

Why did Elizabeth Durack create Aboriginal artist Eddie Burrup? Why, despite the outrage that accompanied her exposure, is she unrepentant? And why has she remained silent until now? Here, she asks ...

What's The Fuss?

By Susan McCulloch Photographs by Robert Garvey





Scene one: A cattle station in the Kimberley, 3000km north of Perth, c 1947-48.

MID-AFTERNOON AND the heat of the day is just on the wane. A young white woman with a small swag and a sketchpad joins a group of Aboriginal people, two women and four men, behind the homestead. Slowly the group moves off, on foot, south, following the tributary of the river, until it peters out, the lush, waist-high river grasses giving way to lower and lower-growing desert vegetation.

The journey, done the "straight" (traditional way) following unspoken but known routes, will take over two weeks. As they travel a subtle change in relationship takes place. Whereas at the homestead the young woman is the "missus", now she becomes the honoured guest. Each morning she is told with whom to walk – usually the older folk, for despite her youth she could not keep up with the younger members of the party as they leave mid-morning to hunt for the evening's food.

At tea and tucker time, the young woman unpacks her sketchpad – her fellow travellers ask her to draw them as she records with her pencil the young women digging intently for yams, tapping the ground with sticks to feel for subterranean tunnels indicating the presence of a small animal, the men standing straight with spears or sitting cross-legged and painted for ceremony. Along the way the party meets two desert dwellers, men to whom white people are a rarity, who sit high in a cave watching the progress of the travellers as they creep ant-like across the desert. Incised boards are exchanged, business discussed and the songs and rhythmic dances of the men haunt the still night. In the morning the desert men have disappeared and the charged spiritual atmosphere of the night evaporates as the group briskly packs to move on. The purpose of the journey is for the homestead group to link with others many kilometres south to discuss whether some unfinished wet-weather business can be completed that year. But it is already late in the season, stock mustering is about to start, the big trip is put off until next year and the group has to return to the homestead.

It is one of many such treks the young white woman is invited to join over the 20 or so years she lives in the area. Mutual trust is implicit. She has no idea where the treks are leading, nor how long they will take. She is trusted not to intrude, nor to observe or document what ought not be seen or recorded.

Scene two: An affluent Perth suburb, 1997.

Half-a-century later it is an afternoon of the same clarity, if not heat, as that long-past Kimberley day, at the same woman's home now in a quiet, leafy Perth suburb. Outside a now-familiar scene is in progress. Microphone-clutching journalists jostle for position on the doorstep, their camera-wielding colleagues behind



trampling the shrubbery. The door opens a crack, revealing not one of Perth's financial or political high flyers headed for the slide of public disgrace but the dignified, usually smiling, now rather dismayed face of a well-known, much-loved and respected member of one of the West's most famous families. Unwittingly, the woman whose life until this moment has followed a largely solitary creative path, is caught in the midst of an artistic furor of international proportions.

AT 81, ARTIST ELIZABETH DURACK attracted a fame she had never really sought, wanted or thought she would ever achieve. And when it arrived, it was accompanied by such a torrent of outrage and abuse she was shaken to the core.

"Shocked – I don't think that's the word for it – I was bemused, astounded, completely overwhelmed," she says.

What Durack had done was create the persona of an Aboriginal man, "Eddie Burrup", signing his name to paintings with a potentially Aboriginal quality. From 1994 a number of these had been on display, some sold, through her daughter Perpetua Hobcroft's Kimberley Fine Art/Durack Gallery in Broome. "Eddie" also made several works for reproduction as

Christmas cards. The first was an arresting image of a Wandjina figure (the ancient rain spirit figure of west Kimberley cave paintings) swaddled as Jesus. Struck by the imagery, Doreen Mellor, curator of the National Aboriginal Cultural Institute Tandanya in Adelaide, asked Hobcroft if the artist would contribute works to her 1996 *Native Title Now* exhibition.

