

Tongue-in-cheek look at stylised bush

BROOME painter Helen Norton's remarkable show, *Heroes*, at the New Collectibles Gallery, Fremantle, is the most Australian work I've seen for a long time.

Norton has a finely tuned eye for the ironies of the outback myths created by earlier artists. She uses their clichés to recover a little reality for the bush. *Ned's Dead*, one of her funniest paintings, might well be her manifesto.

The corpse of Kelly in full armour, helmet and all, spreads across the bottom of a rectangular landscape. His nose jams hard into the deep blue sky. A large jovial black crow perched behind him on a piece of timber looks into the helmet through the eye slit checking to see if it still contains a good meal. Norton handles the scene in a style very close to early Nolan or Boyd.

A smudged, putty white moon is wedged in an enamel blue sky so dense one wonders how the crow could fly through it. This technique is almost exactly the same as that of Nolan.

Norton debunks the stylistic clichés of the post-war painters as much as the legend of Ned Kelly itself. Her entire exhibition is an extended humorous commentary on those artists who loaded the lives and landscapes of the country with the unwanted duty to maintain national virtue.

I've often wondered how country people, Aborigines and migrants, have coped with this load of old claptrap. If Norton is any guide, it gave them a good laugh.

Cape Fear Corgis features a very recognisable Queen Elizabeth II in her coronation regalia. She stands in the North-West

desert perched on a 44-gallon drum, one white slippered foot protruding from beneath her gown. Her scarlet robe, edged with white ermine, looks out across the land in the foreground.

Two demented corgis tread across the red cloth like posturing piglets, to the horror and disgust of the Aboriginal family to their right. Their dog, a decent dingo-like creature, has his back arched at the very sight of such colonial monstrosities. In the distance the Aborigines' hut barely holds its own against gravity.

It's not only the Queen who is out of place in the outback — so are those who once resolutely nailed her picture to the dunny wall.

Norton's three-dimensional collage and paint tableau *The New Guardian* shows them, roused to the core by a large Aboriginal figure grasping a sheaf of papers, perhaps a successful land claim. Six three-dimensional European figures thrust their heads from the flaps of the tents in which they are staking their own claim, straining in disbelief.

One of their colleagues is about to get the same news from a jolly green snake. He is sitting in reflection in a beautifully modelled dunny with a door that really can open and close. The background to this parody of man and nature is a brilliant pastiche of Boyd, Williams and other bush clichés.

Norton's own style emerges more clearly in *I Saw It First*, in which three prospectors are quarrelling about a claim or perhaps they are three squatters debating water rights.

ON SHOW DAVID BROMFIELD

In any case, Norton has caught the spirit of three aggressive European males who only stand out from the orange gold dust storm around them by virtue of their aggressive greed for everything in sight, except their own dogs who seem to share this rapacity. Norton has a fine understanding of the good and bad points of canine character. Nearly all her images feature dogs reacting with sympathy or parodic malice to the antics of their owners.

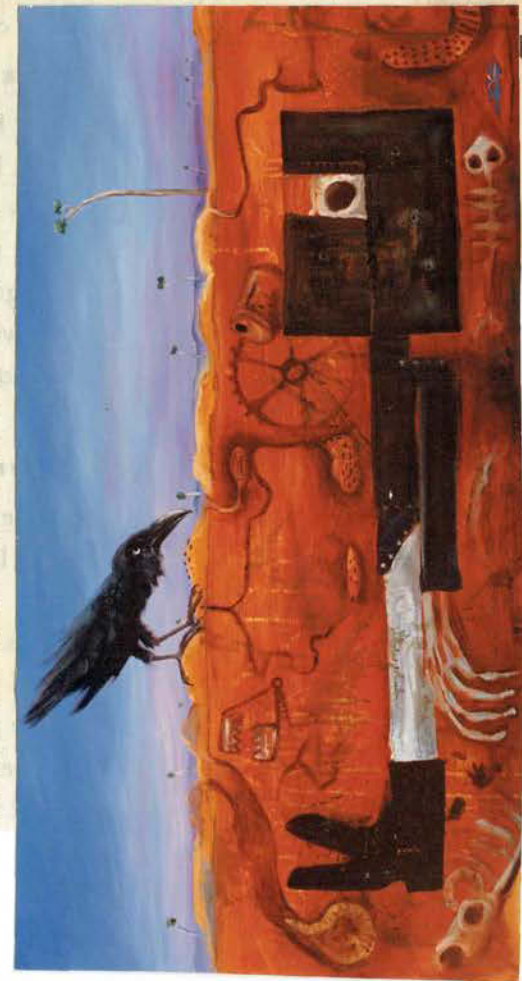
Norton despises those who see nothing in the land but dollars. *The Species Collector* is a conceptual portrait every bit as evil as Tucker's Antipodean heads. The collector's head falls apart to the right into a dream space filled with neatly bound birds arranged in a tidy row. In front of this painting is a beautifully made but disgusting small table specially for animal smugglers. Through its glass top one can see rows of bound birds.

The tableau assemblage *Australian Future Excavation Proposal (Get Out Or Else)* is a more general, ironic commentary on the pioneer's dream of permanent economic progress. It is set in a huge hessian, glass-fronted display case, just like those tokens of a never-never pioneer history that are carefully preserved in our official museums.

Norton has transformed a dry tree trunk into a rearing horse. Worn boots, a hat and a bag of plastic jumbuks stand for the

bushman's history and his fragile hand clutches a leaf from a book called *Get Out Or Else*. This is a marvellous show full of the humour and passion that makes good painting. See it this weekend while you can.

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