

Allie Eagle, interviewed by Lyn Collie, discusses the symbolism and techniques used in *This Woman Died I Care* (1978) and *Tough Call* (2000) in *The Sudden Imperative* series.

LC: Tell me about construction of *This Woman Died I Care*

AE: I used rough rag paper, 200gm in weight, and worked the image of the dead woman loosely using light graphite pencil. I drew minimally and carefully rendered shading on the forms of the prostrate woman's body. I then applied generous washes of thin watercolour, which pooled in arbitrary stains. There were two basic washes of two different colours, an Indian blue I think, and a more greeny blue plus, of course, some bloody red colour - good quality watercolours - with reasonably large brushes - both round and pointed brushes.

When the washes were dry, I strengthened the drawing by using bold EE pencil to accent the woman's hair, her pubic hair, and the towel straddling her leg. The writing and the stethoscope would have been accented with a bold, rough, gestural drawing at this stage as well. The stains of red were applied as flicks, dribbles and smears. These were applied without the use of the brush but rather by pouring and smudging by the hand very much in a smearing, hands-on kind of way.

The broken glass element was a fortuitous conceptual event, which happened after the image had come back from the picture framers. The glass of the frame had accidentally broken, and rather than me returning the picture to the framer for repair, I used the breakage as a happy accident to build more on the idea behind the image. I used two sticking plasters to hold the two pieces of glass together. The break in the glass and the sticking plasters are, in my mind excellent elements by which I could speak conceptually to what I felt were the risky issues of abortion. The issues at that time for me were these:

The woman lies dead on the floor, having used various different instruments unsuccessfully to abort herself. In my mind the woman had died because she was either too poor to bring up a child, too afraid to confess to the pregnancy, or too overwhelmed at the responsibility of motherhood for whatever reason. It was fear of some kind that led her to the choice of abortion. And because it was a botched back street job I felt that a safe legitimate hospital abortion would protect other women's lives. Hence "I support safe, free abortions on demand" which is in the wording of *This Woman Died, I Care*.

At the time, (the 70s) that issue, for me, was a lot to do with the relationships between women and men and the idea that sex often equalled unwanted pregnancy. The heterosexual feminist movement was keen to see every child a wanted child. I was a lesbian feminist at the time and, with my partner and other friends, did some "street theatre", dressed in leather jackets, bare breasted, handing out sticking plasters to other feminists at radical feminist meetings, saying "sleeping with men is sleeping with the enemy - if you don't

want to get pregnant don't sleep with men. Abortion is a sticking plaster job of the patriarchy" (and other such things). I remember we also suggested that women wouldn't get pregnant if they had relationships with women. So playfully, I guess, or not so playfully, depending on how you view this, you might say we were suggesting we wanted to "swell the ranks" and see more women come out as lesbians. Sticking plasters were a symbol or signifier for me that addressed lesbian issues in the feminist movement, both in theatre action and in the painting. I think we lesbians felt we were often being dismissed, as the critical action for heterosexual feminists was abortion. In fact that was not so for us, as lesbians, even though we put a lot of our energy into that part of the women's movement. The sticking plasters, then, for me were a coded signifier acknowledging the patch-up job of abortion and women's fertility and a coded message for my audience about the possibilities of same-sex relationships being an alternative or equal to heterosexual relationships and the patriarchy.

While the paintwork of the cutting-in of the edge the woman's form in *This Woman Died I Care* has been done fairly neatly, there are areas of bleeding in blue onto the white of the leg in obvious blobs. The fact that there is no returning by me to tidy these stains (to correct them) indicates or helps to reinforce the immediacy of this tragic event. It's as if I saw it and painted it without stopping to make corrections. Which is exactly how it was painted. No tutting around - there was no titivating going on.

LC: What was the concept behind *Tough Call*?

AE: It was necessary for me, in thinking about recontextualizing (revisiting) *This Woman Died I Care*, to produce something that had equal weight in terms of its impact. I needed to do this as my thinking had changed. The critical changes have occurred to me slowly over the years over the question of how we looked at abortion on demand and how I think about it now. I needed to make a new equally-as-powerful painting to talk about the other side of the issue. In order to give the new work the kind of presence the first had, I decided I would make a much larger-scale work. It would also have to have some equally strong or "grunty" content. I've been painting large watercolour waxes for the last fourteen or so years - by large I mean that *Tough Call* is about the length and size of a $\frac{3}{4}$ bed. I also decided the painting would be a watercolour, to follow in the genre of *This Woman Died I Care* and stylistically, and in content, it would relate to the issues in the previous piece, which is now in the Auckland Art Gallery.

