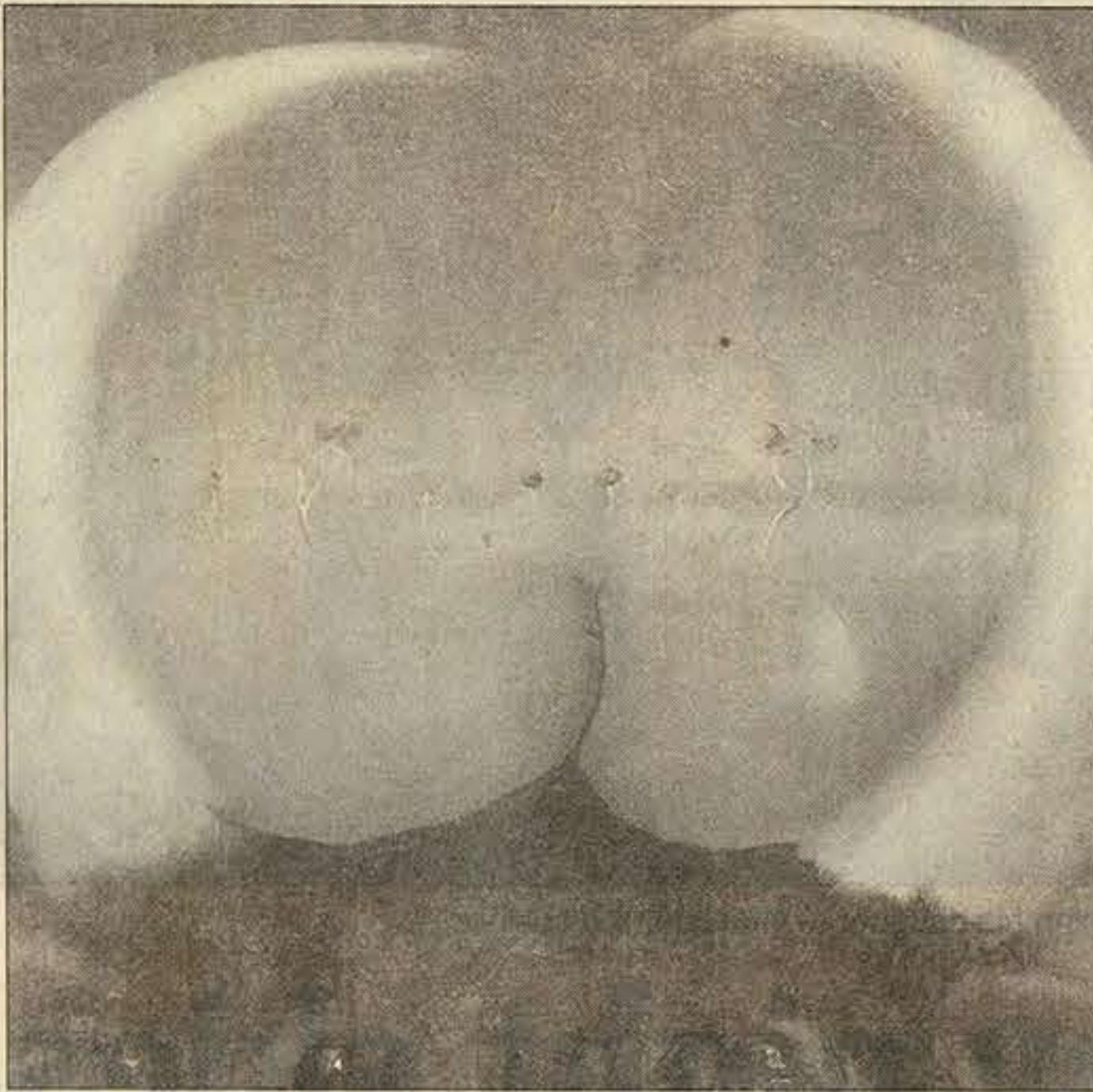


Broome Times

Incorporating ENTERTAINMENT, ARTS, KIMBERLEY TOURING, HABITAT



PIECES from Mad Cows, Rabid Dogs, and Men. "It doesn't matter what the art is, what's important is the viewer – the human being," Norton says.

Mooving art inspired by life

From Melbourne, to shooting rabbits at Sandfire, to national acclaim as an artist, Helen Norton has come a long way. She is one of Broome's most popular and prolific artists. CATH BORTHWICK finds out what motivates her work.

