

ART



Art of healing

Lighting and stage designer Efterpi Soropos in the Disambiguation Room she created for Monash Medical Centre's palliative care unit at McCulloch House.

PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

Can art work as medicine? Monash Medical Centre's first artist in residence, Efterpi Soropos, takes **Liza Power** into her pain management room.

SITTING by her mother's bedside as she battled through the final stages of cancer, Efterpi Soropos was overcome by a shifting tide of emotions. Grief, for one, but also an overwhelming sadness that her mother's final months were being spent in a space that, in many ways, only served to amplify her suffering. Fluorescent lights glared overhead, sounds echoed off sharp surfaces, smells lingered in tight spaces and colours bled into pale imitations of themselves.

What was missing, she felt, was a sense of harmony and dignity. Sickness, she felt, robs people of their every freedom. Why should they be denied the pleasure of their senses as well?

A lighting and stage designer by trade, Soropos had spent many years fascinated by the way plays of light could affect her audiences. By painting

moods with shafts of coloured and textured light and combining these with physical movement, words and images, her skill lay in guiding people through spectrums of emotion and sensation. Surely, she mused, the same principles could offer people with terminal illness some relief from the pain and anxiety that comes with facing death.

Enrolling in a Masters in Community Cultural Development at Victorian College of the Arts, Soropos began her research. Through Monash Medical Centre's palliative care unit at McCulloch House, she conducted a series of interviews with patients, their family and staff about how they felt about the hospital spaces.

"It's a very delicate process to interview people when they're in the final stages of their life. Sometimes they were too sick to speak for long, other times they

were angry and upset about what was happening to them," she says.

Still, Soropos persevered, collecting impressions of how different colours made people feel, what kinds of light, images and sound pleased them.

At the same time Soropos found herself drawn to places of worship. Visits to Buddhist and Hindu temples led her to studies of sacred spaces and their geometry, where she found strong links between her intuitive understanding of timing and space and Eastern religious practices.

Returning to Melbourne after a trip investigating hospital arts programs in Britain and Holland, Soropos drew together a pool of artistic friends. Fresh from a spell in Sweden, documentary maker Lucy Paplinska contributed footage of snow-swept landscapes threaded with rivers. Other passages of film captured forests and waves, and Soropos overlaid all these with music by David Bridie, Helen Mountford and Amy Valent.

In the McCulloch House room she had been given to work in, she began to imagine a

space. Influenced by her research in temples, and by her affinity with water, she assembled an octagon-shaped umbrella in the room's ceiling, suspending sheaves of rice paper from picture railing to create a series of soft walls. "Water is the major element in the work that I do and the way that I respond as an artist. I was looking at the shape of water cells and I noticed there was an octagon within the outside structure."

◀ In my first visit to the room, I finally accepted that I have cancer. ▶

The layers of rice paper came from visiting meditation spaces: "In Japanese temples, monks often go as far as making their own rice paper as a part of their ritual practice," she says.

In the ceiling space, Soropos experimented with light configurations that could change colour to mesh with the film footage projected on the room's walls. She named her completed "transformational" artwork the Disambiguation Room.

The room has had about 200 visitors since opening last July. Patients, their extended families, doctors, nurses and councillors have all spent spells there. Many have written to Soropos to thank her for the experience, and she's used one of these profoundly moving letters to narrate a film about its creation. It reads: "In my first visit to the room, I finally accepted that I have cancer. Sitting in the chair, low music in the background, the colours slowly, slowly changing and the waves rolling in and rolling in, I found myself suddenly taking back some control. I became part of those waves. I thought, if I can keep coming back, time and time again, to cross those rocks I can keep on managing my pain. I can, time and time again, cross my own rocks."

In the same short film, McCulloch House staff talk about the impact of Soropos' work on their patients. Professor Kate Jackson, head of supportive and palliative care, hopes the space will encourage health-care workers to embrace alternative treatments. She also hopes it will help people to

understand how profoundly environments can affect the way terminally ill patients feel about death. Pastoral care worker Paul Blacker says the room allows patients to feel a sense of safety and peace.

Soropos' work echoes that of Roger Ulrich, an American behavioral scientist who has extensively studied the effect of environments on healing.

"Patients feel better and heal faster if they're in environments that have natural light, natural vistas, nice music," she says. "It's common sense in a way, but if you're working in a system based on medical models, you need hard scientific proof these things do work."

The Disambiguation Room forms part of a much broader arts program at Monash Medical Centre. Called Arts Beat and curated by Rebecca Lovitt. Its goal is to promote the healing potential of art in public hospital spaces. Its collection, includes the work of Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, Charles Blackman and Bill Henson.

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