articles about his wartime experiences, incorporating his Changi drawings. In 1960 he produced a very small book in collaboration with his wife about the plight of refugees, from which the proceeds of sales were donated to the United Kingdom Committee of the World Refugee Year 29. However, this is not as well known as his less serious cartoons.

Amongst the St. Trinian’s cartoons published by Lilliput was one called Bloody Sportsdays (May 1952) (Figure 13), depicting the girls chained to and pulling on wooden shafts attached to a huge grass roller. Searle has replicated his POW sketch, Light Duties (1944) (Figure 14), in which POWs pull on shafts attached to a wagon full of timber. The former image is an example of his sardonic black humour, but also proof that his WWII experiences were not far from the surface (1990, p.101).

28 “Within even the craziest of his drawings, the beautiful correctness of observed reality still ruled. He was not making the world look funny, but experiencing it as funny; it was less a style than a psychological condition” (Davies, 1990, p.95).


After being commissioned by Life magazine to cover the Adolf Eichmann\(^{30}\) trial in Jerusalem in 1960, he left England and his wife and family to live in Paris (Davies, 1990, p.136). There he produced a series of 73 violent and disturbing images titled *Anatomies and Decapitations* (1962-66). Could this schism in his personal life and

\(^{30}\) Adolf Eichmann was a member of the Nazi Gestapo who had escaped to South America after WWII.
creative output have its origins in his POW experiences? Or perhaps Searle felt compelled to escape the pressure of the commercial world and time to pursue a different direction artistically. Searle's tours of industrial Europe in the sixties, for Holiday and Fortune magazines, increased his awareness of damage to the environment and several of his cartoons at the time make undisguised comment. They are, however, still infused with the same mischievous social critique, seeing the world and those inhabiting it as ludicrously amusing: an attitude which I do not doubt helped him to survive his wartime ordeals.

31 The Ruhr (1963) and Pollution (1972) (Davies, 1990, pp.176, 177).
3.3 Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack

Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, because of his paternal Jewish lineage, was dismissed from his teaching position in Kiel by Hitler’s fascist regime. He was unable to find work again (Keaney, 2003, p.59) and in 1936 left Germany in disgust – and probably dismay. At the outbreak of WWII, he was teaching in England when taken captive as an enemy alien and interned on the Isle of Man before being transported on the Dunera to Australia in 1940.32 Resi Schwarzbauer states that after his suffering in World War I at the Somme “the Dunera experience was minor” (personal communication September 15, 2009). Hirschfeld Mack’s ability to survive the cataclysmic geographical, social, political and cultural upheavals of two world wars gives a glimpse of the calibre of this peaceful Quaker (Fisher, n.d.).

Prior to leaving Germany, Hirschfeld Mack had studied and worked at the Weimar Bauhaus with artists of the standing of Paul Klee, Wasily Kandinsky, Johannes Ittens and many others (Fisher, n.d.). During this period he dispensed with figuration and turned to the geometrics of neo-plasticism introduced by Piet Mondrian.33 Much of his early work was experimentation with the manipulation of light rays and abstraction. Yet many of the drawings he made during his internment are mainly figurative. Perhaps a change to figurative representation resulted from teaching introductory printing techniques to fellow internees, or realising that his experiences were best conveyed using representation, rather than abstraction.

While in Australian internment camps, Hirschfeld Mack and other German internees organised schools covering a multitude of subjects and, in his drawing and painting classes, he continued to teach Bauhaus techniques. In a letter to his daughter Marga from the camp in Hay, NSW, (13.11.1940), he says how quickly time passes because he had begun so many activities in the camp. He ran a course in colour theory during his brief internment at Orange and from Hay he mentions establishing a school for drawing and painting and making a huge sundial:

showing every 5 minutes from the early morning 5 am until 7 pm on the very top of the roof in the middle of our camp. It was a very straining job to paint on a steep slippery roof. I made also a huge sculpture about seven feet high out of wooden blocks, wonderful red gum, on eucalyptus wood, which is used a (sic) firewood; which is most expensive in Europe. It is more red than mahogany …

32 Bevege (1993) writes that “only strong nerves were capable of standing up to the trials through which many Dunera men and youths had come … they had been deported on a ‘hell ship’ to the antipodes where the stars were upside down and familiar northern sights and sounds missing” (p.90).
33 Neo-plasticism was based on the simplest, basic form and pure primary colour.
We also prepare for Christmas with (illegible): a choir and plays (13.11.1940, Hay). 34

Later in his internment, in a letter dated 20.3.1942, he tells Marga of the art and craft workshop he runs where they produced carved and turned objects such as bookends, paperweights and studs. There is also evidence that he taught the monotype printing technique he had developed with Paul Klee. 35 In 1942, after his release, monotypes were being produced by two other POWs, Erwin Fabian and Bruno Simon, indicating he had passed on his knowledge (Keaney, 2003, p.91).

Hirschfeld Mack’s woodcuts are all very precise renditions of the camps. Two held by the National Gallery of Victoria, show internees at Tatura involved in camp activities. He depicts eucalyptus trees and their shade very clearly. Perhaps this was especially significant after the extremely hot conditions endured at Hay in 1941. 36

He mentions working on the sculpture which was to become known as Yes, Sir 37 (Figure 15). Literature about his wartime artwork mentions a great deal of other sculpture, but which I have been unable to trace. This wooden sculpture however is a ridiculously exaggerated, rotund figure standing to attention, towering above a cluster of huts enclosed by the perimeter fence. “The words ‘Yes, Sir’ are carved into the base of the log. I find it difficult to imagine how and with what tools he worked sculptures from native red gum, which is an extremely hard wood. The absurd proportions of the bald figure are like Searle’s cartoons, humorous ‘digs’ at the military rules and orders regulating camp life” (Keaney, 2003, p.60).