The first thing was finding the right idea. This involved scribbling some initial gut feelings in my workbook to outwork the first visualizing. I guess the idea that was central to this new work is that a death had occurred but that there is new life and hope for new possibilities. Because I used the *Wordless Book** as a springboard for the whole set of paintings, and this painting was to be the RED PAGE from that book, there would be this sense of passion and redemption - blood again - as in "*This Woman Died*", yes - but spilt for a different purpose. To show a different position and to critique the former I needed to work out of the story of Christ's crucifixion as a way of creating a bridge between the two works.

The initial sketching for this thought had a few options. And through sketching and being totally free to try out all the possibilities, one or two images started to pop up. These very loose sketches were quite small and even on envelopes as well as in the workbooks. They came before the life studies I was to do later, and I made an ensemble of slightly different imagery to lastly arrive at the composition that was used.

Before all the finalizing of the symbols in *Tough Call* there was the nutting out of the general overall composition – this came in a couple of rushes really. Almost frenetic gestural drawing happened before the studies to get the composition and idea going. Once I decided that I would have a woman standing with a small child I had to explore a series of possible poses. And start asking myself who these characters were and what they might be portraying so that it would “fit”. I hired Jess to pose for me and in the film you can see me positioning her (a solo mother prototype character) into a number of poses for a series of drawings. I made a number of watercolour life drawings and then did a series of photographic shoots, getting Jess to pose in the environment of the wetland. During the course of painting the picture I re-shot quite a few close-ups of her and her little daughter. I like to get as much information as I can from face to face drawing and then I photograph for backup. Often I don’t photograph before but we had a really tough timeframe because of the filming going on at the same time so I needed to rely more heavily on photographs than what I would do normally. However there was lots of “eyeballing” going on for the final resolution in the painting.

The clear sense of the composition came the night of my friend Joanna Margaret Paul’s funeral.

The drawing for *Tough Call* was established after a lengthy process – seen in the film – of hunting, gathering and collecting imagery that would sustain the whole concept of the painting. The portrait part of the painting is both generic and personal. That is it is a portrait of an actual person whilst also taking on both an historic figure and a generic figure of the late 20th century.

Sourcing imagery for a complex set of ideas takes time and one has to look in lots of different places. Some of that research has been done from life – drawing and photographing from life and plein air drawing. Some images are taken from magazines (I sourced the baby in the bucket from a pro-life magazine www.voiceforlife.org.nz) and the rewarewa plant was drawn and painted from life mostly by artist assistant Vickie Worthington.

In each of the five panels of the *Sudden Imperative* series (of which *Tough Call* is one), I committed myself to using some indigenous elements of flora and fauna, and some elements of Maori presence. In this landscape there is an image of Matariki – Pleiades. Over the last 10-15 years I have had a commitment to locating myself in this landscape of NZ/Aotearoa and acknowledging Maori as tangata whenua. Abortion has not been a big Maori issue until recently but it is beginning to be felt in today’s generation (see interview with Tariana Turia in Pro-Life Times Nov.2004 Issue no. 17).

My choice for the *Tough Call* image was in the finding of an appropriate solo mother who was bringing up her child, and also (positioning her in) a landscape, which has some kind of allusion to women's need to grieve and move on from the losses that they've had from miscarriage and abortion.

The young mother and her daughter in *Tough Call* are my close friends. Jess has a fantastic, changing volatile expression and I began my studies of her by doing studio sketches in pencil, watercolour, and charcoal. I do a lot of sketches of people and objects before I make a painting these days. This is quite a different approach than the very direct one I had in the 70s. I make also studies in these same media, which are more concentrated. I use the camera too for visual references. But it is always in conjunction with lots of drawing.

I hunted for a pose and that took several sessions with Jess. My workbook shows the hunting for that, and even before I started I did doodling, asking "what do I want to put in this?". A dripping cross to symbolise sacrifice was too obvious - it needed to be a real everyday New Zealand iconic image. . The narrative needed to be contained within a central image. I needed to choose symbols that people will get to know, or already recognize in another context, but not so overt that they smack of cliché. I started to get an idea about the lamb in a sling. It is on our New Zealand Coats of Arms. In this case it's a sacrificial lamb.

