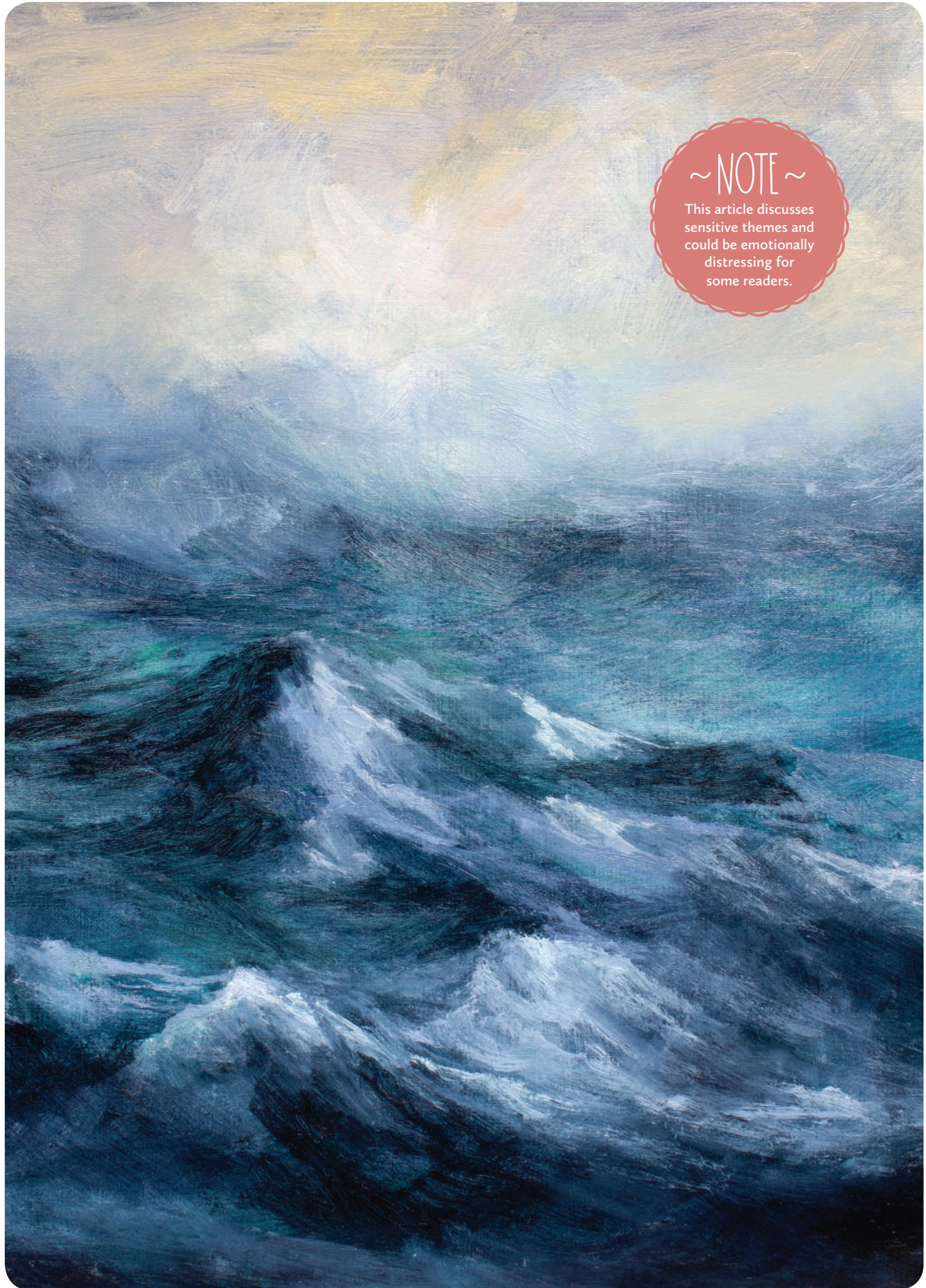




Labours of Love

Inspired by her travels, the natural world, and close introspection, Sydney-based artist Susie Dureau discusses the intersection of parenthood with her creative practice; and how her experience with grief and trauma feeds into her works.



~NOTE~
This article discusses sensitive themes and could be emotionally distressing for some readers.

ARTWORK BY SUSIE DUREA; PHOTOGRAPHY ELIN BANDMANN





As a parent it's integral to prioritise yourself, in order to exhibit the kind of self-love, independence, and personal respect that you want your children to emulate.

Known for huge landscapes of atmospheric weather patterns – tempestuous clouds and wild waves fill the canvas in moody tones of grey, blue, and green – Susie’s inspiration is drawn from residing in Sydney’s Northern Beaches, with the wide-open ocean, and her time living in the scenic Blue Mountains. Susie shares, “I formed a language that related to the moodiness of weather and atmospheric fog.”

