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WHAT LIES BENEATH

At first glance, Helen Norton's paintings appear vibrant and lighthearted but look a little closer and it's clear there's more to them than meets the eye – much like the intriguing artist herself. **WORDS SARAH SZABO**

Helen Norton can skin a rabbit in record time, drive a cattle truck, hunt the odd shark and rustle up brekkie for a shedful of shearers. In her earlier life, she was an inveterate outback traveller, immersing herself in the dirt and blood of an authentic life. As an artist she has shown the same fearlessness and hands-on competence, building a fully-fledged international career from first brick to landscaping.

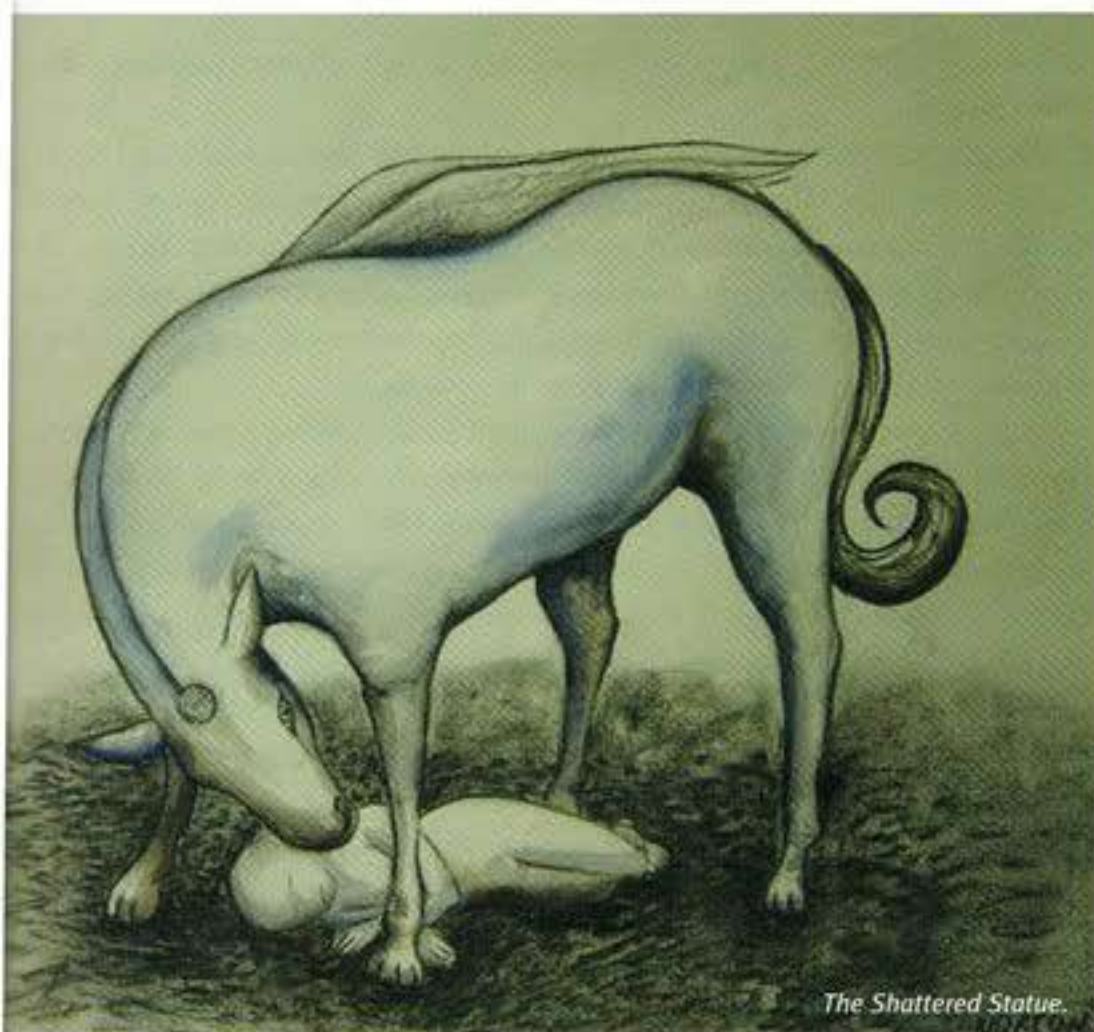
Cockatoo Gallery in Fremantle showcases Helen's work and we conduct our interview under the saucer-eyed and distracted gaze of the many vivid characters who inhabit her quirky and surreal world. She speaks rapidly and with gusto in a voice pitched higher than strictly comfortable. Radiating a restless energy and passion for ideas, her conversation is frequently propelled into overdrive. At the same time there is a personal warmth and charisma that is enveloping for the listener. You feel a little as if you're drowning in waves of ideas, but happily so.