In the painting you can see an image of a woman and a small boat. Abortion and miscarriage are often grieved silently – seldom anybody knows about it - and there's often a solitary bearing of pain. I wanted to acknowledge the sadness and loss that can come up after the event. Not just for the woman but also for the families affected for many years afterwards. Lots of "what if?" questions. Post-abortion counsellors say it's good to do a ritual or commemoration to mark the event –the launching of the boat could be seen as an acknowledgement of an intense and painful moment that becomes the start of a new journey through loss and reconciliation.

There are two landscapes in *Tough Call* which are collaged into each other. One is the Waitakere river wetland where the woman launches her boat and the other -Te Pae O Te Rangi – the high hills that loom over the swamp. There's also a day and a night sky scape. The early morning sky was there the day we did the filming and although sketched before the event, it was very similar on the day of the filming to when we got the final drawing. The sky is really an allusion to day and night. I was thinking of a number of times and seasons - gestation periods perhaps – so we made a configuration of the star formation Matariki and Te Ra O Tainui in the top corner which alluded to our lives, lived under a sky which has covered 1000 years of human habitation. This is a long period of human occupation.

Critical to how this piece worked and how it could be an accurate counterpoint to the 1970s piece of the self-slain woman was the use of the bleeding lamb trussed from the sky and the "collateral damage". It's never easy finding the right emblems for works that need to speak to a large

audience. My search regarding the use of the lamb has been documented elsewhere – in *Chrysalis Seed News*, September 2004). The bleeding lamb = a major iconographic symbol for the crucified Christ = Innocence = sacrifice. The sacrificial lamb is read as a Christian Judaic symbol for a sin offering. Also in the painting is an embryonic foetus slopped in the bucket.

In later years, one of the things that has concerned me about how I had painted *This Woman Died I Care* and my general attitude about “the foetus” is the small amount of concern I had, really, in those days, for the idea of loss of potential human life. The most intolerable part of the heated and often acrimonious abortion debate between the Christians and the feminists was the way we, as feminists, were sometimes accused of being child murderers. The way that we responded, and that I, in particular, responded, was to say that the unborn foetus was “just” tissue, like menstrual blood. Because of my changed position on this after my Christian conversion (in 1980) I became uncomfortable with this idea. However it wasn’t until many years later, in 2002 and 3, that I began to search around for a painting concept that would actually acknowledge what I had now come to see as the spiritual character of that unborn child. In other words I believe it has a spirit that I did not want to acknowledge formerly in those 70s years. And, to be perfectly plain - that each human spirit is God-given. That is the main concern for many Christians then and now. For them there is great importance placed on not taking away human life. Therein lay the real conflict between the feminist community and the Christian community.

There was also now awareness for me of the grief that occurs for women who have had abortions and I sought for a way of speaking into a situation that rarely gets spoken of. I felt concern that my earlier works were being studied as feminist benchmarks for the turning of the tide in abortion law. I longed somehow to make a work that said I had reassessed that position. I was now critiquing my own work and speaking of the other “Stakeholders” in the whole abortion scenario, the stakeholders being: God, grandparents, partners, siblings and the unborn child as well as the mother. As well as the larger culture of the group.

It occurred to me that if I drew from a photograph of a real aborted child or foetus and used the caption “collateral damage” underneath I would be using a phrase that has been currently in used in the context of the bombing by combatants of innocent civilians. This would make a point about losses from “friendly fire.”

I think also there are lots of references in the painting to how I see Christ identifying with suffering - with the woman and children in the loss of life. He is pictured as a suffering person, standing at the bottom left hand of the picture under the image of the young solo mother with his open wounded side.

Tough Call is mainly painted in tints and shades of red and dark brownish purple brown blacks to signify passion and sacrifice.

LC: Construction on *Tough Call* must have been a challenge – how did you go about it?

AE: The painting has been done on a gessoed wooden panel - high quality construction 8-ply. It's been sanded and reinforced on the back and the front painted with 8-10 thin layers of gesso. Each layer has been finely sanded. Gesso is a very hardy paint substance, which has, amongst other elements, plaster, marble dust and good binding material, which make it impervious to moisture and stop leaching into the wood – ensuring preservation. The back has had as many layers of external acrylic house paint (as the front has had gesso) so that the board stays rigid and doesn't cup or warp. Covering both sides seals the board from moisture loss, which would contribute to this warping.

The ground is a coloured surface on which the artist will work to and fro from lighter to darker tones. In this instance, the red panel was created with a finely ground pigment suspended in various different red pigments suspended in gum Arabic, mixed with water. It was generously sloshed, dropped, dripped, poured, rolled and wiped as well as tilting the panel to distribute the paint. Large soft flat watercolour brushes were used in generous applications as well as spraying with an old window-cleaning bottle. Some of the areas, once dry, were re-sanded or wiped with a wet cloth to further enhance textural and tonal effects.

