

personal political emotional

My relationship with Les Griggs developed after my brother died of a heroin overdose in 1985. I had met Les in Pentridge Prison and helped to get him released early to work on the Northcote Koori Mural in 1983. He was 28 and had spent 21 years in children's homes and prisons, a member of what has now become known as the 'stolen generation'.



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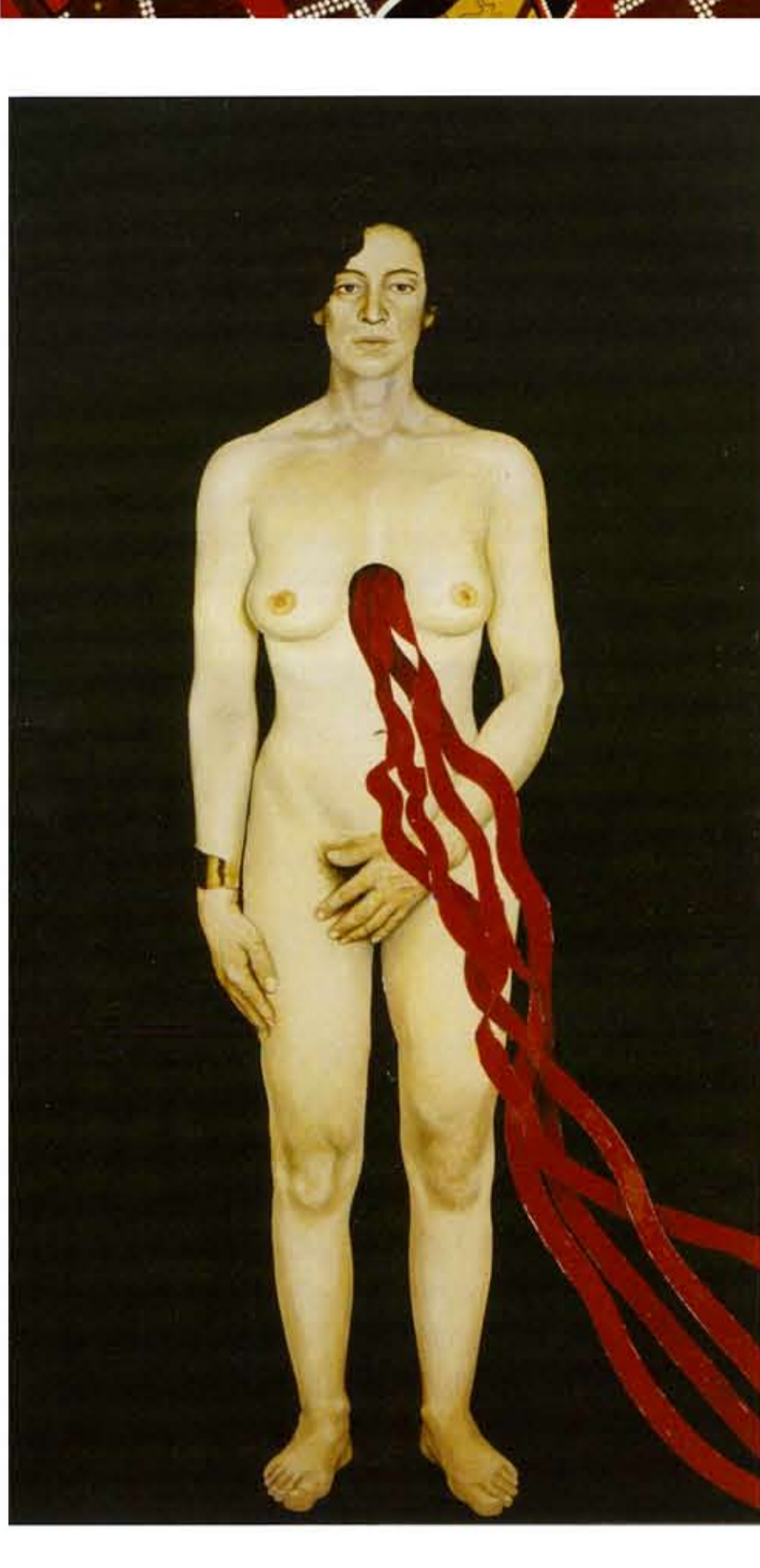
We became friends of sorts, although afterwards he said that he saw me sceptically as another 'pink thing out to change the world'.

I never knew when (or if) that view of me changed, however after bumping up against one another's prejudices and stereotypes for a while we settled into a more equal friendship which eventually became an intimate relationship after he did another 6 months in prison. During this time I began writing to him about my difficulties with my brother who was dealing with a serious addiction. Just before he was released my brother died.