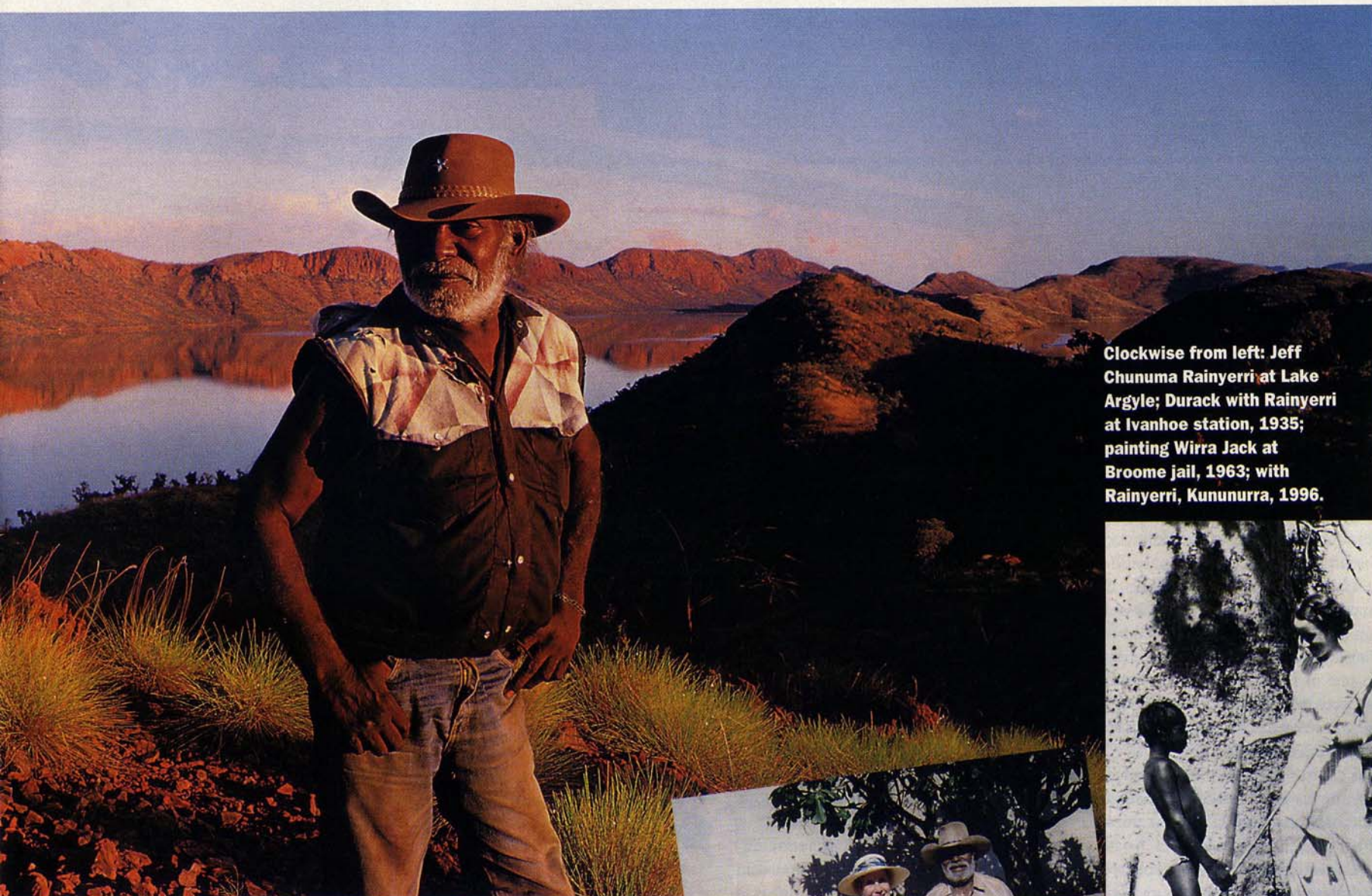
A few months later, Hobcroft and Durack decided to enter Eddie in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, which carries a first prize of \$18,000. Eddie also has a biography written by Durack with quotes from tapes as spoken by Eddie in Aboriginal-English.

"Part of my shock at the reaction this received was that I felt people didn't even take the time to investigate what I had actually done. The implication seemed to be that I sat down and copied Aboriginal dot paintings or something like that. It was never like that – never. But people still don't seem to

want to understand," says Durack three months after Eddie's exposure and still bemused by the reaction.

When first made public in a lengthy article by historian Robert Smith in the March 1997 issue of *Art Monthly*, Durack's actions seemed quite bizarre.

'It was never my intention to upset Aboriginal people – quite the reverse in fact – but it all got out of hand so quickly.'



