

Jill Sampson



Jill Sampson is a visual artist, Bimblebox Art Project coordinator and the curator of *Bimblebox 153 Birds*. She completed a Fine Arts degree at Queensland College of Art in 2019 extending her previous study at the Sydney Gallery School. She was awarded the 2001 Pata Paris residency, France by Daniel and Anne Pata and the Sydney Gallery School. Jill was a keynote speaker at the Eco Arts Australis 3rd National Conference in Wollongong.

It was while living temporarily back on the family farm that Jill became concerned about the resources land grab happening throughout rural and regional areas. Discovering in 2012 that there was a mining exploration lease on their own place, she turned her attention to the Bimblebox Nature Refuge (NR), 1000km away in central

Queensland's Galilee Basin. The Bimblebox NR was under imminent threat from coal mining and Jill could see that Bimblebox was a place of connection for environment and agriculture and science.



Jill began the Bimblebox Art Project with the aim of bringing artists into engagement with the Bimblebox NR. In so doing the artists and their artwork would be able to spread the message of the coal mining threat; to educate on the value of this nature refuge; highlight the importance of biodiversity, water, and food security; and to promote conversations and action on climate change. The first group of artists came together at Bimblebox NR in September 2012 and these camps continue today. The art exhibitions developed through the Bimblebox Art Project are *Document//Bimblebox* (2013), *Bimblebox: art – science – nature* (toured nationally 2014 – 2017) and the currently touring *Bimblebox 153 Birds* (2015 – present).

You can see some of the results at <https://bimbleboxartproject.com/>.

Jill Sampson: <https://jillsampson.com/>

I grew up on a farm where I spent most of my time outside — observing, dreaming, shadowing my father, riding horses and helping with cattle work. My mother cared for orphaned and injured wildlife, so we had a variety of creatures sharing our home. Our farm includes eucalypt woodland, adjoining an area of native pine forest and vine scrub. When exploring on horseback I could observe wildlife, unnoticed. A special memory is watching a Rakali hunting in the creek.



My passion for the environment began when I was very small, said Jill. My earliest memories include searching for tadpoles and frogs. It must have been a time of La Niña, as I remember much rain and many frogs!

Many people have inspired me including Judith Wright, the Franklin River campaign and John Sinclair. Judith Wright’s incredible work for the environment sits alongside my deep respect for her poetry and her work on justice and rights for First Nations people.

As a young teenager I wrote a high school assignment about the unfolding Franklin River campaign - Bob Brown became prominent then. I contacted Bob when I began the Bimblebox Art Project, and he wrote a piece for the *Bimblebox: art – science – nature* exhibition catalogue.

My parents knew John Sinclair (originally through the Junior Farmers organisation) who worked across his lifetime to successfully protect K’gari (Fraser Island). When I was a young teenager, we went on a FIDO tour of K’gari led by John. He is an unsung hero who experienced severe persecution from his community, Qld politicians, and Qld police, because of his work. I reached out to John in 2017 to ask about the role of the arts in environment advocacy. John sent me the

transcripts of Judith Wright’s testimony in the 1975 Fraser Island Environmental enquiry. We met to discuss this and kept in touch intermittently until he became ill.



Environmental conservation has been an evolving conversation in my family and on our family farm. But it was when I asked myself “what could I possibly do” about the resource boom land grab and the increasing climate emergency that an idea to engage through the visual arts began to grow. I approached Paola Cassoni, of the Bimblebox Nature Refuge, about bringing artists into engagement with this threatened environment. My initial aim was to get artists onsite to witness and

document Bimblebox NR. It was important that the artwork we created would be embedded in that environment, and to develop art exhibitions that would take the Bimblebox NR to people across Australia.

At this time, 2012, many Australians thought coal was finished and instead all eyes were on the rapid CSG expansion. Hardly anyone had heard of the massive coal mining plans for the Galilee Basin. I set myself the task to facilitate a project that worked as a vehicle to educate, build awareness, and open conversations, with the hope to bring positive change. I wanted to reach in under the radar, and bring people to a place of seeing, learning, and thinking about this dynamic and vital environment before they realised that they had entered a conversation about environment, climate change and coal mining. I spent many sleepless nights thinking how to reach those people who would disengage if they thought they were visiting an environmental art exhibition.

I am so incredibly proud to have been able to take the Bimblebox Art Project into the Land Court of Qld hearing, supporting The Bimblebox Alliance (TBA) objection to Waratah Coal's Galilee Coal Project. It was a tremendous moment when President Kingham gave her recommendations to refuse Waratah Coal's application for the Mining Lease and Environmental Authority!



Several months later, when the Queensland Government refused Waratah Coal's application for the Environmental Authority, I took some moments to feel the achievement, knowing that my art project had helped to stop a coal mine and save Bimblebox. There are many people, in so many different areas, who have worked incredibly hard across more than 15 years with Paola Cassoni, to achieve this outcome and my art project is just one part of this.

The Land Court case set some important precedents by recognising the impact of this proposed coal mine on human rights, climate risk and environmental values. The Bimblebox Art Project is part of this historic moment.

