

# Layers of dark and light

## An interview with Mieke Scoggins

As creative and sensitive people, how do artists deal with and respond to suffering? Can the traumas of life enhance the creative vision of artists? What benefits might exist for those who go through similar experiences? Mieke Scoggins, a Nelson-based painter, relates the traumatic events of her bicycle/truck collision on a Brisbane road. She discusses her own recovery from the injuries she sustained, and how her artwork became cathartically connected to her healing journey.

Her story offers a kaleidoscope of painful physical lows and also surprising spiritual highs. Pain, by its very nature, necessitates limits upon our physical, mental, spiritual and emotional capacities. Consequently, Mieke learned to objectively 'streamline' her responses, and to direct her available energy levels into healing processes and manageable creative projects. Throughout this ordeal, Mieke's faith in a sovereign God is something that she credits as being pivotal to maintaining her sanity.

### A miraculous survival story

'It happened when I was cycling on a semi-rural Brisbane road, in 2005. Because the reputation of local drivers wasn't great, I was trying to be careful, cycling on the left hand side of the road. I even remember singing to myself, when I was hit from behind by a truck doing 70–80 kilometres per hour. I wasn't knocked unconscious. I can still remember the incredible force of the impact, and the sense of losing control of my body, like a rag doll tossed, flying through the air and then bang, bang, rolling on the ground over and over knocking over those white reflector marker poles.

'When I finally came to a stop I remember looking up to see what had hit me, and seeing the brake lights of a truck. It was really strange, but my body was responding like an instinctive animal trying to cope with the trauma of what had happened. It was as if I was two different people. My body was just screaming out in pain, and yet my mind was strangely clear and really rational. I remember my mind telling my body to calm down. And at the same time, I was feeling around in my mouth for teeth and was just spitting them out. Then the witnesses came and people were looking after me.

'That verse came to mind: to "praise Him through your circumstance". And I realised there was nothing I could do, so I was thinking to myself, thank you Jesus—this must be happening for some reason. One lady later told me that she thought the truck had hit a cardboard box, the way that I was just tossed in the air and rolled and rolled on the ground. She came back to discover that the box she saw was actually my body.

'It's funny what you do in those situations. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I remember asking people who were standing around me, "Are you a

Christian? Are you a Christian?" There was this one woman who was really affected by the whole ordeal. When I asked her: "Are you a Christian? Can you pray for me?" she prayed for me, as best she knew how. She was really shaken. She couldn't drive home afterwards. Someone had to take her home.

'For the next eight days I was in hospital. I lost a lot of blood through my injuries. I was in a state of constant nausea and they gave me these horrible antibiotics and Ribena, which just made me puke.

'But one night I had this amazing dream. There was this sheer cliff that I was climbing up and I had to get to the top. As I was climbing up I realised my arms were getting stronger. Just before the top there was this ledge that came out. And I knew I just couldn't get over it by myself. Up there was this little boy and that little boy was part of me, he was me, he was like my strength. The little boy yelled out: "I can pull you up. I can pull you up." And I said, "No you can't. You can't do it. You are too small. You are only a little boy." So I had to turn and go all the way back down by myself. And as I went down I got stronger and stronger ... When I reached the bottom I still needed to get to the top, but now I understood that I had to go the long way around. I had Rob my husband walking with me by my side, and two other friends. We headed off together. It was such a perfect metaphor for what was going on. At that time I was trying to heal myself—I got it right away, it was really cool.'

### Painting through the pain

Two months before Mieke's accident she began the first sketches of a series of light and dark layered palm-leaf oil paintings. Later, when she was able to sit up on the couch, Mieke was able to slowly finish this series and exhibit them in a Brisbane gallery. 'We had just arrived in Australia and I wanted to capture the essential warmth of the Australian light. It was so bright compared to New Zealand's dark lush green bush. Brisbane had lots of palm trees everywhere, tropical bush and gum trees. The sun would come shining through the palm fronds, casting patterned shadows with a distinct light ... I walked into a gallery where an artist had worked in a similar way to what I was planning, so it confirmed my choice to use light in this way. I went away and photographed images, and started painting. I thought deeply about my compositions ... I looked closely at naturally made patterns. I tried to balance abstract images with recognisable reality.

'I had only placed the very first layers down when I had the accident. When I was recovering, I was able to sit and paint for, say, ten minutes at a time. People began contacting me, saying they expected some great piece of art to come out of all this suffering, and I wanted to do them justice, and so while I was there thinking about what to paint, I just finished off my earlier series.'

**I can still remember flying through the air and then bang, bang, rolling on the ground over and over knocking over those white reflector marker poles**

Opposite page: Mieke Scoggins.







## Layers of dark and light

'... I was working with very, very thin layers. One of the main colours—sap green—is translucent. So in order to make it dark enough I had to place up to twenty layers of paint. It took a lot of patience, a good seven months' worth of just painting, painting and painting as much as I could every day, very slowly.

'I never use black; technically it doesn't contain a colour to enhance, it pulls colour away and dulls it. Without using black I have to go over and over and over in my colours to get that same tonal density. This takes patience and it takes layers.