34 “The internees were well organized and involved in lecture programmes and entertainments ... The inhibiting factor was the lack of basic equipment” (Bevege, 1993, p.101).
35 Durchdruckzeichnung: a transfer printing technique where paper is placed on an inked plate and drawing made on the reverse side, using a tool to make linear compositions. (Keaney, 2003, p.92)
36 Bevege refers to the internees being transferred from Hay in May 1941 “much to their relief ... Tatura appeared luxurious. There were trees, grass and hills [and] the place looked like a holiday camp compared to Hay” (1993, p.109).
37 In the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.
In letters to Marga (3 & 31.12.1941) the sadness of his internment re-emerges: “I have no friends in this camp. I live rather lonely, like in a desert ...” and “Letters are the only real enjoyment in this rather sad life behind barbed wire”. This might explain the poignancy behind his well-known Christmas card woodcut examined next.
Figure 16. Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack. *Desolation: Internment Camp, Orange, NSW*, 1940-41, Collection of the National Gallery of Australia. Woodcut on yellow card, 21.8 x 13.1 cm

The tenacity of an image to remain in the memory often lies in its simplicity. Hirschfeld Mack achieves this through the raw line produced by cutting into wood. *Desolation: Internment Camp, Orange, NSW* (Figure 16),\(^3\) seems to depict both despair and hope as a solitary figure looking up from behind barbed wire at what was for him probably a strange southern constellation. He writes to Marga at this time telling of his walking for several hours every evening within the perimeter fence “seeing all the wonderful star sky of the south with the Southern Cross” (16.4.1941, Hay). Keaney suggests he may have made this reference to the star of Bethlehem using

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\(^3\) First produced as a Christmas card in 1940. Now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.
the Southern Cross to imply a sense of hope in a new land (2003, p.90). Perhaps he was also aware of Australian history connected with this constellation.39

There are two more woodcuts at the Art Gallery of New South Wales made during the few months Hirschfeld Mack spent at Orange: one showing the camp grandstand, and the other an unusual print, in that it is from a viewpoint high above the camp huts stretching across to distant low hills and pastures. The latter is reminiscent of Howard Taylor’s print, *POW Camp, Germany*, discussed previously, depicting the country beyond the camp perimeter. Hirschfeld Mack’s print *Hay: Figures swimming in the Murrumbidgee 1940-41* (also at the Art Gallery of NSW), is somewhat abstract, the curve of the river complemented by the curves of two trees in the foreground. Another wartime print held by the Migration Heritage Centre in Melbourne shows a view of the camp as seen through an open window.

Keaney (1997) mentions watercolour studies for *Tale of Man* (*Searchers*) and *Family* produced at Hay in 1940: “*Searchers* is accompanied by a poem that relates the artist’s despair for himself and for his homeland, calls for strength and speaks of a spiritual yearning for future freedom and peace”: 

Closed in, enclosed in the walls  
under pressure, oh seize your strength  
hardly a ray of silver remains  
hope stays out in France’s fields  
look outwards, O poor soul, abandoned in distant never  
ending horizons where You see a distant circle. (p.89)  

The few wartime woodprints and watercolours produced by Hirschfeld Mack that I have seen are gentle, introspective works. After the war, Hirschfeld Mack stated “this capacity to look thoroughly at things has given men new hope and harmony in desperate situations” (Renowden & Schwarzauer, 2008, p.4): a survival statement similar to that made by Domenico Chiochetti (cited in Saunders 2003, p.197) and Ray Parkin, who knew the importance of “self-knowledge” (Bevan, 2004, p.136). These statements support my argument for the importance of art in adverse circumstances.

Indeed, most of Hirschfeld Mack’s woodcuts were pleasant renditions of his camp surroundings. But a pencil drawing titled *Hate and Madness* is completely out of character compared with all his other work I have seen. Three figures whose faces are contorted with hatred display an outpouring of anger. The central figure is a caricature

39 The Eureka Stockade
of the quintessential Jew, naked except for a pair of shorts. He is running straight out of the drawing seemingly ready to attack the viewer with a dagger. His other hand holds a stick which supports a bundle hanging over his shoulder. Behind him is a naked female figure with enormous lips. A third figure (top right) could be the devil. This drawing probably contains all the frustrations and despair of a man whose life had been drastically altered by war. It is reminiscent of the comment made by Betty Churcher of Bernard Slawik’s passionate rendition of the Janowska concentration camp, where “passion seems to take control of the pencil” (2008, p.93). In this case it could also be Hirschfeld Mack’s emotional outpouring – as a pacifist – at the madness of war.

His family has other drawings of diabolical images which convey such anger they must surely have proved to be a psychological release for his despair. For example, War Wedding shows two skeletal figures kneeling: the bride clasping her hands in her lap and the groom holding an open book. This is signed ‘1943’ so it must have been drawn after his release in 1942. Resi Schwarzauer, a researcher of Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, has suggested that he may be referring metaphorically to the diabolical alliances that had to be made during wartime. For instance Hirschfeld Mack had relatives who were forced to serve in the German army on pain of death (personal communication September 1st, 2009).

A watercolour (Figure 17) presented to the Queensland Art Gallery by Mrs. Olive Hirschfeld, depicts a row of figures whose heads interlock, each sharing one eye belonging to the next head. The figures only appear from the rib cage up. On the far right is a naked woman screaming, joined at the head to a man wearing a trilby hat, with his mouth contorted threateningly. His head is joined to that of a grinning skeleton. The final figure, also joined by the skull to the skeleton’s skull, is another near skeleton. The edge of the paper severs one skeleton. The background gives the impression of a furnace. I am interpreting these flames with hindsight and knowledge of the Holocaust: Hirschfeld Mack’s flames may simply indicate the catastrophic carnage of war and the joined heads may be a metaphor for the people forced to associate with one another during war. Whenever it was painted and for whatever reason, it is a very disturbing and effective commentary on war.
The private drawings held by his family reveal more about the internal conflicts Hirschfeld Mack must have endured than anything I have seen in public collections.