I was working on the Women's Mural in Smith St, Fitzroy with Eve Glenn and one day I looked up to see him walking down the street, all muscles after six months inside, working out. I was griefstricken and ran into his arms. He enfolds me like a large bird. Several weeks later we were in a relationship.

Fairly obviously there was a direct connection between my impotence in the face of my brother's addiction and death and my relationship with Les. His life had been scarred by an insensitive system that not only tore apart his family but treated him as an outsider. I was saved from my grief at the loss of my brother by a difficult relationship with Les, where my pain became focused on my inability to take his away. I knew enough about myself to see this connection. Rationally I knew the folly of what I was trying to do, however emotionally I was drawn into a cycle of co-dependency. The rational was dominated by the emotional.

We were both artists as well as romantics. I loved the possibility of our relationship. I saw it as a microcosm of what was possible at a national level. If we could reconcile our differences (dominant Anglo, Indigenous incarcerated) then perhaps it would be possible for the country to transform its legacy of violence and denial. I took the history of our country personally. My family is five generations of colonists. His family was from the place my family occupied. I felt responsible.



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Yet underlying this intellectual rationale was the psychological motivation for our relationship, in which I attempted to heal myself from the guilt of not saving my brother. The courage it took to face the difficulties of a relationship full of drugs, drama and violence, was wrapped with a protective shield. A rational understanding, informed by my generation's burden of too much self-awareness.

On the other hand the richness of a life of art and culture more than compensated for those difficulties. The opportunity that he gave me to enter a community that I had only ever been on the outside of was extraordinary. 1988 was the best year of our marriage. I was working at the Trades Hall Council running the arts workshop and Les was painting at home having sold his first work to the Koori Heritage Trust and receiving a grant from the Australia Council. It was the year of the bi-centennial and for us a year of protest. We travelled to Sydney for the arrival of the tall ships and protested at dawn near the Queen's yacht where Les was nearly arrested several times for trying to board the yacht from a canoe. We took our banners to the big street march from Redfern to Hyde Park and spent nights decorating the rock walls of Darlinghurst with red, black and yellow. There were many protests that year and we were at all of them.

When Les died in 1993 we were no longer together. He was living with someone else to whom he had a child and another on the way but I was linked to him through our art. Our marriage had failed but I guarded our friendship fiercely. It represented too much for me to just let it go. I was the godmother to their child and on the end of many phone calls of desperation.

I was painting on a collaborative work when he passed away. It was a stormy night and I was in my studio in St Kilda working on a piece we had planned together. He had completed his part; a large painting of the outline of bricks interlaced with padlocks and keys. He had initially called it *Love is the Key* because the centre of the keys held a heart shape. However when we decided to use the painting in a collaboration we changed the name to *The Reconciliation* and it sat between a full body portrait of him and me, linked by red ribbons, which I had been using for some time in my work. Red ribbons in those days were not so inextricably connected to AIDS and for me represented blood lines and ties to my past. I had photographed him for the portrait only nine days before. On the day he died, I vividly remember the large flat plane tree leaves on the footpath in Acland St that had been sodden by the rainstorm and the pine trees snapped in two on Canterbury Rd. A small tornado had come up the coast

Megan Evans and Les Griggs *The Reconciliation* 1993-94, (collaboration), oil and acrylic on canvas. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2009.

from Portland. Les was in Portland. In the lull of the storm I felt his presence and a Leonard Cohen song spoke his words: 'Hey that's no way to say goodbye'. Tears poured down my face without knowing why as I painted.

When I returned home there was a message from a relative in Portland to ring.

The numbness I felt did not save me from the pain of finishing those paintings. They were for an exhibition in the NGV and while I had every reason to put them aside and not complete them, the rational side of me saw it as an opportunity to communicate the urgency of what I believed our relationship and friendship had symbolised.

The months that it took to finish the work were the hardest months of my life. I literally felt that I was peeling my skin off and putting it on the canvas. I knew it would be hard to complete the painting of Les and it was, but somehow it was like an attempt to recreate him, hair by hair and tattoo by tattoo. I had never considered how hard it would be to paint myself. Even in the best circumstances painting yourself life-size, nude and full frontal, is confronting and not at all flattering. To this day it's still the most difficult opening I have been to. I wanted to run a mile. Lin Onus who was a good friend to us both missed the opening and he sent me a letter saying how much he loved the work, but the painting of my face didn't work. It just didn't look like me. My face was so contorted and griefstricken I have no idea what I really looked like but I think it was something like that half-dead portrait. In the image of me I had a hole in my chest out of which poured red ribbons.

As soon as I finished this work I had to get ready for another show. I froze. Nothing would come for weeks and as the days to the exhibition drew closer I panicked. One morning I woke up and knew what I had to do. With no rational understanding I found myself making something, which became a form of art therapy. I went down to the ribbon shop and bought acres of red ribbon, went back to my studio and began to weave a heart. It was a large realistic heart with arteries and veins, made of wire and hollow inside. Every day I sat and wove the heart until when it was finished I sat in my studio held it in my arms and cried. Then I could start my work again.

