

Painting indignity / painting in dignity: Art-making in response to gender-based violence

KAREN MCINTYRE

Runner-up, 2015 Women's Studies Journal Graduate Prize for a Feminist Essay

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 her and engulfed her.

She resisted it with the only tools she had – her mind and her hands. When everything became ugly she stencilled 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 eating her.

She wanted to understand herself, but the self she now saw was not the self she knew or 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 came back.



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. I am that woman.

Introduction

Up to one in three women in Aotearoa/New Zealand will experience violence. We will be raped, coerced, confused, manipulated, beaten, threatened, denigrated, financially deprived, shamed and terrified. Our children and our pets will be used as weapons of control against us. Our private realities will not match the public perception of us as ‘vulnerable victims’ or ‘brave survivors’ of violence. Our resistance to this violence will be hidden, diminished, unacknowledged and ignored. When we finally get up the courage, we will leave this violence to sit uncomfortably within a society which ignores, minimises, and excuses what has happened to us. We will rarely have the chance to represent our stories because experts, agencies and spokespeople will speak on our behalf. We will be seen as too ashamed, vulnerable or damaged to speak for ourselves.

This is our reality.

How then can women represent these experiences of violence in a way that does not further disempower or pathologise them? The following essay will explore the (mis)representation of women who have experienced gender-based violence through the media and the lens of the image, discussing the way in which art-making can act as a crucial method of self-representation.

In our place

In 2013, there were 95,000 New Zealand Police family violence investigations, Women’s Refuge received 81,720 crisis calls, and 7,642 women accessed Refuge services in the community. Of this raft of violence, 86% involved a male perpetrator and a female victim. The statistics show that up to one in three women in Aotearoa/New Zealand will experience intimate partner violence (IPV) at some stage in their lives, yet police research indicates that only 18% of all incidents are even reported (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2013). Grounded in a culture which has legitimated, justified and concealed colonial violence, IPV in Aotearoa/New Zealand, in ‘our place’, thrives.

Many feminist definitions of IPV focus on patriarchal terrorism and denote a breadth of frequent and repetitive behaviours by men against women, which extend beyond physical abuse and may escalate to a fatal level. These behaviours include psychological and emotional violence and the use of coercive control (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011; Johnson, 1995; Stark, 2007; Walton, 2012). The key distinction between this and other definitions of violence against women is seen by Johnson (1995) as the motivation or intent behind the violence. In IPV, this intent is one of purposeful and coercive control (Stark, 2009). The tactics include appropriation and ownership, or ‘naming and claiming’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), of women as objectified possessions; isolation and erasure of familial and cultural connections; the use of coercion and control to suppress functioning, seen in the application of strict codes of conduct, surveillance and laws (Richardson, 2010; Stark, 2009); minimisation of the damage; blaming and shaming (Jury, 2009). Layers of imposed activity; instability and intimidation leading to confusion; physical and sexual violence (Modi, Palmer, & Armstrong, 2014); financial and decision-making constrictions (Wandera, Kwagala, Ndugga, & Kabagenyi, 2015); and mental, emotional and psychological cruelty also disempower and disconnect (Allen & Wozniak, 2011; Jones, 2012; Jury, 2009; Walton, 2012). The insidious, unseen, ‘natural’ and minimised nature of many of these tactics means that those affected often adjust to these ‘norms’ and experience a complete loss of identity (Jones, 2012). Adams (2012, p.104) describes this as a colonisation process that extends ‘beyond the appropriation of individual domains – body, behaviour, mind, and heart ... experienced as a combined effect, a total appropriation’, or an internalised belief system (Bancroft, 2002; Brown, 2005; Evans, 1996).

IPV is a great way of keeping women ‘in our place’.

(How) do you see me?

Historically embedded viewpoints on the difference of women, who are described by Adams (2012) as the ‘original other’, dominate our social media, despite many years of feminist activism. These traditionally accepted myths of women as different, and therefore inferior, define women as the weaker sex (Howard, 1984), in need of guidance and supervision (Adams, 2012); as emotional or hysterical and therefore not rational; as sexual objects (Berger, 1977; Woolf, 1991); or as compliant mothers, wives and homemakers (Adams, 2012; Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993). These oppositional perspectives have naturalised patriarchal domination, and given power to the colonising attitudes that prevail among perpetrators of IPV (Adams, 2012).

