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AUSTRALIAN STYLE

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New York
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JACK THOMPSON
SEA CHANGE.

BANGARRA
DANCE THEATRE
ABORIGINAL
AUSTRALIA'S
MOD SQUAD
ON THE MOVE.

KYM WILSON
.22 AND A
HEARTBREAK
HIGHER.

BONDAGE+DISCIPLINE
WHY MELBOURNE
LIKES TO TAKE IT.

AC/DC
IN OUR YOUNG



OUTWARD BOUND

HELEN NORTON LIVES IN BROOME, WESTERN AUSTRALIA. STARTLING LANDSCAPES, SURREAL HUMOUR AND A VIVID PERSPECTIVE ON POLITICAL MORALITY DISTINGUISH NORTON AS ONE OF THIS COUNTRY'S GREAT NEW ARTISTIC DISCOVERIES. STORY BY STEVE BUNK.

At a table in a jungle under a white sun-moon, a man with a shotgun attends a bizarre meeting. His eyes are the same icy blue as the earflaps on his hunter's cap. A little bird sprawls on the table, its beak ajar. Amid the company are various male accountants and banker-types, a clown with dead eyes, an Aboriginal man weeping, a steer, a cockatoo, a befuddled teddy bear. All are grimly silent as they listen to a gesturing figure in a plush chair with its back to us, something alien or, worse yet, a cartoon. This is the *New World Order Conference*, at once sombre and absurd, dangerous and ridiculous. This is our world through the eyes and hands of Helen Norton.

Riding a bicycle down a Broome back road, everything is big and quiet. The entrance to the Norton place gapes like that a cattle station. Helen's husband Tony needs the space for the trucks he drives. No dogs attack me, despite her warnings. The house is buried in palms and eucalypts she planted - but behind the huge truck shed, a rail-fenced verandah beckons.

Helen appears wearing a jumpsuit buckshot with paint over a bulbous belly (her second boy will be born in a few weeks). Her greeting is relaxed and friendly but not too friendly.

It isn't strange to realise such unsettling characters and scenes flow from the brush of this 34-year-old mother of two. Nor is it surprising that her appearance, sturdy and windburnt, is as vivid as the reds and blues of Broome itself. The muse becomes its host; art is autobiography. And after meeting Helen Norton, you soon sense her grin behind the frosty beard of an old man in one of her paintings, or the tiny-eyed and big-eared curiosity of a "new neighbour", or even the rust-hard profile of a dingo's head.

Norton is none of these things and all of them, earthed as she and her art are in the Outback, lulled and energised by the sun's heat, worn down and made urgent by the harsh facts of rural life. Her work is disarming because it often seems amusing - but having drawn you in, it gets complicated and you begin to feel uneasy. You're no longer sure what to think, and then you have to think again. In these ways, the artist and her art are one.

Ask about recent paintings and there's no humming or hawing from Helen, whose strong ideas about her work demonstrate the good thinking that precedes good art. "I feel, like many people and especially younger people these days, that this facade of goodwill world leaders are putting up in the form of the 'new world order' is very disenchanting, because they're actually not doing anything as far as major change is concerned.

