

BOHIE: Art for the Environment

A conversation with [Anna-Sophie Jürgens](#) and [Blake Thompson](#) | Section: [Interviews](#) | Series: [Street art, Science and Engagement](#)

Abstract: In this article, artist BOHIE discusses her work in the public art formats of street art, murals and fine art murals, and the messages they convey. Her work is a gentle, research-inspired representation of the natural world; inclusive with a sense of belonging, but also challenging social constructs and gender stereotypes. Through her fascination and engagement with sciences – including the science of emotions – BOHIE communicates in a kind, non-judgemental way, which inspires reverence for, and connection with, animals and the environment around us. The conversation delves into our environment, the science of emotions in street art and her collaborations with researchers and research institutions.

BOHIE, we are delighted to welcome you to the online journal w/k. You are a multidisciplinary, versatile artist creating design, murals and creative workshopping experiences that explore our relationship with each other and our natural world through visual storytelling. In other words, you engage in culturally transformative creative works through large scale public mural works, fine art and commercial design. Many of your artworks – and in this conversation we are particularly interested in your murals – are dedicated to environmental themes, convey environmental messages and are linked to (if not the result of) your engagement with research and science and your discussions and collaborations with researchers. All this is very interesting for w/k, and in this article we invite you to reflect on these collaborations and how environmental research (and discourse) inspires and shapes your work, with the aim of better understanding the artistic concept behind your environmentally themed murals. As an introduction, we would like to ask you to briefly introduce yourself to our readers, who are interested in the intersection of art and science.

Hello! I'm an artist based in a beautiful small town of Braidwood, located just an hour from Canberra, the South Coast and the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales (NSW; a state in Australia). I create murals, art, design, and creative workshopping experiences that explore wonder and connection to each other and to the natural world. I work alongside educational institutions, government agencies, community focus groups and stewards of the natural world to design change-making campaigns for each creative project. I utilise a research-based methodology to find inspiration for my artworks, resulting in 2D images which are laden with deeper stories and symbolic meaning. This narrative driven conceptual development injects my unique authenticity and grass-roots integrity into the public arena, which I see as a conscious challenge to public advertising. In a time of rapid change, extreme instability and a globally recognised feeling of imminent threat, my art provides messages of hope for empowerment within a changed future.



BOHIE: *Inspire Growth* (2022). Photo: BOHIE.

My work explores philosophical connections that influenced both our colonial past and our shared future, seeking to highlight how our perceptions of the natural world and each other might still be influenced by archaic and often ill-serving social constructs and gender stereotypes.



BOHIE: *On a Journey* (2021). Photo: BOHIE.

Within this, my specific focus is on *connection and belonging*, which I approach through the lens of our inherently capitalist society – as learned through my background in client driven graphic design. In this space, my own narrative is explored, both for generational healing and for connection to both local communities and the natural environment around me.



BOHIE: *A Sense of Belonging* (2021). Photo: BOHIE.



BOHIE: *Taste the Feeling* (2019). Photo: BOHIE.

My ideas express gentleness and empathy towards the audience, inviting them to pause and be present with moments of vulnerability and care in our rapidly changing world. I ask the viewer to question our current circumstances and create mindful connections both with the natural world and with each other.

Art in public spaces

On your [website](#) you mention that you create meaningful artwork within the public realm, including murals, street art and fine art murals. How would you define and differentiate these genres for our readers?

That's a great question. I would say the answers to this question can vary from artist to artist depending on their own relationship with their art and their individual career path. For me, a *mural* usually means I've been given a brief – let's say, by a café owner or public school. It could be indoors or outdoors and can often have a message that the client wants to convey to help them build their brand. *Street art* is in the public realm, so it's often grant funded or government supported with a community in mind. Street art has the potential to create placemaking for a suburb or town and can often explore ideas and opinions shared by the local community. Street art doesn't speak on behalf of one business or group; it is open to interpretation by any person, age, gender and race who might be walking by. *Fine art murals* provide an opportunity for the artist to express themselves on a large scale. These are often in the public space or can be private or even commissioned by an office or business. They give the artist an opportunity to express themselves without a brief, on whatever topic they choose.