Tucked away in a back street halfway between Broome townsite and the jetty is Helen Norton's Cockatoo Gallery.

Inside the doors, the bold, colourful statements on display challenge the visitor beyond the initial attraction into a deeper questioning, with subject matter covering everything from sunbathing to bird smuggling.

"There is always a hidden agenda in my work," Helen Norton said.

"I'm not a decorative artist." Norton said her work allowed the invention of any scene she liked as a tool for her own learning.

"I paint to learn, to undo questions, and I hope that people who view my work learn from it too."

Norton's expressionistic style operates on many levels, drawing attention with vibrant colour and often zany characters while offering deeper layers of meaning.

She likes people to bring their understanding of life and human nature to their interpretation of her work.

"Whatever level they're at, their own life experiences will tell them how to read my paintings," she said. She considers herself lucky.

"Painting for me is not a job, it's a fortunate skill that allows me to visualise everything known to me – and unknown. The conscious and the unconscious.

"I'm truly glad that what I know, or don't know, and is injected into the canvas is actually felt by other people," she said.

"It's like a surprise all the time."

Norton uses a variety of media to depict bush life and events – people, creatures, land, water and plants to express the human condition and the relationships with all things we encounter as we travel through life.

Her work addresses issues of spiritual confusion, love, power, frustration and the constant reassessment we all face as a complex and creative species.

"Our quest for power gets mixed up with more ethereal demands, as we trip and stumble into the new world of mixed cultures and beliefs, refusing to accept our mortality and our similarity to all men and women regardless of race," Norton said.

"We forget our compassion and ignore the fact that we are all in the same boat."

A decade of experience (beginning when she packed her suitcase at 16, leaving home, family and Melbourne behind), living and working at isolated roadhouses, rabbit shooting camps and cattle stations has given her first hand knowledge of the Australian bush life.

She has also earned her living pumping petrol, doing factory work, housemaiding, shark fishing and geriatric psychiatric nursing among other things.

It is a stimulating curriculum vitae for an artist whose focus is social commentary.

Now wife of truck driver Tony Norton and mother of Marshall and James, Norton spends as much time as possible in creative work.

She has recently employed someone to help her with the escalating business side of her success as an artist, and she plans to establish a secret retreat with fewer distractions than at Cockatoo Gallery.

The gallery includes an office, framing workshop and an upstairs studio where the bookshelves carry tomes on other artists, wildlife, history and Aboriginal dreaming.

Norton is self-taught and her art comes from a strong sense of awareness, keen observation, and an intensity of feeling – to her each

painting takes a lifetime to complete.

Her continuing development comes from reading anthropology, art and history, giving her increasing confidence in portraying images from her own imagination and trusting her intuition.

She feels that by not abusing the media she uses or the source of her inspiration she has a wellspring of constant ideas.

"I only lack time," she said.

"I could be a lot more prolific than I already am, but I'm always being warned by the people that run the art world that that's not the right thing to do according to value or reputation.

"So I restrain myself all the time and perhaps it's good, as it directs me to getting more into the one piece in an abbreviated form.

"I'm learning from the discipline.

"My inspiration for my work is

the subject of my work and the source is everything, our existence."

Recently Norton has begun to explore the possibility that many cultural myths become distorted to allow those in power to escape responsibility.

Norton's latest exhibition, in Darwin, is entitled Rabid Dogs, Mad Cows and Men.

She uses an image of a mad cow, conjured up before the recent European tragedy gave the title new meaning but giving it further weight as a totem along with the dog – the two true domestic servants of mankind but as the title suggests, out of control.

The works touch on the issue of the disconnection of modern man from his myth and his attempt to get back to it by way of the rituals he performs.

At Framed, the Darwin gallery in

Stuart Park, the exhibition runs from August 9 to 27.

Later in the year, Norton hopes to have an official opening exhibition at her Cockatoo Gallery (still being finished) in McDaniel Road.

Norton paints cockatoos as scraps of glorious white in the mid of harsh outback vividness, their audacious presence reminding us of how tenuous life can be.

"I think the point of art is that it doesn't matter what that art is, what is important is that the viewer, the human being, is moved to soulfulness and is put in touch with his or her emotive side, the beauty or pain or whatever it is the work stimulates.

"It is the sacredness of this, not the object, that's important.

"It's the essence of recovering a compassionate society," Norton said.



HELEN Norton, at home at Cockatoo Gallery.