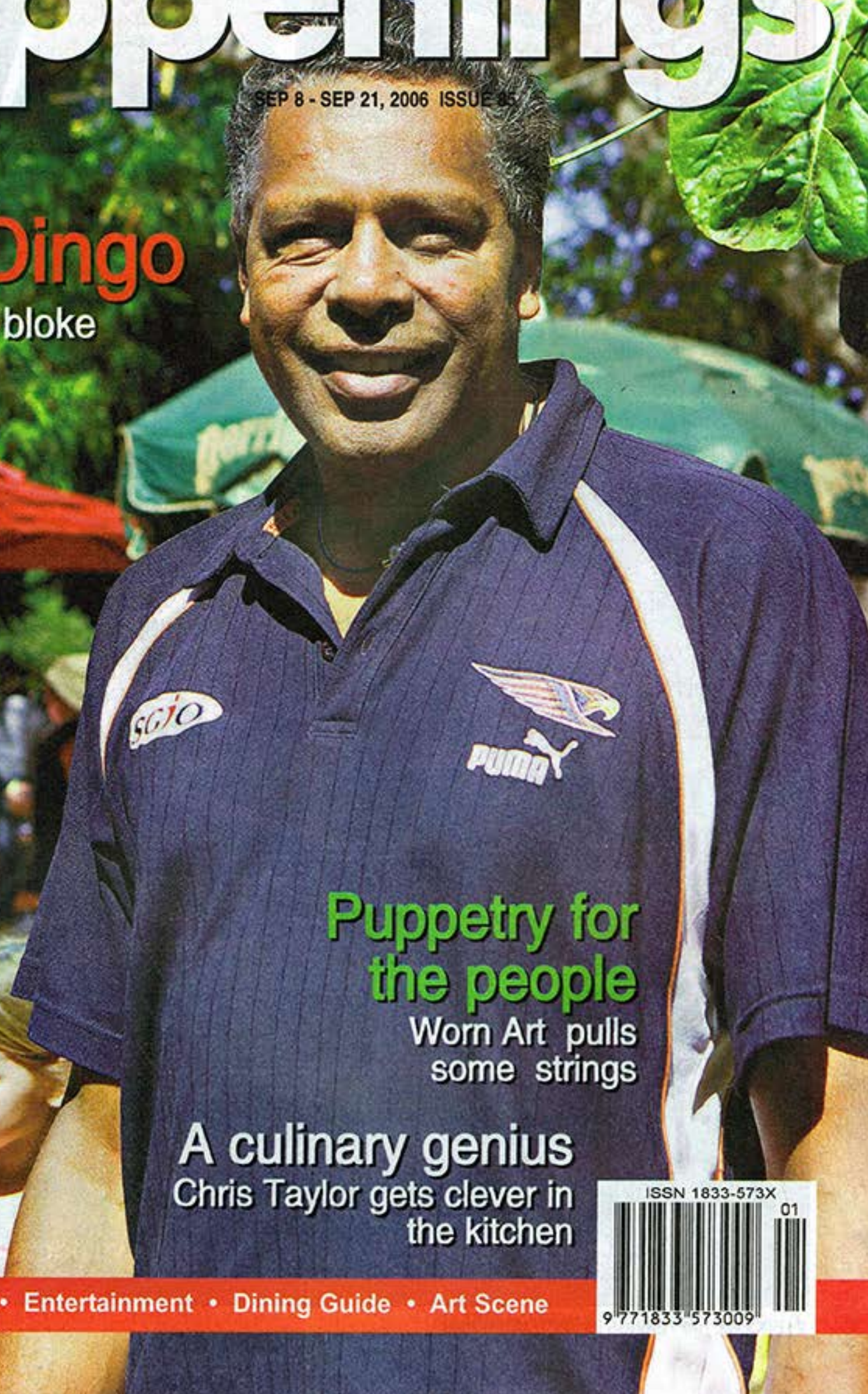


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free

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Ernie Dingo
A pearler of a bloke



**Puppetry for
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some strings

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Norton's vision of Broome

by Phillipa Prior

SPEAKING with artist Helen Norton is akin to taking part in a crash course in eastern philosophy; her ruminations on the spiritual aspect of life in Broome are almost meditative in approach.

On canvas, they translate into dreamy depictions of the experiences of the Shinto Buddhist-schooled early Japanese pearling divers – an altogether different imagining of life on the last frontier.

“With Broome, what I was interested in was the appeal it has for that rebellious part of ourselves that wants to debunk all those restrictions on our freedom – and what more poignant image of freedom than the soul?” Norton says.

“Broome itself is a cultural entity, a container if you like, that evolved itself with its own little rules and ways. There was something there that is still there today

that attracts rebels and free thinkers.”

Norton left Broome several years ago for a period of anonymity overseas and a soul-seeking mission to rediscover her artistic motivations.

Viewed from a distance, she would find Broome to be a conflicted jumble – a “container” for many souls seeking fulfilment in utopia but struggling with the desires for power, control and conformity.

“Coming to Broome starts out with idealism, the desire for freedom is evoked,” Norton muses. “Many people go there because of that and they bring with them all of those desires, forgetting what drew them there in the first place.

“Therefore conflict is constantly manifesting within the people; they can’t deal with the opposition to the ideal of being in a tropical paradise. Human beings need to have containment for their fears and worries and the worst manifestation of insecurity and fear is a very cold, capitalist

systematic process.”

Norton was further inspired in the theme for her exhibition, *Obon*, which follows the “soul journey” of a Japanese pearl diver, after talking to long-term Broome resident Richard “Salty Dog” Baillieu.

“He’s one of those few people who have actually had the experience as a diver and who is a good narrative story teller,” she explains. “Even in Broome’s heyday, ideals were the draw card – the Japanese fishermen sought solutions for their home town’s poverty. We had some long discussions about the divers and it made me think ‘why were these guys reputed to have a particular courage?’

“The Japanese divers would approach their environment in a fearless way – but it was with a sense of belonging. They were the best because they had something inside them that was strong and trusting of life and death.

REFLECTIVE: Helen Norton has found a new way to see Broome

“They’ve analysed reality and fear to a point where they can actually see beyond a very limited view of life as being just for the individual person. If you get beyond that way of thinking, you’re not just community minded, but you actually have a sense of being inseparable from everyone and everything, including nature.”

What emerged in Norton’s work was a mythical story about the diver: “You don’t see this guy walking around in the pictures; what you see is an evolution of thought,” she says.

Paintings including *Souls Path*, *Empty*, *the End of Memory* and *Sunday Night* explore his death, Norton says, and the transformation of a soul bereft of a body.

Images such as dragons, geisha, cyclonic waves, ships and mermaids are interspersed with the tiny floating lanterns from Obon, the annual Buddhist event when ancestors’ spirits are guided back to



the world.

“It’s about aspirations that men or women had about containment, about something they could imagine as a state of perfection,” Norton says. “It gets a bit ethereal I suppose, but I’m not trying to do anything but express that I’ve found a different way to see Broome.”

“Broome is enchanting with its landscape and it’s never been otherwise. But Broome is essentially a series of relationships – that’s what life is for human beings.”

Obon is now exhibiting for the month of September at Cockatoo Gallery Johnny Chi Lane, Chinatown.