In another watercolour titled *Jump into a new World* (Figure 18), 1940, Hirschfeld Mack explores the spatial relationship between abstract shapes by depicting an abstract figure caught in a maze of geometric patterns. Could this have been his psychological and physical response to the turmoil of his life? And yet the colours and the composition allude to a sense of order and harmony, the maze culminating in the luminosity of the central figure, and lending the work a spiritual dimension (Keaney, 1997, p.91). This is a fine example of his abstract technique showing movement on a flat surface.

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40 Shown to me by Resi Schwarzbauer.
41 Held in the National Gallery of Australia collection.
Many of the paintings shown in a 2008 exhibition of his work at the Ian Potter Museum in Melbourne followed this geometric format. His technique incorporated tonal, sometimes waxy backgrounds, with heavily incised, patterned lines and textural designs applied in thick calsomine on card. These mixed media works produce complex, robust surfaces rendering an overall impression of movement and space.

In the notes for this exhibition there is a quote the artist made (taken from an article written by Clive Turnbull in 1946): “… upon the inter-weaving of the lines of two-dimensional shapes, and of silhouettes which are so composed in their values that they create third-dimensional illusions.” This helps explain his approach to spatial problems in painting and reveals that his approach to resolving these problems is similar to Howard Taylor’s studies at the time. Snell says that movement in painting was important to Taylor, as shown visually and pictorially in *Bush Figures*, 1957. “He pursued the interpretative possibilities of abstraction in describing visual sensation. Only Frank Hinder and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack had made equivalent contributions to this line of experimentation. As he continued this systematic analysis of movement … his paintings became more three-dimensional” (Snell, 1995, p.49).

Realising the qualifications and ability of Hirschfeld Mack, Dr. J. Darling, Principal of Geelong Grammar School offered him the post of Head of the Art Department in 1942, where he continued to practice and teach Bauhaus theories until his retirement (Fisher, n.d.). In 1963, he published *The Bauhaus: an Introductory Survey*, which formulated

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Bauhaus concepts for use in schools. He was a member of the Arts and Crafts Standing Committee of the Schools Board of Victoria, participated in two UNESCO seminars in 1954 as well as holding classes for teachers (Burke, 1964, p.11).

His contribution to education still reverberates today. Peter Stasny presented a paper in 1999, called Bauhaus Pedagogy in Exile: Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack and Art Education, and his biographers have just brought to my attention that The Free University in Berlin has initiated a four year Visiting Chair of Australian Studies, called the Hirschfeld Mack Chair. I feel this quiet, self-effacing man and talented artist, who brought with him the innovative techniques he developed at the Bauhaus in the twenties and introduced into the Australian education system, deserves to be better known and lauded. Had he gone to America with Walter Gropius as apparently had been planned, one wonders if Australian art education would be what it is today.

3.4 Reflection

In the introduction I asked the rhetorical question “How did imprisonment shape the individual artistic production of Howard Taylor, Ronald Searle and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack?

I believe that, in the case of Taylor, his interest with the sculptural effects of light on form and movement on a flat surface, developed in the POW setting, later produced work showing sublime integrity. Ronald Searle’s characteristically satirical humour, which he honed illustrating the Changi camp magazines, continued throughout his long career making him one of the sharpest, political commentators since Hogarth. Hirschfeld Mack’s wartime output seems to reflect the restrictions placed on him in captivity. Perhaps the fact that he was teaching others influenced him to create more figurative representation as he certainly resumed his interest in geometrical linear representation of movement on a flat surface after the war.

My research into these three artists has also revealed three completely different personalities, and yet they share certain similar behavioural traits. Howard Taylor, from the beginning of his art studies, pursued a methodical, intellectual and

43 Hirschfeld Mack presented a paper Creative Activity and the Study of Materials.
44 At the International Society for Education through Art (InSEA) 30th World Congress “Cultures and Transitions”
46 William Hogarth, English painter, printmaker, satirist and social critic. Lived from 1697-1764.
observational approach. In a 1986 interview, he spoke of honesty in relation to nature and painting and his preference for “honest painters” such as John Constable and Samuel Palmer (Dufour, 2003b, p.63). Taylor, like Hirschfeld Mack, became a teacher, bringing his intellectual integrity into the classroom. His pre-occupation with the resolution of depicting a three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface introduced him to making sculpture after the war, but his paintings became increasingly minimal explorations of light on form. In this respect, both he and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack apply a certain academic rigour in their approach to art-making and problem solving.  

Hirschfeld Mack’s early research into light, movement and colour theory, and his pursuit of Bauhaus ideas prevailed throughout his life: his design work at Geelong Grammar perpetuated Walter Gropius’ concept of Gesamtkunstwerk. Although Taylor and Hirschfeld Mack used different methodologies and techniques, they were both seeking to convey the illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional surface. From all the evidence uncovered in my research it is clear that the artwork of both Taylor and Hirschfeld Mack evolved through a purely intellectual commitment to their individual techniques.

The lack of materials during captivity may have affected the way they worked later in their career; Taylor was known to live an extremely frugal lifestyle which he employed in his studio, and Hirschfeld Mack was known to encourage economy of material and form (a Bauhaus principle) with which to produce art (Fisher, n.d.). Many of his paintings used calsomine with cardboard as the support, which are both very inexpensive materials.