Clockwise from left: Jeff Chunuma Rainyerri at Lake Argyle; Durack with Rainyerri at Ivanhoe station, 1935; painting Wirra Jack at Broome jail, 1963; with Rainyerri, Kununurra, 1996.



“Famous Aboriginal Artist Exposed” trumpeted the magazine’s media release, thereby blowing Durack’s belief that, sympathetically introduced to the outside world by a knowledgeable friend, Eddie’s emergence would be a gentle one. Never mind that Eddie Burrup was not a famous artist (he’s never had a solo show, won any award or resides in any public collection); never mind that the real artist was one respected by hundreds of West Australian Aboriginal people for having portrayed their lives with empathy for over 50 years; never mind that other artists paint under pseudonyms. That a white artist – any white artist – had passed work off as Aboriginal was, not surprisingly in today’s climate, seen by many as arrogance of the highest order.

Although she has no regrets, indeed not really any choice, about the creation of Burrup himself, there are some aspects of his public revelation that she would have had otherwise. “I would have hoped the reaction had been somewhat tempered,” she says. “I think the press release that *Art Monthly* issued gave a wrong impression – for example, that Eddie was a famous artist – and led people to react without knowing the full story. It was never my intention to upset Aboriginal people – quite the reverse in fact – but it all got out of hand so quickly.”

Senior curator of Aboriginal art at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art, Djon Mundine, succinctly encapsulated the outrage. “It’s a f..... obscenity. It’s like Kerry Packer pretending to be Mahatma Gandhi.

It’s just unbelievable.” To Mundine and many others this was yet another instance of the cultural appropriation which for years had seen Aboriginal images lifted without acknowledgment, attribution or compensation for anything from Australia’s first \$1 bill to carpets and T-shirts. Meanwhile, the media was looking to link Durack with other artistic frauds, making Eddie the Ern Malley or Helen Demidenko of the art world.

Durack’s entry to the art award seems something of an enigma. Neither she nor Hobcroft (who entered the Eddie paintings) give a definitive reason for the decision, other than that as Eddie was being accepted as a legitimate artist they wanted to give his work further exposure.

Winning the award was certainly not a prime reason, but his being shown in situ, as it were, with 200 or so Aboriginal artists, definitely was. And while it would have been highly embarrassing, not to say a major scandal, if “he” had won, frankly the chances of an unknown artist doing so (especially in

that year when one of the judges was ironically the MCA’s Djon Mundine) is extremely unlikely.

The reaction was not all so vitriolic. A spokesperson for the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council in Broome was reluctant to comment, saying “there are many different types of reconciliation and the Duracks have such respect here”. Letters to the newspapers from numer-

ous individuals, largely based in Western Australia, pointed to Durack’s abiding championing of Aboriginal people’s culture and the important educative function of the books she illustrated with her late sister, Dame Mary Durack. Phone calls and letters offering >

◁ support flooded in from fellow artists, leading private and public gallery directors, academics, art curators and a host of others. Dismayed by the huge reaction, Durack adopted an obdurate silence.

"I just felt so knocked back by the hostility, I couldn't say anything that I thought wouldn't be misinterpreted," she says. "I kept giving that Matisse quote ... 'An artist should speak only with his brushes'."

Meeting her first at the launching of a book on the history of children's literature at the Children's Book Foundation, Dromkeen, near Melbourne in early March, right at the height of the furore, I was struck by Durack's charming yet determined demeanour – similar perhaps to the quality that imbued her forebears with the strength of purpose to carve out their tough outback life. Happy to talk of her illustrations of Aboriginal people in so far as they related to her books, even the mildest of questions about Eddie was deflected by silence. I remember thinking it was the same response as that of many Aboriginal people who, when asked something they don't want to answer, simply don't respond. No defence, no acknowledgment even, just a dignified, disconcerting, highly effective blank.

It was a different Durack who, having decided that now was the time to talk, and this was the right medium in which to do it, welcomed photographer Robert Garvey and me into her Perth home two months later. In one of Perth's gentrified suburbs, surrounded by faux colonial five-bedroom mansions, Durack's house is both reassuringly unassuming and the comfortable environment of a working artist. ("Real estate agents can't wait for me to die around here so this can be torn down and replaced with something much more suitable," she smiles. "I don't think I'm going to give them the satisfaction just yet.")

