

IN THE STRAWBERRY PATCH: A FAMILY PORTRAIT

Suzanne Emslie

ALL IN A DREAM

In the Strawberry Patch is a project founded on an experience from my childhood. The idea began with a recurring childhood nightmare. As children, we were told to sit on the floor, even if there were seats free. We were to be quiet and only talk when we were spoken to, especially in the company of adults. The dream that haunted me was a picture of my mother and her siblings telling us what to do and when to speak. Their physical appearance, amplified by my child's perspective to almost balloon-like proportions, became more and more distorted and their voices grew louder and louder as their bodies loomed closer and closer.

Sigmund Freud believed that dreams were the reflections of a person's hidden feelings and that the unconscious could communicate through imagery and symbolism. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), he explained how dreams could show a pathway to understanding the unconscious. He explained how symbols and imagery in dreams could not only reveal the dreamer's hidden feelings, but lead the way to helping them attain what they truly desired. Psychoanalysis offers an understanding of subjectivity in art via the interaction of the conscious and the unconscious elements in the mind, an approach which has resulted in growing connections and crossovers between psychoanalysis and contemporary art.

The art work becomes the object of mere subjective experience and consequently art is considered to be an expression of human life.

Sigmund Freud¹

In making the work, I was interested in expressing the things that were unsaid which made up the total experience. Growing up around a large family, there were countless big family gatherings: weddings, births, christenings and birthdays – any excuse for a party was taken up. Family values were paramount at any gathering, evident in family traditions and practices passed down through generations. Despite the difference of opinions, everyone took care of and looked out for one another. My most memorable experience of family life was that I often felt invisible. On the surface, it was all about fun – but, as a child, I felt overlooked and very alone with this very large extended, traditional family.

For almost 40 years and two generations, the Thompson family ran extensive strawberry gardens and a farm on Fernhill, Queenstown, until the 121-hectare block was sold in the late 1960s for a housing and hotel subdivision. The Thompson era began in 1928, when they planted hundreds of strawberry plants and established their tourist business in ideal surroundings. Holidaymakers would walk the 3km from Queenstown to the strawberry gardens for generous helpings of freshly picked fruit with farm-produced clotted cream. The strawberry patch was situated behind the house, where a hive of bees ensured good pollination, but visitors were served at the front of the house, either in the garden or in a small teahouse. By 1950, and the second generation of Thompsons, the strawberry plants had grown in number to almost 40,000, with the addition of 2000 raspberry canes. My mother's generation grew up in the 1940s and '50s; family life was centred on the family business. In the busy season, they would pick from

Sam till ten at night; more than 40 pickers and family members chipped in. There was always mischief between the Thompson siblings, but the other workers turned a blind eye to their shenanigans in the strawberry patch.

RECOLLECTIONS

In The Strawberry Patch is a portrayal of many stories told over generations of the strawberry gardens on Fernhill. The works I have created are reminiscent of a long day's end, with a "strawberry standoff:" lobbed strawberries, the squishier the better; the more bird-pecked and rotten being best, spilling strawberry juice over clothing, bodies and faces. A family portrait of my mum and her siblings centres on the rivalry and competitive behaviour within the large family group. A fun narrative of voluptuous, joyous figures, where if you didn't make enough noise or get up to mischief and run with the pack, you were either cornered and tickled till your laughter turned to tears, or you were ignored completely.

The plum tree

Our big plum tree was in the yard and when the plums were ripe, it was our job to pick them for mum to make into jam and preserves. We would get up the tree, shaking the tree for the plums to fall. It was then a race between us and the hens to see who got the most.

Pat

Drunk hens

Have you ever seen drunk hens? Mum preserved a large amount of fruit each year. Apricots, nectarines, plums, pears, apples and peaches. She spent hours preparing and bottling them for winter. Sometimes, some of the seals didn't work well and the fruit fermented. One year we cleared out all the not-well-sealed fruits and threw it all to the hens. They loved it and they got drunk on it. The funniest thing to see was hens walking around and falling over themselves and one another.

