

## Allie Eagle – an artist's life

Allie Eagle was born Alison Lesley Mitchell in Lower Hutt, Wellington, New Zealand on 9 January 1949. Her father was English-born local businessman Lesley Bernard Mitchell. Her mother was Lorna Muriel Procter who had trained as an artist under Lynley Richardson and was an accomplished portrait painter and watercolourist.



*Allie with her big brother Bernard and little brother Glen and their parents Lorna and Leslie Mitchell, Lower Hutt, 1956.*

Allie's grandmother Muriel Jacobs was also a trained artist, having studied at the Otago School of Art from 1914 – 1918. Allie's Great Grandfather Adnet William Jacobs was a furrier and taxidermist who worked as an assistant to the ornithologist and naturalist Sir Walter Lawry Buller, trapping and preserving a number of native birds including the now extinct huia.

After Allie's parents separated in 1962 she lived mostly with her father and two brothers in Lower Hutt, although the children commuted regularly to Rangiruru Beach near Otaki on the Kapiti Coast to visit their mother and grandparents.

As a small child Allie often went with her Mother to see exhibitions at the National Gallery in Wellington. When Allie was about eight years old she recalls being taken to a show by well-known New Zealand painter Peter McIntyre who had just returned from explorations in the Antarctic. Allie remembers McIntyre in the artist's stereotypical seaman's jersey and beret with pipe and asking him how it was that he was able to make the sea around his icebergs look so real? When McIntyre replied that all he did was to paint waves in tones that got gradually darker, Allie knew that she wanted to be an artist herself.

In 1965 when Allie was in her last year at Hutt Valley High School, Boyd Webb, who went on to become one of New Zealand's most famous ex-patriot artists, was in her class. Allie remembers how as teenagers she and Boyd developed a passion for art and "egged" each other on. However it was Boyd's inclusion in an Auckland City Art Gallery show in 1974 called *Six New Zealand Artists* (which featured the work of men only) that provoked Allie's growing frustration with the unequal opportunities that women artists received compared to their male counterparts. As a result, in 1975 Allie curated a parallel show of her own at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch, entitled *Six New Zealand Women Artists*. This was panned by the critics, who roundly dismissed the significance of an exhibition constituted merely by gender. This was, in fact, Allie's point, given that the chances to exhibit were in those days available mostly to men and rarely, if ever, to women.



*Allie and Boyd Webb "egging each other on", Otaki Beach, 1960s*

In 1966, aged 17, Allie went to Ilam School of Fine Arts at Canterbury University in Christchurch. There she flatted with fellow student Shirley McGregor who later became the photographer and painter Shirley Grace.

Other students who Allie met at Ilam were Gaylene Preston, Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, Phillipa Blair, Bronwyn Davies, Phil Rooke, Bill Hammond and Philip Clairmont. In that first year the most electric and inspiring teachers for Allie were Don Peebles and Tom Taylor.

At Ilam Allie's painting teacher was Lithuanian painter Rudolf Gopas, an abstract expressionist who encouraged his students to think of painting as being without any formal relationship to the perceived world. Under Gopas' instruction Allie was to seek a "conscious unconsciousness" where accidental, non-gravitational, arbitrary and unhinged forces could be unleashed through notations of colour "incidents" that had non-representational but emotional connotations. In his teaching Gopas often cited Rembrandt without being in the least bit interested in Rembrandt's visual narrative. Gopas was entirely guided by the abstract structural achievements of the works, drawing his students' attention to the subtle nuances of the placement of Rembrandt's marks and his fresh unrepeatable ability to make notes in space. Gopas' teaching was often inspired by the writings of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, giving Allie an opportunity to indulge in a degree of painterly playfulness typical of the then mostly abstract non-figurative painting department at Ilam.

At this time Allie also studied life drawing with Bill Sutton who was an outstanding watercolourist. Although watercolour as a medium was regarded as old fashioned and parochial and was not taught at art school, Allie still regrets not paying more attention to Sutton and his instruction.

