

# Local artist's work 'discovered'



HELEN Norton and Joel Weatherald in front of her painting titled Save Them From Themselves.

WELL known Broome artist Helen Norton, who paints realistic and sometimes stark paintings of the Kimberley, may soon receive recognition throughout Australia.

Art entrepreneur and co-ordinator of the Adelaide Festival's Exhibition of Fine Art at Scotch College in Adelaide, Joel Weatherald visited Broome recently and 'discovered' Norton's work.

He immediately made contact with her and, after viewing her recent work, offered to take six pieces to show as part of this biennial exhibition.

One hundred Australian

artists will be shown as part of this exhibition which commences in February 1992.

Norton's work will hang beside the likes of John Olson, Pro Hart and Arthur Boyd.

Mr Weatherald said, as well as showing new works of more established artists, the exhibition also aims to promote and launch new artists from throughout Australia.

Weatherald said he found Norton's paintings particularly exciting in that she, being a non-Aboriginal woman, could paint the Aboriginal experiences of social issues and history with

such a refreshing style and honesty.

Weatherald intends nominating one of Norton's paintings for the Moet et Chandon exhibition later in the year.

This annual art competition is open to any artist under the age of 35 years who has already achieved some measure of success.

It carries a cash prize of some \$20,000.

Thirty artists are chosen from among the hundreds of entries and these, as well as the winning painting, tour as an exhibition to each state.

This gives a broad base of

exposure to the artists' work.

Since commencing to exhibit her paintings in 1988, when she won the Kimberley Art Prize in Derby, Norton has gained high praise for her work.

She has also had a number of solo and joint exhibitions in Broome and Perth since 1988.

The exhibitions have been highly successful, not only in terms of critical acclaim, but also in commercial terms.

Almost all of the paintings she has exhibited have been sold.

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Since 1988 she has taken out a number of other prizes, in Broome, Derby, Port Hedland and Perth, 16 in all.

Her next solo exhibition will be in April at the Framed Gallery in Darwin.

But life has not always been so easy for Norton.

As a determined and independent youngster, she left her St Kilda home in 1976 at the age of 15.

At first she tried to stay at school, while supporting herself with two part-time jobs but decided to move when the strain of this lifestyle became too great.

Her first job after leaving was in a roadhouse on the Nullarbor Plain in South Australia.

She found she liked the outback, the isolation and the lifestyle and spent the

next 10 years of her life as a professional shooter, contract fencer and station hand.

She lived in bush camps with minimal facilities and little communication with the rest of society and liked it.

"It was here I learned to love the secret beauty of isolation," she said.

"Although circumstances and conditions didn't allow much time to paint in those years, a lot of solid groundwork was laid down and stored for that elusive 'right time'."

In 1986, Norton travelled to the North West of WA, where she met her husband, Tony.

This was the first time she had been somewhat stationary for years and provided the first real opportunity she had for time to herself and her art.

With her husband's support, she was able to study and to work in a safe

environment without needing to provide for herself which gave her the freedom she'd sought.

Although she has had no formal training as an artist, Norton maintains that "life, looking and experimentation are my teachers."

She uses different mediums in many different ways as the spirit of each painting requires.

Norton said until the middle of last year, she painted mainly descriptive bush scenes from the Kimberley region.

She now sees this period of her work as serving out an apprenticeship, getting her technique together, and exploring different subject matter.

"I was extremely fortunate in that I sold everything I produced," she said.

"This was extremely encouraging to me."

Then in mid 1991, she made her first attempt at more 'historical political' art. It was also her first attempt at painting a series of works based on a central theme.

The theme she chose was of Jandamarra, otherwise known as Pigeon, an Aboriginal resistance fighter of the Bunuba people who for years tried to fight against the tide of white settlers entering his people's traditional lands.

He lost the fight in a bloody battle.

Norton was impressed and intrigued by the story and she wanted others to be aware of this piece of history.

Around the same time, she also painted scenes which showed the blind faith, the naivety and the courage of the early white women settlers who followed their husbands into the unknown.

As well as paying tribute to these women, Norton said she wanted to gently poke fun at their blind faith in their religion and their men, while failing to develop faith in the land

and the people already inhabiting it.

Norton's latest work is a further development of these and other historical socio-political themes.

She wants to explore further the clash of cultures between Aboriginal and white people during the early contact period.

Norton wants to look at the conflict the white settlers had with the land itself, at their vulnerability and at the irony of their situation as they failed to learn from the Aboriginal people the benefits and importance of living with the land rather than against it.

Relative to her own experiences of isolation, she wants also to explore the experiences of the women who went to the bush.

Some suffered, losing children through illness and lack of experience while others, nursed by Aboriginal women and learning from them, survived.

Norton said painting, was now the biggest adventure of her life. She feels true to her work and qualified for it.

## THE WALL

The great dividing wall came down  
But it hasn't gone away;  
It lies flat on the surface now  
To keep what's underneath at bay.  
And what's below our surface  
Has become the "other side"  
More dreadful than the communists  
Across the old divide.  
Yes the wall's been repositioned  
And it's thick and strong and flat,  
To keep us from the awful things  
Swept underneath the mat.