How we are seen, and therefore understood, has a material effect upon how we are treated. Throughout the history of art, women have been portrayed as a sexual and maternal dichotomy; compliant and take-able, visually submissive to the possessive power of the dominant male gaze. The bodies of women were, and often still are, represented in ways that unquestioningly violate, offering them up to the male gaze. Berger explains this dynamic with the phrase ‘men act and women appear’ (1977, p. 47) – referring to an oppressive dichotomy that activates men and subdues women. This dichotomy is linked to a wider framework of binary oppositions of race, ability, ethnicity and gender.

It is important to note that images are never neutral. They hold the potential to both exert power and act as instruments of power and can sustain and legitimate ideological violence. Hooks describes representation as ‘a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonisation of the mind’ (1995, p.3). Surrounding us in modern culture, imagery in photographs, visual art, film and television are constructed representations, not replications, of the real (Bell, 1992; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). In short,

visual representations are reflective of the wider social context in which they occur. The way in which groups are represented depends on the way in which they are viewed within society, and on who is doing both the viewing and the representing (Dyer, 2002). The perspectives that inform this dialogue are often coloured by stereotypes and a lack of knowledge about ‘others’. Representations on behalf of groups may assume commonality, fix identity, and reproduce their marginality; simplifying, distorting and even doing injury to meaning (Dyer, 1993; Lester & Ross, 2003). Images possess a seductive power to confirm our belief that we somehow ‘know’ those portrayed (Berger, 1977). It is precisely because of this that images of women who have experienced violence must be considered in a more carefully analytical way.

Up until the 1970s, representation of abused women was rare in the public arena. Abuse was not discussed publicly, or if it was, it was from a medical, clinical perspective – what went on in the privacy of people’s homes stayed there. In addition, passive or more ‘benign’ forms of abuse, often seen in the representation of women through art, were entrenched in society and were therefore ‘not seen’ as abusive. Representations of women who have experienced violence are now common in the mass media – on television broadcasts, in advertising campaigns or in newspaper reports. Worryingly, in light of the broad and complex range of psychological and emotional abuse noted in research around IPV, women – if they are even seen in violence-prevention advertising campaigns – are most often portrayed as physically abused, a fact that minimises the impact of the non-physical violence experienced and further marginalises ‘victims’. This point is noted by Cismaru, Jensen, and Lavack (2010) in highlighting the inconsistency of such representations with current understandings of IPV. Their conclusions include recommendations that depictions of abuse should be broadened to include verbal and emotional abuse. This view is supported by Sims (2008) in arguing for the explicit inclusion of emotional abuse as a form of domestic violence within media reports. Observable injury and physical forms of control are readily seen and understood, and in contemporary society are clearly viewed as inappropriate. However, emotional, psychological and spiritual harm are more difficult to understand or define, often even for the ‘victim’ herself. Its damage is intangible, unseen and mostly inexpressible – ‘a police report cannot be filed for a “stolen self” or a “broken self-esteem”, and a picture cannot be taken of a “bruised and battered soul”’ (Sims, 2008, p. 377). Concise and accurate media representation of IPV could offer women an accessible way of identifying these more insidious and less readily visible forms of abuse.

The World Health Organisation confirms that the media could play a bigger role in fighting violence, viewing the lack of positive representations, and the often stereotypical images of women as victimised, as indicative of the male-dominated field of journalism (as cited in Wakefield, Loken, & Hornik, 2010). This view is supported by results from a global survey of women’s participation in the media, which clearly indicates the need for change in both the way women participate and the way they are portrayed in the media. The survey notes that when reporting violence against women, 64% of reporters and experts are male, resulting in a distorted image of women. Ultimately, the authors argue, representation of this group by those outside of it correlates strongly with ideological constructs of women, abuse, homes, and families, telling us more about the producers’ own culture than their subjects (Global Media Monitoring Project, as cited in Macharia, O’Connor, & Ndangam, 2010). This systematic bias is supported by McManus and Dorfman’s (2005) feminist critique of intimate violence reporting, which notes the inferior media coverage IPV receives. This bias was discussed as often relative to a lack of understanding of IPV, closely related to ingrained perspectives that IPV is a ‘women’s issue’ and a private rather than a public problem. Further, the ongoing focus on homicide, or abuse against and by public figures, as the newsworthy face of IPV is seen by the authors as another serious failure of representation on the part of the media.