When Allie was in her third year at Ilam she became more and more interested in meshing the "unhinged" and abstract world that Gopas proposed with her own desire to make sense of her "body" and her "self". It was painting from life and the late introduction by Gopas to the representational figurative work of Kathe Kollowitz that gave Allie the opportunity to draw on her own experiences. Allie is not exactly sure why Gopas delayed showing her the work of contemporary figurative woman painters but supposes that her teacher wanted to make her a good abstract painter first before allowing her to be too influenced by the great traditions of painting the body. In many ways Allie is glad about this because she has always understood painting to be about abstract qualities, regarding content as an empathetic device that overlays intuitively with the relationship that form and colour have with energy and light.

While at art school Allie also remembers that Tony Fomison and Phillip Trustrum often came in to visit her teacher Rudolf Gopas. On a number of these occasions Allie got to talk to them and it was Fomison who first introduced her to the world of Maori art.

In 1969 Allie left Ilam and went to train as a secondary school art teacher in Auckland. There she became friends with Ngahua Te Awakotuku and spent some important months on section at Te Kaha Te Whanau Apanui. Her time at the teachers training college under the inspiring tutelage of Peter Smith was further enriched by becoming friends with her classmates, the graduates from Elam (the Auckland University of School of Fine Art), most notably Derek March, Leon Narbey and Claudia Pond-Eyley. The painter Joanna Margaret Paul and Allie struck up a friendship at this time as well. These young Northern artists, heavily influenced by their teachers Don Binney and Colin McMahon, had a very different art school experience to that of Allie. Where Allie was completely free from the spatial limitations of the need for horizon and had been encouraged to explore both inner and outer consciousness when making marks or forming voids, the new generation of Auckland painters were much more landscape based in their work. These Northern artists were speaking brave new words in a modernist vernacular about the need for a sense of place framed by the deliberate gestures of time and light and being.

It was then that Allie started to make a fully conscious break from the conventions she had learned at Ilam and became interested in Zen watercolour painting and haiku. She developed a minimalist calligraphic quality to her work that was capable of conveying both inner and outer thought through a more simple and reduced manipulation of the brush, where a figurative world became able to denote "things" in the natural world.

After graduating from Auckland Teachers Training College Allie returned home to the South where, from 1970-1972 she taught art at Upper Hutt College. During these first years as a teacher Allie felt a growing isolation as her own work oscillated between the discipline of pure abstraction and the representational thinking of the Auckland painters. Allie observed that their work still allowed the artist a modernist engagement with landscape able to contain both airy clouds and kauri forests with swooping tui. For Allie, pure abstract expressionism had nearly come to a natural end. While the musicality of colour and the requirement for connectedness with materials was still a great attraction to her, she was dissatisfied with an exploration of purely expressive and non-representational configurations. Allie was beginning to realise that not only did she want to paint about what was happening to real people in real places but more importantly she also wanted to paint about what was happening to her. It was at this point that Allie began her own debate about the dynamics of sex/politics and feminism joining the growing ranks of women who were asking exactly the same questions.

In 1973 Allie returned to Christchurch where changes in her political thinking radically influenced the way she thought about painting. At this time a job as an exhibitions officer at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery exposed Allie to a number of the New Zealand women artists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Margaret Stoddart, Dorothy Kate Richmond, Olivia Spencer-Bower, Flora Scales, Evelyn Page, Francis Hodgkins and Rita Angus. The discovery that New Zealand had a tradition of women painters immediately reconnected Allie to all that she had learned from her mother as a child. Allie also spent many hours connecting with other contemporary women artists both in New Zealand and overseas including the American feminist artist Judy Chicago. This new awareness ensured that Allie was able to reject the sexist model she had encountered at art school that chauvinistically determined who an artist is.

While at the Robert McDougall Gallery Allie had unrestricted access to the collection and could choose to hang on her office wall a work by any number of artists. It was only then that Allie had the opportunity to admire and learn from pictures by accomplished but still mostly unrecognised New Zealand woman painters such as Margaret Stoddart and Francis Hodgkins. At this point Allie realised how much of her female past remained hidden and began extensive research digging into newspapers and archives tracking down and interviewing survivors from this older and largely forgotten earlier generation of women painters. While engaged in this excavation of female history Allie found that she was in fact unearthing the remnants of a tradition buried even deeper - that of watercolour painting in New Zealand and its relationship to the documentation of the European experience of colonial life.

