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# Renovations

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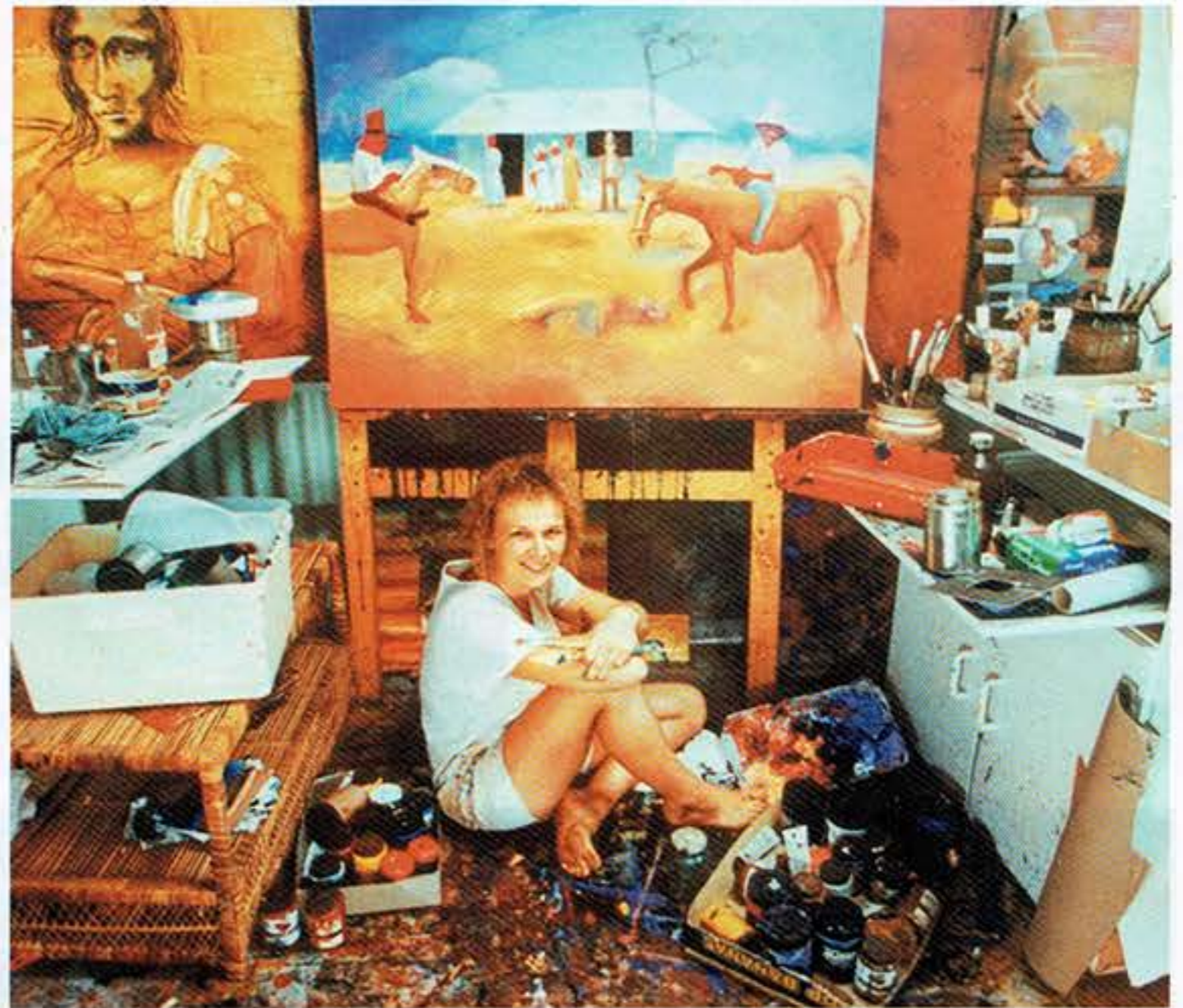
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# Hit and myth



Helen Norton hopes that sometime in the future as you're lying in the dentist's chair, some eye-catching thing on the ceiling will lift your mind above your temporary discomfort. And that thing will be one of her prints.