Feminism has opened up dialogue around many such hidden topics, critiquing and affecting representations of women. Feminist artists have responded by creating works that directly oppose the dominant masculine spectator and explore women's lived experiences of violence in society, viewing the personal as political through imagery and effecting social transformation in the process. Giving an influential aesthetic form to political discourse, feminist art has marked moments of protest, demanded political change and offered pointed insights into the oppressive, personal realities of women's marginality. While the media acts as a weapon of ongoing oppression, it has also been used as a tool for social change by many feminist artists worldwide. The representation of women's issues by women permitted a specific discourse to develop around violence against women. In developing this discourse, women as 'victims' of violence were identified and public empathy was roused in the effort to create awareness and social change. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, explicit representation about violence by those who had experienced it was also given a place in the public domain. However, despite the action and activism of feminists and the more open transmission of our stories through art and literature, the attitudes and stereotypes that remain around women who have experienced violence continue to impact on the power we have to represent ourselves. The opportunity for women to choose how they name, lay claim to and voice their experiences of violence is crucial to the creation of social change. Acting as a voice for these silenced and suppressed stories, art has the potential to subvert and re-represent – asking the viewer to see me and hear me from my perspective.

Self representation – the chance to speak for ourselves, instead of having people speak 'for', 'to' or 'about' us – is not often afforded women who have experienced violence. Jury (2009, p.39) notes the 'taken for granted understanding that the most authoritative and authentic experience of abuse would come from women who have been abused'. Therefore, if we are to acknowledge the realities of women who are experiencing abuse, and educate and alert those who may identify and assist, then these authentic experiences are vital to media and education campaigns. It is arguably most important then that such experiences be treated with great care to ensure that the authenticity of women's experience is preserved. For instance, two of the participants in Walton's (2012) research commented that they were dissatisfied with current public awareness campaigns. One woman spoke about the fact that she did not feel the current 'It's Not OK' campaign was representative of women in her position. Another woman stated that this campaign 'focused on stereotypical victims of IPV, while not effectively explaining what IPV actually is' (p. 91). The lived experiences of women who have experienced IPV will always provide the most intimate, representative understanding. However, sharing these personal narratives of violence may prove an onerous task. How can a woman speak of such unspeakable acts of violence in a way that is socially sanctioned? And if she cannot share these core experiences, then how can she seek help, feel connected and empowered, or even understand them? Jones (as cited in Hogan, 2012, p. 201) discusses the difficulty of 'sharing these narratives of abuse with friends and family or wider society' and the unbearable weight of pain and disgust they may cause others, and questions the ability of the emotionally meaningless language of violence to capture the lived reality – how can the word 'rape' ever sum up the act of rape? This inability is described by van der Kolk (1994), from a medical perspective, as arising from the shutting down of the brain's right frontal cortex, particularly the Broca's area – the centre of speech and language – which occurs in response to traumatic events. The effect of this response is to impair the ability of people to think and speak about such events. Coupled with the social shame and stigma attached to gender-based violence, many women may never speak out.

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While women may be viewed as ‘other’ to the dominant male stereotype, abused women are seen as even more of an ‘other’ – different even from ‘normal’ women. The perpetrators’ coercive control enforces this belief to the point where women themselves feel this distinction and it becomes a further form of isolation. Nina Mariette (1997, p.9), a woman who experienced abuse as a child, comments on this difference – ‘although I met some good, caring women, I felt like an alien, as if I almost belonged to a different species’.

Perceptions of abused women as somehow to blame for their situation, as obviously lacking in intelligence or they would leave, as uneducated and poor, are common, and these social stigma increase the difficulty of seeking help or speaking out against this abuse, even to other women (Howard, 1984; Jury, 2009; Walton, 2012). Any woman who is seen to have been abused is then exposed to further stereotyping as a ‘victim’ of violence or as an abuse ‘survivor’, with all of the inherent stigma attached to these terms (Allen & Wozniak, 2011). Grounded in perspectives of her vulnerability and instability, her broken or damaged status within ‘normal’ society, are attitudes that further control autonomy and identity and therefore ‘claim’ her as ‘other’ (Bancroft, 2002; Jones, 2012; Jury, 2009; Mariette, 1997; Walton, 2012). As Mariette (1997, p.25) contends, ‘You get so used to the feeling of being not quite right with yourself and the world, and of course being told that it’s you who is out of step with the rest of the “normal” world’. These negative social responses not only undermine well-being but also contribute to ongoing suffering. Wade (1995) describes a colonial code of relationship embedded in the helping discourses of various human services that utilises psychology ‘as a tool to identify some people as healthy and others as unwell and therefore less deserving’, misrepresenting them as deficient and therefore in need of assistance from those who are proficient. This code considers the following:

- 1) I am proficient
- 2) You are deficient, therefore I have the right to
- 3) Fix you, diagnose you, change you, intern you
- 4) For your own good.