Of these three artists Ronald Searle is possibly the best known, internationally, solely because of the popularity of his St. Trinian’s cartoons and films, and his acidic satire at the expense of the British upper class and, much later, his critique of the prosperous West German business world (Davies, 1990, p.174). Yet I find him to be the most elusive to describe. His talent with the pen is all the information he wants people to have. He wears satire like a cloak, covering his deep-rooted indignation at what he

47 “By being conscious of what constitutes good and bad design and choosing that which is good, you are helping to form the style of the 20th Century which is our contribution to the developing history of mankind” (Hirschfeld Mack, cited in Renowden and Schwarzbauer, 2008, p.27).

48 Walter Gropius was the founder of the Weimar Bauhaus and “Gesamtkunstwerk sought to bring artists and craftsmen together to collaborate in producing a larger result” (Renowden and Schwarzbauer, 2008, p.22).
perceives to be injustice of any sort. The fact that he left England (as I did) in the 1960s, might be due to the stultifying snobbery of the class system, its cloying mores, and another example of his need to survive.49

I find Searle’s work far more emotive than Taylor’s or Hirschfeld Mack’s but no less cerebral. I see it as a form of social comment, which, I am convinced, is the equal of that of William Hogarth in the 18th Century. We laugh at his cartoons, yet are made distinctly uncomfortable at the existence of the reasons for our laughter. His years in captivity may well have refined the need in him for making social comment through his art. The artworks of both Taylor and Hirschfeld Mack convey a sense of optimism. However, I think Dufour’s statement about Taylor being “an artist who never stopped experimenting with new ways to share the daily visual discoveries of someone attentive to the everyday experience of being in the world” (2003b, p.31) can equally be applied to Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack and Ronald Searle.

My admiration for these three artists lies in their lifelong dedication to their craft and the pursuit of technical excellence in visual art. Their art was their lifeline. This tenacity to pursue their individual ideologies inspires me to continue along my path: producing visual anti-war art.

49 The Great British Songbook, (compiled by Kingsley Amis and James Cochrane. London. 1986) is a great example of his disdain.
4. Bringing the Past into the Present

The prime function of memory, then, is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present (Lowenthal, 1985, p.210).

As we have seen, many hand drawn and site-specific POW images convey the barbarity of war and man's propensity for cruelty. POW art can effectively convey psychological and physical oppression and humanise the impact of senseless carnage. Art that recounts the personal day-to-day impacts of war is of particular importance because statistics, though shocking, distance us from human sorrow and suffering. Still, today, the effect mass murder and upheaval has on each individual caught in the maelstrom of war is not sufficiently acted upon. My WWII childhood experiences, the disruption war caused to my extended family, together with my research, strengthen my conviction that the historical anti-war sentiment located within POW artwork from WWII should be immediately endorsed as powerful anti-war art and promoted as such. It makes no sense to me that these potentially powerful messages for promoting peace should remain invisible.

It is possible that art can be held captive by its place in history. The magnitude of recent events, such as WWII and subsequent wars, might hold too many hard lessons. The resulting 'distance' and shrinking responsibility produces the disadvantage of a disconnection. But historicity should not diminish the significance or impact of POW art. Our visual history, together with written history, has always provided explanation and understanding of past societies and cultures. With the benefit of hindsight, the past is always better defined than the present.

With this idea in mind, I suggest that the unique artwork produced by all POWs deserves to be exhibited in its own right and that, to this end, separate sections for POW art are established in the institutions holding this work. It is evident that war museums do not afford POW art its proper place amongst its 'official' war art. Much POW art appears to be dispersed amongst University and art gallery collections and is, even today, still kept by family members. Its own separate exhibition space could bring it together making it a much more powerful concept, and introduce it to a younger generation. Lowenthal, (1985, p.46) states “The past is most characteristically invoked for the lessons it teaches”.

Although art should not be held captive by history, it cannot divorce itself from its social context without becoming meaningless. Papastergiadis (1998) asks “What
happens when there is not even the memory of other struggles? ... To attempt to forget the past is to be condemned to repeat it by other means” (pp. 22, 23). How can I as a visual artist respond to the theory that humanistic values are in danger of becoming increasingly depleted?

However, Nietzsche warns that “over-attention to the past turns men into dilettante spectators, their creative instinct destroyed” (Nietzsche, cited in Lowenthal, 1985, p.65). I find I tread a fine line between the idea of learning from the past and staying in the past. POW art needs to be seen as part of its historical context but also needs the opportunity to break free from its historicity and speak to future generations. I believe that art is not only important within its own context but that its importance prevails beyond its context. Art’s defining message will inevitably ring true today: the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Shakespeare still provide us with lessons from the past.

Sixty years after WWII, and some 30 years after the Vietnam war, anti-war and social comment about injustice are gaining expression through a broader spectrum of the arts.50 Daniel Heyman travelled to Turkey and Jordan to interview 25 previous Abu Ghraib detainees. He painted their portraits and integrated his interviews with each sitter, by writing his questions and their responses within each painting. Sandow Birk constantly makes reference to the past in his work. For example, his book of etchings entitled *The Depravities of War* is based on Jacques Callot’s *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War* (1633) – a response to the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Almost 200 years later (1810-1813) Goya completed 82 etchings entitled *Disasters of War* which was also a tribute to Callot’s work. (Braddon, 2007, pp.26, 27, 32). There are many contemporary artists making artwork and commenting on current wars and atrocities and the internet is encouraging the spread of these ideas. Much successful contemporary visual art provides a way to involve its audience, striving to demand a collaborative consciousness, awakening critical reflexivity and consideration of the past. By combining the essence of deprivation and loss of liberty with the mounting world-wide tragedy of people displaced by war and seeking refuge in safer countries, I intend to invest my visual arts praxis with my ethical sense of responsibility for promoting humanitarianism and peace. I seek to add my voice to this rising tide of opposition to war.