Balancing my background in hand painted typography with a deep care for the natural world, I use kindness within my art as an ethical model for leadership towards our shared future. My style is bright, warm, inclusive and filled with hope to encourage a sense of connection and belonging. It's important to me that my artworks provide an open-hearted sense of welcome for the viewer to engage with.



BOHIE and Faith Kerehona: *In Our Hands* (2020). Photo: BOHIE.

Your murals are public art, and you are passionate about inspiring social and environmental change through your work (including your murals, but also mural workshops). Please tell us a bit more about your thoughts on the cultural and transformative power of (street) art in public spaces!

Public art is so unique in that it is an artistic response to a theme or idea that is not closed off behind gallery walls. Public art is in open space and open to interpretation by the hundreds or thousands of

people who might pass by it within that artworks' lifespan. The opportunity to move people in this context is an incredible platform and one that we can consider here a little further. For example, when presenting a new idea on social media that we hope might inspire cultural change, we are competing with thousands if not billions of other messages. The viewer might scroll past our message and spend a second or two looking at it, or perhaps they are not in the mood, and they scroll right past or perhaps the algorithm doesn't even show our message until we pay more to have it displayed.

On a large-scale wall in the public space, we have the opportunity to engage with everyday people while they are open minded, taking the world in, walking past a mural for 20 or 30 seconds – or perhaps it intrigues them from blocks away or they drive past it every morning on their daily commute. There is no algorithm, so the message is available to everyone, and it's not advertising which the audience may have developed the mental ability to tune out. Perhaps the artwork becomes a part of what they consider "home", or they stumble upon it while wandering the streets to process emotions. Perhaps this artwork provides them with a sense of calm and wonder and inspires them to take a moment to pause and breathe and engage with the natural world around them, giving them a much-needed hit of dopamine on a stressful Monday morning.

I consider this potential to be deeply valuable to our social consciousness and for the health of our planet. We, as humans, need green spaces, colourful spaces, breathing spaces and public spaces where unhurried connection can take place. It is especially important to me that these spaces don't have a capitalist agenda behind them.



BOHIE: *The Future is Bright* (2020). Photo: BOHIE.



BOHIE: *Together We Can ...* (2019). Photos: BOHIE.

In my personal art I aim to provide the opportunity for non-humans to feel seen, heard and have a sense of belonging. So the message of equality and sustainability is expressed *within* the artwork.

It's important to me that humans are reminded that they are not the only living beings on this earth, and my art aims to provide a light-hearted and non-judgmental approach to communicating this message. In my art, animals are often portrayed as highly emotionally intelligent and the human-animal relationship is portrayed as equals who are working together (often with the animal in the leadership role) towards a shared future. It is this quality in my art that creates a sense of innocence and childlike curiosity, as our imaginations at a young age can easily create friends and familial narratives behind any living being. The reality, as scientists know, is that the intelligence of plants and animals is deeply astounding and deserves reverence. The desire to over hunt, mine, forest or create monocultures of living beings feels deeply wrong to me, and I want to encourage others to question this and feel empathy towards the living beings and millennia old environments that are being taken advantage of.



BOHIE: *How to Stay Curious in a World Gone Topsy-Turvy* (2020), fine art mural, Canberra, ACT. Photo: BOHIE.

Empowering understanding: Science and Art

Your work is very collaborative and research-informed, which also applies to your environmental-themed murals. How has your collaboration with scientists and researchers developed? How do you work with researchers and what artistic results have these collaborations led to?

My collaborations and research-based art practice have developed through structured artist residencies with field-based methodologies. These are specifically created to get artists out of their studios and into

the field to conduct interviews and learn directly from guest speakers and informed community members. This is inherently an *intake* of information, often without requiring immediate creative results.