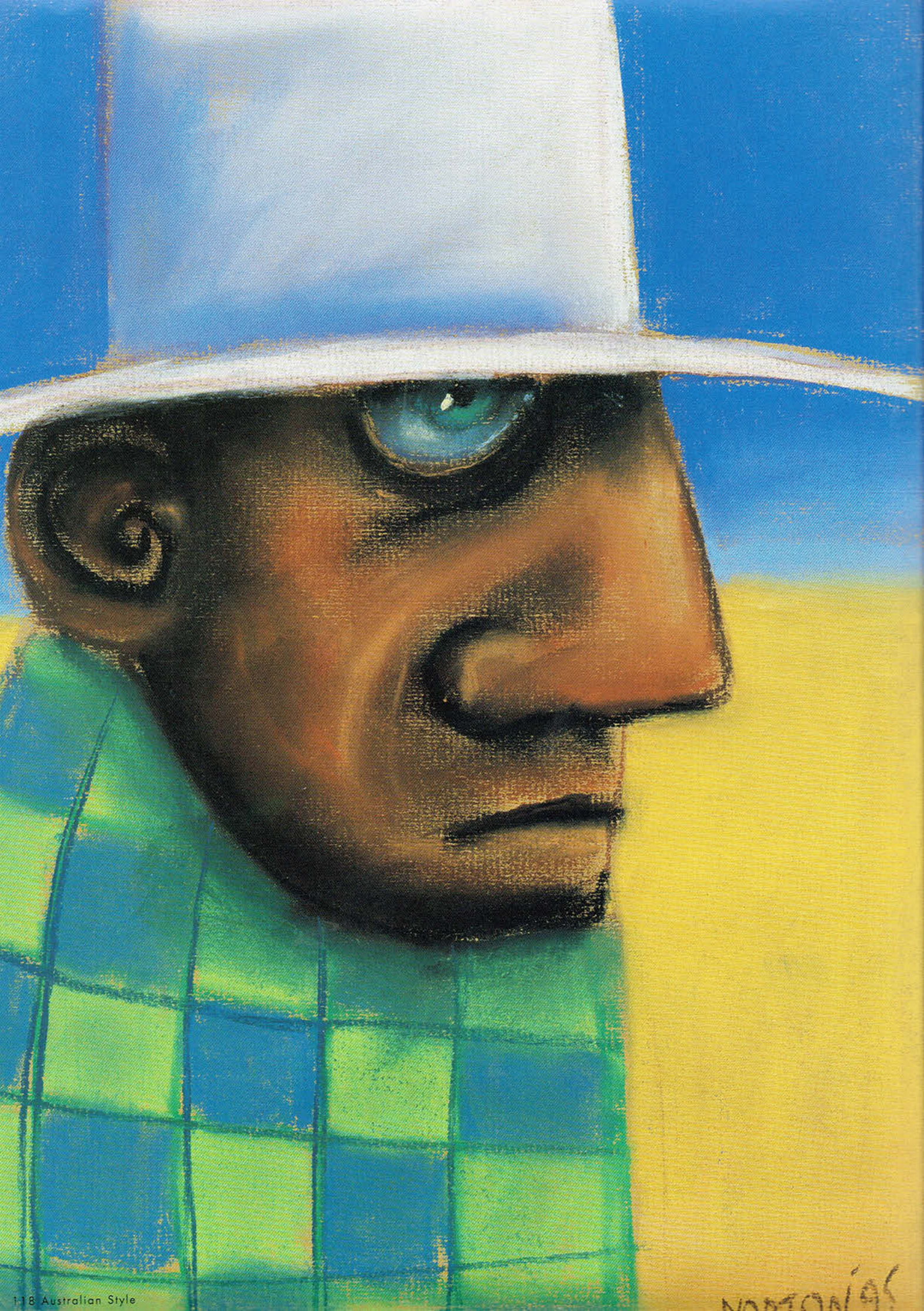
"With all the cruelty amongst humanity in the name of religion and politics - which are the two human social foundations - you would think that perhaps God just might be a duck shooter. It's up to us, as human beings, with our own compassion, to take right in our hands and start empowering ourselves...with the right to be good to one another, instead of always throwing our responsibilities away to a figurehead, like a God or some figure of worship, because it disempowers everybody and it also takes away their responsibility as people to other people."

