

Anne Wallace artist statement

I first heard about Sue and about other young girls who had ended up at Wolston Park whilst in State care when listening to a podcast from the Museum of Brisbane. 'Remembering Goodna' was an exhibition held over 2007 to 2008 that dealt with the history of the State's largest and oldest psychiatric hospital. Listening to Sue tell her terrible, shocking, ultimately inspiring story made me want somehow to pay tribute to this person who had survived an infancy of neglect and abuse, a childhood of uncertainty and trauma, and a girlhood spent in the company of adults committed to an institution for the criminally insane.

Listening to Sue opened my eyes to this travesty of 'welfare' and to the other women I've painted. I learned how children who were suffering and traumatised were punished by being locked in tantrum rooms, by being drugged into docility, and by being cowed by physical, sexual and psychological abuse. I also learned that there was a law that said that once a certain amount of time had elapsed after such abuse had occurred, nothing could be done about bringing a legal case for compensation—the 'Statute of Limitations'. Why did the case of Sue and others placed in Osler House and other notorious wards at Wolston fall outside the terms of reference of both the Forde inquiry and the Senate Inquiry into institutional child abuse? How much suffering did there have to be before the Government compensated those who had been abused while in its care? Even the Catholic Church had done that, despite their attempts to get out of it.

In late 2012 I contacted Sue to ask if I could paint her for the Archibald. Here was an Australian who I thought was worthy of being painted. Meeting Sue in person was a very important day and one which I will never forget.

I thought I would depict her among the flora and fauna of the bush, with the oldest building at Wolston Park behind her. In the foreground is the small seclusion building, where the so-called 'uncontrollable' patients would have been isolated. The original women's ward (which apparently could be heard for miles around at night, voices carrying over the river, back when the hospital was overcrowded with patients) is behind these hulking brick shells. Osler and Lawson House were further back up the hill. I wanted to show Sue both in and out of the place that had 'housed' her, and that she was safer and stronger out in the bush, as she was when she finally escaped. The datura or angel's trumpets are poisonous, as are the spider and snake - but like the person who gets poisoned and survives, you build up your resistance. That seems to be true of Sue, although her life is still deeply marked by what happened to her.

My hopes to win prize money that would be given to a lawyer who could fight for compensation were not realised. Telling Sue that the portrait did not get accepted into the Archibald was one of the worst moments of my life.

However, Sue was kind to me about it and said she was still thrilled to have been painted. She had already invited me to attend the Apology that took place in March 2013 at State Parliament. That day I met several other women who had also been wards of the State incarcerated at Wolston: Barbara L, Barbara S, Rhonda, Sandra, Angela, Patti and Nell. I also learned something of how the families of some of the girls had suffered terribly too by speaking with Barbara's mother Alice. All of them allowed me to take their photographs, because I was planning to do more paintings—I still hoped to get some publicity for the women in the only way I knew how. I still remember talking myself into asking them if I could take the photographs—I felt compelled to do it, even though it is not in my nature to bail people up like that.

And so with the series of portraits I embarked on the most significant work of my creative life. I read a lot about the women I painted, read their poetry, their testimonies to the oral history project undertaken by the National Museum of Australia, watched their YouTube videos. I read articles by academics and historians. I entered my series of portraits into the Sulman Prize, naively thinking that surely the fact that I had won that prize some years back must mean I would at least be selected. But no—another rejection.

I received the lovely present of some patchwork pillowcases from Christine, the sister of Pamela, who now lives in Perth, and is a tireless advocate for the group. I knew that Christine was anxious that Pamela—who had stood up to a vicious nun who terrorised children in one of the Homes and had been deemed 'uncontrollable' and set on the path to Wolston—not be forgotten. Even though I knew there were so many

others to whom this had happened and that I couldn't possibly paint them all, I still wanted to do one more painting, and to include Pamela. This time I didn't even tell them in advance I was doing it. It had been bad enough telling them all about the Sulman not making the selection. This time my plan was to enter the Blake Prize—which could be about a religious subject, or about a social justice issue. I still wanted to try and get the story out there, but I also thought it was a subject that should be painted for its own sake.

My painting shows Sue, Nell, Patti, Barbara L, Rhonda, Sandra, Pamela and Barbara S in an imaginary boat on the river. I took the view from Priors Pocket, across the river from Wolston Park. It's the section sometimes called 'Hospital Bend', and on one map it's marked as Woogaroo Reach. This side of the river—the place they have escaped to—shows an old mattress among the weeds and lantana. It's based on a decaying mattress that I did see in the grounds of Wolston Park. There is a snake carrying off an egg, symbolising the fragility of defenceless children. But I wanted to show the women as survivors, having arrived where they are due to their own resilience, ingenuity and strength. Their initials are on the tree trunk to the left, although I've written them in a language sometimes known as 'Passing the River'. It's also known as the Witches Alphabet or Theban. I'm not making an equivalence between the survivors and 'witches', unless it be because both groups have been historically misunderstood, mistreated and forced into the margins of society. And both are powerful.

Anne Wallace

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