

PRIME COMMISSION



- when Broome artist, Helen Norton landed a commission with Qantas, she hardly expected to be transported to the high seas aboard the QE II dining with millionaires, rich eccentrics, movie stars and the odd extremely rich rogue.

- artist, Helen Norton

Artist, Helen Norton was thrilled at the prospect of her recent commission with Qantas which is to be used for the cover of the *Qantas Club Magazine*. Qantas has commissioned an artist to complete a painting for each issue of the magazine this year, many of them with a national profile. Tucked away in Broome, Helen would be the least known of all the artist's commissioned by Qantas.

Her brief was simply to complete a work titled 'The Captain's Table'. The upcoming issue of the *Qantas Club Magazine* covers travelling by sea aboard liners, the painting providing a link to the theme. Though without first hand experience of dining at the Captain's Table, Helen hardly expected to be flown to London to join the QE II for a trip to New York to research her subject at close quarters.

While in London, she 'walked all over the monopoly board' with her hosts, visited galleries, and more importantly, took the opportunity to complete negotiations for a solo exhibition there in early 1998. Her fleeting visit gave her an insight into the personality of the city which will form the basis of her 1998 exhibition in London.

Aboard the QE II she summed up the experience as 'other worldly, part of a different world'. While Helen had an image of what life might be like aboard a ship, it was quickly dispelled. Imagining the young outdoors type spending time on deck at play, she found instead middle aged and older people attending lectures and extravagant cabarets.

The 'always formal' life on board the QE II and the company of eccentric millionaires, movie stars and the like, left the Broome artist a little aghast, and feeling like a fish out of water. Her rescue came in the form of James Stevenson III from Florida, who took her under his wing during the trip. Seating allocations saw them dine at the same table each night, where James insisted on teaching Helen to eat caviar with every meal. She managed to escape his dining habits sometimes during the day, gleefully reverting to plain, ordinary fare.

And did she sit at the Captain's Table? Though she could have, she felt it was her role to observe the Captain's Table rather than be a participant. A different

officer joined them at dinner each night, which helped her gain an insight into 'life aboard the ship of 24 hour total self indulgence'. Viewing the ship as 'classic', in the Titanic mould, their stories of how the QE II had beaten gigantic waves, and the foulest of weather because 'only the QE II could have come through', lent a touch of uneasiness to the journey.

Her impression that people became different when they entered QE II world was not unfounded. For rich widow dripping with gold adornments, it is one of the few places they can feel completely safe, unescorted and without the need for security. It is the same for other passengers. Once on board the QE II, they are encapsulated in a world completely removed from reality.

Arriving in New York, James Stevenson III once again took Helen under his wing showing her the sights of the city. The warmth of the city and the people in New York were a direct contrast to the formality and stiffness of London where she felt the gloom of a people struggling with their egos. Witnessing a road rage there staged by 'bruiser boy' types she felt disarming distress for the motives behind such behaviour.

Back in Broome, the experience has provided much inspiration for Helen. The commission for Qantas now completed, together with a portrait commission for the Captain of the QE II, Helen has turned her thoughts to interpreting the experience of her trip by sea for an exhibition on the QE II when it arrives in Sydney in February next year. Once again she has been invited to join the QE II for the first part of the exhibition from Sydney to Darwin before the works travel the world.

Helen's trip on the QE II is just one of her many adventures. Born in Melbourne, Helen left home at sixteen and worked in a knitting factory, as a cleaner and service station attendant with the aim of paying her own way through school. She then travelled alone to Adelaide in pursuit of work in the outback. She found work as cook on the Nullabor Plain before being introduced to feral animal hunters. For three years Helen trapped and shot feral rabbits, cats and foxes, mastering the art of skinning foxes - and 6000 ways to cook a rabbit.

After trying her hand at professional fishing, she moved

on to rabbit shooting camps in the Northern Territory and the Simpson Desert. At Anna Creek Station she worked as a cook, jillaroo and stationhand. In Queensland she drove cattle trucks.

After almost ten years travelling the bush Helen began to paint again for the first time since leaving school. Over the following years, her art slowly began to take over her life. She put as much energy into researching her subject matter based on bush culture as she had done making her living from it, and travelled extensively through the top end of Australia. Her renditions of outback Australia are not only drawn on observation, but on being part of the inner workings of a culture far removed from Australian city life.



- 'The Captains Table', oil on canvas by Helen Norton.

Helen has exhibited her works since 1988, and from the beginning gained a reputation for her quirky, ironic and satirical images. Her works are a visual narrative of the world she sees around her, covering subjects such as the New World Order which Helen says "refers to the frustrations and dilemmas we face as a creative and complex species on a contemporary world scale." Her exhibition last year at New Collectables Gallery in Fremantle was titled, 'Once Upon a Time There Was a Man'. The sustaining image of the exhibition was a painting of the same title showing a rather perplexed and quizzical man in the process of painting the flowers in a field quite a different colour than nature intended. In this exhibition Helen showed man forever changing nature to suit himself, but in the process becoming further and further removed from the natural environment.

Helen's success over the years stems from a rare ability to connect with the viewer. There are no cryptic images where one needs to know the artist personally to understand the meaning of the work. The questions