

A photograph of two women standing in front of a traditional thatched-roof building. The woman on the left is wearing a striped short-sleeved shirt under a long red wrap, a headband, and dark sandals. The woman on the right is wearing a yellow sleeveless dress with a ruffled collar, a beaded necklace, a beaded belt, and sandals. The background shows a dirt path and more of the building.

Through the lens

An interview with Briar March

Director **Briar March** is well known for her first full-length documentary film *Allie Eagle and Me* (2003) a project she began while in her final year at Elam School of Fine Art. During her degree course, Briar worked in multi-media and moving image, despite an early intention to be a painter, like her father. Initially, she made video pieces that explore embodiment, identity and place, many of which subvert traditional film narrative. However, since graduating, Briar has worked mainly with narrative filmmaking.

Briar finds this a very direct way to communicate her ideas to a wide audience. She also identifies her art practice as a process of exploring her own beliefs (whether spiritual, political or personal) in relation to what she sees through the lens. Besides *Allie Eagle and Me*, recent works include three music videos, a commercial for the NGO ECPAT (Non Government Organisation End Child Prostitution and Trafficking) and three documentaries on activism that she edited with producer/director Claudia Pond Eyley. Never one to sit still, Briar is currently developing several television documentary ideas and working on her latest film about the sinking island of Takuu, 250km off the coast of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea.

How did you get started as an artist?

'I was one of those lucky people who grew up in a nurturing, creative environment where there were crayons and paint and dress-ups. Also, my parents were never-ending in their activities. For example they made these masks for a play and we kept them for a long time because they were absolutely brilliant—these huge masks that you stuck over your head, made of papier mâché and chicken wire. Later on in our teens we'd stick them on and dance to Spanish music, and it looked really funny, as you can imagine. And my Dad is a painter and has always dealt with very serious themes to do with the environment, to do with spirituality, to do with the world. That has probably had an influence on the way I work.'

What was it that attracted you to the medium of film?

'I went to Elam Art School in the second year of my degree (having completed the first year at Unitec). I majored in Intermedia [Studies], which is a wonderful word that really refers to what happens when art forms collide, fuse together or cross over one another. The word could also relate to the process of filmmaking, which combines so many different elements together, and I guess this is why I was attracted to it.

'During my time in Intermedia, I worked mostly in the medium of video, making installations and performances. I orientated myself with editing software, cameras and stuff that one would call the tools of a filmmaker. In my third year I went to a course on documentary-making, and this was really the beginning of my direction towards making longer-form pieces that have a narrative and tell a story.

'At the same time a deeper thing was going on for me. Probably like many people who go to art school, I was grappling with the experience of being an artist. I had shows where I'd spend heaps of time on a work, and then see that only a small portion of society came to the gallery to see it or understood what I was on about. I still think of myself as an artist, and I do

believe art is very important and would like to return to making it one day, but my move towards film was a reaction to some of these things. Film can reach people in ways that I haven't seen other art forms do. We all relate to moving image, having grown up with TVs and cinemas. Also I loved the experience of making documentaries on so many levels—I wasn't totally involved in my own personal views on the world—I had to think about others and their views (in relation to mine) a lot more.'

What led you to make a film about Allie Eagle?

'The birth of a project is often very organic with no one particular thing being the main impetus for its creation. Should I tell you it was because I wanted to buy a camera and making this project was an excuse to do that? Or should I tell you that I was interested in the issues around Allie's work, or that Allie is actually one of my neighbours and long-time family friend? All of these answers could be partially correct, but in the end, after having talked to Allie about it in some depth, I think I realised that it could be a very interesting story. And at the time I was very inspired by the Agnès Varda film, *The Gleaners and I* (2000). I liked the way Varda put herself in the frame, which is reflected in the style I chose for *Allie Eagle and Me*.'

Allie Eagle and Me considers Allie's spiritual and religious motivations. How do you think your filmmaking is informed by your own spirituality?

'I grew up in a Christian home, so I've always had an insight into Christianity from that experience. Like lots of people, when I reached my twenties I realised I couldn't easily accept the idea that there was only one way to God—through Jesus Christ. What about all the other religions out there and the other spiritual teachers? And that questioning has come through in my work.

'Allie is an artist who has moved from being a lesbian separatist to being a Pentecostal Christian. She was brought up in a Christian home, meaning her upbringing is similar to mine. I thought, "this is an interesting story about an artist who seems to have moved from one camp to another, or in her older life gone back to her childhood roots—and what does this mean?" But there was also a personal searching, with me thinking "what is my opinion?" and "what's my relationship with this idea?". It's something that's slightly subconscious. Why am I interested in certain themes? Potentially it's because I'm trying to find out certain ideas for myself—it's about using your art practice as a way of trying to understand things—which is what artists are doing all the time.'