Allie acknowledges that it was Canterbury artist Olivia Spencer-Bower who taught her most about the practise of the painter and what their accumulated life and works might look like.

Under the supervision of Olivia, Allie learned to understand where watercolour fitted into the hierarchy of art-making and how, according to a scale of accepted values, its worthiness always ranked lower than that of oil painting. Allie also learned what a rapid and direct medium watercolour was for an artist like her wanting to make poignant images of either the fleeting or the ephemeral.

Allie met Olivia Spencer–Bower while researching for a book by Gordon Brown on New Zealand painting. In Allie's opinion Olivia was one of the most sure handed watercolourists New Zealand has ever seen. Whereas Rita Angus has a strong bounding graphic line, Olivia absorbed the best of the European and English freehand tradition combining this with astute drafting and quick observation. This combination allowed her to produce eloquent passages of gutsy watercolour drawing that unerringly recorded, with a directness of execution, the atmosphere of land and rural life that she encountered as a girl growing up on a North Canterbury farm.



*"Each year, once in spring, once in the autumn, magpies come to call from trees at the back of our yard. Today, imagine a great eagle is there, dear". Watercolour and pencil, 1977*

Allie spent two years writing Olivia's biography and assisting her to inventory and select work for her 1977 national retrospective. Although Allie was responsible for cataloguing thousands of Olivia's works she was occasionally curious about the fact that Olivia never seemed to paint the abstract or to scratch beneath the surface in order to say anything very deeply about what was really going on in her own life. In this instance the artist's anecdotal remarks were quite often in powerful juxtaposition to her far more objective but nonetheless passionate rendering of the world as she saw it. Allie is of the opinion that Olivia produced very few works that actually evoked raw emotion. One exception was a set of pictures of Olivia's elderly mother, who was, in her later years, very dependant and the other an image of a solitary chair up in one of the high country musterer's huts near Erewhon. For Allie, Olivia's strengths as a painter resided in her strong drafting and sensitive handling of watercolour that subtly recorded the infinite changes in the "lay of the land" and its atmospheres.

Allie's tenure at the Robert McDougall Gallery ensured that she was hooked on watercolour and from 1974-77 started working up her first radical works in that media. Up until this time Allie had painted only in acrylic or oil but now she switched to big juicy works on paper that not only showed off her ability to draw but were also filled with her own emotion and sense of

purpose. Ordinarily the intention to work politically and address the ethics of feminism was way beyond the usual concerns of the lady watercolourists Allie had been researching. Perhaps this was because of an unspoken code of personal restraint and the belief that there were certain aspects of a woman's experience that the artist could not make art about (these were traditionally contained in letters and journals).

Whatever the case Allie began to revisit old classical models and to investigate the language of painting before formalist values were scrapped and superseded by existential angst and self-expression. Although Allie would never entirely abandon the need to surrender the interior of personally felt experience to the rigours of academic scrutiny, the works she produced while living in Christchurch were very much an integrated fusion of the deep political and personal experiences that constituted her life and relationships at that time. Her use of watercolour during this period was intentionally subversive: appropriating an inoffensive woman's medium more typically associated with the disengaged but educated middle class and applying it to produce politically loaded works that were able to challenge both the traditional use of the medium and the way that content was expressed.

In 1975 a damaging fall from a high loft in the gallery left Allie with injuries that saw her take up more of a curatorial role. In 1978 the combination of health related stress and a major alteration in her personal relationships saw Allie leave Christchurch and decide to go up North for a while. It was only after running an advertisement in a local newspaper announcing that a woman artist wanted a "quiet place near sea, sunshine and privacy", that Allie discovered Te Henga on Waitakere's West Coast and moved into a bach owned by fellow artist Juliet Batten. At that time Allie had a significant influence on Juliet's creative direction introducing her to feminism, lesbian politics, Wicca and to her own energy-filled approach to painting. Juliet in turn introduced Allie to her friends who not only bought Allie's work but who also taught her about environmental activism and the need for planned proactive guardianship of the land.

