

## Fifty-One

Claire Beynon in conversation with Michelle Elvy | Ko Aotearoa Tātou | We are New Zealand

29 October 2020

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- *Your work 'Fifty-one' was selected for inclusion in this new anthology, and then chosen as the cover for the book. Could you please tell us about the idea behind this art -- the materials, the concept, the way your thoughts evolved as you were making it?*

Fifty-one people died in the attack on Riccarton's Al Noor mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre on 15 March 2019—men, women and children between the ages of three and seventy-seven years old. In response to the shootings, Jacinda Ardern urged all New Zealanders never to speak the killer's name—

*'He sought many things from his act of terror; one of them was notoriety which is why you will never hear me mention his name... And to others, I implore you—speak the names of those who were lost, rather than the name of the man who took them.'*

The eloquence—and efficacy—of silence when used in the service of love and justice.

I had initially submitted three works for consideration for *Ko Aotearoa Tātou | We are New Zealand*; two paintings (each of which included text) and a prose poem, titled *'For what binds us'*. *'For what binds us'* borrowed as its starting point a 'block' of news reportage on the mosque shootings. I'd progressively pared the text back till only the letters T,C,A and G remained with the intention they be read linearly, as a DNA sequence. *'This is the thread of our common Humanity'*, is what I was trying to say. *'We are a community united in loss.'* And, too, *'I am sorry but I'm not able to find words adequate to the task'*—my response to the shootings reduced to a stutter.

A holler.

Both.

I did then what I tend to do during times of crisis; I created a ritual. In a corner of my cottage, at the base of a built-in bookcase, a large wooden kava bowl holds a ready supply of tea light candles. *'It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness'*\*. Words had failed me—and I, them. Lighting a candle for each man, woman and child whose lives had been taken felt like the respectful—and only—thing left to me to do. Candlelight and silence, a way to connect with them, their families, our wider community. I counted out fifty-one candles, grouped them together in front of the fire, struck the match and lit them, pausing a moment between each one.

While I didn't initially have the making of an artwork in mind, by the time the candles had burned down, I knew I would use what was left to make something. *Fifty-one* is the visual poem that came out of that vigil—and out of my inability to speak. I see it as a 'concentrate', a distillation or synthesis of my previous attempts to respond to the horrors of that day.

*Fifty-one* is composed out of the metal tea light 'collars' that held the wicks as they burned. The candles took just under four hours to burn down. The image on the book's cover is a photograph; the collars appear loosely arranged in a circle, each one impregnated with molten wax and subtly different from the one on either side of it. Together they form a community of individuals, a whole of many

parts, joined by their common fate. A tribute to those who died—and to those who live now in the presence of their absence—this work can be read as a mandala, an invocation or prayer. A place of pause and contemplation. Perhaps a space to step into, sanctuary from the persistent chaos of these times.

The circle is a powerful symbol in many of our world's spiritual and philosophical traditions. It alludes to wholeness, to beginnings and endings, to unity and diversity. In esoteric terms, the circle with a dot at its centre is representative of the Monad, or Soul—that part of us that is pure and untainted, infinite and whole.

In times of crisis, art in its many expressions can offer us steady ground, a place to stand that in turn enables us to process outrage and loss. It reassures us that together we can find consolation, even—especially—in grief.

- *You talk about your work as documentary in nature, and it's often collaborative. Could you share a bit more about the relationship between the individual and the whole, and the dialogue that takes place between the artist (you) and others (collaborators or viewers or others)?*

I'm most interested these days in making work that poses questions and engages the dilemmas and concerns of our times. The world and everything in it is in a rapid process of change, dissolution, renewal, reconfiguration. No sooner do we put a pin in something—an opinion, theory, ideology or what-have-you—than it changes shape. This mutability is certainly keeping us all on our toes. In terms of my art-making, I feel our work only really lives when it draws others into its 'field' and facilitates an exchange of some kind. In this way, every artwork is dynamic, a conversation or story whose outcome varies according to who engages with it in any given moment. A painting or poem might come to rest at a certain place, but there's another level on which each depends for its ongoing life on interaction with others. Perhaps one of the paradoxes of every creative undertaking is that while a work may begin in a solitary space, it nevertheless implies—indeed relies upon—collaborative participation.

- *And finally, please share a bit about your creative space, if you like. What ideas are informing and changing your art today?*

I'm in something of a transition state at the moment—doing a major review of how and why I spend the hours I do at my easel, studio workbench, writing desk. For me the purpose of making has primarily to do with building relationship, sparking connections, making meaning via communication and exchange. I especially appreciate times and spaces where the interface between maker, space, object and community is immediate, intimate and direct. The old model of the salon is one to revive, I think.

*\*Author unknown (sometimes attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt)*

[Published on the site *Love in the Time of Covid | Chronicle of a pandemic*  
<https://loveinthetimeofcovidchronicle.com/2020/10/30/word-christchurch-2020-fifty-one-by-claire-beynon/> ]