As an artist she's been prolific, and as a writer and poet she will often write thousands of words a day. It is not difficult to identify the elements of her quixotic, rebellious personality that have propelled her professionally and led to the spectacular midlife burnout she suffered recently.

She began painting in her mid-20s and instinctively found a medium and style that combined the landscape of her inner and outer worlds. Turning a lack of formal training and exclusion from the arts scene into a badge of honour, she famously described the arts establishment as "overbubbled champagne and smelly fishy eggs."

"I used to feel that arts training was something I had missed out on but now I feel quite blessed," she says. "What I missed out on was the intellectualising of art but instead I got my hands dirty and taught myself how to paint."

She believes university arts courses train arts teachers, arts administrators and arts critics but not necessarily artists. "You can't teach an artist. There is



Helen Norton uncovers the meaning behind some of the symbols and metaphors in her art.

The sea

The sea represents the emotions – that deep and mysterious vastness within the psyche. It resonates as a symbol of the unconscious dimension in our dreams and inner imaginary world. A place so vast and yet so ignored in our conscious world where there is little time to ponder what lies behind the way we act and react in our daily lives.

Sea shores

At the edge of the vast ocean, the shore is a transitional and gentle place where I imagine we hang around when we are first coming to terms with “something else in life”. It is a meeting place and platform for grand happenings.

The lighthouse

The lighthouse is symbolic of the climb through life. It is an image of “getting to the top” only to find loneliness, isolation, barrenness and questioning. It is a place we get to through the development in youth of our “ego self”. A sense of disorientation, discontent

and confusion often accompanies mid-life.

The lighthouse keeper

He is the man who has served his life according to the rules, regulations, expectations and guidelines of his culture, family, business or religion. He is the man or woman who now questions and searches for the mystery that beckons from deep within.

The seahorse

The seahorse is the mythical messenger. In conscious life we know the creature is a fish. However, because of the way it appears, we prefer to see it as a horse. The symbol lends itself as a metaphor for all that we wish to imagine and dream.

The mermaid

A symbol of femininity associated with the seahorse, she is representative of feminine energy, fleetingly entering but the form of a woman untouchable.

She concedes it was a midlife crisis but prefers the term “midlife opportunity.” Always a traveller, Helen felt an intense need to relocate from the Broome base that had been home for 14 years to a different lifestyle, culture and attitude.

The plan was to return to an earthier and less structured world where she could bring up her two boys and take an inner journey to rediscover her strengths and identity. In 2000 she fled, selling her business and shaking off the constraints of expectation. The wild and lawless environs of Vanuatu felt like “returning to mother earth”.

“I took on the decision to risk throwing everything away when I left Australia in 2000,” she says. “When you have success commercially there is a very strong pressure to perform, perform, perform. I physically collapsed and psychologically had to get away from all that structure.”

Over the course of four years and in the embrace of the natural world and the people of Vanuatu, she reclaimed a sense of balance and the ability to make decisions without feeling like a puppet on a string. “All you see when you fly into Vanuatu is two big breasts, which are two big lagoons,” she says. “You are surrounded by deep water – all symbols for the unconscious and getting down deeper. I wasn’t conscious of what I was doing. I just had to go there.”

“Most things that people are trying to lure you into are dressed well. What I am really doing is marketing the soul and I am dressing it up so that you are attracted to it.”