The photographs and drawings were lightly and loosely sketched in with willow charcoal onto the prepared boards. Any excess marks were softly rubbed out with a cloth. I did the actual drafting, but I had an assistant help with some of the smaller elements like foliage and lettering and small fiddly areas, as I have wanted to work with this sense of team or atelier – Vickie Worthington and Anna Nicolson were the main hands-on assistants who worked with me on this piece but there were others who also played a part. Anna was particularly good at working in the reductive scratching of the foetus and dog so I let her go in that task. It was both a challenge and exciting to let go and trust others else to work on your composition. This is how the old masters and the few mistresses worked. It was fun working like that and this was actually very necessary because of our time constraints. I began loosely sketching in the local colours of Jess's clothing, her face and her whole body. As the painting built up, so did subsequent layers of colour – I started to use acrylic in a washy way with a binder glaze, as the body of the paint has a stronger, more intense luminosity. This was to make the painting stand out and have a strong presence. The actual painting of Jess's face and hands was finalised in oil paint – because it would give it more “body” and would make the face appear more natural – Jess's face is volatile and expressive and I wanted to use a malleable material – oil behaves itself very well – it can be changed around and has a rich look to it. It was important that the intensity of Jess's expression was sustained with that volatile/malleable look that she's got. It gives a focus to the painting. Most of the other passages in the work are thinner glazes and therefore more transparent.

The boat, Tessie (my dog), and the baby in the bucket are all done using reductive sanding. This means sanding back through the red of the ground to the white of the gesso panel. That created a very graphic and almost etched accuracy to some important details that I didn't want to gloss over.

The wounded Jesus that's at the bottom left hand corner has been built up in layers of acrylic tones and finalised in oil. He's positioned so a viewer could see the similar aspects of his wounded crucified person self-identifying with the lot of suffering women. The lamb has all been painted in a similar gestural, painterly way to Jess's body and the landscape. A couple of different styles – some loose, gestural stuff, and some small detail. It took quite a bit to marry the two approaches but I think the treatment worked. Part of the working process for me in this painting was that the filmmaker and her team were often in situ while the painting was being established so there were timeframe rhythms to observe for the filming process as well as the painting's life. There was quite a lot more premeditation to the processes than what I would need to do if I were working alone.

And the other thing of course was the degree that I was continuing to experiment with the idea of artist atelier. I was the lead artist but I was allowing my artist assistants to be involved in crafting the painting with me. So it was quite a discipline to be filmed whilst trusting in other artists to "do" parts of the painting. That I "gave away" parts of the painting to others and showed all of that on film! There are lots of artists today who engage assistants to work on their work but it is usually a mystery thing and not as highly transparent which parts they play. My process was reasonably open.

Three final images laid in were the re-sited woman who died of the backstreet abortion, the flat colour of the red page, the words and the gold leaf name of the biblical character, "Mary", and last of all, were the words, proverbs and scriptures that formed the main idea.

The pigment impregnated encaustic wax process adds a final layer of tinted, transparent glaze. The glaze is to protect the textural quality of the surface and to give the watercolour protection. The wax has been impregnated with pure colour pigments to retain vividness. Layers of hot, pigmented wax were applied with a brush and burned onto the painting with an iron to produce the smooth finish seen on all of the works in *The Sudden Imperative* series.

Some years before I painted this series I participated in an exhibition curated by Cushla Parekowhai called *Taonga Maori* and it was here I learned that a Maori artist doesn't name their work – the elders do. I used that Maori model when I was searching for titles for the works and for passages in the paintings. I brought in some friends and shared the concepts. We prayed and then they went away and they came back with the scriptures and titles. The naming of the paintings came from how they read the works – with a scriptural overlay. There are multi-various relationships to biblical narratives and a number of spiritual readings and personal narratives. The actual biblical characters, Mary in the picture - the mother of Jesus - and the scriptures, don't always match up – the paintings have Old and New Testament verses that allude to a number of human and spiritual conditions and narratives that concur with the stories that I was telling in *Tough Call* and in the other works in *The Sudden Imperative* series.

*The wordless book is or was a Sunday school resource used in the 50s, 60s and 70s. It had five coloured pages - black, red, white, green and gold - the same colours as in the sudden imperative series.

A website on the abortion debate from a pro-life perspective is:
<http://www.voiceforlife.org.nz/unborn.htm>