I then take what I have learned back into my studio for study and creative output, sketching, writing, sifting through photographs and research notes. Once I have developed a strong concept, I refine my idea and then begin the process of acquiring mural artwork approval – which may include conferring with the original scientist or guest (environmental scientist, Indigenous consultant or historian, for example) – to make sure that the artwork is both relevant and appropriate before painting.

What influence do (environmental) research and science have on your mural work?

Research based art residencies have provided me with an incredible opportunity to learn directly from scientists and cultural leaders from around the world. Some of the most moving residencies for me include: the *Bundian Way Artist Exchange*, facilitated by the ANU Environment Studio in Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (August 2021), an eight-week programme sharing local Indigenous stories about the Bundian Way song line, which stretches from Eden up into the Snowy Mountains (NSW). Here I learned from Indigenous poets, park rangers, authors, environmental scientists, astronomers and more. The *Sensation themed two-week online residency created by Ayatana Science Research Residency* from the Gatineau National Park, Canada (January 2022), introduced me to sensory themed specialists from all around the world, including speakers on bat sonar, insect acoustics, bee vision and the effects of light pollution on nocturnal wildlife. I also thoroughly enjoyed the *Biophilia; Ecology For Artists*, also ran by the *Ayatana Science Research Residency* (August 2020), where I learned from mycology experts, artists whose work focuses on outer space, forest ecologists tracking nocturnal animals in the canopies of Panama and animal mourning from specialists found all around the world.

The coming together of art and science is an incredible collaboration. Art is the *feel* to science's *thought* and creating moving images with science-based research behind them is an incredible tool for science communication. I feel it should be encouraged more by institutions and governments across the world. Both fields are inherently curious and seek to understand how and why things are. Learning about the environment both from a western science and First Nations perspective is just as important to me as learning about being a human from psychologists and philosophers. It informs a sense of belonging and empowers me to connect more consciously with the world around me, which I hope translates to my audience through my art.

Which scientific theories/methods or research streams do you refer to or draw from in your creative work? How did your interest in certain sciences or research areas develop?

I'm very interested in behavioural psychology and have been actively researching how cultural, societal and gender constructs are influencing my perception of the world around me. This has a direct link to brand psychology which leans on inherent cultural symbols for marketing purposes. I'm interested in utilising and in-turn leveraging these symbols within my artworks with the hopes of creating new narratives that challenge social norms. This research thread developed from a desire to understand my own place within my immediate family and as a woman in our broader culture. The biggest theme of my adult life is "Why?". This question tumbles out through all of my artworks, as I aim to challenge the audience into a more inclusive and caring state by encouraging them to ask "Why aren't we like this already?", or even "Why am I moved by this?" What media, marketing, relationships, behavioural or cultural patterns have become obstacles in our great desire to feel connected and have a sense of

belonging within our natural environment?

Does a special kind of knowledge emerge from these collaborations?

Working directly with a specialist in any field is a real treat. Being close to someone's life work, their knowledge and dedication to that field is so energising and fuels me to want to create visual communication that celebrates their passion.

Why is it important to bring environmental science and art together in public spaces?

I believe art is the language of feeling and that the collaboration between art and science is crucial to informing change in the public conscious.

How have your environmental murals been received by the public/community, researchers and other artists?

The response to my environmental themed murals has been very moving for me. It seems my creations have a deep sensitivity to them that catches the viewer off guard. I think my concepts remind them of something deep within themselves, a deep connection to the natural world that we are encouraged to forget or ignore as we move into adulthood.

If someone were to ask you to invent a science, what would it be?

I'm fascinated with the science of emotions. They rule every moment of our lives and yet we (the public) know so little about them or indeed how much influence they have on our reality. I'd love to study how they work and how to monitor them in real-life time and translate the theory of emotions to the broader public so we can teach children about it in primary schools.

BOHIE, thank you for this wonderful conversation!

Details of the cover photo: BOHIE: *Inspire Growth* (2022). Photo: BOHIE.

This article is part of the series [Street Art, Science and Engagement](#).

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Tags

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2. Blake Thompson
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