Her views about how art is practised and where it's placed don't always please the establishment – but more of that later. First let's celebrate an artist of and for the people, who respond in droves to her paintings whether the images be delightful or dark.

Often they're dark and delightful simultaneously. Messages about the human condition are delivered through gorgeous colour and figures we recognise. In other words, they're meaningful pictures which actually look good on the wall.

"It's up to the individual how deeply they want to explore the layers, but I try to present the meanings in ways that are accessible and aesthetically pleasing. Artists do not serve anybody by vomiting on canvas!" Helen declares.

She admits there's also a commercial element in reproducing lighter images – outback kids, nudes on beaches, feisty mongrel dogs – as popular prints and

postcards. Also, purely joyful paintings are necessary for balance in life.

"Many artists get into a rut where they think they must always produce serious stuff. But producing happy images has never been just a marketing tactic – more a way of getting people to look at my work without being frightened of it. I thought if I could get them to gently follow, they would slowly become aware of the psychological side of my work."

Helen believes art which stimulates the mind enriches our lives. To do that well, the art must be visually appealing and the complexity not obscure. The artist should offer insights which people can then consider from their own perspective.

But she suggests the powers-that-be – from formal art institutions to interior designers – are misguidedly stopping us from getting that rewarding mix of the sensuous, intellectual and spiritual. In person, Helen