Resettling with a sense of peace on a small farm in Queensland in 2003 was the start of a new life chapter. Now, she meditates and writes more and paints less. “There is no longer an urge to churn work out to ease the pressure that I have worked under for so long,” she says. Current studies in analytical psychology and an interest in Jungian psychology form the basis for her new works.

“The landscape I am drawing on now is my inner psyche and the expeditions I take are into the inner world through dream work and active imagination,” she says. In her dream journeys she has been surprised to encounter many of the mythical figures and symbols that have featured in her work.

“These symbols seem to have resonance with all of us,” she says. “They belong to the collective unconscious and I experience them through my dream life and creative life. I mix up all these ingredients and shoot them out the other end and there you have a painting.”

These days she is as likely to call herself a mythologist or an alchemist as an artist. She believes her work has always been a means of exploring the greater stories and truths inherent in the myths and archetypes that lurk in the collective psyche.

“I have never been interested in just being an artist,” she says. “My work is here for bridge making. If there is a bridge I can create that sparks a wake up to someone to reach into that other part of themselves through imagination, then that is good.”

Helen Norton's work is available online at her website helenorton.com.au and at Cockatoo Gallery Broome, (08) 9192 1224 and Cockatoo Gallery Fremantle, (08) 9335 5152. Her original paintings range in size from 40cm x 35cm to 140 x 110cm and cost between \$1900 and \$9900. Prints start at \$49.50.

no such thing as going to an arts college to be an artist – it doesn't exist," she says. "The best artists are mothers who have just found the brush or fathers who take it up at 45 because they are doing it from the heart."

Eschewing the popular stereotype of the starving artist by selling originals and prints to a wide audience has led to criticism from the so-called "poppy choppers".

"I have heard a few intriguing comments like 'she's too commercial' and 'she hasn't done the hard yards', which I love," she says, instead describing herself as a "wild brumby who will not get herself stuck in someone's stable".

Helen's paintings are vibrantly coloured with the palette of the outback and peopled with a diverse range of characters that dominate the landscape with their half-glimpsed stories and journeys. She uses archetypal figures (angels, clowns, lighthouse keepers, mermaids) and animals as metaphors for the human condition. There is always a story, sometimes tantalisingly just beyond the frame, that leads the viewer in.

Her use of a white dog as a recurring motif has become something of a trademark. "That poor little white dog has been in the works for years and years and it is only just recently that I have been able to identify who or what he is," she says. "One of my friends said something about him and I said 'you

know who he is – he is my soul!' and she said 'don't tell everyone that – they won't buy it'."

She admits to being a seducer, using colour and humour to invite dark explorations. Her vibrant creations, often featuring forlorn figures, hint at themes of isolation and existential angst. There is a standing invitation to the viewer to enter a much darker and more complex underworld of meaning. But, like the siren call of the mermaid luring sailors to dark waters, the song is pleasing and attractive and can be enjoyed on its own terms.

"I have always stuck to the importance of aesthetics," she says. "A church is lovely – it is meant to be sparkly, otherwise you wouldn't go in. Most things that people are trying to lure you into are dressed well. What I am really doing is marketing the soul and I am dressing it up so that you are attracted to it. Once you get inside you will find it horrible and ugly. When you look deeper it is not meant to be attractive."

Her astute business sense and propensity for hard work has brought acclaim, success and financial reward far beyond her expectations. She has always managed her own career, sold her own work and created a market for herself. But it came as a surprise when escalating demand for her work suddenly felt like a tightening straitjacket.