Allie lived in Juliet Batten's bach at Te Henga until 1982. This four year period was a very productive time, in which Allie made a series of strong gestural watercolours inspired by her close and disciplined observation of the surrounding natural environment. Entirely aware that views of the windswept West Coast swamps and denuded hills were the recognised territory of artists like Don Binney and Colin McCahon, Allie was nevertheless drawn by the compelling quality of the same landscape. She was transformed by the great banks of rain heavy clouds that drift in from the sea over the wetland at Te Henga sometimes completely obscuring the swamp in a cloak of haze. This would slowly rise to reveal steaming banks of bronze raupo, nodding titoki and silver manuka against the distant glint of the river reflecting ambiguous silhouettes of wild fowl and the bleached arms of upturned kauri logs or other flotsam washed down from the ranges by the floods in spring.

Allie quickly invented her own routines and methodologies for painting from "the great outdoors", relating her approach to the inner quality of her experiences at that time. Works from this early period at Te Henga reflect not only Allie's response to the actual observed world but also to the edgy, ambivalent qualities of her day to day emotional and relational experience.



*View of the confluence of Waiti Stream and the Waitakere River from Juliet Batten's bach at Te Henga with eagle about to land, 1978*

Fired by the acute observation and analysis of how the natural light was working by day, by night Allie returned to the visual language of abstract expressionism, allowing the brush to roam at will and creating large flowing abstract works on paper. Although resonant of the coastal wetland environment in which she was now living, when the sun had gone down Allie felt free to explore her own interior landscapes, including coded references to loved ones left behind in Christchurch and to the lives of those inspirational wandering women of the 70s who had been Allie's mentors and friends.

It was then that Allie found herself able to speak her heart about the new nature of her spiritual world and the internal conflicts she was experiencing. At this time her painting liberated itself from the demands of place and location while at the same time remaining symbolically connected to both. In 1980 a number of works from this period were exhibited in Wellington at the inaugural show of the Woman's Gallery.

Allie's more contemplative approach to painting saw her carrying a sketch block and watercolour paintbox up over the hills of Te Henga and Anawhata and down into the Waitakere Ranges. This initiated a healing process that began a re-engagement with past spiritual aspects of her life. Painful though this was Allie started to consciously and unconsciously re-evaluate all of her thinking, unpacking and scrutinising passionately held ideas about lesbian feminism, relationships, spirituality, and personal values.

In 1980 Allie underwent a major conceptual overhaul and began to identify with Christian values and belief. Up until this time biblical teaching and practice had been anathema to what Allie had thought about the liberating qualities of the 70s and the sexual freedom it espoused. Now, soothed by the pervasive effect of the natural world she experienced at Te Henga, Allie felt an overwhelming desire to revisit the spiritual education she had received as a child. Allie was not disappointed and surrendered herself to a life-changing conversion. From this point on Allie found herself operating in a completely different way and this in turn caused a significant change in both her art and her art making.

One of the first consequences of this experiential change was the fact that in 1982 Allie felt "led" and found herself accepting an appointment teaching art at Liston College, a Catholic Boys Secondary School in Waitakere City.

For Allie it was a huge challenge to make the transition from the bosom of the matriarchy to the bowels of patriarchy, accepting in the process the professional reality of working within

male culture. Allie quickly realised that in order to speak directly to her students she needed first to engage them in an art practise that was relevant to them and able to reflect their own interests and concerns. Predictably one of these interests was the very physical dimension of male adolescent experience. It was at this point Allie decided to teach her students everything she knew about life drawing including the more traditional classical sources as well as frequent references to the comic book anatomy of *Marvel* illustrator Burne Hogarth. Using such strategies Allie not only secured a high level of engagement from her students but also had the opportunity to be reacquainted with the principals of volumetric drawing as outlined by the pre 20<sup>th</sup> century painters she often quoted in her teaching. During this period Allie turned a corner ignoring for a moment the politics of feminism and choosing instead the need to address the very practical challenge of being a full time secondary school art teacher while attempting to maintain a career as an exhibiting artist.



*Allie and her students at Liston College, 1982*

In 1985 Allie took a year off from teaching to work fulltime as a painter to produce an exhibition for Janne Land Gallery in Wellington. These were juicy watercolours on paper and semi abstract nature. In some ways they could be seen as Allie's neo expressionist period of artmaking, where she revisited Gopas' abstract expressionist training received whilst at Canterbury University School of Art.