50 Much of the protest art to which I refer achieves a world-wide audience via the web. Virtual space is now used by museums and Universities. I found internet images by Americans Sandow Birk and Daniel Heyman commenting on the war in Iraq, (the latter specifically about the abuses at Abu Ghraib) which I could not have viewed in any other way.
The arts instantly react (and should react) to the cataclysmic destruction of war. Immediately after WWII, there was a resurgent creativity in the arts in the West, possibly even an act of rebellion against politically modified and imposed values and restrictions. For instance, both modern jazz improvisation and abstract expressionism ignored the rules of convention 51: a similar artistic reaction to that which prevailed after the First World War in the form of Dadaism, the Novembergruppe, Neue Sachlikeit and Surrealism. These movements investigated the meanings of everyday life and were “a critique of the dominant forms of consciousness in the modern world” (Papastergiadis, 1998, p.23).

There is a dominant ethos today which, I believe, is often referred to as the ‘me’ generation, based on fulfillment of the individual, consumerism and a lack of collective responsibility, an ethos which has been prominent since the 80s. Papastergiadis comments that debates within the arts in the 80s included discourse on critical theory and incorporated debates on modernism within broader scholarship, implying that this no longer occurs (1998, p.22). This is not to say contemporary artists are unaware of theory and politics. Perhaps the fractured diversity of post modernism reflects lives compromised by constant global conflicts, and the ‘special’ dehumanising language describing aggression which is used by contemporary media camouflages the truth and numbs our reflexivity. “The discourse of war abounds in double speak: contorted language is deliberately used to insulate our minds from its hellish reality ... protective reactions ... pacification ... targets ... friendly fire” (Livingstone Smith, 2007, p.109).

Our critical faculties are strained by the steady bombardment of information and we have become desensitised by and to images of horror. Roland Barthes (1979, p.71) suggests that we become “dispossessed of our judgement” because of image saturation. The picture becomes a news item “someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us: the photographer has left us nothing except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence” (p.72). We simply accept what we see. In a sense, visual art transcends this apathy. Artists can provoke viewers to negotiate meanings, responsibilities and actions.

51 After WWII artists were challenging previous aesthetic yardsticks, by developing Tachisme (a stylistic variant of Abstract Expressionism): la tache meaning spot or blotch of colour. “Art Brut” (crude or raw art); and Colour Field Painting (Mark Rothko), which give no direct link with the outside world and appear emotionless and unengaged (Richter, 2001, pp.98-104)
For those who are fortunate never to be involved in war personally, comprehending the horrors of war can be a slow process. It can take a lifetime to accumulate the true facts behind the causes and effects of war. Images in newspapers and magazines or art by both ‘official’ and even non-official artists often obfuscate facts. I contend therefore that the most effective anti-war mechanism, which remains longest in our collective consciousness, is that which is seen, and witnessed, by people at the scene who can record and recount directly, and interpret what they see.

In my research I have found that since WWII, none of the subsequent wars produced the same amount of POW art. The reason for this is not immediately apparent. Prisoners captured by the Vietcong were imprisoned for longer periods than WWII POWs but Saunders (2003, pp.198 – 200) mentions only one wooden sculpture from the Korean War and “innumerable cigarette lighters, letter openers, and models of military equipment made from recycled war materiel” during the Vietnam conflict. Thus the WWII POW art becomes an especially important historical record. However, the massive peace movements and the art these later wars engendered can also be seen as important historical outcomes. This directs my research to investigate contemporary artists whose social conscience has taken the form of anti-war protest.

Many contemporary artists born in the decades after WWII have dealt with unpleasant social commentary, such as the inhumanity of war: genocide, ethnic and political violence, colonialism and the plight of refugees. Luc Tuymans (2001) has referred to the Holocaust in his painting *Within*, by depicting an empty cage in which the absence of inhabitants symbolizes death. Mona Hartoum has also pursued this symbolism in her work *The Mexican Cage* (2002). In her 1994 installation *Women, War, Victimage, Resistance*, Nancy Spero referenced Nazi atrocities to women. Her work contained a printed collage titled *Masha Bruskina, Gestapo Victim* (Bird, 1996, pp.98-109). Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar makes art based on the inhumanity of political violence: genocides and ethnic cleansing and Anselm Kiefer’s artwork seeks answers to the atrocities which occurred during WWII in his country of birth - Germany.

I contend that since WWII, exhibitions of the art, and photographic, records of WWII atrocities, have helped to influence an anti-war consciousness. This has led to post-war artists becoming more politically aware and outspoken, producing artwork condemning injustice. Even contemporary ‘official’ war artist, Peter Churcher (who was sent to Afghanistan) does not hold the view (as did Paul Nash in WWII) that paintings are a propaganda tool. Churcher sees modern warfare as “dehumanized” and
says “we’re just losing that connectedness with what it’s really all about, which is basically human despair and destruction”. He wants his artwork to recall to the viewer the “small moments” of the war and for his portrayal to make the viewer imagine being there (Bevan, 2004, p.284).

