

Science and the creative arts: a potent collaboration for change

During National Science Week we ran the third in a series of Canberra Conversations. The event centred on the role that the creative arts can play in global issues such as climate change, particularly given the ability of the arts to bring voice to the emotional and ethical dimensions of these topics. Our key speakers were composer Judy Clingan AM, Jungian analyst-composer Dr Glenda Cloughley, renowned cellist David Pereira and CSIRO scientists Dr Richard Stirzaker and Dr Nicky Grigg.

Glenda Cloughley discussed the importance of metaphor, teaching stories and songs, and the need for voices of logos and eros to be brought together for humans and nature to be brought into harmonious relationship. She spoke specifically of her work "The Gifts of the Furies" about relations between people and Earth and discussed Tom Bass' statue "Ethos" as a powerful symbol of the wisdom we seek. Judy Clingan spoke of a work she wrote twenty years ago, Terra Beata – Terra Infirma, which looked at the history of humankind's attitude to the natural environment. In this work she brought life to voices from our past, quoting humans from across history who have voiced a caretaker role for the Earth. David Pereira presented a "pure and abstract" view of music, one where music is valued for its own sake, and he cautioned us about the dangers of using music for other purposes. The audience contributed actively with their own reactions to the artists' points of view.

Richard Stirzaker discussed the perils of scientists promising "solutions" to difficult and complex problems in water use and food production. He reflected on the nature of complexity and how his view of the role of scientists has changed through his experiences. Nicky Grigg described how the physical sciences have, over the years, provided a lot of well-researched information into human impacts on the Earth. The need now is not so much for more biophysical research in isolation, but more intelligent interaction between the biophysical knowledge and the human dimensions studied in economics and social sciences.

Glenda Cloughley composed two new songs for the occasion. "How to Tell" was written from a characteristic collaboration within A Chorus of Women, where Glenda observed and talked with Nicky Grigg about some of her deep motivations as a scientist and musician. Nicky sang the song after speaking about her science, and many participants said they felt this song was the emotional pivot of the event. The song "Songs in the Science" involved the audience in singing the hope underlying the event's purpose.

We were particularly pleased with our audience, who participated fully in all the discussions, resulting in a rich and detailed dialogue and response to the interviews and musical performances.

A Chorus of Women has run three events in National Science Week over the past three years: "On the Edge of Silence", "Longing for Wisdom" and "Science and the Creative Arts - a potent collaboration for change?". Each event has explored topics of climate change and global change and brought an artistic voice to the science and the ethical and emotional dimensions of these big challenges.