

Art beat

The story behind our exhibition: Anne Riggs Trauma / Loss / Grief Southern Health Art Space 25 November to February 2010

A series of painted animal bones positioned vertically appears as a forest. This landscape of gnarled and reduced forms leads the viewer into the exhibition. Each bone displays a tiny painted image of a tree that has been pruned back almost to its trunk, as is common practice throughout Europe and even in cities here. The bones echo the shapes of the trees, and also remind us of our own mortality; yet the trees, despite being pruned back and restricted so intently, do grow again each spring. Their shape is forever changed, but they can still flourish, and for Riggs these are a metaphor for those recovering from pain, trauma and loss.

Inspired by her work with a group of women survivor's of child abuse at Moorabbin's SECASA unit, Riggs' artworks can be described as a collection of fragments of experience that have been carefully articulated and given shape, texture and form. Riggs never asked to be told the individual stories of the women in her group, rather through the process and exchange of teaching/ learning art making, snippets of these experiences and current states were shared.

Astonishingly given the diversity of objects, all artworks in the exhibition were made by Riggs.

In one section of the space, children's clothes starkly white and inherently fragile appear super real in their ceramic guise as they hang from the ceiling, evoking clothes on a washing line. They are not immobilised completely, but nor will they ever be filled with life. The viewer almost wants to reach out and touch these delicate forms but can't and should not. Another area of the exhibition shows flattened, almost steam rolled plaster covered clothes, pressed to a wall. Life has been withdrawn and the clothes remain as signifiers of what has been lost – in this case the loss of childhood.

A mess of hand made purple doilies hang in the centre of the room – falling down into a large white wicker storage trunk. All have been made from recycled children's clothes, cut into fine strips and then crocheted by Riggs. Some doilies are complete while others were never finished or are falling apart and unravelling. Some have hair and wire entwined. Riggs was taught to crochet by her own mother and in this installation she contemplates what is lost if a parent is not there to pass down a tradition, or is not there to protect, care and love adequately and appropriately.

Protection and the home are conjured again in a series of cocoons – some ugly in their wire like shapes others with beautiful exteriors are inhospitable on the inside. Of course cocoons are also places of transformation, and some of the survivors describe their process of dealing with trauma as akin to the emergence from cocoon of a butterfly.

Another recurring theme is one of restriction and reduction, in the flattened clothes and in sculptural hanging figures that are almost reduced to the skeletal – but yet remain in the living - twisted and bent over in pain and suffering. The materials of her work also speak of these states – some fragile and delicate, others sharp, durable and dangerous: wax, bone, glass and wire feature. Often objects have been exposed to extremely high temperatures in the kiln, such as plaster figures embedded with wire that end up so delicate they barely hold together.

Some of these images are hard to look at, and as psychiatrist Dr George Halasz observed, the viewer needs to allow themselves the time to look – and breathe. Child abuse has only in recent history become something that is spoken about and even now an exhibition of this kind that actually gives form to the pain so many have felt is a rarity and can be disturbing as it should be.

Riggs has worked consciously to avoid showing the site of the wound, to avoid the shocking or that which may revolt the viewer. It is for her much more about acknowledging the trauma, pain and loss and allowing ourselves to emotionally engage with the subject.

Riggs asks, can art contribute to recovery, or to wellbeing, if the inverse, being the silence surrounding sexual abuse serves to amplify the pain, shame and horror for survivors? For the women Riggs has worked with – the answer seems to be a resounding yes, and it is for this reason that the exhibition and display of this work becomes such a necessity.

See also:

- www.southernhealth.org.au/page/About_Us/Arts_in_health/
- www.anneriggs.com
- Our feature article about the Trauma / Loss / Grief exhibition in The Age Saturday 28 November 2009.