Margaret Bourke-White is best known for her photographs of the Deep South of the United States in the Thirties, but she covered WWII as a photo correspondent and witnessed the Buchenwald concentration camp liberation. Her photograph entitled, Survivors in Buchenwald (Figure 19) is an eloquent condemnation of evil ideologies (Anderson, 2005, p.145). In 1976-77 another artist, Audrey Flack, incorporated this in a powerful painting World War II (Vanitas) (Figure 20), which reinforces my argument that WWII art work is still significant. This is a symbolic picture relating an allegory of war in the context of beauty and evil co-existing. The still life genre known as the Vanitas was an intellectual form of still life popular in the 17th century. Flack has used luscious cakes juxtaposed with the Bourke-White black and white photograph, seeking to lure the viewer with aesthetic beauty to reveal the horror of war (Audrey Flack – WW2, n.d.).
All the above mentioned artists – and many more born after the Second World War – reflect the spirit of the WWII POWs’ art: raising ongoing deep, social and moral questions. This proves that it is possible for images evoking a particular context at a particular time can continue to resonate far beyond their original context. Art provokes dialogue with history. Contemporary artists still make reference to Francisco de Goya, Otto Dix and many others. I believe WWII POW visual art still has a place today. It can influence contemporary protest and anti-war art and provide an ethical voice. In my practice I seek to emulate the spirit of these artists’ works. I believe I can interpret the critical content of WWII POW visual art within my own practice to strengthen the anti-war message within a contemporary context.

4.1 Practice

Through my praxis I endeavour to sharpen awareness of history – particularly war history from the perspective of victims ravaged by the diverse and often lasting effects of war. The combined experience of analysing original documents and talking with
curators in preparation of this paper has stimulated my awareness of the historical relevance of POW art at this time and its significance as a form of protest art, and also why it has been so important for me personally.

Researching images made by POWs and the associated circumstances and long lasting impacts on their lives has been somewhat like holding up a mirror to my own lifeworld and has made me realise why I have such latent anger and deep rooted sadness about WWII in particular, and war generally. My practice helps me overcome the personal anguish I feel about the disruptive effects WWII had on my own family, and its lasting effects. Therefore I feel it is important to embrace the spirit of POW artwork by linking it with contemporary issues such as the refugee crisis fuelled by the horrors and social injustices of war.52

I see parallels between the ineptitude and indifference of the power brokers in the Thirties53 with those of today. I find it frightening and hard to reconcile how it is that humanity still so often takes a back seat to politics. I seek to address this inequity through my praxis by promoting peace, both in my written and visual work. Figure 21 shows my painting referring to the Twin Towers' destruction, titled Will it never end?, 2004. This title is a reference to the senseless killing of innocent civilians for whatever reason: ideologies, political expediency, revenge. The painting reflects on 20th century wars, referencing First World War graves, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, an extract from Picasso's Guernica and the image of a WWII fire fighter (my father?) being a reference to the incessant carnage. One of the horses of the Apocalypse has a central place, as I recall a New Yorker referring to the destruction as being an apocalyptic event. I have twinned despair and hope with the inclusion of Cimabue's medieval head of Christ and a benign Buddha surrounded by doves of peace.

52 "Both the materiality of artwork and its meanings are always situated within social history" (Papastergiadis, 1998, p.22).
53 UK Prime Minister, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, French Premier, M. Eduard Daladier, Sir Nevile Henderson, British Ambassador to Berlin, and Lord Halifax, British Foreign Secretary.
My third year graduation installation artwork made reference to Goya’s prints the *Disasters of War* of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, combining this with the media coverage of the torture victims photographed at Abu Ghraib (Figure 22). My current installation reflects the spirit of WWII POW visual art54, some of which depicts hordes of displaced people being removed from their homes, often going to their death. The present situation, where thousands of refugees flee the wars of the 21st century, is one which I cannot ignore and which other contemporary artists have also addressed.

54 *Transport to the East* by Leo Haas, himself interned at Terezin concentration camp.
Figure 22. Eileen Whitehead. *Man's Inhumanity to Man*, 2007. Acrylic on calico, installation panel 25 x 127cm.
With the proliferation of internet websites, artists have been able to make connections globally, generating ideas and organizing resistance against institutional ideologies, such as the fabrication and artifice perpetrated by the Howard government on the subject of refugees. Websites formed early in the millennium tackled this issue by representing the context of images depicting boat people, staging benefit concerts and organising school projects encouraging year 6 and 7 students to document refugee stories in their own communities. Australian composer, Brett Dean, wrote a piece for a string quartet, entitled *Eclipse*, in response to the Tampa asylum-seeker crisis of 2001. 55

The American artist Jenny Holzer is well-known for her LED signs with which she illuminates buildings all over the world. Her artworks consist of words and ideas commenting on current political issues, such as genocides and refugees. Nancy Spero’s recent *Cri du Coeur* (2005) shows a world declining into violence, chaos and grief. An-My Le, herself a Vietnamese refugee, explores the disjunction of wars as historical events and their representation as contemporary entertainment. I particularly appreciate the tension in one of her paintings of a deckchair facing the sea from the beach. Next to the chair is a table on which is placed an AK47, also pointing out to sea.

The treatment of refugees during the Howard government engendered several artists groups 56, all actively promoting public consciousness through their art. Juan Davila, a Chilean artist who fled the Pinochet regime in the 90s, produced an exhibition titled *Woomera* in 2002, in which he depicted the refugees as being ‘white’, implying anyone can become a refugee. WWII certainly proved that.

To encourage an awareness of the continuation of oppression invoked by war my own artwork aims to reflect the impact of wars, both in the past and currently within a contemporary scenario. To this end I have created an installation referring to the continual physical and mental fragmentation brought about by displacement, and the disruption global wars cause. It refers to loss – loved ones, possessions, homes, cultures, identities - and questions what we become because of this loss: what do we lose within ourselves, both as recipients, perpetrators and observers?

55 "I felt that their very humanity and the enormity of their own personal struggles and fates were entirely eclipsed by the power games of a bigger political agenda" ("National Concert Tour Four: Alchemy," 2009).