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Rationally emotional or emotionally rational I don't know which was directing me but afterwards it all made so much sense that now it seems like the worst cliché, but it really did happen this way and I know it saved me from some life-threatening illness brought on by unexpressed grief.

Les always used to say, 'Will you tell my story?'. I refused because I knew I would never tell it in his words, I would clean it up and make it nice, even if I didn't mean to. Fifteen years later I have begun to write my story of Les. This I can do, the story of my learning from being a 'pink thing out to change the world' to who I am today, informed and shaped by my life with him. I have never felt one moment of regret at the sorrow and pain I experienced through knowing him. His pain was huge, taken at two and raised in a brutal system that didn't ever stop to consider what it must have been like for a sensitive boy who saw the world two feet from the ground, to lose everything he knew, (even his little red car that he held onto when he was taken to the welfare) and never fully find it again. My pain always seemed immaterial in comparison and it was always tempered with joy and inspiration at knowing his intelligent wit and good humour against the odds. Not to mention the wonderful family of nieces and nephews, uncles and aunts I inherited, who still nurture me today with endless grand-nieces and nephews.

The story I have begun to tell is my story of reconciliation with myself and my land, through a relationship that undid me and put me back together again. It will be fiction because when you understand one Indigenous story you understand that it is all a story, especially the history that my people of Anglo and European descent try so hard to verify and prove, to find facts rather than story, so that we can either justify or nullify our past actions.

When Sorry Day was first created I was sceptical. I heard people saying sorry to the ether, people who I thought didn't know an Aboriginal person and did nothing to meet one. I guess I was still angry but it inspired a piece of writing that was a forerunner to this. I read it to a friend and she said that it should be read out in Parliament. Of course I thought it impossible but with encouragement and the political clout of a friend it was sent to Kim Beasley who was the opposition leader at the time. I forgot about it until one day I received a phone call from a political advisor to say congratulations; my piece had been read out in the Senate by Senator Nick Bolkus at the closing of the Wik debate; the longest debate in Australian parliamentary history.

When I first met Les he had just passed Matric level politics from his cell in Pentridge. He said he aspired to go to Libya and learn to be an armed fighter for his cause. I wish he knew what would come after his death, his work published, his story in Honsard, his life a role model for so many who never thought of becoming artists. His mantra was always that he was taken when he was two and had been institutionalised by the colonial system. The term 'stolen generation' wasn't invented then.

His life was a short but powerful influence on many, most particularly me.

Thank God for love as the rational alone wouldn't have got me there. ☺

Dr Megan Evans is a Scottish, Irish, Welsh artist.

In Response to National Sorry Day

I haven't signed the sorry book. It seemed to me to be too small a thing to do to express a very big feeling. My husband was one of the stolen children. He was a year younger than me.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry that when I was a child of seven wearing party dresses and carrying my suitcase to school, he was regularly being beaten with a strop strap at a Children's Home and running away by hanging underneath a train all the way from Sale in Gippsland to Richmond station.

I'm sorry that his mother died in 1988, the year of the bicentennial, at the age of 46 and I am lucky enough to still have the company of my mother at the age of 75.

I'm sorry that I am about to embark on my 8th year of tertiary education and he had to study for his HSC from books he begged in jail.

I'm sorry that he was nine years old when his mother was eligible to vote, having some small say in a future on his behalf, yet my parents took that right for granted on all of their life and mine.

Most of all I am sorry that I couldn't ever know his pain or do anything that would take it away. He used to say that he wished someone from the government would apologise for the mess they had made of his life.

I am sorry that he died a lonely and painful death with a noose tied around his neck in 1993, the International Year of the World's Indigenous People.

Megan Evans 1998

(This was read out in the Senate by Senator Nick Bolkus at the closing of the Wik debate in July, 1998)

19th March 1994

Dear Megan,

Just a quick note on the run.

Sorry I couldn't make it to the opening at the Access Gallery. As usual, some crisis developed and the day just slipped through my fingers.

Anyway, the upshot of this is that I managed to get in to the NGV on Saturday. It was most useful, as I was able to see Ginger's work in the McCaughey Prize and your work upstairs.

For a time I had given up on finding your painting as I had been wandering aimlessly through the women's show downstairs, when I stumbled across the Access Gallery.

Your painting stopped me dead in my tracks. I think it is the most powerful and poignant image I have ever seen. I know the work means a great deal to you and it moves me in the same way - a great painting about a great friend. Thank you so much for making it.

I know this sounds passé, but if there is anything at all I can do to help you in any way, please do not fail to get in touch.

My heartfelt love and best wishes.

Lin Onus