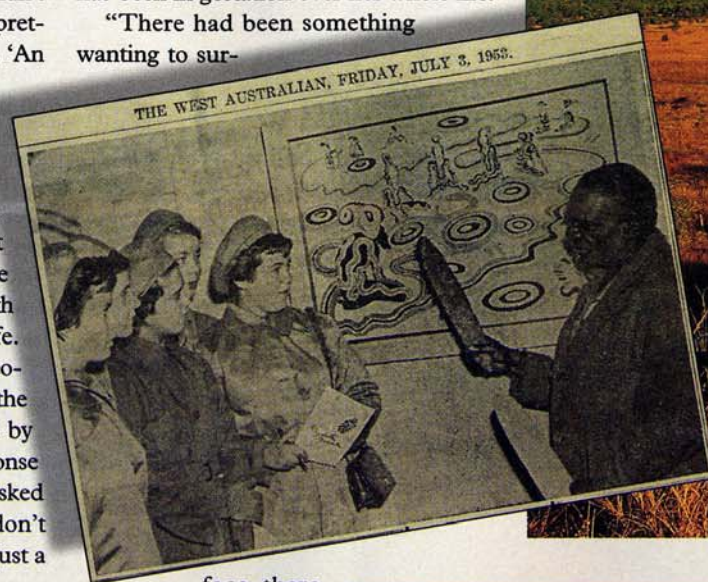
Domesticity is sandwiched between art and literature with drawings and books in orderly but toppling piles covering shelves and benches of the long studio/living room. A series of eighties works is tacked up along the length of one wall and latter-day Aboriginal carvings and artefacts (the family sold its historical collection some years ago) vie with ornaments from India and Indonesia for the few spaces free of papers. The only pieces of remarkable furniture are the solid chunks of hand-made hardwood and crocodile-hide chairs made by her grandfather. Work is done mostly at the long table outside in a sheltered and private courtyard whose trees and play of light have become sources of inspiration for the art of Eddie Burrup.

Durack herself shows the dual character qualities of many an artist. A patrician face is softened by a lively wit and often self-deprecating humour; a generous, empathetic streak co-exists with the focus of the dedicated artist; the strongly intuitive nature of one who listens to unseen forces, who believes in the power of the spirit and of the natural world, parallels a background earthed in the harsh realities of life on the land. A Russian writer during a visit to the Duracks' family home in the sixties prejudged her as an "elegant lady who probably painted pretty pictures, copying art, copying the fashion". Then he looked at her hands "... the big tired hands of a weaver or winder, the kind of hands I'd seen in factories ..." and changed his mind about the art of this "elegant lady".

A few minutes into a conversation with her and it's hard not to believe that if Burrup himself does not actually exist, his presence or aura certainly does. And what becomes clearer and clearer is that Burrup is no

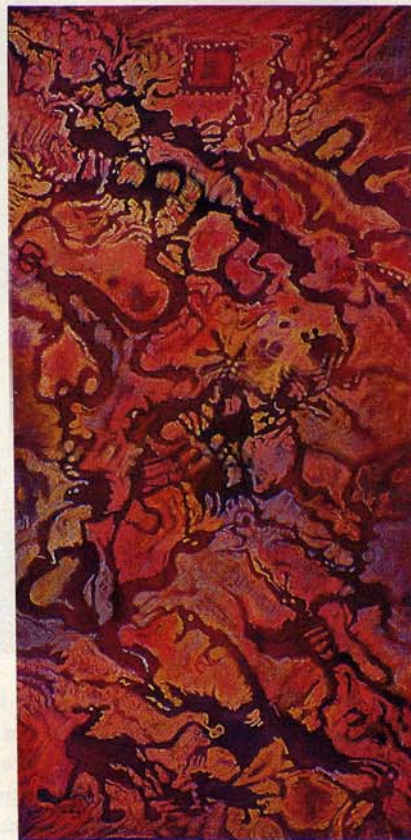
sudden creation. Artistically he has been evolving for at least the past 20 years and his persona, drawn from living alongside a powerful culture for several generations, has been in gestation over her whole life.