'The colour contrasts became important, obviously the darker I went, the lighter the light areas became. All these technical things became a metaphor. The high contrast had to do with the depth, the sorrow, the darkness that I was in, and also the incredible joy which was on another extreme as well. As a composition your eye naturally follows an eye path around a painting ... but I noticed in these paintings that my eye would always end up landing on a light source. It became a metaphor for me of focus. I had to focus on hope. I had to focus upon the light.'

With her colour layers taking so long, the successive layers also became metaphorical Mieke. 'Not just the layering of paint, but the actual image layering of palms. You had to go through different things: [a ladder of rungs to climb] or bars restricting you, a journey of various stages you had to go through. Sometimes those stages are inexplicable...

'... They [the paintings] were beautiful for me. When I exhibited them in Australia, a woman (who has only recently died of cancer) saw them and they really spoke to her in her illness. So in contrast to my portraiture, the meaning they held was universally accepted; they helped other people persevere in challenges they were going through. It was relating to other people; others who had been through all kinds of trials could relate to them. That was encouraging for me, as in my state of self-focus, I would feel useless and even guilty that I wasn't out there doing God's work. I learnt that God could use me powerfully when I was at my weakest.'

## The necessity of suffering

'It started coming to me that God was using these very paintings as my therapy. And this was confirmed in a poem, which was given to me by a good friend, titled

*The Weaver.*

*My life is but a weaving  
Between the Lord and me  
I cannot choose the colours  
He worketh steadily.  
Oft-times He weaveth sorrow  
And I, in foolish pride  
Forget He sees the upper  
And I, the underside.*

*Not till the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly  
Does God unroll the canvas  
And explain the reason why.  
The dark threads are as needful  
In the weaver's skilful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver  
In the pattern He has planned.*

'That last part was really important. To get to that joy, to let that really shine through, it is necessary to have the darkness. It's not just that it exists, it's actually important and necessary. You need the darkness, you need the suffering, in order to grow, in order to experience that joy. Once we grasp hold of that concept, we can change our thinking of what suffering really is. We do not have to dwell in self-pity and despair about suffering in the world. We can rather see it as a need. Sometimes that need, if we think about it hard enough, can even become a want as well. If we get a taste for learning, for growth through suffering, we know that we can get there. Because we know that's what it takes. If you really want to grow in your character you are even going to ask God for it.'

## Leaving the darkness

'This whole period, I felt as a transition. As soon as I exhibited them [the palm-tree paintings] and was able to talk about them, in front of people, I was able to get them out. It was not just about "me" and "the paintings" any more, it was putting them out there. I felt the transition. I moved from the darkest period and I was suddenly into a period of light ... I could let them go. I'm still happy to have them around, I'm still happy to look at them. The colour is calming for me as well, it's bright, it's intense—again part of it, not-too-subtle colours. Originally I was thinking too literally about the accident. But it doesn't make sense to me—why would I want to paint a truck or a bike? These make sense.'



Opposite page:  
*Season #1*, 2005, Mieke Scoggins,  
oil on canvas, 760 x 610mm. Private collection.

Right:  
*Season #2*, 2005, Mieke Scoggins,  
oil on canvas, 760 x 610mm. Private collection.

## Metaphors of colour

Mieke deliberately uses blue instead of black for her shadows. Black also has an ability to communicate darker feelings, whereas she appears to use colour optimistically. 'I don't tend to like looking at paintings that are in that dark place because I don't have the energy for it—it takes a lot of energy to look at that type of painting, to have one on your wall ... I don't have the energy to be able to confront people like that ... using those visual methods of communication. I need to use colour ... each colour has an emotion, or an attribute. People who work with colour therapy [recognise] colour as important; it can change your mood.

'... I need to learn more about it, but I recognised shifting from [her previous use of] red to these colours that there was something going on here that was really important. If I can't stand looking at a colour, there is definitely something going on, changing within me. [I will keep my colours] bright and uplifting until I have the energy, one day, to be able to handle those colours again.'

## On being changed

'The accident changed how I viewed myself. Even though my body was all mucked up, I felt more confident about my body. I was released from the anxieties and insecurities about how I viewed my physical self. I could simply rest and be myself. I could just let go. Before the accident, when I was working as a waitress, if customers got annoyed at me about anything I would take it personally. But after the accident I learnt how to put boundaries between myself and others, to keep myself safe. If a customer got annoyed, I learnt I could put a boundary between myself and them, and still walk away with a smile on my face.

'... I used to use a lot of colour, reds that showed my passion. What they stood for—boldness, being passionate—they stirred up emotions, and now after the accident I've been using subtler colours: blues, yellows, greens, and I want to capture things that are calm and peaceful. It was a huge shift. The focus with my art now is one of simplicity again, not so much emotion. [It is] still powerful, but subtle and peaceful and about light and joy in life rather than those dark and challenging times. I realise that the good things that came out of the accident were far greater and outweighed the bad—things that make people smile.'

**Anaru/Andrew Panoho**