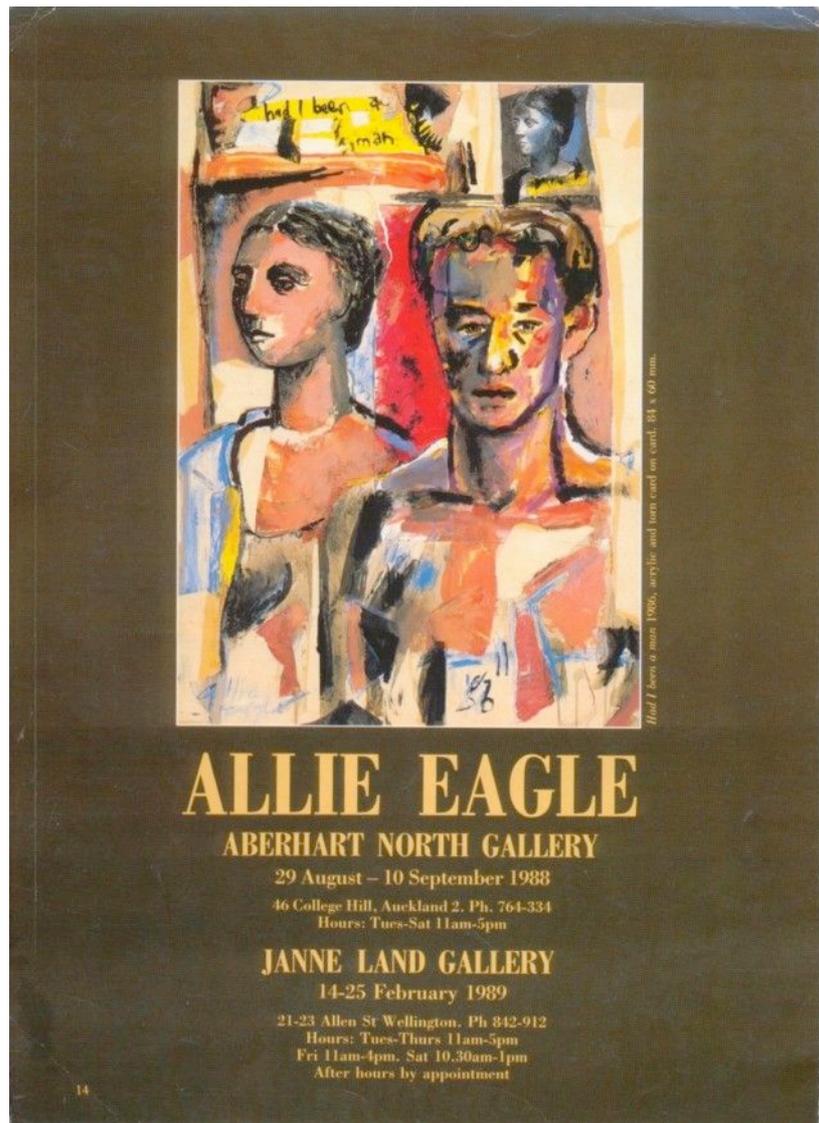
Subsequently Allie reduced her teaching commitments radically and resumed life as a professional painter.

By 1986 the Homosexual Law Reform Bill was before parliament. This was a very conflicting time for many Christians and the Gay community in New Zealand and Allie similarly found this a very testing time. During this period she produced a number of surprising and feisty works that attempted to make sense of what was happening in her life.



*"You helped me walk again" from Hearts on Trial (the rue of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill), pastel on paper, 1985"*

Allie's work was now both figurative and gestural, employing the recognisable drawing skills and strong lines that she had learned from her study of male Old Masters such as Rembrandt and Goya and the later painters Roualt, Doumier, Picasso, Max Ernst and Kathe Kollowitz.