"There had been something wanting to sur-



face there for a long time," she says. "I'd felt my art had been groping its way toward it for many years through works I was calling my morphological works – relating to both a branch of biology, the forms and structure of plants and animals, combined with something unseen, a sense of being surrounded by the sights and sounds of the totemic world. I did not exhibit these works, but worked on them covertly. When people asked what I was doing, I'd say, 'I am working on my last creative phase.' Which I am – I've never felt happier with my work than I do now."

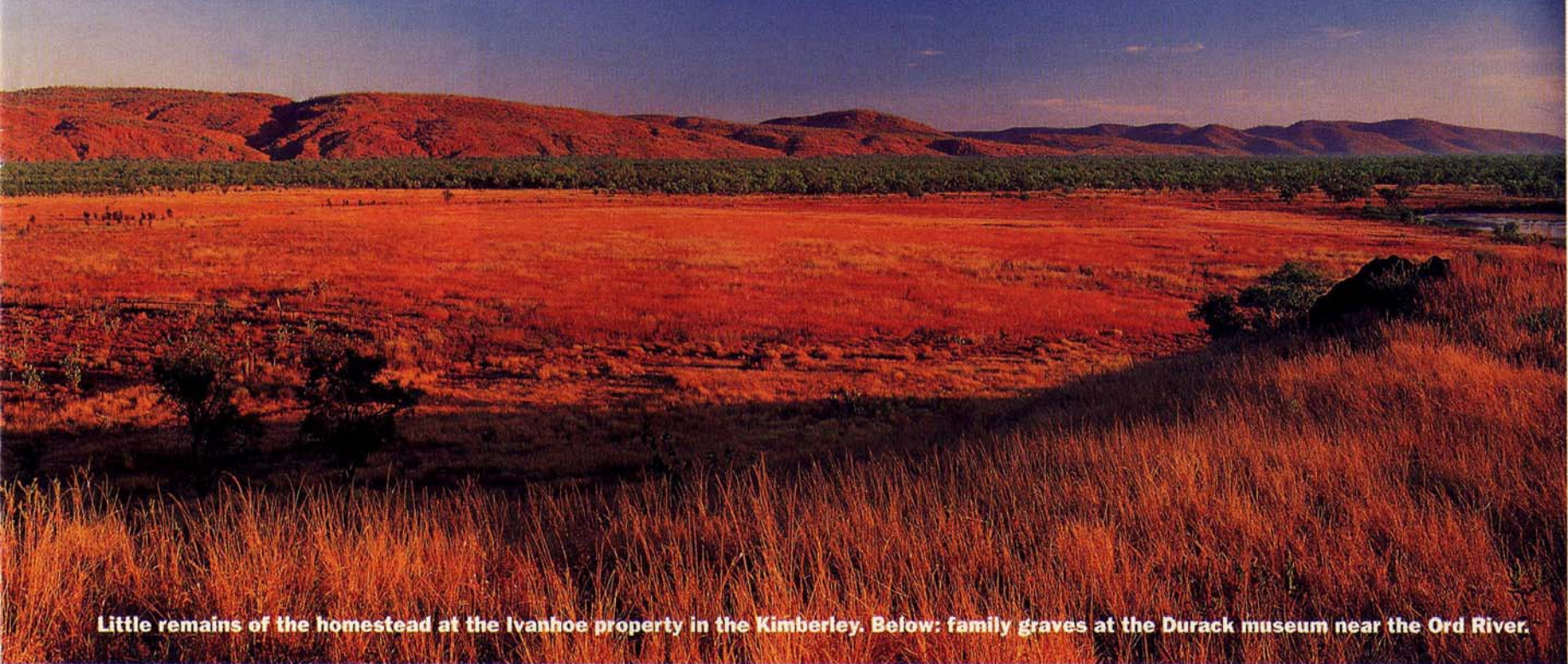
THE ART WORLD HAS never really known how to place Elizabeth Durack. While between 1946 and 1950 she held a staggering 11 solo exhibitions, reviews such as the conservative critic J.S. Macdonald's comment of a 1947 Melbourne show, "It is hard to place her paintings", sum up the cautious response her work has more often than not elicited from eastern-based critics. Yet she was one of only three women artists chosen for the 1961 landmark exhibition *Recent Australian Paintings* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in company with Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker, Fred Williams, Brett Whiteley and others. She has received an OBE and CMG for services to art and two honorary Doctorates of Literature, and represented Western Australia in a 1979 World Trade



Top: J.M. Green, of Leonora, WA, describes a painting from the contentious 'Cord to Alcheringa' series to students in 1953. Above: two 1996 works, 'Numbanana Yard', left, and 'Flood on the Yule River' (also titled '... all them creek 'e run a banker - cover'm up land fars eye can see. Salt water too ... Allabout lookin' now for 'igh ground ...')

