

The art of hope

—Caroline Magerl and the transformative qualities of art.

“Often, the thing that gives us the energy to do what we do is buried deep in our emotional life”, Caroline Magerl muses as she flicks through the pages of her journals, “Why else do it? What makes people write for years?”

I watch the pages turn in a flurry of ink sketches and cursive scrawl: winged dogs, scarecrow-haired people, surfing rabbits. There’s a whimsy tinged with poignant nostalgia to the pictures, an intimate confessionalism but also an uncanny relatability.

This, I think, is human experience, iconised, made sense of and transformed through art.

“Why else do it?”, Caroline repeats, pauses, runs her fingers along a sketch of the rabbit that, I notice, recurs throughout her work, “Why? Because it’s *vital*, that’s why”.

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For Caroline Magerl art is “sustenance”, a way of accessing buried parts of the self. And as she discovered while writing her first children’s book *Hasel and Rose*, it is a way of transforming confusing personal experience into objects of beauty that can nourish not only ones-self, but others too.

“Art is a way of retrieving things and making something better out of what happened”, she tells me, as we sit at her kitchen table, her journals and the layout for *Hasel and Rose* before us. It’s midmorning. I clutch an earthenware cup of tea and breathe in the woody turpentine that wafts from Caroline’s studio next door. I peek in. Her artwork peeks back: oil paintings, etchings, children’s-book illustrations, comical doodles, and, everywhere, the sketches for *Hasel and Rose*.

These images come to Caroline’s mind as a sudden nostalgic blow, offering no comprehensible explanation.

“When something needs to come to my attention, it will come to my mind as an image and I will paint the thing”, she explains, “I won’t know what it means exactly, only that it’s important”.

By drawing these images, Caroline traces them back to experience, and transforms them into allegories of hope that resonate with viewers on a deeply personal level.

And so, while the events that inspired the art were buried deep in Caroline’s personal history, the transformative journey towards *Hasel and Rose* began with an image.

It first came to her in the early days of motherhood: A little rabbit, with floppy ears. With trademark wry humour, she cut a pattern from a pair of “ugly” maternity pants, and made the stuffed bunny for her daughter.

Then, years later, the rabbit reappeared, this time with a chant:

“Hasel arrived in a tired brown box. The stamps weren’t licked right to the corners. It was made with tiny stitches and inside was a red glass heart”.

Caroline began to draw the rabbit, again, and again. Slowly, the image solidified into a memory: Caroline, aged two, clutching a stuffed toy. She found a photograph, taken not long after her family had immigrated to Australia, that matched the memory. Long buried emotions surfaced. The image had something to do with family, something—perhaps awakened by becoming a mother herself—about how love can be handed from a parent to a child, but how grief can to.

Caroline is not one to use a term such as ‘cross generational grief’. Instead, she looks fondly at the images of Hasel and Rose, then out the studio windows, where fat raindrops splatter against the glass, but the sun continues to shine, and she tells me about “the ground from which this story grew”.

It began in Germany, with Caroline’s parents, and the wartime malaise that raised them. Like many of their generation, they emerged from the war with unshakable sensations of grief, mistrust, and, most overwhelmingly, dislocation. Soon after Caroline was born, her parents applied for immigration. They ticked every country on the immigration form—South Africa, Canada, Australia—, and soon found themselves in Sydney. There, in their backyard, Caroline’s father began to build a boat. Caroline was seven when they finished it. She vividly remembers the day they launched the 45-foot steel shell into the Parramatta River. The interior was not yet finished. The plumbing was a long way off. But from that moment, the boat was home.

Theirs was a nomadic life. They travelled up and down Australia’s East Coast, mooring in muddy mangroves where the rent was cheap and the other tenants accepting. By the time Caroline was fifteen, she’d attended ten different schools. As she tells me this, her eyes shine in such a way that—even though she’s warned me against romanticising her past—it’s difficult not to envision her at the mast, flanked by the Pacific. But then a sad smile comes to her face.

