

Interview: Allie Eagle

Allie Eagle has been a practising artist and arts educator since the nineteen seventies. She is a familiar face at galleries, art schools and secondary schools around the country. Her lengthy curriculum vitae is testament to her life and her contribution to New Zealand art. This year a film titled *Allie Eagle and Me* has been part of film festivals around the country. The film reflects her participation in the Women's Art Movement and 30 years later, the significant changes that are now reflected in her life and through her art. She is the Managing Artist for the exhibition *Walking Past Each Other* held at The Suter in Nelson from 14 September, 2004 and Artist in Residence at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology around the time of the exhibition.

How have you selected the artists included in this exhibition?

The selection process, both for the artists and writers, included getting people who speak to various concerns which I think are integral with the theme of the show. I wanted to ask at least one artist who has a love for primordial landscape - in fact there were two artists in this category for my first 'hit list': Don Binney and Derek March. Don's not available due to the pressures from having just completed a mammoth effort of showing his work around the country. I am sorry he can't be in the show. I wanted to ask at least one artist who has a love for the natural landscape, and its own healing processes. Derek March has an abiding interest in re-vegetation projects in the Waitakere River Valley where over the last 27 years he has lived as my neighbour and friend in Te Henga/Bethells. I thought having a sincere advocate for the natural lands we inhabit and live near is always a good start when we begin to talk about land issues. The selection of the other artists has been on a basis of bringing different points of view to the central ideas of the exhibition.

There is Jonathan [Mane-Wheoki] whose understanding of things Victorian, architectural and Anglican is by no means skimpy. He has also got a good handle on the contemporary art world.

Cushla Parekowhai and I have worked together on a number of projects and I am always very indebted for her perceptions in the way we regard one another's stories and experiences of Aotearoa. Especially important for me has been the way she and brother Michael Parekowhai's parents have inculcated in both of them a wonderful sense of community. They have a sensitivity and humour about our differences and a generosity of sharing their own Maori sensibility with this very elegant and at the same time inclusive kaupapa.

The Parekowhais' work engages the artist with real communities and helps to set up conversations that include the 'little' people who are often seen as unimportant, and, when this becomes art it's very lovely.

What has motivated you to engage with the issues of land, ecology and identity that surround The Suter redevelopment?

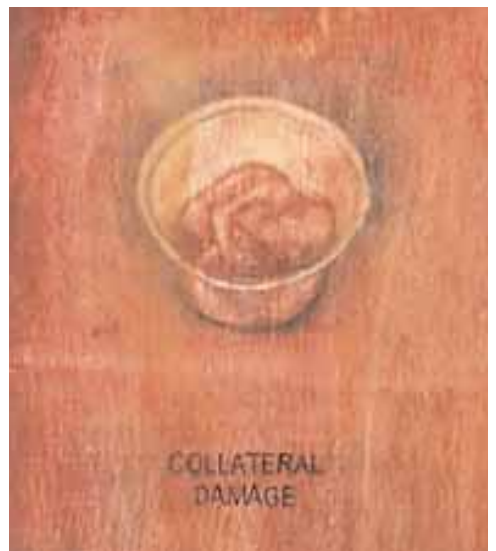
I am a 'coastal bush dweller' from Te Henga / Bethells Beach, and I also spent a part of my life at Otaki Beach with my mother. I came to The Suter with an idea that I wanted to have an exhibition here, that it would speak to the Nelson people and environment about things that matter here, that may have some parallels with the rural environments that I live in. When I found out the problems of The Suter needing housing for their collection and the Queens Gardens' advocates wanting to see the Gardens conserved and not encroached on by The Suter, I thought that seemed a good starting point for an exhibition. I understand the needs The Suter has for extensions, and [that the opposing parties want] conservation of the Gardens. I could empathise

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Tough Call (from *The Sudden Imperative* series), Allie Eagle, 2003, watercolour on gesso wooden panel with pigment impregnated encaustic wax, 550 x 600cm. (photograph by Elizabeth March)



Tough Call (detail). Collateral Damage alludes to Eagle's 1970's now iconic watercolour painting, *This Woman Died I Care*, of a woman who died from an illegal back street abortion.