56 We are all Boat People [www.boat-people.org](http://www.boat-people.org). Artists for refugees [artistsforrefugees@hotmail.com](mailto:artistsforrefugees@hotmail.com). And several others.
The ideas for my installation altered as I struggled with the concept of referring back to the life-changing events of WWII and combining these with what is occurring today. Drawing inspiration from WWII pictures, I originally envisioned working with clothes and alluding to the disappearance of the wearers. However, the small drawing, *Transport to the East*, 1941, by Leo Haas (incidentally my year of birth), impressed on me a connection with all the illustrated newspaper articles I collect depicting lines of refugees today.

Acknowledging Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, one of my three case study artists, by using Durchdruckzeichnung a transfer printing technique he invented,\textsuperscript{57} appealed greatly. It has allowed me to draw directly into the ink which produces negative images when printed, or, if I draw the image directly onto paper placed on the ink, gives me one positive image with all the remaining prints being negative. The negative print suggests disappearance and a sense of ephemerality and loss of identity: a methodology which sits perfectly with the theme of displaced peoples. This oscillation between positive and negative shapes gives me the metaphorical reference I was seeking for hope and despair.

As the ink in my print run fades with each copy, the faceless figures disappear altogether, leaving the viewer to explore the remaining void and to imagine the reasons for this loss of form and what the spaces left signify. My work, a composition of fragments, is a reflection on what a combination of homelessness, loss of homeland, culture and probably incarceration, together with host country resentment, can do to destroy people (Figure 23).

Using this transfer printing process gives me the satisfaction of producing a different drawing every time I re-ink, which allows me to interact with the meaning behind each print run. Although this method of image preparation is slow, the actual printing process itself is faster and has allowed me to produce the two hundred and fifty prints I need for the installation concept I eventually adopted. It also allows for subtle differences in the hues of the mixed inks, which combine blue, red and yellow to produce various subdued shades of brown – sometimes even a dried blood colour.

Originally I chose to use butchers paper to print on because of its significance: its multiple uses of wrapping up fish and chips, meat, parcels, etc. – a throwaway material which yellows with age and is not very strong. Its connection with my subject seemed

\textsuperscript{57} Transfer monotype print process invented at the Weimar Bauhaus by Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack and Paul Klee in 1921 (Keaney, 2003, p.92).
of the essence. However, I decided to use newsprint instead. It is similar to butcher’s paper in an everyday context, but is more directly associated to world events and war. For more than five years I have been collecting newspaper articles about war and asylum seekers. Hence I acquired unprinted waste newsprint rejected by The West Australian because of contamination with faint traces of print. The inadvertent light transfer of ink from adjacent press runs seemed apt as a ground for my process of transfer printing as, in both cases, this faded quality of image could metaphorically allude to the plight of refugees and their displaced identities. My prints also imply poorly printed newspapers: faded, wrinkled and creased. Damaged, like old photographs, they refer to forgotten items of news, misrepresentation, disappearance and elimination. The prints are pinned together implying the fragility of life for displaced people and how quickly our life-world can come undone.

I initially planned two separate installations in which the viewer would walk through an S-shaped corridor formed of eight foot high walls constructed from my prints. The concept of having a wall of prints stems from the Israeli wall keeping Palestinians refugees in their own country. This maze-like corridor led to a small corner installation depicting an empty chair and a table with an empty family photograph album, which was a reference to my own personal wartime experiences. However, I decided this would not be easily understood by anyone other than myself.

Looking again more closely at the Spectrum Project Space chosen for this installation, I decided to use the large RSJ beam which dissects the room across the middle, from the north wall to the large factory-style door in the south wall. Instead of using the S-shaped maze idea I am making several fixtures across this beam, which will support two rows of prints about 100cm apart gradually narrowing (funnel-like) until only 20-30cm apart at the door on the south wall. My printed images depict line ups of people. The prints are impaled on barbed wire signifying detainment.

This corridor of prints, almost the length of the room, refers back to the isolating experience and official processing of displaced people. One wall of prints begins with the positive prints which gradually fade out through the door indicating the return of unsuccessful asylum seekers. In contrast, the second wall of prints begins with strong, positive prints flowing in through the door and fading as they enter the room to denote successful relocation. The narrowness of the passage is meant to convey a sense of confinement, disorientation and discomfort. The door is the focal point for this process. The viewer can choose whether or not to enter this claustrophobic space.
At the end of the corridor of prints and directly facing the closed door is an institutional style of chair. I am prompting the viewer to question who would sit in this chair: an immigration officer, a family member awaiting reunion. On the chair is a blank (unprinted) newspaper. For me the blankness alludes to the question of what next?

While writing this exegesis I am still in the process of making the prints for this installation, therefore the images of work are details of the installation. The full effect of a 9 meter wide wall of prints cannot be appreciated from the images included here.

Figure 23. Eileen Whitehead. Installation detail, 2009. Transfer monotype printing on newsprint paper.

I feel it is important for my art to provoke dialogue within social history. I think it is imperative to learn from historical art sources. I contend it is important that the past remain at the forefront of our memory to prevent repetition of evil (to be condemned to repeat it). The works of twenty WWII POW artists I have considered in the course of
my research together with the works of Christian Boltanski and Alfredo Jaar that make reference to war-induced social injustices have influenced me to make art about difficult and sometimes unpalatable subjects. I feel compelled to continue to represent past and present injustices through my work and work to help promote tolerance and peace.
5. Conclusion

Art, among other things, creates values ... Humanity is not something with which man is born. It has to be learned and fought for, and often the artist becomes the individual in whom the struggle to maintain or achieve true humanity manifests itself, the man in revolt against accepted values, the guardian of non-conformity (von Blum, 1976, p.ix).