Centre exhibition in New York. She has published illustrated books on New York, New Guinea, the Philippines, Nigeria and Indonesia, and received numerous major commissions from bodies as diverse as Hamersley Iron, the Australian Wool Board and the Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

Yet the extent to which Durack has taken artistic risks is generally overlooked. As early as 1941 the dramatic and rather surreal paintings used as illustrations in the children's book *The Way of the Whirlwind* contrast with its black and white realistic sketches. In the sixties, she experimented with enamels forming "melted



Little remains of the homestead at the Ivanhoe property in the Kimberley. Below: family graves at the Durack museum near the Ord River.

images” in which figures and landforms emerged ghost-like through the seemingly abstract surface. In the late seventies, she briefly dispensed with the brush entirely – hurling black paint at white canvas in Pollock-like freedom in a series titled *Discoverers and Explorers* (which gained some good reviews in a New York showing). Concurrently two other disturbing and unique series, *The Rim, the Rim of our Brittle and Disintegrating World* and *Flightless Birds Achieve Lift Off* – were developing. Both show the artist’s deep consternation at a world shattering, its ecology destroyed, the fabric of its very structure under threat. From them arose the gentler, more abstract “morphological works” whose resolution became the art of Eddie Burrup.

It is no coincidence that a 1976 exhibition was entitled *The Two Faces of Elizabeth Durack*, for a survey of her work reveals a far richer development than the paintings and illustrations for which she is best known – the graphic, poignant and to some in the sophisticated art world cloyingly sentimental images of Aboriginal life and children.

Nor was the fuss around Eddie the first time Durack had run into ideological criticism of her portrayal of Aboriginal culture. In 1979, the children’s book *Kookanoo & Kangaroo*, published in 1963, written by Mary and illustrated by Elizabeth, was banned by the US Maryland county of Howard for “demeaning the self-image of black children”. (The ban never got further than this county.) Potentially more serious was a threatened cancellation of a 1995 retrospective at the Art Gallery of Western Australia when several younger Aboriginal people, including an assistant curator at the gallery, suggested that some fifties works using ochre and depicting sand paintings and designs on boards could not be shown. Ironically the entire series, portraying the story of a celestial myth called “Cord to Alcheringa” had been bought by the University of Western Australia and had been hanging in its Winthrop Hall for 40 years. They were “allowed” to be reshowed at the AGWA and the retrospective went ahead as planned

after a Kimberley Aboriginal man had signed that they were “free to be seen by everyone – man, woman, child – everyone”.

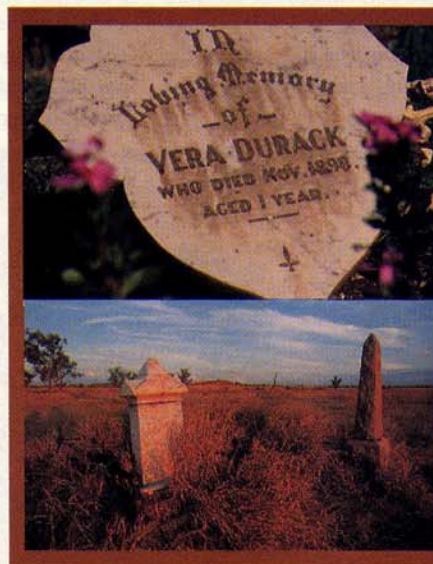
What is also known, but perhaps not fully appreciated outside the west, is the Durack family’s lengthy interrelationship with Aboriginal people – as colonial pastoralists to be sure, and as such and no matter how benign, dispossessors of indigenous people. But people with a history largely of coexistence, including many instances of close friendships, respect for the power of Aboriginal spirituality and culture, and genuine and mutual personal respect. Dame Mary Durack in her epic biography *Kings in Grass Castles*, based on the documents of their grandfather, the first Durack Kimberley pioneer, Patrick, and the detailed diaries of their father, Michael, was not shy of enumerating

(at one stage in the thirties she and Mary ran the family’s Ivanhoe property with only their Aboriginal helpers to assist them) and the immersion in Aboriginal culture which ensued.