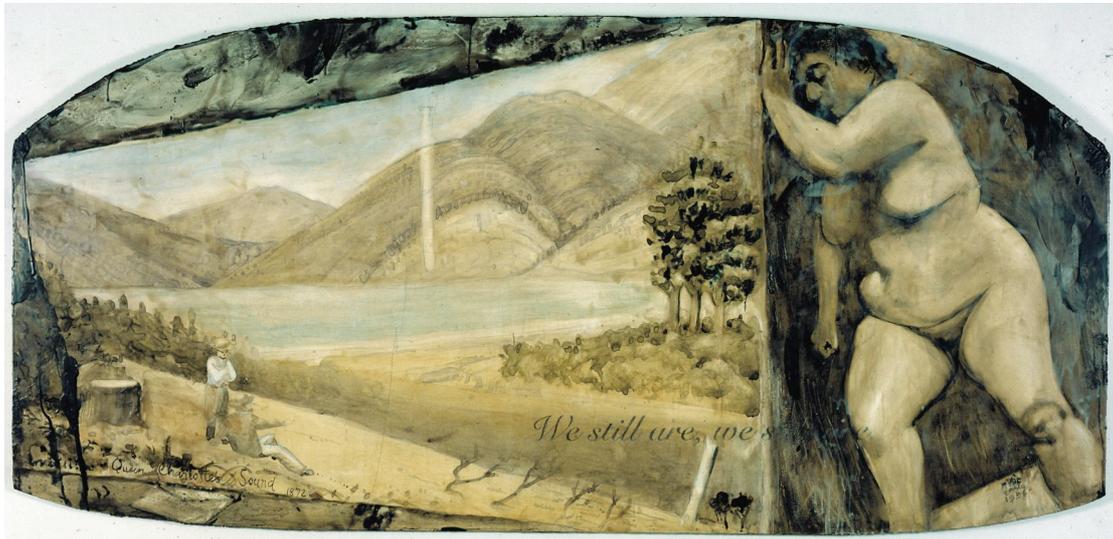
*Sourcing the Masters "Had I Been a Man", acrylic and torn card, 1986*

These influences combined with Allie's love of the fluidity and deftness of touch of the lady watercolourists and the "greats" Turner and Constable as well as the blue and pink periods of Picasso.

Towards the end of the 1980s Allie left Liston College to begin part time tertiary art teaching at Elam and at the School of Art and Design at Manukau Institute of Technology. It was during this period that Allie made other significant changes to her art practise. Firstly she started to experiment with the need to make watercolour go a longer distance and began a series of big pictures designed for big spaces. Although Allie wanted to retain the transparency of watercolour she also wanted to increase the scale of the work and began painting on board instead of paper, protecting the much larger finished surface with pigment impregnated encaustic wax on wooden panels painted with gesso. Allie hoped this increase in scale would encourage recognition of watercolour as having a more permanent quality, challenging an existing art hierarchy that insisted watercolour ought not to be regarded as real "painting" but should be seen merely as "drawing".

Perhaps the best example of Allie's insistence that her ideas be read more rigorously and go a longer distance is the work *We Still Are, We Still Are* (1995) Here a fuller figured naked woman puts an ample shoulder to the edge of a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting of a denuded landscape and slowly but purposefully heaves.

Compared to Allie's earlier work *This Woman Died I Care* (1978) where overt nakedness implies vulnerability, weakness and abuse, *We Still Are, We Still Are* recasts such confrontational exposure asserting confidence, determination and strength.



#### *We Still Are We still Are, 1995*

In *We Still Are We Still Are* the naked female body parallels the exploitation and stripping bare of the New Zealand landscape where large tracks of virgin indigenous forest were clear felled by 19<sup>th</sup> century colonials. Allie appropriates John Kinder's watercolour painting of *Queen Charlotte Sound* (1872) reproducing his view of a roughly milled new settlers' block at Anakiwa. Allie skilfully layers surfaces and stacks meanings. On the one hand *We Still Are* insatiably consuming natural resources but on the other hand some people *Still Are* resisting the exploitative advance of global capitalism.

Although many of Allie's recent concerns may appear to have changed her assertion of the need for women to be respected and empowered remains consistent.

More importantly however, Allie's work reminds us that there must be dynamic occasions where, as individuals and communities, we interrogate conventional ideas and examine past belief in order to set up the possibility that we just might change our minds. For Allie the ongoing project of the artist has allowed for a fundamental shift in perspective that in no way compromises or undermines a profound personal commitment to equity, justice and peace.