Is this a motivation in your other work as well? What about your foray into more commercial works like your music videos or your editing and shooting on Claudia Pond Eyley's activist pieces?

'I get excited about a lot of things, so maybe that is the best answer! I am still developing a style to my work, so I like to cross a whole lot of genres of filmmaking, and I am still discovering things I am interested in. I've made three films with Claudia Pond Eyley. They've all been about activism in New Zealand, including about the Rainbow Warrior (*The Women who Launched a Rainbow*, 2006), New Zealand becoming nuclear free, and the nuclear testing in

Briar March in a toha dancing costume with friend and production assistant Rosevita Tione. Photo: Zane Holmes.

Mururoa. The music videos are fun and very visual, and get me back to my purely creative side. I wanted to make them as a way into directing commercials, since I thought making commercials would support my documentary projects, but to be honest I'm not sure how I feel about this any more—it doesn't sit very well with my politics.'

Your current project is a documentary about a sinking island. What inspired this, and what challenges did you face?

'With the film on Takuu, I was looking for a new story and one day I was reading an article about Richard Moyle, an anthropologist who has been to Takuu many times, and also written about it. He was describing the island and I was really fascinated, firstly because the article claimed that the island was sinking and

that I imagine some people would have found pretty uncomfortable. What should I mention? The mosquitoes, the chickens running through our house and the roosters crowing on our roof at all times of the morning and night? The rat that loved to watch me from the edge of my desk? Being made to dance in front of a crowd of laughing women in my underwear? Going to the toilet in the ocean every morning? Well, I actually love these kinds of experiences!

'On a more serious level, one of the biggest concerns I had with a project like this was the responsibility I had to accurately capture on film a culture different to mine. Everything is subjective to a degree, but how could I go in there and make a sensitive and fair record? Also, perhaps I wasn't the best person to be making the film—some people might argue that somebody from Takuu should make it.



Briar working at her desk on Takuu. Although the Panasonic Toughbook laptop is powered by stored solar energy, light is provided in the form of a very old-fashioned kerosene lamp. Photo: Zane Holmes.

that the community would potentially have to leave, and secondly because they were a very unique community, quite isolated, and for them a shift would be such a huge thing.

'We had enormous issues with visas, getting the right equipment, booking travel through Papua New Guinea, the logistics of shooting on a tiny budget, no power and no way to buy peripherals like batteries. Getting the funding was tough too; fortunately The Screen Innovation Fund was very generous, and we found the rest of the money from Robbers Dog and Occasional Productions, two companies I've worked for.

'On a day-to-day level, there were lots of things

'While we were shooting I was having to think about Christianity again, because another important issue is the religion on the island. The people on Takuu still practise their traditional Polynesian religion, and they're one of the last places in the world to do this, although Christianity has recently been introduced. When I went to the Christian churches on Takuu, what I perceived, in a lot of the practising Christians, was a very simplistic sort of faith—God loves us, we trust God and so everything will be okay. So when it came to issues like whether the island is going to go under, or any of the dangers that a low-lying atoll could face at this point in time, the response was God loves us, we trust God, we will be okay. And I, personally,

didn't want to think that way about God. I found it made people optimistic about their situation to the point that they believed nothing bad could happen, and they weren't prepared to challenge anything. But then, similarly, some of the old people who practise the traditional religion think the same way. They told me the spirits will protect them, that they could stop a tidal wave from coming.'

How does that relate to the way that you shot the film, and what you're thinking about for the edit?

'I would never say that the Christianity practised on the island is a bad thing and should never have been introduced, and neither would I say that the traditional religion is a bad thing and should be stopped. I would prefer to explore all the different ideas around these issues—look at different people's perspectives on it.

have a very analytical mind (it drives my friends crazy), but the documentary medium is perfect for this way of thinking, and the best place for me to use my time breaking things down into arguments or ideas. It's important to try and understand where your subject is coming from, and to have sensitivity to their values and beliefs. I'm continually being challenged and opened up to new ways of thought, and always having to re-think or re-consider my views, and that's what I love.'

Lyn Collie

Find out more about the making of the *Takuu* documentary on the blog www.takuu.blogspot.com



Dawn on Takuu. A woman washes as the tide reaches her kitchen's edge. Photo: Briar March.

I think that to be an interesting filmmaker, you don't want to preach one kind of view, you want to show different ideas and the debate amongst them. I also have to recognise that in some ways I am not in a position to judge my characters, as they are from another culture and way of existing that is completely different to mine. At all times I have to balance these kinds of considerations, and it is these considerations that make a film more interesting and potentially more truthful.

'What's more, I have to admit that through the process of telling somebody else's story, I will often learn more about myself, and even change my own views. This is why making documentaries, for me, is so rewarding. I