

Appearances deceive

Unorthodox artist Helen Norton trucks her visions of the outback to the east coast

BY CHARLES BOAG

The gallery owner was insistent – the painting was about the defence of Australia. The two thuggish-looking diggers playing cards in front of the barbed wire-ringed, penile mountains with the tank coming out of the side were keeping us safe. It had nothing to do with satire or paradox. If I didn't believe her, here was the artist herself.

The paintings filling the gallery were huge, confronting splashes of colour: a tiny Queen Elizabeth garbed in flowing red robes atop a 44-gallon drum with an Aboriginal family cowering before her, entitled *Cape Fear with Corgis*; a woman in thongs leaning into the elements shoving a pram, to a desperate backdrop of giant mining machinery and a parson beside a church, called *Tomorrow Boy's Heritage*; a girl playing a piano in a fiery landscape titled *Birthday Piano*.

Gigantic things, all reds and blues and savage irony ... confrontationist art. Wild passion and bleak humour. Coffins, fat white men lolling in billabongs, Aborigines cowering from clergymen, a typhoon carrying away a church in a sea of sand (*In the Wake of Wisdom*), embattled women, cynical-looking parrots, crotch-biting dogs.

Reeling from the power of it, you expect the artist to be physically massive, overwhelming, a no-nonsense awe-inspirer in paint- and blood-splattered dungarees, spitting invective. Instead you are introduced to a small, calm blonde woman with a baby at her breast.

Amiable, chatty, Helen Norton agrees with you. On the surface, she is not her paintings. A miner who accosted her at a Perth exhibition over *The New Guardians* – miners staring balefully out of dugouts at Aborigines in uniform – was told mildly: "I'm not being deliberately confronting. You see what you want to see." Which shows appearances can be deceptive.

Drudgery: Orthodoxy and Norton have as much in common as an eaglehawk and a canary's cage. Born 33 years ago, she decamped from her working-class Melbourne home at 16 having decided that workaday drudgery wasn't for her, and got a job as a cook at a Nullarbor roadhouse. That paled when she met the rabbit killers. She joined them, blasting the

living daylights out of rabbits and foxes and feral cats the size of dogs and selling their pelts in Ceduna. When myxomatosis affected this livelihood, she turned to building stockyards and fences.

During this time she scratched out the odd drawing, but somehow the power of the landscape eluded her. A relationship with a fellow hunter withered. "I was competitive," she says. "I developed muscles like a bloke. It was like sleeping with my buddy."

She got station work as a jillaroo and cook, with boils and cysts as constant companions: "I remember many a trip to

centre and north-west. Following her first exhibition in the late '80s, she has since mounted more than a dozen, winning numerous awards, all in the west.

Humour: But now she has leapt the divide to mount her first real showing in Sydney. While the works she has chosen tend to be on the mild side of confrontationist, with a deal of outback humour, their impact is still great.

A committee of locals gathers outside an outback pub; horses' heads leer out of their frames; a gentleman on a beach with a parrot gives you a baleful glare; a clergyman clutching a Bible harangues a



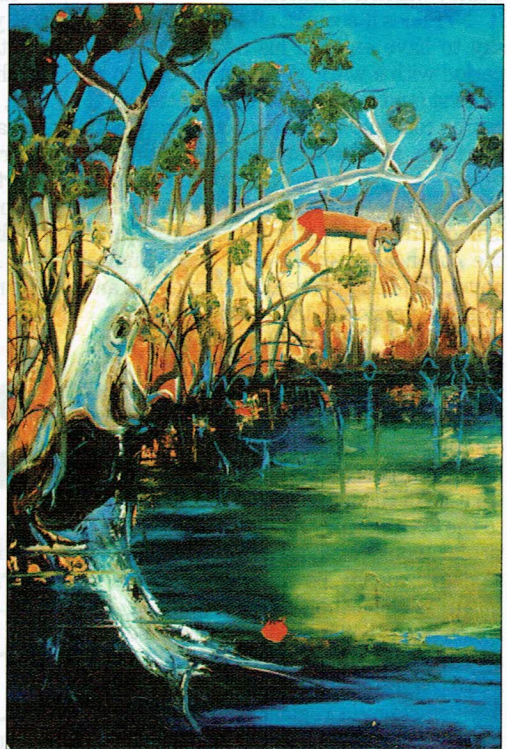
Yellow Boatman (above) and Tree Leaper (right): talent born of her pain

Coober Pedy to see the doctor and not being able to sit down because of the boils."

She moved north, lost the muscles, met her husband, truckie Tony Norton. She suffered "turns". It had been happening for a while. She found Aborigines' sacred sites affected her. She felt herself tugged out of her body by unseen forces; she had nightmares, felt a power dragging her out of the moving truck. The sensation grew so insistent that she refused to travel in the truck at all. Not long afterwards, it crashed. Tony survived, but the passenger side was crushed.

Her beginning to paint in earnest in the late '80s somehow coincided with the end of her spiritual torture. She settled in Broome where she not only painted but sculpted, made pottery, even furniture. She developed a style that might be compared with those of Drysdale and Hart, but has little to do with either. It is a talent born of her own pain.

So far, her vision has been confined to the west. Her subject matter is the torrid skies, brilliant ochre landscapes, the loneliness, tragedy and humour of the



congregation at Halls Creek; a couple of gents loll in a gum-fringed waterhole.

Helen Norton has been, by her own admission, "a bloke". She has suffered physically and emotionally, a torment evident in many of her works. She is now a mother and a painter. And that, she says firmly, is what she will remain. It is good, she says, "to be back". The sentiment echoes from her work. ■

Helen Norton, Art House Gallery, Rushcutters Bay, Sydney, till September 28; and concurrently at Royal Automobile Club, Sydney, from September 1