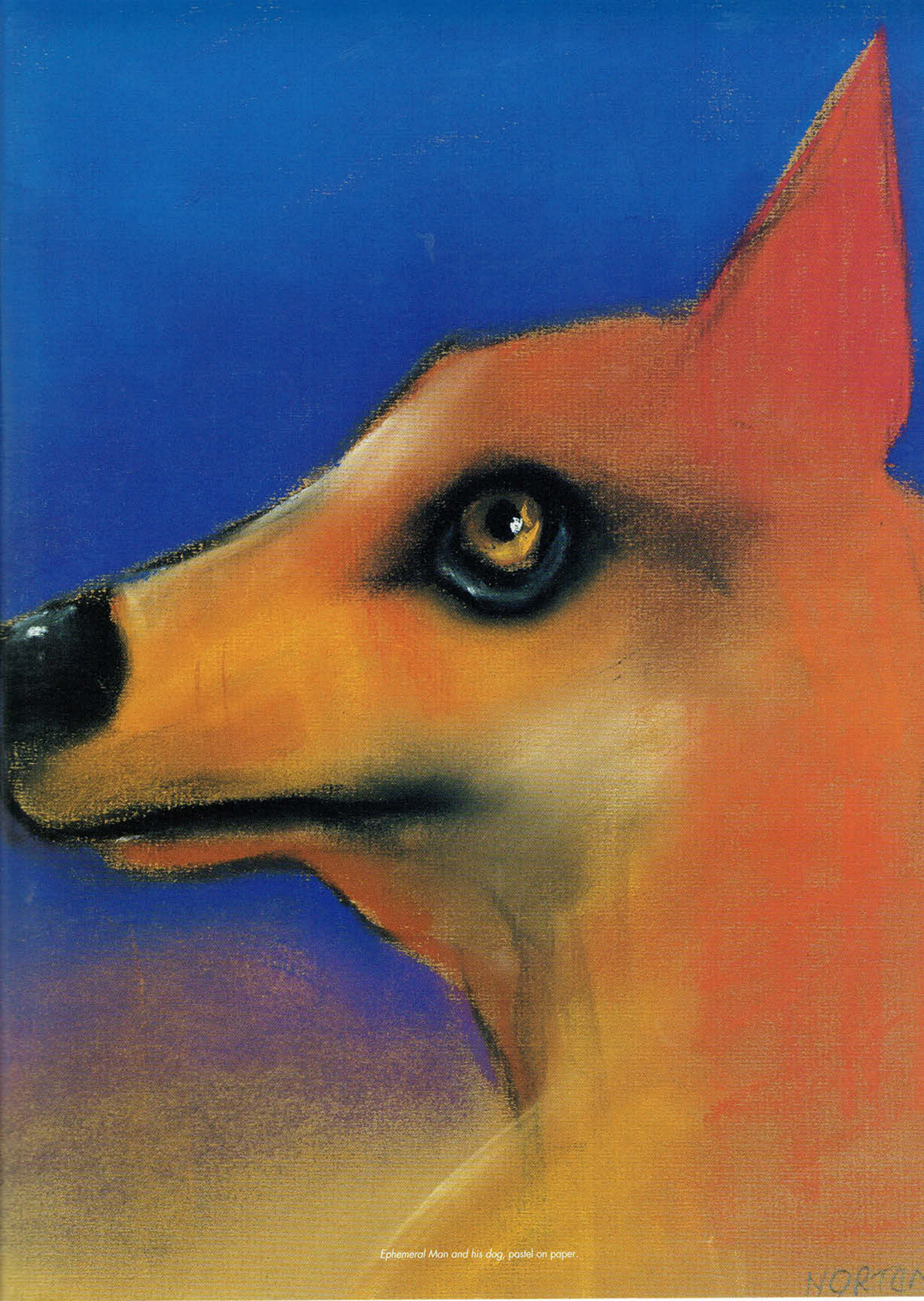
Despite the distraction of two-year-old son Marshall ping-pong off every object in sight as we speak, Norton is caught up in the intensity of her ideas. She says all traditional religions are characterised by the exclusivity of their doctrines. The isolation of distance and lack of quick transportation meant they never had to confront their own intolerance in the past, and while the world has changed, religions haven't. "They're too tight, they're too old, they need rehashing, they're too cramped."

Ushering Marshall out of the gallery as we enter the coolness of the shrub-and-tree-clothed Norton home, she does however affirm a belief in the need for "guidance". That, she says, is what continues to give relevance to religion.

