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the clarity of light

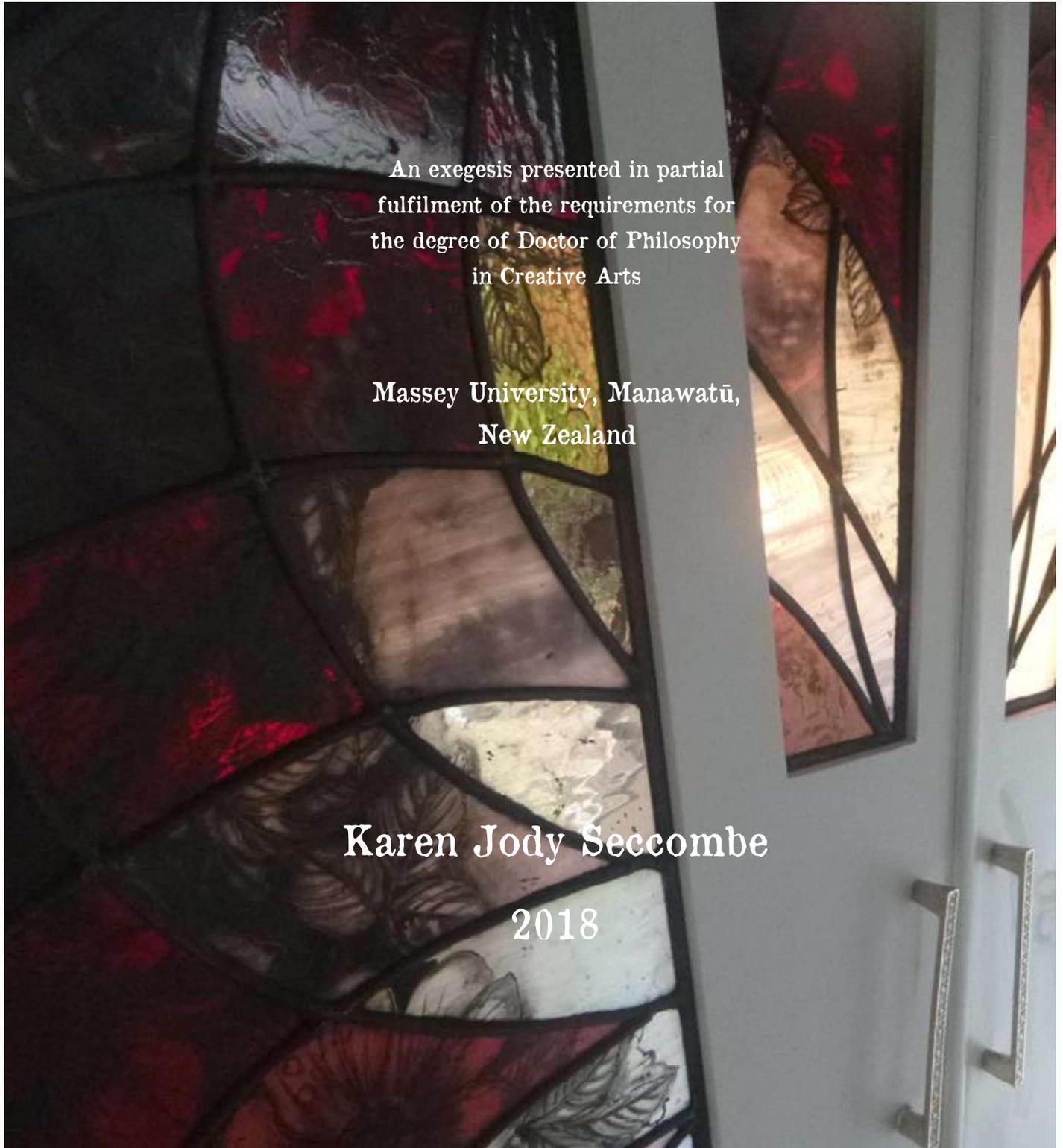
Self-representation through art making - a personal response to the
social justice work of WAI the Women's Art Initiative Collective

An exegesis presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Creative Arts

