

Marie Shannon

b.1960

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A few months after the Beatles split up in 1970, Paul McCartney's group *Wings* released the single *Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey*. It had the catchy refrain "Hands across the water/heads across the sky". It was a worldwide hit and possibly inspired this evocative photograph and Shannon's title.

Many of Marie Shannon's images are attempts to bring out emotions embodied in intense relationships and one person's love or deep tenderness towards another. Usually, she uses written language to do this, but this very theatrical image is different. We see two lovers clutching hands while apparently living on opposite sides of the world – as shown by the symbolic placement of their bodies. Separated by the sea and great distance, their hearts still beat as one.

The image suggests their hands are joined just prior to separation, before one of them leaves for the other hemisphere. Or it could just refer to their communication through letter or telephone, while physically separated. The photograph has the bodies of the unidentified lovers positioned so the woman is standing on the left and the man is on the right. The models are likely to be Shannon herself and her husband, the artist Julian Dashper, with the camera on a tripod and the film exposure achieved using a timer or long lead.

The lovers are standing in front of an old oil painting, the significance of which is ambiguous. It is more than just an image of the sea, an abstract symbol for distance. It shows two ships, one a sailed clipper, the other a coal-fuelled tug. In the image, the tug has guided the clipper out to the safe open water and is about to return to the harbour. There is a partnership between the two craft that also symbolises the relationship of the manually clasping couple who, like the two boats, are about to separate.

Like the tug and the clipper, the lovers work together to get through dangerous waters. The painted backdrop implies their parting and isolation may lead to problems if it continues too long. The work also alludes to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting of *God And Adam* reaching out to each other, with

God creating and sustaining life. In Shannon's image, the giving is two way, a balanced relationship where the couple sustain and protect each other.

In a funny sort of way, the background canvas in Shannon's sea image is a postscript to the arm-and-hands symbolism of the foreground. It adds an extra statement that declares vulnerability in times of turbulence.

In recent years, Shannon has made a number of other photographs about intimate relationships and how couples communicate. She is especially interested in hand written notes, recording with her camera texts such as "I love you", "I love you forever", "I.L.Y.", "I.L.Y. always", and "I.L.Y. xxxx". Often they include extra comments such as drawn hearts, "sorry for being grumpy", or "you are the best". They are all classic expressions of intense passion and emotional commitment.

John Hurrell

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.govettbrewster.com
www.hamishmckaygallery.com
www.suecrockford.com
www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Strongman, L. and Leonard, R. (1995). *Hangover* catalogue, Govett-Brewster, Waikato Museum of Art and History, and Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Web search:

Michelangelo's *God And Adam*