This leads her to comment on the downside of multiculturalism when misapplied: intolerance to other ethnic groups, rather than a celebration of differences. Such shortcomings of society, she says - poised with a morsel of homemade cake between thumb and forefinger, and half her attention on Marshall's reckless driving of a toy truck - must be put under the spotlight along with the cultures that have nurtured them.

The cake is tasty, and it makes me smile at a memory: her saying



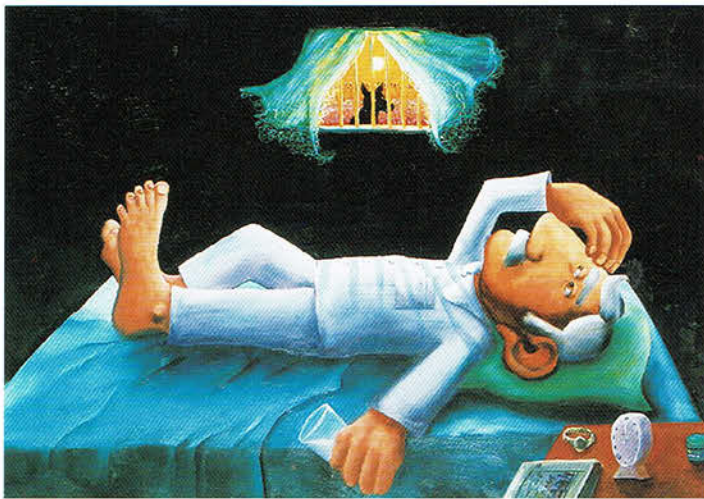


Ephemeral Man and his dog, pastel on paper.

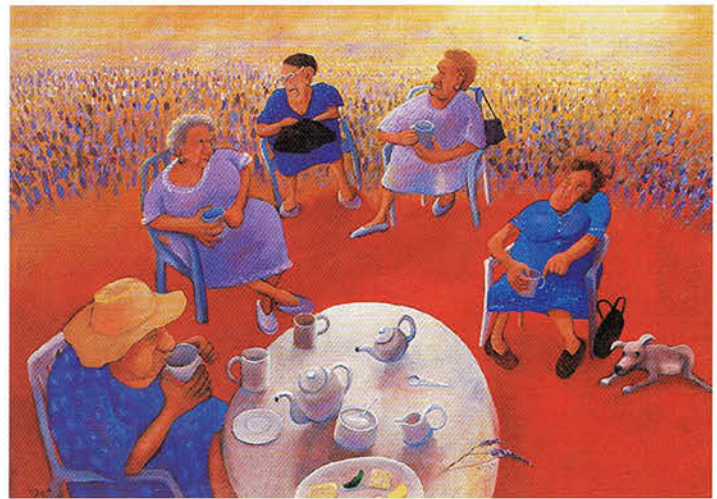
NORTON



Family Portrait 1 (The Blurry Children), oil on canvas.



Newsman, oil on canvas.



Gods wife and the lavender women at Serendipity Farm, oil on canvas.

last year that a bit of "sugar" in her paintings always makes the pill in them go down more easily. She was talking about their humourous content, her anthropomorphic livestock, the deliberate naivety of buildings and landscapes, the vibrant colours that draw you to the canvas in anticipation of something lighthearted. The artist herself is likewise personable and warm, not at all a judgmental crusader, and that makes her impassioned message easy to hear.

A rumbling outside signals the departure of Tony, who Helen married after working Outback for a decade at every job from jillaroo to feral cat-shooter, following her departure from Melbourne at age 16. In 1986, the couple settled in Broome and she traded in her wide-ranging life for the challenge of producing art.

How does Tony feel about her work? "He takes it all with a grain of salt. He's very pleased with it but...no, I don't like answering this question," she says, laughing. Then she tries again. "He makes some interesting observations and is very grounding for me. I think why we're such a good union is, he comes from a completely different source from me...(but) he's one of the most super-sensitive, educated truck drivers I've ever met and I guess that's why I married him.