Today, only a few of Durack’s oldest Aboriginal friends survive. The most significant, for this story, is Jeff Chunuma Rainyerri, born at the Duracks’ Ivanhoe station (although his country is around the former Argyle homestead). In his 60s, Chunuma, a warmly generous, spirited man with a sense of humour not unlike Durack’s own, is a senior and highly respected member of the Waringarri Aboriginal community at Kununurra. It was Chunuma who “approved” Durack’s “Cord to Alcheringa” paintings and who now, as her classificatory son and as one of the inspirational sources for Eddie, is in the position of both taking responsibility for her actions and passing on to her the community response. “You tell im ’e’s got to come up here, sit down and talk to us,” was his first statement about Durack. “It’s no good what ’e’s doing. That old man behind her shoulder. She got to stop doing that.” In the months since the news of Durack’s “Aboriginal” paintings hit there have been many meetings and discussions about the issue at Waringarri and other Kimberley communities. In the absence of her personal explanation the only translations of what she had done were those reported in the media. (Durack says she will go to Kununurra soon but as she usually drives she wants to wait until it gets slightly cooler.)

People, says Kevin Kelly, Waringarri Aboriginal Art administrator, may be able to accept Durack’s actions artistically but are highly critical of her entering the country’s longest-standing and most prestigious indigenous-only award. “Imagine what would have happened if she’d won!” he says.

But Chunuma and Durack’s relationship is both long-standing and deep. Vocally disapproving though he may be of her present actions, there is no way a lifetime of shared experience is going to alter his feelings for either his “mum” (he calls both Elizabeth and



The weight of her heritage, says Durack, at times bears rather heavily. “There are people who instantly see me as a relic of the colonial past.”

instances of meetings, clashes, friendships and issues of debate between black and white people in the 1800s.

Although carrying it with pride, the weight of such a heritage, says Durack, at times bears rather heavily. “There are people who instantly see me as a relic of the colonial past,” she says. “Just mentioning the name is generally enough to conjure up in their minds someone who couldn’t possibly understand.”

Counterbalancing this is Durack’s actual life, the daily contact with Aboriginal people for years on end



Durack sees 'Eddie' as a means of getting across the message of the quiet conciliator. Below: 'The Coming of Gudea'.

the late Dame Mary "mum") or many other Duracks.

The relationship goes back to Chunuma's infancy when Elizabeth, aged 17, returned after schooling in Perth to the family's Kimberley homesteads Ivanhoe and Argyle to live. Based there for long continuous stretches of the ensuing 20 or so years, she drew what she saw – the landscape, the people. Chunuma, as a toddler, was the little boy model in most of the Durack sisters' early books on Aboriginal myths and stories for children. Today he still gets a distinct kick out of seeing them and both he and Durack can reminisce for hours on their early years in the Kimberley, the tales of stock mustering, the days it took to get to the closest town, Wyndham, the journeys across country on foot, of the bough Elizabeth would paint under each day on the banks of the Ord River.

Neither of the original Argyle and Ivanhoe homesteads exist any more. Argyle was submerged by the waters of Lake Argyle as part of the vast Ord River Scheme in 1974. (A re-creation of the Argyle house containing Durack memorabilia now stands near the gateway to the dam.) Old Ivanhoe, set back some 4km from the banks of the Ord, built by the Duracks' father in the 1890s, was burnt down in 1950.

This house, says Durack, had a breezier, more open atmosphere than that of Argyle, which tended to be oppressive. A simple square building with verandas on three sides, its great attraction was not only its nearby billabong, which provided a constant water supply, but the steep rocky outcrop behind which formed an ideal lookout. All that remains is a concrete block

marking the floor of the meat house, some cattle yards, several iron Furphy tanks, bits of rusting farm machinery and a rather elegant bush gate.

On a clear day, however, from the hill behind the original site, looking across the lush grasses towards the Carr Boyd Ranges, with the broad Ord River in the background, it is not too hard to re-create the atmosphere circa 1935. The herd of goats (subject of one of Durack's best-loved works, *The Kid*) was corralled at the foot of the hill; stock mustered in the adjacent yards; and the household was alive with comings and goings and the work of keeping its inhabitants fed and clothed.

