

Practitioner's Statement

Are we failing our children?

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My body of work focuses on the theme of child abuse which initially stemmed from my interest in beautiful faces. My body of work began as an attempt to move the drawings I previously did of beautiful models and other celebrities towards drawing people linked with a social, or a deeper, more relevant theme impacting real people and real lives.

I looked at a variety of different portrait artists including Abbey McCulloch, Ashley Oubre, Vernon Ah Kee and Vince Low where I developed my understanding of why the use of mediums, style and subject matter of the artist's work was intentional and completely relevant to creating their portraits. This was evident in Oubre's work where her delicate use of graphite enhanced the subject's vulnerability. I was drawn to Oubre's photorealistic style and her style inspired me through the development of my own work.

As I began to compare faces to portraits and started to think about why the portraits were in fact portraits, I began to understand why the drawings I had been creating over the years weren't actually portraits. It became clear to me that faces, as those depicted in media and advertising, are not about the people, but rather the people are objects surrounding the sale of products. It occurred to me that the difference between faces and portraits was linked to the context of the subject and that the portrait required to represent the person-themselves, their story, their life. I found that social issues can draw together people's stories and experiences to comment as social portraits. Through these shared experiences, they have the ability to shed light on social issues. After exploring various artists and their own work, I began to experiment on faces with various mediums, colours and styles. I found how medium, colour and style can influence the gaze of the viewer and impact their feelings.

Firstly, I began to look at young girls who were entered in beauty pageants as their faces were beautiful, yet I was also interested in the social practices of this beautification of children. My research about beauty pageants led me to the thought that they were a form of child abuse. I found stories of exploitation, sexualisation and images of little girls crying and mothers injecting Botox into their daughter's face. I was appalled by what I had found and I saw this as a form of child abuse. I made my first set of work to show that the child's beauty on the outside is not reflected on the inside.

After looking at the problems associated with children in beauty pageants, this encouraged me to look at other ways in which abuse was made public in the media. I decided to take a closer look into real children who have been victims of child abuse. As I researched, I came across the story of how Rosie Batty's son, Luke, was murdered by his father.

Rosie repeatedly told authorities of the threat Luke's father held towards them, however, she was ignored multiple times which eventually resulted in Luke's death. This incident caused me to think about how the issue of violence continues to be ignored, even after it has resulted in a death. Rosie Batty's efforts to raise awareness about domestic violence inspired me to think about how I could use my artwork to comment on the lack of awareness about child abuse across Australia. To both comment on the issue and pay tribute to, I decided to draw Australian children who were victims of murder.

For each set of portraits, I wanted to enhance the youth, tenderness and innocence of each child so that I could emotionally connect the viewer to my work. I chose to connect the children and their experiences to one another by using the same style and medium for each drawing. I also decided to draw two sets of three A4 drawings to create consistency. I used Oubre as an influence throughout the process of creating my own work. I chose to draw the children realistically in order to accurately represent who the child is and to therefore symbolise the importance of their experiences. I created my drawings by using graphite in order to reflect the tenderness and naivety of each child. The black and white tones of the graphite imply the idea of a lack of lifelessness and happiness to the audience.

When in the process of creating each drawing, I used fine graphite shavings and applied them to the paper where I smudged them with a cotton bud or a tissue. The way in which the graphite was applied created a soft, delicate effect and therefore reflected the children's tenderness. I decided that after I had finished the portraits of the pageant girls, I would drip a watercolour tear from each of their eyes to represent the suffering that they are internally experiencing. Each girl's tear was then painted in the same colour as her dress to connect each girl more deeply to the issues surrounding beauty pageants. The children I drew who had been murdered were Tanilla Warrick-Deaves, Zahra Baker and Daniel Morcombe. I decided to draw Daniel Morcombe as I knew his face was widely known and is strongly linked to the issue of child abuse. I didn't select the other two girls for any particular reason as all the children who have lost their lives to violence all have a special story to share.

This body of work has been framed and displayed so that the portraits of the pageant girls are hung on the top row and the portraits of murdered children have been hung directly below them. The two portraits of the pageant girls with their hands against their face along with Zahra and Tanilla have been hung on the outsides in order to create a visual balance. The portraits of Zahra and Tanilla have been hung to appear as though they are looking at each other to imply that they are connected through their shared experiences. The aim of my body of work is to make the audience think about why each child's face is relevant and significant. I believe that my work has the potential to be powerful after the audience understands the theme present and realises that each of the children drawn are victims of abuse. Through my work, I want the audience to recognise that child abuse is a serious issue present in Australian society and that our lack of awareness about it is resulting in a loss of precious lives.