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New Zealand

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Abstract

Through the medium of art a very different way of thinking about, representing, and responding to women who have experienced violence has been constructed. The Women's Art Initiative (WAI) collective approach to art making within an insider community offers a powerful, authentic, self-directed alternative to more commonly applied art therapy approaches. It challenges many deeply entrenched deficit and pathologising stereotypes which are used to represent women who are considered too broken or unsafe to speak for themselves. This research shares the WAI way of thinking and an applied approach that are anchored in years of reflective practice, many conversations, and a rich diversity of membership. It clearly reveals the profound, socially engaged, and unique responses women can construct when they are respected, heard, and offered autonomy within an insider directed art making setting. The WAI Spirographic model of practice, a personal body of stained glass art work, and the collaborative fabric works developed demonstrate a personal response to the research findings.

Sharing such precious and privileged knowledge within the space of a research environment may hold dangerous potential for misunderstanding and further exposure of those who have already suffered the overwhelmingly negative responses that others often make to them. It is, however, the best chance that we have, as those who know violence intimately, to create change, and to have our perspectives and knowledge recognised and legitimated.

Dedication and acknowledgments

I have walked amongst a community throughout this research project. Without every one of these people WAI the Women's Art Initiative would not exist or continue to thrive, and I would not have the privilege of sharing my understanding of these precious knowledges.

I honour the contribution of the women of WAI to this research. The knowledge, wisdom, and strength that every one of our WAI collective members has brought to our shared kaupapa, has enhanced and informed this research, and significantly altered my own reflections, thinking, and approach to making art.

It has been a privilege to conduct this research within the protective space of Te Pūtahi-a-Toi, School of Māori Art, Knowledge and Education at Massey University in Palmerston North. The generous sharing of understanding and knowledge, and the care offered to me by the academic staff has guided and supported this project and offered the WAI collective dignity, allowing us a safe space to find our own way. I acknowledge the patience, sensitivity, trust, excellent advice, and respectful guidance of my supervisors Prof. Robert Jahnke and Dr. Margaret Forster. The mentoring they have both so generously offered has altered my own thinking and self-representation, and has enhanced the WAI model of practice. The integrity of the WAI approach continues to be grounded in many profound and thoughtful discussions which took place in 2012 with Associate Professor Ngataiharuru Taepa and Lecturer Rongomaiaia Te Whaiti.

An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to the National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges, in particular to the Managers and advocates of Palmerston North Women's Refuge, Te Whare Rokiroki Māori Women's Refuge, Wellington Women's Refuge, and Marlborough

Women's Refuge and Sexual Abuse Centre. The model that the refuge movement in this country offers is robust, empowering and upholds the dignity of the women they support.

The belief and real-life knowledge that these amazing women have offered to the WAI kaupapa has kept me going. The work that is done every day all over this country by Women's Refuge New Zealand is pivotal in the fight for better social responses to women who have experienced violence.

Many people have also supported the practical and messy personal art making side of this project. Without their enthusiasm, advice, and problem solving abilities I would not have had the courage to tackle such a formidable body of work. A special acknowledgment must be made of the women who worked alongside me to create collaborative fabric works - all are busy women with many commitments. The time and love that was given to these works and to developing our shared understandings has humbled me. Huge thanks to Greg Hall, Kate Dobbs, David Traub; Paul at Nightowl, and my Kimbolton neighbours, Terry, Ralph, Eddie and Peter. It has been an enormous privilege working with so many creative and inspiring people throughout this project.

Without the very generous financial support of a Massey University Vice Chancellors' Scholarship, a 2015 Freemasons Post graduate Scholarship, a 2016 Claude McCarthy Fellowship and a 2016 Janus NGO research award, this research would not have been possible. I have also truly appreciated the support of a 2017 Earle Creativity and Development Trust award, and support for exhibition from the Palmerston North City Council Creative Communities Scheme. I am very grateful to have received such formidable support.

Finally, and most importantly, I extend my deepest appreciation to my beautiful family – my partner Ang, my parents, my three children, and my grandchildren. The belief you all have in me has allowed me to walk this difficult and personally demanding research path with dignity and courage. You are my touchstones, my heart, and my strongest motivation to see social change.