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with both positions very easily. Its not too different from stuff that happens in other places around Enzed. Certainly these conflicts have been part and parcel of my life at Te Henga where there are variations of concerns to do with the natural and man-made environments. Derek March and I have been involved in a very holistic way in the development of a park at Te Henga (there's another conversation there), but at its heart its quite similar and then there's all the questions I ask myself when I come to a new environment like: what's gone on here before and who are the guardians now? Is this place (Nelson) like the Waitakeres where there is a map full of place names that allude to Pakeha occupation and another layer under it or over it like an overhead projector sheet that speaks of Maori names and memories that seldom get a look in and then? And then, who are the Iwi in Nelson? How do they see this place? Are there street people who live around these precincts? How do they live? Who was Bishop Suter and his colleagues, the artists, and the people who set up the gardens? What were they establishing? How did the old chiefs and people walk over this patch while the plans were being made? Then finally looking down on this little patch in time what was God's heart yearning for in all this?

What outcomes would you most like to see come out of the exhibition?

A pattern has been emerging about my need to work with artists as we speak to and with families, and friends and communities with our art. Our growing conversations (my Maori colleagues lead the way here for me) and it's a very exciting dialogue. An outcome is that I may be helping to model a very respectful, if not sometimes feisty and challenging way of doing art in the community and speaking with a desire to hear back, include, reflect and get people to be involved.

How is your faith expressed through your art practice?

Oh, its really in-yer-face my faith, the way I do my art! I just have this number one mission statement - that's to 'paint the purposes of God into peoples hearts'. This is, I s'pose in concrete terms, doing stuff where I work with others in mentoring and networking. I'm thinking about areas where I have worked ... like art teaching, working in the environment and building community through art making practices. [I'm] actually waiting to hear what God has in mind for the next step of what I'm going to do. After that, I think I am stepping out in faith, trusting Him to meet all my needs.

Describe how your faith has changed the way that you make your art.

My faith in God works a little differently to natural faith in oneself. When I painted *Tough Call* recently (the red painting that's in Briar March's film of me - *Allie Eagle and Me*) I wanted to make an image in 2003 that was just as tough and

grunty as my 70's picture of a woman who'd died having a backstreet abortion ... so I prayed and said something like this. What should I have that is an even more powerful image, Lord? And then a few moments later, as I waited for an answer, came the thought of a dead lamb hanging - like the sheep that is in the national coat of arms of Enzed. So, I go on, Dear Lord, that's a bit much isn't it? I'm not big on bleeding Jesus's on crosses. I want to think of the risen Christ.. but I do know how important that sacrifice is in all of this. So I said: ok then Lord, well if that's really you please confirm it today, 'cos the painting needs to be done. That night when I get home the phone rings and it's a friend who is about to drive out to see me from her farmlet. She says I've just buried a couple of sheep. I'll wash up and come on out! I say, springing to attention, don't wash yet - dig one up and bring it to me!

How are you re-addressing earlier feminist concerns in your current art practice?

I am doing it by taking a hard look at what I made then and looking at the images and saying what do I think about this now? What does the interim wisdom of my years tell me about the way that I formed ideas and art then, and do I have new stuff to say about all this now? So the work gets to be different of course, not just because my practice has developed hugely over the years but 'cos the woman has thought about a lot of things differently over this time too. In some cases, I needed to do that because I was ever being inundated by requests from art students studying the Feminist 70's art practice. It occurred to me that while it's not unflattering to have people want to learn about you, I would rather sit in a current seat of teaching than one I left a quarter of a century ago. So, I needed to do the mistress works that replaced, in a sense, the old ones, and thought it was a reasonably good idea to re-contextualise them. I read recently that Witi Ihimaera has needed to do a similar exercise with some of his earlier works because his polemics and thinking changed so much also. Ever the art teacher, these things I enjoy playing with comparisons and introducing new clues - I could bring in other elements that don't allude to the big Feminist concerns of that time. There's quite a series of works I have done in this recast manner - The Suter owns one of the first of these pieces [titled] *We Still Are, We Still Are*.

Wendy Grace Allen

Opposite page: *This Woman Died I Care* (details), Allie Eagle, 1978, watercolour, graphic, glass and sticking plaster, 72 x 52 inches, Collection: The Auckland Art Gallery.