"He has a wonderful instinct for what a good painting is, and he'll instantly say whether he likes it or not. And the ones he likes are always the best. He wouldn't say this, because he's a man, but he has very good intuition."

The birth of Marshall, followed by personal troubles, made Helen lose focus but seeing the work of Polish figurative expressionist Stasys Eidrigevicius at a Perth exhibition helped. "It reminded me to trust your own images and imagination," she says. "Have confidence in your own feelings and instincts. Go and be a child, draw up from your imagination what is in there, don't be frightened to put it down.

"When you're surrounded by practical problems on the surface of the world constantly, you lose that confidence to be a kid and do what you want to do. And I got that back, which I was really pleased with. Now I feel like I can be silly and get away with it, if you know what I mean. I can actually be myself and play on the canvas and it comes out okay, and other people can relate to it."

Part of Norton's continuing development as an artist is that her early inspiration from wide readings in history, art and anthropology has given way to this increasing reliance on her inner voice. "I'm floating on my own instincts, in that I feel confident now to execute my images. What's coming out is more instinctual painting, in that the images are very much formed from my imagination."

But while her paintings use wit to deal with social problems, her recent, sell-out Sydney exhibition - *Is God A Duck Shooter?* - was also inspired by personal tragedy: the death from cancer of a friend Helen's age who had two children. It took her six months to get over the sadness.

Despite the advantages of modern communication and transportation to remote places like Broome, Helen remains outside the establishment in just about every way. A frequent award-winner in the west, where she

often has exhibited, she has yet to be shown in her hometown of Melbourne or indeed, anywhere in the east except Sydney. The combination of humour and power in her message spoils the stuffy notion of some east coast gallery owners that fine art must be serious.

"I'm determined that her work will be recognised and get into state galleries," says Diana Yeldham of Art House Gallery, the venue for Norton's Sydney exhibitions both this year and in 1994. "Similar things probably happened with Boyd and Nolan at first, not being taken seriously - and I believe that's the calibre of artist she is."

The public seems to have an opposite reaction to that of the curators, snapping up her work as fast as she can produce it. Yet, some viewers also are taken aback when they recognise the harsh judgements enfolded within her charming style. In short, there are people who can't deal with the humour and others who can't cope with the seriousness.

"Anybody that gets anywhere usually has a hell of a time getting accepted by the 'right people.' And I like that feeling, I'm happy with that," Helen says, chuckling. "It's like, you're really obsessive with getting success for a while, and I've got over that now to where I'm comfortable with what I'm doing and extremely happy with my clientele, which is growing constantly."

Sydney writer and arts aficionado Charles Boag is among those Norton fans who scoff at the idea that serious art can't be amusing. "Helen is a mistress of that delightful secret irony that underlies the situation of us newcomers to Australia," he says. "We see ourselves as the saviours of the country and oftentimes...are the harbingers of its destruction."

Lauding Norton's rare ability to both entertain and challenge, Boag believes she has the talent to break through our traditionally male dominated art scene. She fits snugly into no school, drawing from sources as disparate as Aboriginal art, the moderns and the masters.

Helen's too hard-working to be much involved with Broome's flourishing arts community, but does feel an affinity with it. "The Broome artists are unique in that, as you've probably noticed, their colours and subject matter are always really optimistic, bright and happy. And among the intellectual art world, that makes them unfashionable."

Those who have visited Broome can see why that would be the case. The brilliant hues of Nature pervade this confident and extroverted little town, which is burgeoning as a tourism centre. Like her fellow Broome artists, Norton is outward-directed rather than introspective but the bright and decorative aspects of her work help to probe important issues, which is why she is emerging as one of the country's leading new artists.

"I have a close friend who said, 'I used to only like landscapes and now...they're so wimpy, I've got to have a strong picture,'" Helen says with satisfaction. "It's like they're able to cope with confrontation better, with stronger images and social issues. I really think that is getting somewhere."

Helen Norton's exhibition at New Collectables Gallery in East Fremantle, WA, is on until November 19.