Prologue

Once there was a young girl who loved climbing trees and watching sunsets, who read voraciously, and dreamed. She liked to paint, draw, write, and make things. She had a wonderful imagination. She wanted to grow up and be a woman but she was scared. One day the girl met a man who was strong and confident and told her what she needed to do to make her way in the world. He promised to make her life easy and to take care of all of the hard stuff for her. She would have an amazing, lovely, life if she would follow him. So she did.

She followed him into a dark slow death.



She followed him to a place where she became lost and invisible, alone and isolated, she became powerless and he became a monster. She lost her voice, her ability to feel, her ability to function and her sense of who she was. She felt very, very sad. The darkness enveloped and engulfed her. She resisted it with the only tools she had – her mind, her heart, and her hands. When everything became ugly she stenciled roses on the walls. When she lost touch with herself she touched the earth or held her children. When she was suffocating she inhaled literature and poetry, and took shallow breaths of creativity.

Her light became dim.



She was confused and ashamed, and she blamed herself for her pain. When she finally could she ran away fast and she never went back. That was not the end of this story, it was really the beginning.

Afterwards the girl tried to understand what had happened. She was different and her world saw her as damaged, broken, undignified, and deficient. Her story was not allowed to be told, because darkness can't be seen in the daylight. It made people uncomfortable. The girl needed to get on with living in the daylight and put the darkness behind her, she was told.

She did her best but the darkness kept following her. She wanted to understand herself but the self she now saw was not the self she knew nor remembered. So she went back to what she knew – she read voraciously, she made art, baked, gardened, studied, and grew beautiful children, and somewhere along the way her darkness started to leak out and into her world. The shadows of her pain did not hide anymore and she started to see them everywhere. Other people's shadows, the shadows of this place she called home.



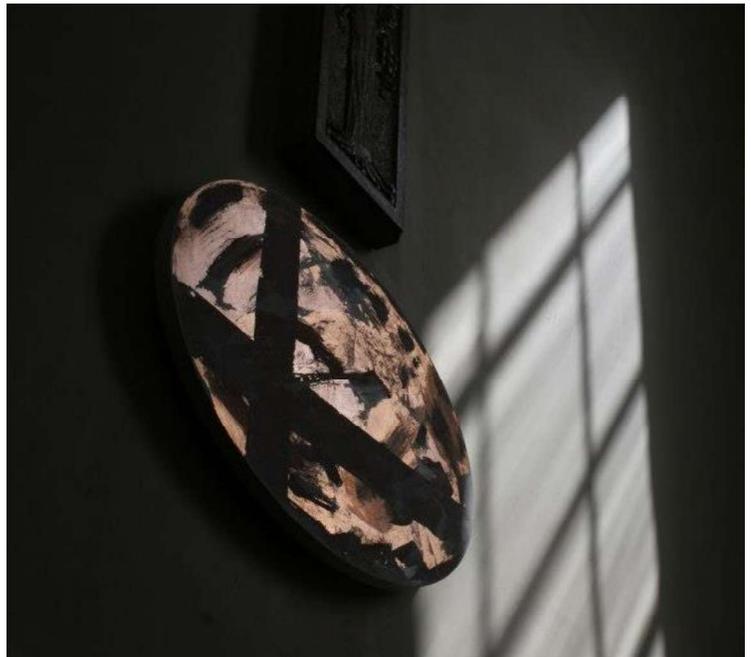


The darkness began to exist alongside the light in a way that made her want to point it out to anyone who would listen, but she had no words to speak of it.

It came out in her artwork – what she wanted to say, her truth, her pain, and her difference, the darkness of a world that condoned such pain, which committed such pain. Her voice started to come back, but not in words. She put her story in a place where others could see it. It made her vulnerable and really scared but in giving up her secrets her power was manifest.

Throughout her passage of darkness she suddenly recognised her inherent, undiminished light. When she looked in the mirror she did not see a passive, weak girl but a fierce woman she knew and understood.

That woman walked the long path to this report.



All images above: McIntyre, K. (2012). *Passage Series*. [Acrylic on board].