Not only are women blamed for their situations, pathologised as broken, vulnerable, or victims, and treated as unwell or somehow less than other ‘normal’ women, they are also given no opportunity to grieve for what they have lost. Mourning the loss of identity, their hopes, dreams and aspirations, their innocence and confidence, sense of safety, and the person they might have been, is an unacknowledged or unsanctioned grief. This disenfranchised grief has no forms of social support or rituals which allow for its acknowledgement. It is an uncomfortable social problem largely dealt with by ignoring or minimising it. The invisible status of this grief further disconnects women who may already be experiencing a wide range of other negative social responses (Grebin & Vogel, 2007; Wade, 2013).

Numbing the pain and quelling the confusion can be achieved in any number of ways, and often is. If women don’t choose to self-medicate, then they have the option of being diagnosed and pathologised as depressed, mentally unwell or any number of other labels. Self-medicating may also lead to other diagnoses if it gets out of hand. Attempts to seek help through therapy may lead to further traumatisation, further diagnoses, and further confusion, unless there is a real acknowledgement of both resistance and dignity through this process (Wade, 2013). Even art therapy is still therapy.

A body of literature sits around the concept of participatory art-making (as opposed to art-therapy) within the mental health sector (see Brown, 2005; McKeown, et al., 2012; Stickley, 2012). Participatory art-making is just that – participation in making art. It is a non-therapy-based approach. The preconceptions around many people viewed as ‘patients’ within the mental health sector led Brown (2005) to conclude that art as medicine or therapy ‘formalised and diminished art just as much as the codices of mental illness, adding seemingly impermeable layers of labelling and disempowerment’ upon those who were already stereotyped and marginalised (as cited in Stickley, 2012, p. 62). Parr (2012) also acknowledges the crucial importance of art-making outside of the clinical setting and interpretation of therapeutic approaches. This understanding is corroborated in relation to the ‘victims’ of violence by Jury (2009, p.60) who states that ‘social change arguably lies outside the scope of any therapeutic or supportive relationship’. If participatory art-making dignifies and empowers those who are described as ‘mental health patients’, then why can it not offer those same benefits to women who have experienced violence?

The tactics of control through IPV and this colonisation of the mind are subjects I addressed in my 2012 post-graduate painting installation *PASSAGE*, held at St Andrews in the City, Palmerston North. Taken from my own experience of 13 years of IPV, the 12 works (several of which appear in the above prologue) speak of many of the tactics and effects of coercive control and violence, and also my responses. They represent my experience from my perspective. They act as a voice for something I have no words to describe. They are a crucial form of self-representation. Made in response to the gender-based violence I experienced, they are not ‘art as therapy’, although the effect of creating and exhibiting them has been therapeutic. Making art about these experiences has allowed me a way into this difficult dialogue. I can tangibly see my own resistance to this violence and this upholds my dignity. These works validated my experiences, allowing me to understand and share them openly without the sense of shame, secrecy and disempowerment that always sat around them previously. Speaking out honestly and unashamedly about my experiences of violence has allowed both my own and others’ shame to start to shift back to where it belongs – to the perpetrators of gender-based violence. Exhibiting these works has effected a social change greater than my one narrative, my one perspective. It has opened the door for many other women to disclose their own ‘shameful’ secrets, started a collective movement of art-making in response to violence (the Women’s Art Initiative [WAI]), and offered media publicity that has privileged the voices of ‘victims’ over those of other experts and spokespeople.

All this from some paintings.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence continues to thrive because the patriarchal, colonising attitudes that dwell here in Aotearoa/New Zealand – our place – have not gone. The mass media campaigns and plethora of social service agencies are not stopping this violence, but merely allowing more ready reporting of it, and continuing to mop up the pieces after it. Challenging the stereotypes and myths that legitimate, conceal and perpetuate this violence must continue. To have any integrity, this challenge must come from those who ‘know’ gender-based violence. Art-making offers a way to self-represent these stories without further humiliation. Exposing experiences of this violence does not then expose the ‘victims’ – their dignity remains intact, and may in fact be increased by the acknowledgement that these experiences were real, they were violent, and they did resist this violence in every way possible.

KAREN MCINTYRE is a PhD student in Creative Arts, Massey University. She is the facilitator of the Women's Art Initiative (WAI) in Palmerston North. As part of her PhD, she is currently in the process of setting up three new WAI collectives in Wellington and Blenheim. Her goal is to develop a working model of practice that can be offered to Women's Refuges across Aotearoa. Karen has a Master of Maori Visual Arts with a first class pass; a BFA, with distinction, from UCOL Whanganui; and a BEd (teaching). She is also currently a Massey vice-chancellor's doctoral scholar, a Freemasons 2015 Postgraduate scholar, and has a Claude McCarthy travel fellowship to present her research in Vancouver in 2016.

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