After undertaking a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the National Art School (NAS) in 2002, Susie and her husband Tim found they were expecting their first baby, a little girl, to be named Eva. But this gift was heartbreakingly transformed into grief, when little Eva left this world shortly after birth. Losing her led to a series of events that Susie describes as a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction to loss. Susie returned to the jarring mundanity of her regular life, as a new parent – without a baby. In the throes of grief, Susie and Tim moved from inner Sydney to the Blue Mountains, withdrawing from the frenetic energy of the city and gaining respite in the rugged bushland region.

Wading through the cloying sense of loss, Susie found herself desperate to have another baby. Only months after Eva’s birth, Susie experienced the elation of expecting a second time. Ten weeks into her first trimester, anticipation was again turned to anguish when she miscarried. Like the violent disturbance of the ocean in tempest, another surge of grief, a transference of the first, washed over Susie. This time, it was six months before she fell pregnant again. Another little girl; Naomi.

After sifting through the maelstrom of her guilt, dread, and expectation, Susie recognised that her desire to have another baby was by no means the same projection as wanting Eva back; it was a simple longing for a family. When commuting on the train to the city from the Blue Mountains became too hard while pregnant, Susie made the decision to take a year off from her studies.

This year, Susie went back to the NAS to complete her master’s degree. In her words, “going back to do the masters is a full circle... to walk back into the same institution now is still part of that healing process.”

For Susie, painting became a way to navigate through the sea of grief, sharing, “maybe that’s what drew me to nature, because it coincided with moving to the Blue Mountains.” She adds, “I had some pretty destructive ways of dealing with the loss, I was drinking a lot (between pregnancies) and there were a lot of tears. But I also wrote a lot... and I started painting. I found it really helpful.”

Susie discloses that one of the confusing elements to the grief was her loss of identity. “When it’s your first child, you feel like a mother, but you don’t look like one to the outside world; you have milk but no baby to feed. It’s complex. Somehow I felt that I had betrayed Eva because I was not able to do all the practical tasks that proved how much I loved her.” But of course, even without that tiny, cherubic bundle – with soft, peachy skin, gossamer hair, aromatic musk of sweetness and warmth – you remain a parent.



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Susie was approached recently with a proposition to start up a palliative care unit for babies and children. Susie adds, “when you have a child dying, you are just put down to the end of the children’s ward. I was recovering for five days after the delivery in a ‘grief’ room at the end of the maternity ward, the nurses were wonderful, but I was surrounded by mums and their new babies. My little Eva’s body was in a crib at the nurse’s station (in case I wanted to hold her). The first time I felt well enough to go for a walk, I ran into a woman I’d met at the prenatal class with her new baby, she asked me where my baby was.”

Drawing inspiration, in an abstract way, from her trauma, Susie describes her artistic process as “more about the totality of the experience of life – about stepping up to make a painting and bringing all of your life experience and your breadth of emotion.” Adding that as a parent, with experiences of hardship contrasted with such sheer joy, “you suddenly have a broader field of emotion.”

Eva’s memory is often evoked in Susie’s work through the use of particular hues; vibrant magenta, deep crimson. She is also inspired by the Japanese methods of Kintsugi – ‘golden joinery’ – which sees a broken ceramic object repaired with gold. Susie adds, “the piecing together of something that has broken can sometimes make it more beautiful,” understanding that all life experience, joy and grief alike, makes a person who they are – beauty through adversity. An origami boat motif also appears throughout Susie’s paintings, which she shares is about the value in our inherent vulnerability, “that something really delicate can actually be really resilient; you don't

need to put up defences to show strength. It’s about being able to be vulnerable, and yet knowing that you will survive.”

Susie’s new paintings reflect on the environment. Not from the standpoint of an observer, but rather with a sense of moving through nature, with all the senses. Her most recent exhibition, *The Real and The Fugitive*, evocatively explored the “intuition that there’s more to this life than what we can easily articulate.”

As a parent it’s integral to prioritise yourself, in order to exhibit the kind of self-love, independence, and personal respect that you want your children to emulate. Susie also reveals that if you are a creative person, investing time in your practice is essential to healing. For her, motherhood, family and art practice are inextricably linked.

After travelling overseas and around Australia, Susie and Tim moved back to Sydney. They currently live in the stunning suburb of Bayview, with their two children, Naomi, 14, and Marlow, 12. The wildness and strength of this oceanside region continues to inspire her artwork, and perhaps serves as a natural metaphor for the fierce beauty and depth of Susie’s own journey.

Words by *Emma-Kate Wilson*

For support, education and guidance, Sands offer a 24-hour helpline with peer-to-peer services for bereaved parents. Visit sands.org.au or call 1300 072 637.