“For all the beauty and the amazing life we had on that boat, there was another aspect, a quiet tragic aspect, that I saw in both my parents”.

It was an unspoken thing, a strange, unnamable grief. Her family was not really running to adventure; they were running from something they could not name.

“We were very much in flight: We came to Australia but we weren’t part of Australian life. We were an island, physically and in many other ways”.

Caroline struggled to make sense of this wordless emotion that had been handed down to her.

“It was something that was too big for my little head to handle when I was a kid. It was a real despair, something really, really deeply awful that I think mum and dad must have experienced and that I felt. I felt it and I didn’t know what to do with it”.

In this silence and isolation, Caroline fell in love with the unspoken language of images. She took refuge in the picture books her grandmother sent from Germany. Even when

the world around was so confusing, those Eastern European narratives “made a weird kind of sense”.

So the seed was planted.

Caroline knew she was destined for a life of images. After she left home, she worked as a satirical cartoonist, illustrator, and fine artist. The years passed, and although Caroline thought she’d moved on from the confusion of her childhood, images of that time, like the rabbit, kept reappearing in her art.

“The intellect”, she found, “is bypassed in art”. Often, the things she’d felt but never fully understood would find a means of expression in her art.

But when it came to the image of the rabbit, Caroline needed more than expression. The unnamable feeling she’d transformed into an image was asking to be transformed again.

“Imagery expresses experience, but it doesn’t always solve things. Sometimes you need words to talk yourself through it. With *Hasel and Rose*, I had to do both”, she explains. Working first in German, then in English, she translated the images into words. For nine years, she wrote and rewrote the story, and as she made sense of the narrative before her, she also made sense of her own story.

What had previously existed only as flashes of viscerally felt yet bewildering imagery became something tangible. Writing brought closure. She began to accept the past. She began to move on.

In this process, a further transformation took place. The memory had taken on the form of a picture book, just like those that had given her so much joy as a child. She knew this was her chance to turn the grief that had been passed down to her into a positive gift for others.

“I understood that it wasn’t just about me”, she explains, “I had to transform it in a way that would be a nourishing and sustaining thing”. Writing *Hasel and Rose* has been a kind of art and narrative therapy for Caroline. Now, she wants to offer the product, this book about hope, to others as a kind of bibliotherapy.

Hasel and Rose is a story about optimism and hope. Rose, the protagonist, is looking for something she can’t name. While her family tries to help, they can’t grasp it either. Then Hasel arrives. The rabbit, like a vagrant memory, has come from far away in time and space to appear when Rose is ready. The two make friends, and, with Hasel nestled close, Rose begins to see the good she’d previously overlooked. The rabbit, then, is a symbol of renewed hope.

“I believe in an ability to regenerate one’s self in the world”, she tells me. The renewal she speaks of is a type of healing, made possible only by accessing and transforming shadowy memories. These images have transcended the isolating barriers of language, time, and emotion, appearing in Caroline’s life so that she can communicate love and joy.

I ask Caroline what she hopes her story will give to others.

“I hope they take the positive message”, she says, “I hope people see what these images did for me. Jung talks about images and symbols and how sometimes they are

your food. And they are. Sometimes those images genuinely have been sustenance when I haven't had much else—or rather, when I haven't seen what's there. It's a sort of food you can't get in other ways".

I find myself nodding. Caroline's images and writing seem to have fortified something in me too. I tell her this, and she doesn't seem surprised: she often hears from collectors that connecting with artwork helps them work through their own emotions. I wonder how something so personal for the artist can also be so personal for the viewer. As if reading my thoughts, Caroline continues:

"The best thing art can do is show you that your experience is not unique. That you're not stuck. That you can transform things, and you can overcome things".

Both the creation and the experience of Caroline's art is bound this vital thing that Caroline calls sustenance.

"It's hope. Food for hope—Yes, I think that's what art is".