

1992 Beasts and Beauties – ©Helen Norton - Narratives

Artists Statement

I've not set out to change the world. I would however like to pry its eyes open a bit. Ignorance and turning the other cheek leads to misunderstanding. I want to creep deeper than the history books and move through the psyche and the souls of the people or players of that time. It was a time in history where one race treated another badly. It could have been anywhere in the world. I've no drama with being black or white, right or wrong; we're human. We the 'whitey's' have lost our tracks over this civilized time and seem to be coming undone at the seams. Perhaps our society structure is not working. Some very basic ingredients have been so distorted that they no longer work. Our whole earth system and connections, each important for the other species survival. Our 'civilised' disconnection from those principles – our 'exclusiveness' and refusal to respect what formed us in the first place makes us an outcast breaking the chain which in a dramatized sense will lead to our extinction or disintegration.

We are lucky in that we have only to look back such a short time of 200 years to see a wonderful spiritual society in action. We've got to acknowledge and respect that culture and spirituality to the land quickly and learn from it. Perhaps then preserving it, but not like what has been done by the 'do gooders' to date – the social justice warriors - which is to treat it like a pickled onion, or more likely as a dangerous oddity, like a deformed scorpion in a metho jar. Far more beneficial surely would be that the cultural significance is kept alive as a living breathing experience.

If we want a national identity then surely part of that multicultural symbol would have to come from the people of the very land we tread, and a very large part. We must understand that this fragile continent is not like others. We do not have rich volcanic soils and growling hard animals as much as we have tried to make it so and in that we are a very different and delicately balanced existence as far as the land is concerned – here 'down under' as they say.

There are a lot of mixed feelings that surface in the audience of my work. In some ways the western religions helped place band-aids on some of the shocking history as it was taking place. The survival of many Aboriginal groups would have been impossible had they not sheltered them, but there was a price to pay as is always, a trade off, in our world of trading. I can't help but feel uncomfortable at the thought of having to trade one's soul and spirituality for the right to exist.

So with a realistic world now of mixed races more likely than not I find people not sure of where their loyalties lie thus interpreting my work in different ways. Their beliefs about who they are when it comes to culture are messy. There are a lot of grey areas in the modern borderless world around personal identity as it is formed around spirituality and faith mixed with sovereignty due to increasing ease of global movement. It is after all how invasions were conducted, peaceful or violent. It's very hard to retain such nebulous material as 'spiritual belief' unless it's backed by a very powerful 'institution' to retain the symbol of it. The Aboriginal culture by its very nature was not this way inclined as the whole point was that man was smaller than the symbols of nature. All he could do was try to describe these in cave paintings and delegate stories to elders to retain and pass on. There were no big books or slush funds to finance the retention of the power of the belief. Therefore it was an easy target to wipe out and scrape quickly from one generation's psyche to the next. The lessons of remaining humble and as a servant (caretaker only) of the land were not going to be of any use to a culture that was hell bent on making nature subservient to man.

I consider that I am not taking sides in my depiction of our history, but merely making observations of incidents from my white seat. I want to remove the dark curtains from the windows and let some reality and light stream in. Some of these pieces may not be what you would want to sip tea and eat cup cakes to in an afternoon art exhibit, but no person has ever slain a haunting guilt or solved a problem of past or present without looking at it in all its truth. I have executed these pieces to flush out some of my own misunderstanding and curiosity encountered in my 10 years in the outback working alongside many Aboriginal friends in stock camps and other occupations. These were the sons and daughters, of mixed marriages, but always from the outback, therefore their mothers or fathers had never left the more remote areas of Australia (to live in cities). I was always interested in what they had left of their own culture, and how they viewed themselves – through what values, what lens. There was no confusion for them. They had no trouble holding both cultures together in who they were. Asking them such questions was stupid. Observing and living alongside was the only way to have answers.

Perhaps we could all take a dose of some of the most marvelous Aboriginal traits of all; their most incredible sense of humour, tolerance, sense of family and love which has helped them cope with their European visitors, invaders, refugees and friends as we all are in one way or another.



Big One Muster

The gathering of 'troublesome natives' from newly claimed white properties was often described like that of herding cattle, drafting off the young men, and troublesome ones to be taken to nearby towns to work on roads, rails and the like under captivity (chains).

Savanna Death

You
 Man
 You bring me here
 So my babies will wither
 with the great time of dry
 No sustenance from this
 lifes udder
 You make me put him in
 a hold out here
 I stand on the edge
 Bird of prey watches,
 waits for my tear
 A moist novelty
 My babies
 Their bodies washed away
 with big wet
 Your world
 Full of extremity
 My fine lace is red
 My turned wood is fodder
 For small white beasts
 Who suck the life marrow from them
 My babies taken by Savanna death



Dreaming of the Doomed Men



This looks at a lost man in his last hours dying of thirst. The little buxom nymph sips wine in complete comfort in the burning sun while the doomed man, his horse long gone, writes his last words to his faraway wife as the numbness of perishing overtakes him as mother earth comes to gently take him back to his beginning. Little nymph celebrates the death of his ego.

