

## *Through the Eyes of the Young*

### **Stephanie Cicchiello**

"The portrayal of the world around us is dependent on our notions of it and projections of experience"

My work, *Through the eyes of the young*, is focussed on art expressing the innocence of children and children in war. Through creating the artwork, my perceptions have been challenged, along with trying to find some rationale for the current state of devastating world events. I wanted to create a work that presented 'innocence', evident in the fragility of childhood and the comfort children seek and are nourished by, as well as directly comparing this to children caught in the crossfire of war.

Development of this concept assimilated through researching how 'innocence' was perceived throughout art in history. I began looking into historical interpretations of young children in art and their portrayal of 'innocence'. Historically, young children were perceived as young adults for them to become mature adults. Further research led me to address the controversy in contemporary art surrounding the portrayal of children, through artists such as Bill Henson, and Sally Mann to gain a comprehensive understanding of innocence.

While researching current news, I was constantly struck by how children were 'caught up' in war, for example, the Syrian war. I found myself immersed mentally and emotionally in the topic and felt the need to examine and reflect upon these situations. I felt that I could not just be a voyeur; watching and 'scrolling' past. Images of these children were personally confronting and I felt strongly about making a statement in response, through my artwork. I also recognize that my focus, research, and reflection on such an emotive topic was an act of catharsis - making the work was necessary to try and comprehend terrible events and situations that the innocents, children were caught up in.

Oil painting was a new art medium to me and I was inspired by contemporary Australian artist, Anna Platten's delicate and tonal realistic pieces, particularly *Myself as Madonna*. The composition helped shape my work because of how the child is depicted in the painting. Platten's theatrically arranged scenes and subject matter at first were overwhelming but made me reflect on structure and composition as a strong visual element. Through persistence and practice, I was able to work through colour studies and painting techniques to reach a point where my ideas could be realised on canvas.

In 2018, I attended the talk, 'Ben Quilty in conversation with Lisa Slade'. Here, Quilty introduced and spoke about his work in Syria with Australian author, Richard Flannagan and his meetings and interactions with the young Syrian children. His stories expressed details of the raw and sheer devastation experienced by these young innocent people. His book, *Home* is a collection of children's drawings from this experience, struck me and ignited a passion to express this issue in my art. Immersed in my research and concept, I found it necessary to incorporate the children themselves into my work, inspired by Quilty's project, to create a cohesive connection and enhance the meaning of innocence.

My body of work, *Through the eyes of the young*, aims to explore how the notion of childhood and innocence is perceived through comfort, protection and hope and how that is compared to severe disruption and innocence taken out of a child's life in difficult situations that are not of their doing, such

as war. Oil paint can create achieve detail and delicacy, much like Anna Platten's tonal realist method, and charcoal drawings inspired by contemporary Australian artist Daniel Connell's Cambodia Project, aim to present the very issue that I find so disturbing in current society - child innocence lost through war.

As a focal point in my work, like Ben Quilty's Home drawings, I invited my seven-year-old brother and his friend to use bold and heavy crayon colours to add to the artworks, inviting them to draw their responses to the paintings in front of them. Intentionally, the drawings in each piece are of what the children thought each piece conveyed. Clustered sketches are intentionally placed to enhance the presence of children and its impact on how this is distinctly perceived by the audience. The oil paintings and the contrasting juxtaposition of the charcoal drawings highlights this theme. The children's drawings throughout all pieces are intended to entice audiences and bring forward an emotional connection to the subject matter. The layer of drawings aims to instigate hope, joy, and optimism to audiences, whereas the dark, muddied charcoal drawings embedded beneath the children's drawings directly contrast this, and intend to prompt notions of desolation, hopelessness and loss of innocence.

While the portraits are painted realistically, the fluctuant proportions and distortions aim to unsettle the viewer. The centre oil painting represents optimism, hope and opportunity in the future, whereas the two paintings either side emphasise on childhood innocence. The charcoal drawings are interpretations of famous images, sourced from Time Magazine to capture circumstances in which innocence has been abruptly removed, increasing vulnerability and fear for individuals. The contrast of blacks and whites are deliberately striking; the series representing perceived innocence and loss of innocence. I aim to engage the viewer in a conversation surrounding children in war.

My aesthetic has developed immensely throughout my piece and has stretched into creating a coherent, meaningful piece. The theme of innocence and loss of innocence in children is evoked to create a personal connection between the concept and prospective audiences. My eyes have been opened throughout this process, specifically with the severity of children caught in the crossfires of war, and the loss of their childhood. As a practitioner, I creatively explored representing this topic directly from my emotions and feelings. Influenced by Anna Platten, mastered oil painting, and much like the artist, I needed to enhance detail and facial expressions. Comparatively, charcoal artist, Daniel Connell influenced the expression of my charcoal pieces, evoking intense emotion and chaos experienced within each image.

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