

Practitioner's Statement

Untitled

Amy Davies

I have always loved children, especially babies. I treasure their bouncy joy and marvel in their quick development. I am fascinated by the ingenuity and wonder of the human body through pregnancy and birth. I have always wanted to be a midwife to help others in their journey through motherhood. My desire to assist in this development as a future career is what inspired my body of work. Nobody is mentally or emotionally prepared for a stillbirth, and yet 1 in every 130 women, in Australia and New Zealand, reaching 20 weeks gestation will have a stillborn baby. As stillbirths are not often spoken about, I wanted to draw attention to how the experience can deeply effect the mothers, families and the surrounding families of these children.

Through my research, I found that mothers who experience this devastating process tend to display similar emotions in their journey of grief and healing: disassociation, anger and loss. Mothers are usually left in a state of shock, causing them to disassociate from the reality of the situation. Some mothers express their grief through anger and frustration, often blaming themselves, their lost child, partners or the people around them.

When we become angry, our eyes water and we begin to lose control of our voice as it shakes. I have used this analogy of 'wet anger' to symbolise a mother's pain of caring *too* much as they attempt to comprehend their dark reality. Unfortunately, we cannot control nature. While one mother may experience the long awaited and much anticipated wailing of a newborn baby, this is sadly juxtaposed by another who attempts to interpret the confusion of silence. Why does one baby have breath and yet another none? Along with the disassociation, anger and feelings of failure, that *are* normal within such experiences, mothers may also feel a loss of hope as they contemplate the termination of dreams they had for their child.

My three underwater portraits attempt display aspects of mother's emotions following stillbirth. The enlarged, close-up compositions emphasise feelings of being overwhelmed and out of control. The hard, shiny and clear resin overlayed on my charcoal drawings, engulfs the mothers as they struggle with their loss. My compositions were heavily influenced by contemporary photographer Alban Grosdidier and his 'Drowning Project'. His metaphoric series captured emotions of stress and claustrophobia experienced by people 'drowning' in work and the fast-paced world around them. The surrounding body of water caused the viewer to hold their breath and gasp as they identified with the subject.

Using this same technique of underwater photography, I was able to express sensations of struggle and stress, as though the darkness was closing in from all sides. I found that my best photos were taken in Unley Swimming Pool, where the dark blue background of the pool contrasted to the porcelain skin of my female subjects. Ripples and bubbles within the water above distorted and exaggerated the expressions of the women and assisted in capturing their emotions: disassociation, anger and loss.

Using only black and white charcoal on a dull green pastel paper drew focus to the emotion of the subject. My workshop with Yanni Floros, an Adelaide-based portrait artist, helped me to develop my approach to drawing. I learnt that charcoal should be applied in smooth,

rendered layers which could be reworked to develop depth and form. In contrast to Floros' hyper-realistic technique, I found that a

harsher and stronger application of both black and white charcoal was better in suggesting the angst felt by the subject. Similarly, Robert Hannaford's charcoal portraits at the South Australian Art Gallery revealed quicker suggestions of the human form. Using Hannaford's strong emotive technique and Floros' smooth blending, I was able to develop my own drawing aesthetic.

Although the addition of resin was risky, I felt it suitable in the development of my theme. Like these mothers who had nurtured their babies for months, it was fitting for me, the artist, to experience the feeling of losing control. The fluidity and spontaneity of resin meant I was giving complete control to a new medium on top of three drawings I had spent so long refining. Fortunately, the resin worked. In fact, it actually enhanced the drawing itself as the dull green paper became a rich, dark grey. The rippled, glossy resin suggests movement, as though the submerged mother is trapped within her current emotional state.

To accompany the three portraits, I created four elongated canvases with cool blue tones (two dark and two light). Mixing blue, purple, turquoise and black inks with pouring medium was a unique way of marbling the tones together. This abstract interpretation of a large body of water was symbolic of our spirituality. While I identify as a spiritual person, my experience of hard times is that we either draw closer to our spirituality or push it away. For me, the water was representative of God and my desire to seek refuge and comfort in times of pain and loss. The unpredictable nature of the medium suggests the unfortunate outcome of stillbirths as being out of our control. While the darker two canvases evoke a sense of misery and one's overwhelming desire to drown and escape, this contrasts to lighter canvases which present a view of hope and perhaps even freedom.

These light blue tones connect with my depiction of three babies surrounded by a rhythmic body of water. I found the blotchy, organic watercolour techniques of Cherry Hood and Agnes Cecile suitable for my interpretation of the babies. Similar to Hood, I layered flesh tones to build tone and depth. However, initial layers of cold blue tones and additional cool skin tones gave the impression these perfect babies had no breath. The wet, fluid nature of the watercolour paint as a medium was suitable for suggesting the water. My expressionistic application was comparable to Anger's Cecile as I attempted to capture emotion through colour and shape. The three babies connect with the mothers above as the viewer is left to contemplate the dreams, desires and 'could haves' of each child. The luminous blue water presents a notion that each child, although taken from this world, is safe and comforted by a higher power in another realm.

This theme has been challenging and without resolution. However, the physical process of developing a body of work helped me to identify, somewhat, with the struggle mothers and families must journey through in such experiences. It is my hope that, although this work may be confronting and somewhat controversial, it acknowledges a mother's struggle and strength to endure.