My aims were to explore my interests in WWII POW art-making by analysing primarily the significance of such work to the artists themselves, to their fellow internees, and its relevance as a form of protest against war. The personal experiences and creative outcomes of three POW artist case studies that focus on Howard Taylor, Ronald Searle and Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack support my conviction that making art is a therapeutic tool for surviving war and is, potentially, a highly effective means of deterring war and promoting humanitarian values.

My research has revealed the importance of creative activity in the lives of POWs. Art elevated the POW artist above the oppressive conditions of imprisonment and also helped provide relief for fellow internees. For the three artists in my case studies, creative activities were highly important, providing them with a meaning for their life in captivity. Howard Taylor certainly escaped prison constraints by intellectually challenging himself to solve optical perceptions of light on objects and perspective, both effecting a sense of space in his WWII drawings, and emanating in a subliminal "vaporous quality" in later works\textsuperscript{58}. Ronald Searle’s zeal to record his POW experiences gave him the incentive and will to survive, and his humorous magazine illustrations and theatre sets provided other POWs with a sense of optimism to attempt to endure inhumane circumstances. Professionally trained Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack continued practising his art during internment. He also taught fellow internees different printing techniques and provided them with occupation in the arts\textsuperscript{59}. His rapidly changing circumstances provided new stimuli and unfamiliar southern hemisphere landscapes to focus on. Like all those in captivity he had to use whatever materials were available.

The survival of these three artists was assisted by the importance they attached to producing personal reflections of their respective environments. Their images also provide significant historical records of the conditions they endured. Post war these

\textsuperscript{58} Paintings such as *Forest Land*, 1982 and *Halation*, 1985 (Snell, 1995, p.121)

\textsuperscript{59} He ran a school of drawing and painting while at Hay. (Letter to his daughter 13 November 1940).
three internees went on to become professional artists and produce art which was shaped by their WWII experiences.

It is difficult to prove categorically the importance of art to POWs other than the artist, but all the literature written by non-artist POWs and writers who have researched wartime prison conditions have spoken of the positive effect of art on the overall morale of POWs. MacArthur (2005), on the subject of Lt. Col. Philip Toosey’s attempt to improve conditions at the Tamarkan camp, says “arts and crafts were inaugurated as therapy for convalescents” (p.86). Ray Parkin described painting “Like a symbol of triumph over defeat and confinement” (Bevan, 2004, p.126), which surely must be construed as therapeutic. Witnessing and recording war-related events as they occurred certainly proved to be a therapeutic tool for the artist and the act itself invariably involved the participation of others (collecting objects, being subjects) who gained a sense of community spirit.

While I have been unable to prove my theory that the invisibility of POW artwork is due to institutional ideologies, it is a fact that this kind of artwork is rarely exhibited. In addition to the Benalla Art Gallery’s unsuccessful attempt to borrow Chalker’s POW drawings from the Australian War Memorial, which I discuss in the Introduction, the Art Gallery of Western Australia also has no record of any recent exhibition of Howard Taylor’s WWII drawings (personal communication October 12, 2009).

In Chapter 4 Bringing the Past into the Present I argue that art can be held captive by its place in history. In the case of POW art I believe it is being held captive by institutionalized ideologies. Campaign failures, such as Gallipoli are held in high esteem and touted as a historical event which has shaped our national identity and has legitimated Australians in their own eyes. Yet the art produced by captured soldiers, sailors and airman and, in the instance of Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, an enemy alien, is not lauded but hidden away. I agree with the spirit of this quote from Wiel (cited in Lowenthal) that “We possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past, and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us” (1985, p. 44). Whilst I concede there are other treasures, I contend that humanity is diminished because of the invisibility of POW artworks.

I believe it is time to acknowledge that state and national institutions are not always appropriate custodians and venues for exhibiting POW art. Every country town in
Australia has its own war memorial prominently displayed and I maintain the POW artwork should also be displayed within a communal setting to acquaint younger generations with the history of war and the impact on ordinary civilians.

POW artworks have transcended time, and immediately transport the viewer back into the conditions depicted. We can smell the rot and decay of the ulcerated leg and hear the buzz of the flies in Chalker’s Chungkai, 1943 (Figure 2). POW art has this power because it imparts transience, tomorrow is not a given.

Although sixty years have passed since WWII, I maintain its POW art is still relevant in contemporary society and can be used to question the ceaseless repetition of war. Herbert Marcuse, on the subject of Auschwitz and My Lai, states that “Art draws away from this reality, because it cannot represent this suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form … this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it [war] impossible.” He goes on to say that deception and illusion are part of an established reality but that a work of art “does not conceal that which is – it reveals” (1978, p.56). “Art can preserve its truth, it can make conscious the necessity of change, only when it obeys its own law against that of reality” (Marcuse, 1978, p.32).

In my own praxis, I equate chaotic scenes from the Pathe News which I saw as a child on cinema screens, and the pictures in newspapers of millions of refugees streaming out of Europe for several years after WWII, with the tragic war-induced events of today. Unfortunately, conflicts globally are still prompting mass migrations of people who are rendered homeless and often destitute. The subsequent human rights abuses associated with their flight to perceived safety are appalling. Like the humanitarian ethos underlying Alfredo Jaar’s work, my praxis keeps returning to the interaction between the dominant and the dominated. I am increasingly concerned about issues stemming from invasive military strategies. The refugee crisis today (as was the case after WWII) is in part caused by the actions of dominant powers and I feel compelled to address this in my artwork.

History must not dominate the present but if its meaning and lessons to future generations diminishes, even the memory of past evils will not survive. In the words of Louise Adler, CEO of Melbourne University Press, “Righting the wrongs of the past is a shared responsibility; acknowledging the past and its victims is a touchstone in a
civil society. Our ability to recognize and empathise with history’s victims is a foundational marker of a decent society” (“A lesson”, 2009).
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