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**IT'S MAX
TIME**

NORTON'S NEW WORLD

A yearning for the outback led artist Helen Norton on an odyssey to the North-West. Now she's using her experiences to shape her intriguing paintings. KIRSTEN STONEY caught up with her.



The New Neighbour, an oil on canvas by Helen Norton, painted last year.

THE 16-year-old's pent-up frustration with city life and an obscure desire for adventure beyond her years shot out with an odd frankness. "I want to go to Sandfire flats and skin donkeys," high school dropout Helen Rodwell said.

She knew little about Sandfire except she'd read of it somewhere and it was as far away from Melbourne as she could get. Her mother nodded slowly as she pondered a suitable response to her only daughter's frank words.

For months she had watched Helen stand on the roof of their Elwood home as she gazed past the chimneys and smog and imagined life in the bush. The camp fires, flies sucking the blood from lukewarm kangaroo carcasses, the endless expanses of what seemed to be nothingness and a dry inland wind bristling through the trees.

She was a creative spirit — a cocky in a cage — begging to be set free.

Within days, the spindly teenager bumped



Above: Helen Norton's works in Cockatoo Gallery in Broome. Left: Helen Norton and her two-year-old son, Marshall, with one of her paintings in Cockatoo Gallery.

her huge suitcase along the furniture-cluttered passage of her upholsterer parents' humble inner-city home, armed with a ticket to Adelaide and a stomach brimming with anxiety. This was it, there was no turning back.

It took Helen Norton — now 34 and married — almost 15 years to make it to WA's Sandfire roadhouse between Broome and Port Hedland. Her old ute, complete with swag and a barking dog, gurgled on to the dusty red driveway before she lurched from it, stretching and eyeing the surroundings. It was an oasis in the desert, a civilisation the young woman had shunned since abandoning her city upbringing for the tranquillity of outback Australia.

The outback. How she loved it. Every spare hour at her first job as a roadhouse attendant on the Nullarbor Plain, she'd jump in her old car and speed out over the flats, wide-eyed and in awe at the endless and apparently lifeless landscape.

"My first lesson about the bush was the illusion of it," she said. "When there appears to be absolutely nothing, you stop and look around and it is teeming with spirit and life. I learnt how to extract something from apparently nothing. It was like I found my own spirituality."

Soon afterwards, Norton discovered an amazing decency among a band of feral animal killers near the SA/WA border and she joined them. Touting a blood-stained shirt and often no shoes, she quickly became a gun fox shooter and skinner herself and was known around Ceduna as "the rabbit woman".

"I was a bit of a bloke," Norton said. "And the perfect hermit. They'd go into town and I'd stay at the camp. It was a fantastic experience, but I couldn't kill a flea now," she laughs.

No, but she can paint. Norton's arrival at Sandfire in the early 80s was the rebirthing of a raw, artistic talent she had largely left

behind in Melbourne. It was also the place where she met her husband Tony, a transport operator (she hates the word truckie), and drove up the highway to Broome, where they now live. Within six years of picking up a paintbrush again, Norton was painting full-time. Self-taught, she struggled with different techniques, drew on her own creativity, consumed other artists' styles and fought to shed a recurring style, fearing repetition and rejection.

But the dogs — spotted, spooky, black, mangy and child-like — the cockies and the big-nosed faces just kept springing up. "I am always looking at arrogance and pride and the things that get us in the most trouble," she laughs. "That's where the big noses come from, I think."

It has taken experience and confidence for Norton to accept that the wonderful, often quirky, little characters — dogs, horses, Aboriginals, stockmen or just people — are her trademark. She loves to create faces and give them individuality and life. Humour is important to her and so are eyes — they are often the mouthpiece for the emotion she wants viewers to feel.

"What I've discovered is, by focusing on a symbol you use consistently, you can radiate and learn from it," Norton said.

"I love it when someone rings me up and says 'I can't live without that work, it keeps coming back to me'. My purpose in painting is to make people feel emotion. What I'm aiming for is more than a coffee table piece. I want the work not to be neutral, but provocative in some way, to instigate conversation and make people think a bit further."

Norton, whose works have been compared with the likes of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, is prolific. You can't find solutions unless you paint, paint, paint, she explains. Her works flit from a unique, Australian outback flavour to bold, surrealist and confronting social comment. Ochre landscapes, brilliant blue skies, sadness, desperation, loneliness and heart-warming lust and contentment. It's no secret that life in the bush has taught Norton a bucketload and



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← given her plenty of time to form all kinds of ideological views — particularly about the human condition — and mould them into pottery and sculpture or put them down on canvas.

The recent birth of Norton's second child, the subsequent reinforcement of her motherhood and the eternal human search for answers is evident throughout her latest series of paintings. Her favourite, Family Portrait No. 2, is a stirring depiction of a father's feelings of inadequacy and stupidity towards his newborn baby and the emotional rollercoaster between couples after a birth.

The Bosnian crisis, society's discomfort with interbreeding, her cynicism towards religion, the destruction of our myths, and humanity's strive for great success and achievement — there's not much Norton hasn't put on canvas.

She doesn't like television. It's full of bad news. And hence a portrait of an emotionally-drained Peter Holland (the ABC-TV newsreader, who she quite respects), thrashing out the night's news long after it has been put to bed, was conceived.

Norton isn't shy about telling people how she sees things.



New World Order Conference No. 2 (God's Handicap), oil on canvas.

"If all the cruel and unjust things that are happening in the world are God's will, then I reckon he's got to be a duckshooter," she says matter-of-factly.

And that's exactly the title of her last exhibition in Sydney: Is God A Duckshooter?

Norton is definitely not "arty-farty". She's down-to-earth, likes her own company, talks a million miles an hour and admits she is a frantic, stressed out, hyperactive person, which helps keep her going.

When we visited her Broome house late last year, she was running in and out, breast-feeding baby James, keeping her two-year-old son, Marshall, entertained and trying to finish her exhibition works. And the thought of travelling back to the big smoke for her exhibitions didn't exactly thrill her to bits.

While Norton's household has been travelling at a frightening pace for some time, she has found some peace of mind dreaming of a caravan and carting the family out to the bush this year to re-establish her links with the land. She's had a hell of a few months, but it is only temporary chaos, she reassures us.