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Introduction

“when we dare to speak in a liberatory voice, we threaten even those who may initially claim to want our words”

(hooks 1989 p.18)

This research addresses the perceived symbiotic and therapeutic relationship between art and women who have experienced violence, offering an alternative set of insider understandings which challenge and resist common deficit and therapy informed responses. When the word art sits alongside the words violence, ‘victim’, or ‘survivor’ some very specific connections are often made. Overwhelmingly the inference is that the art making process and its outcomes will be therapeutic - used to analyse and fix the perceived deficits of the ‘client’ being ‘helped’. A plethora of art therapy research backs these common ways of working. This dissertation aims to present a comprehensive picture of a very different art and philosophical approach to walking alongside victims of violence. It is an approach that privileges the voices of those who know and understand violence, and publicly expresses these through the exhibition of the artistic responses made within a supportive collective environment.

A prologue leads into the writing, offering the motivation and deeply intimate context for this Creative Arts research - the outcomes of which are the written dissertation and a personal and collaborative body of artworks. The prologue begins with a private narrative, included as a critical element to ground the kaupapa (the philosophy, subject, theme or issue) and explicitly identify the insider position of the researcher.

Chapter One sets the scene, establishing the social and cultural context within which this work is undertaken. Through an examination of the history of violence within Aotearoa New

Zealand it identifies an ongoing and legitimated history of violence against those considered 'other'.

Chapter Two explicates the chosen research methodology and method. The carefully constructed qualitative stance outlined attempts to identify inequitable power relations, and addresses oppressive mainstream research practices which this researcher argues create an inevitable, but avoidable impact on the integrity and honesty of the information gathering process and the analysis of the findings.

Chapter Three summarises the 2013 Women's Art Initiative (WAI) model of practice developed through the researcher's Masters of Maori Visual Arts research. This previous work aimed to offer dignifying ways of providing women the opportunity to self-represent their experiences of violence. The chapter then goes on to outline the questions and aims of this project, concluding with a discussion of the many complex ethical implications of this research.

The philosophical approach which underpins the WAI way of working and thinking and our approach to art-making and exhibition are underlined in Chapter Four. Part One opens a space around the representation of women and violence through art and literature, and develops a rationale for self-representation. Part Two encompasses the key beliefs and philosophies that underpin our collective approach to art-making. These include: Response Based Practice, resistance to violence, upholding dignity, the WAI concept of 'being', an active engagement in art making, collectivism, and insider facilitation. Our understandings of these concepts and the particular and specific ways in which we use terminology, are addressed.

Chapter Five describes the WAI Spirographic model of practice developed through the research process, unpacking the many flexible, layered, shifting and very real

understandings that inform the current representation of this. This model of practice encompasses the WAI Palmerston North (PN) collective's core beliefs and our kawa, or ways of doing things, and the different pragmatic approaches we have taken to implementing this 'model'. It offers a snapshot of our 'walk' as an art making collective, and records our social justice approach, which challenges many of the contemporary discourses surrounding violence against women in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A reflective discussion on the WAI data collected and the research findings is presented within Chapter Six. These findings directly inform the personal art making practice described in Chapter Seven. An overview of the originally intended research process, which was to take place alongside three other regional Women's Refuges, is included. WAI PN's art making process, outcomes, themes, symbols and approaches are analysed, using the ongoing written reflections made over the research period. Collective members written reflections are included within this section, as is a discussion of the public responses to our work, and an analysis of our WAI art as activism.

Chapter seven translates the research into a personal and collaborative art making practice, unpacking the elements, symbols, materials and concepts through which the binaries implicit in contemporary discourse are represented within the exhibition *the clarity of light*. This chapter discusses my responses to the WAI research through my art making. I respond to the WAI ways of self-representing identity, of flipping deficits and challenging the binaries inherent in the discourses of violence. Through the presented installation, which is made up of stained glass, altered wardrobes, and collaborative fabric works, I share my artistic reflections on our collectives' way of working and thinking. All that I have learned through the research informs this visual narrative.

The final substantive section of this dissertation, the conclusion, gathers together the various threads of the research, providing the reader with an outline discussion of the overall project. This is followed by a poem in the form of an epilogue. Summarising a sense

of hope, this epilogue offers a challenge to entrenched and unhelpful ways of responding to 'victims of violence'. It asks readers to carry forward the precious, alternative knowledge which is identified through this research project