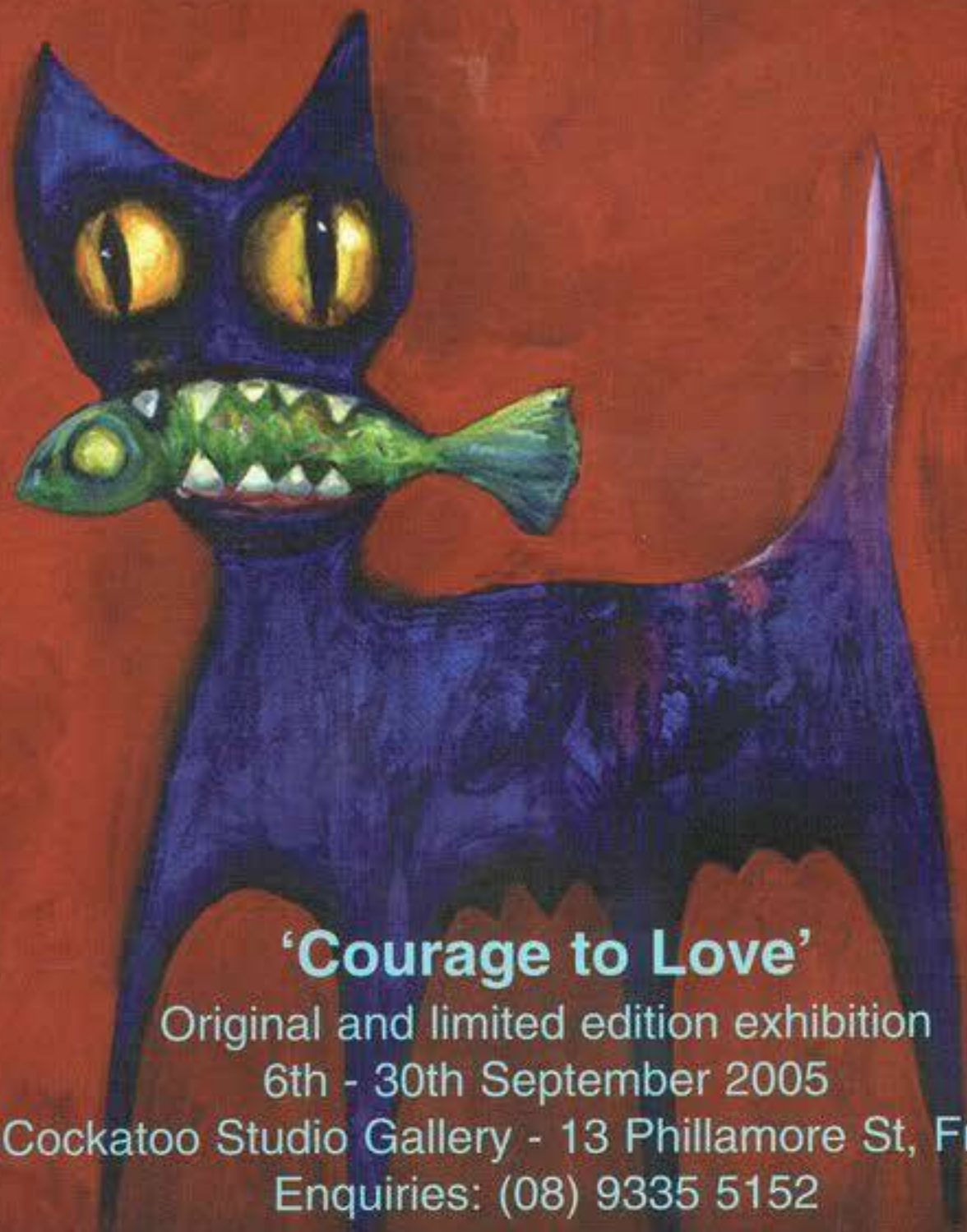
"The best artists are mothers who have just found the brush or fathers who take it up at 45 because they are doing it from the heart."



Opposite: Helen Norton. TOP LEFT: Consortium 2. BOTTOM LEFT: The Oracle Bird progress. RIGHT: Fisher King progress detail.

HELEN NORTON

Coming Exhibition



'Courage to Love'

Original and limited edition exhibition
6th - 30th September 2005

at Cockatoo Studio Gallery - 13 Phillamore St, Fremantle
Enquiries: (08) 9335 5152

NORTON



Selected images from this exhibition available as limited editions.

Cockatoo Gallery

Broome - Shop 11-12, Johnny Chi Lane, Ph. (08) 9192 1224 • Fremantle - 54 Market St, Ph. (08) 9335 5152.
Open 7 days.

Online Gallery - www.helennorton.com.au • Email - info@helennorton.com.au

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