There have been far too many challenges during the development and work of the Bimblebox Art Project, to write here. The biggest challenge though, is always how to reach people and engender a connection to the environment and Bimblebox, so they will want to care for and protect it.

Developing the art project was a huge learning curve. There have been mentors, people who offered advice and those who have worked with me on different areas of the project. I made many mistakes and there were many dead ends, but the project lived and breathed because artists believed in it and wanted to contribute to positive change. I will always be in awe of the trust that each person, in those early days of the project, gave into my hands. I had no idea when I started this project if it was even possible!

Burnout has been a regular and ongoing challenge for me. Working for this long, in a volunteer capacity, on an environmental art project, alongside the normal challenges of life, has meant that burnout has occurred often. The enormous time commitment of these many years has been difficult to sustain. Time away from the project and regular walking, especially long walks in the natural environment, have been helpful.

2020 was when I had planned to build a more ambitious touring program for the *Bimblebox 153 Birds* exhibition. However, Covid hit, causing havoc in the arts and the gallery system. Then, as the year progressed, I became increasingly unwell. By the time of my diagnosis with the blood cancer Myeloma I was dangerously ill, experiencing severely decreased mobility, reduced cognitive function and close to end of life. Myeloma has been the ultimate challenge that brought everything to standstill. It was phone calls from galleries wanting to exhibit *Bimblebox 153 Birds*, the unfolding Land Court case, and restarting the artist camps, that brought me back to working again on the project.



The Bimblebox Art Project gave me both a positive contribution to work toward a better environmental future and a great network of people with aligned values.

For a time, this work offered an antidote against the potentially overwhelming loss of hope. In my lifetime, the Earth has lost 60% of its fauna and three quarters of the land on Earth has been impacted and changed by humans. I had young children when I started this project, they are now young adults. I wanted to do the best I could to push

for change away from fossil fuels and to protect our biodiverse natural environments. I wanted to give my children a future.

While working via the arts to protect an important environment from coal has helped me feel, at times, that I can make a difference, it is just a tiny drop of what needs to happen for our planet to have a stable climate that continues to support life. Something is terribly wrong in Australia's values when natural wonders like The Great Barrier Reef (that also protects a huge area of the Qld coastline) along with vast and ancient underground water reserves vital across inland Australia, and a stable climate that supports humans and other life, are rated at a much lower value than the destructive processes and outcomes of mining, coal, and gas. Tragically, we continue to see profit and wealth put before all that supports the incredible diversity of life, including human life, on this wondrous planet.



The Bimblebox Art Project has inspired others to develop art projects and exhibitions around their threatened environments. Parallel to these, an important research project by Andrew Nicholson, using the *Bimblebox: art – science – nature* exhibition as a case study, has demonstrated that art can foster pro-environmental behaviour.

More than 600 artists/creatives from around Australia and across the world have been directly involved in making work about the Bimblebox NR, through the Bimblebox Art Project. At the time of writing, more than 69,250 people across Australia have engaged with the Bimblebox NR through the exhibitions. Added to this is an unknown number of people who have learned about Bimblebox NR through talks and presentations, poetry readings, the media, online presence, social media, digital sharing, and further exhibitions of work by camp participants.

The Bimblebox Art Project has taken Bimblebox NR well beyond its boundary fence and created a cultural legacy of place and time. Importantly it kept the Bimblebox NR publicly visible through all the years when the coal mining plans were parked due to low coal prices. And it was part of the Land Court of Queensland court case that paved the way for the refusal of the Environmental Authority by the Queensland State Government, saving Bimblebox from coal mining.

I would also reflect on the role of the annual Bimblebox art, science, nature camps. This is a self-perpetuating, reciprocal model that builds dynamic, creative relationships and engagement between the Bimblebox NR and the wider community. For one week each year, the Bimblebox NR provides a nurturing and supportive place for people to explore and develop their work while completely immersed in the natural environment. Many who attend are in the arts, and they carry their experience, stories and developing ideas home. The outcome is that the Bimblebox NR continues to

flow outwards, into other communities through the ensuing conversations, art exhibitions, writing, music, and more.

In 2024, two of my artworks are taking their environmental message to an exhibition at the University of Delaware, USA. Meanwhile, the travelling exhibition *Bimblebox 153 Birds* will be in north Queensland.

I am now living back on our family farm, learning what I can from my parents, as myself and my husband begin to take on the farm's care and management. Myeloma treatment has gifted me time and while I have recovered much of my health and mobility, there is no getting around this cancer. It continues to impact my every day and one day it will return. In view of this, I plan to bring the Bimblebox Art Project to a close.

My advice for those working in the art and environment space, would be to take regular periods of *time out* to fill up again. To stave off burnout, disengage completely from your computer and phone to be in forests, woodlands, oceans, and other wild places. Walk and breathe in the wild environments and surround yourself with a network of good, supportive, caring people.

My advice for women specifically, is keep your voice strong and hold ownership of your vision and your work. Put your name on that work with confidence. Make history honest by holding and amplifying the voice of *herstory*.