HMAS Pioneer



This painting was inspired by the story HMS Pioneer which I read in an old book on Northern Territory stories.

The painting was used in a number of publications including Australian Short Stories and shown in a TV documentary about the men.

HMS Pioneer is a tremendous story from the wild early days

of the explorers of Australia. A team of 15 men survived in crocodile infested Northern Territory waters after having to kill and eat their much-loved team of horses to survive. They then had to use their skins to make a vessel to escape their predicament. They would survive for several months before they would receive help thanks to the horses.

Boss Fella Gone Away, Lookin' After Mrs



The station owners wife was often left alone for many months while the men were our mustering. The Aboriginal women here take care of this ailing, lonely lady with their own way of doing things. The women of the outback, with their natural compassion had better understanding of each other than the constantly power driven men.



Meetings of Dreamings

The white woman settler is frightened in her new surroundings (the Australian bush) and she seeks cover in her faith, in her dreaming. The Aboriginal women and the birds have no use for the ornaments of this ladies complex cultural refuge and process.



Catalyst For A Massacre (Coniston Incident)

A typical incident where a white man was killed by the Aborigines for sleeping with the tribesmen's wives at his leisure and pleasure. He was stuffed down a rabbit warren. This fellow was a dam builder and a dingo poisoner. His camels would drag the dirt out of the hole for the dam as

there were no bulldozers back then. Inevitably what followed his death was a huge indiscriminate massacre of hundreds of Aborigines in the area as a 'get back'.



Morning Harvest



Save Them
From
Themselves

Half caste children were scooped up by various religious societies that were forming in some of the most remote parts of the outback. The dilemma of identity had begun and much pain was felt as these children

were just taken from their Aboriginal mothers and all they knew of as home in order to make them more civilised 'for their own good'.



The Drovers Boy

There are many tales (true) of drovers taking a young Aboriginal woman with him on his long droving journeys and dressing her as a boy. The young woman would share his swag and be a kind of 'mustered mistress and cook' with no pay of course.



The Audacity of Boat Men

Sometimes when white explorers would come across country where the Aboriginals had never seen a white fella, they would see the natives turning their heads totally the other way as if ignoring them. The white Englishmen would regard it as pure audacity, but what the Aboriginals were

really doing was hoping that 'the pale devils' would disappear if they didn't look at them.



The Chinese Cook



Gone To Wonderland

This piece is a celebration of the Alice Springs women's protest against 'the grog'. They showed their concerns for the bad influences alcohol was having on their community and their children by staging a bare breasted march through the town of Alice Springs a few

years ago. Alcohol has wrecked many generations of Aboriginal societies as it has provided a 'forget me' type of solution to the sense of loss of purpose for many Aboriginals since the displacement that took place only a few hundred years ago. There has never really been a reconciliation for the bizarre disruption to their culture and the patronizing Bandaid solution applied by white do-gooders. Nothing much has changed.



Birth of Fear

As the whitening process began in the mission schools, all the children's previous beliefs were discarded. The dazzling light rushes in searching for the taken girl, as the dreaming spirits sit degraded, ridiculed and shunned in the back rows of the church - hopelessly stripped of their power to the girls soul. She drops to her knees. Her life ends, her fear begins.

They Found Them With Flowers in their Hair

There are stories about many white children becoming lost in the bush and being saved thanks to Aboriginal trackers. There are other sad stories where they were not so lucky such as one where a little girl when picking wild flowers and became lost and died. This image was inspired by stories of how Aboriginal girls would make little clay breasts and hang them around their necks pretending to be mothers. The notion here is that they go with this with the intent to nourish the lost child if they find her, but in this case they are little ghosts.



The Selection

A few white men took young black girls with them as stock workers, cooks and bed warmers. They dressed them like boys and quite often the team wouldn't even know that they were any different. The children's spirit in the hands on the wall. Their world of evolution, lizards and dreaming as she is wrenched out by a man, white of skin and blue of eye, as he looks to the heavens believing he is holy and justified in his 'selection'.

Beautiful little girl
He chooses well
Black velvet
You go with him
He takes you
To hat and saddle
You'll do
Your world cries
Spirits of ancestors
The rulers of dreamtime
Cry out
They take justice their own way
They wait in the drought
They wait in the flood
They wait in all things
That can take a white man
In this land of the mother
Beautiful girl
Daughter of your mother
I'm all around you
Don't be alone.



Stairway From Heaven – Acquisition Award 1992 Broome Shire WA



Creation of a Nations Masterpiece





The Other Woman

This woman is coming to terms with and accepting her once harsh and frightening environment.

The image inspired Leslie Corbett's short story 'The Other Woman'.

The Abduction



Fear of Men

Reflections on the bombing of Darwin and the fear men have in what comes from the skies.



Black Velvet

Girl on Her Head

A ridiculous portrait of the duties of an Aboriginal nanny around the turn of the century.



Camel Man

Campfire

There were stories about a drover with a glass eye. When he had to go away from the camp he would leave his glass eye upon a post and tell the Aboriginal stockmen that the eye was a part of him and would keep a watch on everything they did.



The Drought Riders

Cowmen Sketch



Killer Night



Mona's Lost Children Story