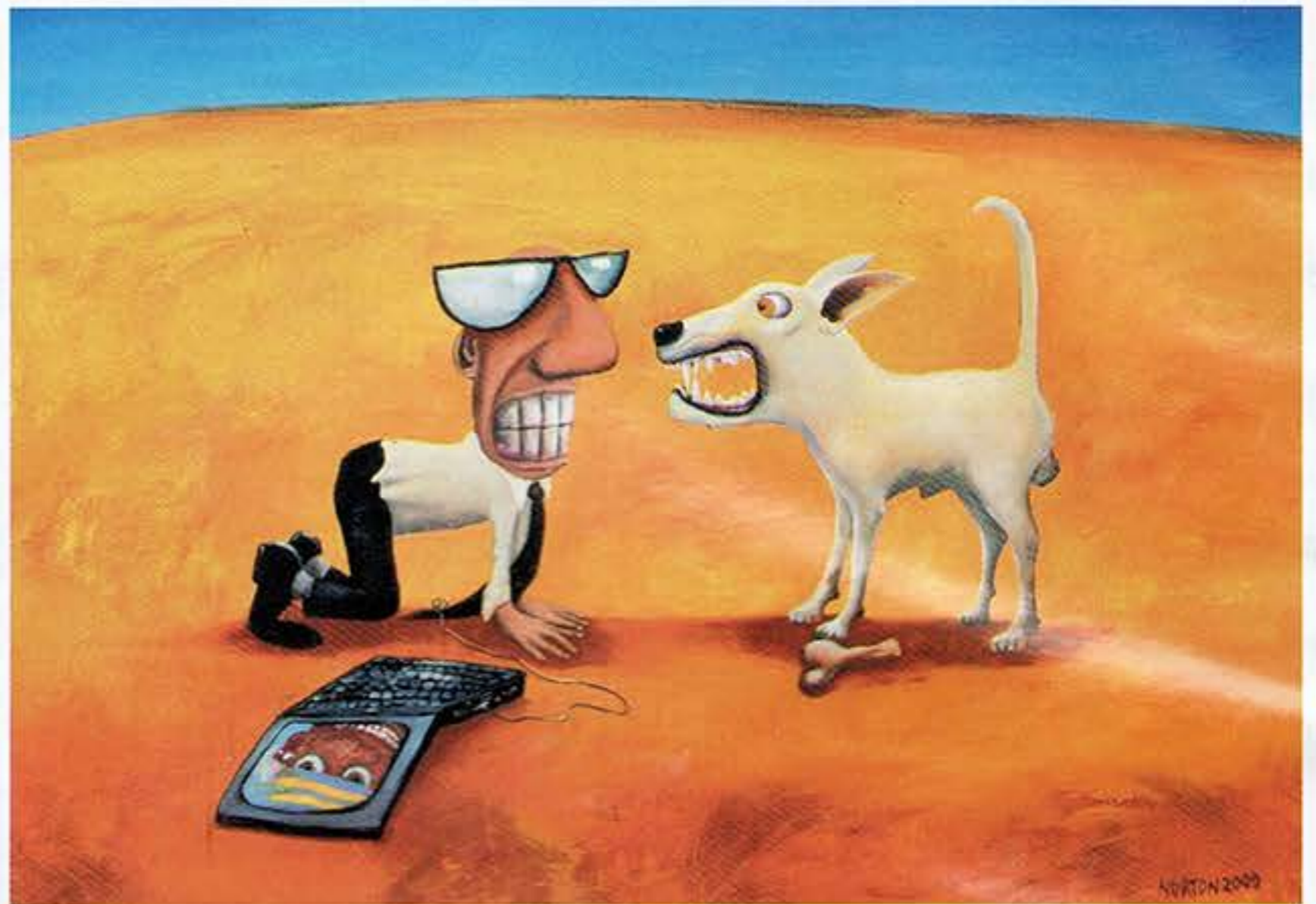


comes across as essentially compassionate and very humorous, but she's also a smasher of systems with a tongue like a sledgehammer.

"Most training institutions destroy art students' careers – I won't water those words down, because they're on the noggin. The reason people want to become artists is they've got a feeling for creation, but institutions flood them with theory and concept and tell them visual art's dead, painting's finished.

Previous page: Helen Norton in her studio and the painting 'Sniffing Dogs'.

This page: 'Dog's Bluff' and 'Sunfly's Dinner Party'.



her opinions are radical – and to the aforementioned dentist's chair.

"In the Louvre, when I was looking at massively complicated depictions of moments in history or religious subjects, I remember thinking 'these would have been the corporate pictures of their day.' So why is it, today, that boardrooms of banks usually have benign landscapes?" she asks.

"Why can't you look at something thought-provoking in the doctor's surgery, or dentist's? Interior designers could choose works with more gusto – they might find clients don't all want safe pictures. I love the idea that corporate heads could have something hanging above them which would make them smile and remind them of their humanity. Even conservative people can relate to my imagery!"

Indeed, anyone can relate to the archetypal men, women, animals and places – brides, generals, mermaids, hunters, mothers, farmers, angels, cricketers, knights, lambs, chrysalides, endless deserts, succulent jungles, luminous ocean fringes.

"People today – especially our troubled youth – need new fairy tales, heroes with substance and depth, new metaphors to reveal the forces of evil and distribute optimism," Helen reflects.

The smasher of systems is also the maker of myths and a seller, not of dreams, but of truths. ■

"Then artists get into the grant cycle, eternally relying on someone else for approval instead of expressing their own truths. My advice to young artists is follow your spirit – and get business training, because the hand that feeds you should be your own. You have a responsibility to sell."

Selling is something self-taught Helen

has little trouble with. Her originals command high prices now, although many private collectors can't bear to re-sell! Equally satisfying to Helen, however, is that, by producing modestly priced prints and cheap but good postcards, she's made her work available to low income earners. This brings us to the public domain – where again

• Helen Norton's artworks and books, *Revolution Is Slow* (essays) and *The Angel And The Butterfly Man* (poetry), are available at Cockatoo Gallery in Little King Street Arts Centre, Perth, and Johnny Chi Lane, Chinatown, Broome, or via the website [www.cockatoo-gallery.com.au](http://www.cockatoo-gallery.com.au)