Judy

Grapes

Each year when the grapes had ripened, dad would climb onto the porch roof to pick them. One year when I was quite young, it was the best harvest we had had. All us kids that were still at home were waiting around the bottom and dad would throw us each a bunch.

Mary

Blackberries

Down in the cow yard, lots of wild blackberries grew. There were tremendously fruitful bushes. We used to pick loads of them so mum would make pies, jam and jelly. We of course ate many when we were picking them. One afternoon with nothing better to do, we had a blackberry fight. It was great fun. It went on for most of the afternoon. What wasn't fun was when mum saw us – we were in the bathroom for hours trying to get the stains off us and out of our clothes.

Thelma

POSITIONS PLEASE



with oversized limbs and exaggerated facial expressions. Walls at least one inch thick were consistently scraped, blended and pressed onto the surface to render smooth skin and a textured finish for clothing.

A total of 11 siblings were created – two brothers and nine sisters – and their notable differences in personalities were, I hope, captured in the performance of the narrative depicted. One of the men was to be shown exercising his very strong will, hand on hip and shaking a finger. The second male, known to be a bit of a prankster, would hold a slingshot at the ready. Both are standing tall, legs spread for balance, both a little exaggerated in height as they had nine sisters to contend with – strength in numbers rather than in size.

With the women, I began with four seated figures. The oldest and youngest sisters are taking a bite from a strawberry; the youngest sits with her mouth full, trying to look innocent. The third sister was to be aiming strawberries at another as the fourth guarded her face. Three more sisters were kneeling – one was intended to be pulling a face,



From photo's and drawings, maquettes were made to represent each sibling in the family. I constructed the maquettes as closely as possible to correct proportions – almost one twentieth of normal human size. Body language, balance and gestures, and facial expressions are mirrored from photo's – old and new – taken of each sibling in order to represent them as closely as possible in clay.

Each figure was then built up to larger than life size, for two reasons: to allow for shrinkage in the paper clay material used,² and also to add a sense of humour;

while the other two were on the attack. One was to be larger than them all – she was known as the headstrong sister and a bit of a bully. The last sister was to be shown standing, swaying to one side and shielding herself from a slingshot attack.

In the grouping, I wished to capture the feel of the 1950s in the textured surface of the clay, suggesting cotton, denim, seersucker and suede fabric surfaces. Ceramic strawberries were also strewn about in reference to the strawberry fights which sometimes happened at the end of a working day.

A LARGER-THAN-LIFE FAMILY

The sheer scale of the build, the size and number of the sculptures, and the amount of time the figures needed to sit to dry through completely meant that the project was a huge learning curve. I had many mishaps, and some figures had not been created full-size as the project reveal date loomed. The size of the kiln also played an important part in the design of the figures, meaning that the majority of sitting and kneeling figures had to be made so their hands/ arms and heads could be attached once fired in the kiln. It was a mathematical puzzle for me to piece them together, and it also added a bit of lunacy and humour to the narrative to see the separate pieces in the studio.

In The Strawberry Patch is a projection of what I saw in my mother's family, as well as my own recollections of growing up. There was much posturing and many cracks revealed in the relationships within the family unit, but ultimately this family portrait is best seen as a light-hearted romp between siblings.



Suzanne Emslie has spent seven and a half years completing a Diploma in Ceramics and a Masters of Visual Arts in ceramic sculpture. She has been a practising artist for the last 14 years, working in both ceramic and limestone materials, and sculpting and carving figurative works.

- 1 Sigmund Freud, quoted in Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004).
- 2 Paper clay is considered the strongest clay mix for creating sculpture. It can be joined and rejoined, working from wet clay to dry, or vice versa, as a result of the paper fibres immersed in the clay. A mix of 25% paper with 75% clay creates a very elastic and forgiving mix, most suitable for building large sculptural works.