

What Lies Beneath

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Helen Norton can skin a rabbit in record time, drive a cattle truck, hunt the odd shark and rustle up brekkie for a shedful of shearers. In her earlier life, she was an inveterate outback traveler, drawn towards immersing herself in the dirt and blood of an authentic life. As an artist she has shown the same fearlessness and hands-on competence, building a fully-fledged international career from first brick to landscaping.

Cockatoo Gallery in Fremantle showcases Helen's work and we conduct our interview under the saucer-eyed and distracted gaze of the many vivid characters who inhabit her quirky and surreal world. She speaks rapidly and with gusto in a voice pitched higher than strictly comfortable. Radiating a restless energy and passion for ideas, her conversation is frequently propelled into overdrive. At the same time there is a personal warmth and charisma that is enveloping for the listener. You feel a little as if you are drowning in waves of ideas but happily so.

As an artist she has been prolific and as a writer and poet, she will often write thousands of words a day. It is not difficult to see the elements of her quixotic, rebellious personality that have propelled her to the top of her profession nor to the spectacular midlife burnout she suffered recently.

She began painting in her mid-twenties and instinctively found a medium and style that translated and combined the landscape of her inner and outer world into one. Turning lack of formal training and exclusion from the arts scene into a badge of honour, she famously describing the arts establishment as consisting of "over bubbled champagne and smelly fishy eggs."

"I used to feel that arts training was something I had missed out on but now I feel quite blessed," she says. "What I missed out on was the intellectualizing of art but instead I got my hands dirty and taught myself how to paint."

She believes university arts courses are training arts teachers, arts administrators and arts critics but not necessarily artists. "You can't teach an artist. There is no such thing as going to an arts college to be an artist – it doesn't exist," she says. "The best artists are mothers who have just found the brush or fathers who take it up at 45 because they are doing it from the heart."

Eschewing the popular stereotype of the starving artist by selling originals and prints in many forms in order to reach a wide audience, has led to criticism from the 'poppy choppers.' "I have heard a few intriguing comments like 'she's too commercial' and 'she hasn't done the hard yards' which I love, but I generally can link those comments back to some kind of hurt," she says. Describing herself as a "wild brumby who will not get

herself stuck in someone's stable" is a polite way of indicating that gallery curators left out of the loop have sometimes been behind the poisoned arrows.

Helen's paintings are vibrantly coloured with the palette of the outback and peopled with a diverse range of characters who dominate the landscape with their half glimpsed stories and journeys. She uses archetypal figures (angels, clowns, lighthouse keepers, mermaids) and animals as metaphors for aspects of the human condition. There is always a story, sometimes tantalisingly just beyond the frame that leads the viewer further into the intrigue.

Her use of a white dog as a recurring motif has become something of a trademark. "That poor little white dog has been in the works for years and years and it is only just recently that I have been able to identify who or what he is," she says. "One of my friends said something about him and I said 'you know who he is – he is my soul!' and she said 'don't tell everyone that – they won't buy it.'

She admits to being a seducer, using colour and humour to connect to darker explorations. Her vibrant creations, often featuring forlorn figures, hint at themes of isolation and existential angst. There is a standing invitation to the viewer to enter a much darker and more complex underworld of meaning but like the siren call of the mermaid luring sailors to much darker waters, the song is pleasing and attractive and can be enjoyed on its own terms.

"I have always stuck to the importance of aesthetics," she says. "A church is lovely – it is meant to be sparkly otherwise you wouldn't go in. Most things that people are trying to lure you into are dressed well."

"What I am really doing is marketing the soul and I am dressing it up so that you are attracted to it," she says. "Once you get inside you will find it horrible and ugly. When you look deeper, it is not meant to be attractive."

Her propensity for hard work and astute business sense has brought acclaim, success and financial reward far beyond her expectations. As an artist she has reached a position that few achieve. Her body of work is extensive and is seen in the marketplace as a sound financial investment. She has always worked independently of galleries and has managed her own career, sold her own work and created a market for herself. It was a surprise when escalating success suddenly felt like a tightening straitjacket.

She is comfortable referring to it as a midlife crisis but prefers the term "midlife opportunity." Always a traveler, there was an intense need to relocate to a different lifestyle, culture and attitude from the Broome base that had been home for 14 years.

She wanted to return to an earthier, and less structured world where she could bring up her two boys and take an inner journey to rediscover her strengths and her identity. The wild and lawless environs of Vanuatu felt like returning to mother earth and it allowed

the self-nurturing needed. Helen fled in 2000, selling her business and shaking off the constraints of expectation.

“I took on the decision to risk throwing everything away when I left Australia in 2000,” she says. “When you have success commercially there is a very strong pressure to perform, perform, perform. I physically collapsed and psychologically had to get away from all that structure.”

Slowly over the course of four years and in the embrace of the natural world and the people of Vanuatu she reclaimed a sense of balance and the ability to make decisions without feeling like a puppet on a string. “All you see when you fly into Vanuatu is two big breasts which are two big lagoons,” she says. “You are surrounded by deep water – all symbols for the unconscious and getting down deeper. I wasn’t conscious of what I was doing. I just had to go there.”

Resettling to a small farm in Queensland in 2003 with, she feels some degree of peace has led to a new chapter in her life and work. She meditates and writes more and paints less. “There is no longer an urge to churn work out to ease the pressure that I have worked under for so long,” she says. Current studies in Analytical Psychology with a particular interest in Jungian Psychology are the basis for her new works.

“The landscape I am drawing on now is my inner psyche and the expeditions I take are into the inner world through dream work and active imagination”, she says. In her dream journeys she has been surprised to encounter many of the mythical figures and symbols that have featured in her work.

“These symbols seem to have resonance with all of us,” she says. “They belong to the collective unconscious and I experience them through my dream life and creative life. I mix up all these ingredients and shoot them out the other end and there you have a painting.”

These days she is as likely to call herself a mythologist or an alchemist as an artist. She believes that her work has always been a means to explore the greater stories and truths inherent in myths and archetypes since the beginning of time which lurk in all our psyches.

“I have never been interested in just being an artist,” she says. “What my work is here for is bridge making and if there is a bridge I can create that sparks a wake up to someone to reach into that other part of themselves through imagination then that is good.”

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