The only time Durack was absent for any extended time from the Kimberley over this 20-year period was between 1939 and the early forties when, in Sydney, she married the late journalist Frank Clancy (father of her two children Perpetua and Michael).

"It was a mad, exciting time. We were married only a couple of months before the War and there was an amazing feeling – feverish almost. Just about every thinking Australian was radical in those days. Frank was 16 years older

than me and I felt as though from the quiet of the Kimberley I had been thrust into a social vortex. It was wonderful but I also had this great pull to the west and the north. I kept going back."

Eventually, Durack left Clancy, but never divorced him. "It sort of gave me protection somehow being married," she said. "The only problem was that in those days you couldn't leave the country without your husband's permission, so I couldn't travel as did many other Australian artists in the fifties and sixties. They went out and I went 'in'."

Back at Ivanhoe under her bough shade on the banks of the river, she was producing large, almost encyclopaedic oils. "I felt as though I was looking at the last of something," she said. "Events such as the walks – the journeys for ritual purposes – were declining. I suppose I wanted to record it before it disappeared altogether. I'd tack large canvases up on boards or between trees. They'd get dirt and grit on them if the winds blew and the Aboriginal people would always come up and make comments – tell me what I'd got wrong about who was wearing what, or some such."

One of the major paintings from the series *War and Peace* remains with her. "You can see the ghost of a dog in that corner. It was in the painting but the dog died during it and the people asked if it could be taken out. I painted over it but it sort of came through."

To her daughter Perpetua Hobcroft, Durack is "something of a maverick".

"Her insight and perception of things has always been fresh and original," she says. "Certainly a loner – at one and the same time both intellectual and intuitive – creative, imaginative, self-disciplined, energetic. She's widely read and has a remarkable memory, cuts through humbug and is also immensely good fun."



Hobcroft, who for five years has run a gallery in an older-style Broome house with wide verandas and wooden floors, admits it was on her suggestion that Durack's "morphological" paintings develop in an Aboriginal context.

"I first said to Elizabeth," says Hobcroft, "one – as it turns out – fateful day in 1994 while looking at a stack of these arcane 'Out of Mind' paintings, 'Why are you doing this mad, wild work when the art cognoscenti will never look at it, let alone make any perceptive or intelligent comment concerning it?' As I looked into them I saw something hovering there and went on to say: 'If, however, this work had been done by an Aboriginal ... then I believe it would be taken seriously ... but you are so damn straight you would never exhibit under another name.' Nothing more was said. Elizabeth did not respond and I'd forgotten about it when suddenly some hours later when we were walking by the river and talking of something else entirely she said, 'I'm not totally against showing those morphological paintings under a nom de brush ...'"

"It was then," says Durack, "that the shadow of Eddie fell between us. He was just there, hat and all."

From then on Eddie became not just a presence "waiting in the wings" but a fully fledged person. His biography soon followed and the paintings based on his experience and that of his people flowed. Durack placed Eddie in the Pilbara, rather than in the Kimberley, although his experiences and spirituality are drawn mostly, but not exclusively, from those of the Kimberley men – Chunuma and the late Argyle Boxer (Durack's father's long-time friend, and an elder of considerable authority).

"I've often wondered why it was that I learnt so much from the Aboriginal men," she says. "That's largely why Eddie is a man – the men would tell me things, invite me to watch ceremony. I've never really understood why – except that I think to them because I wasn't an Aboriginal woman I was sexless – outside the bounds of what women perhaps should know."

According to his biography, Eddie Burrup was born in the Pilbara and raised as a stockman. When in the Broome convent school his drawing skills were encouraged. During the sixties he worked with an iron ore company as an adviser. It is all an extremely plausible, not to mention fascinating story.

Burrup's paintings themselves are similar but more refined than those of the "morphological" works. Colouration has been reduced to varying tones of the same basic hue – burgundy, blue or grey – and images of animals or figures swim to the surface as though from primordial depths. There is something very poignant, very moving about these works, made more so by their dual titles '*In the beginning ... (Genesis 1 I)*', '*Well you can see – all them ol'fella now – comin' out now from underneath ...*'

In creating Burrup Durack felt, insofar as it was a conscious decision – and there is something definitely more intuitive than intellectual or "conscious" at work here – that he became a conduit for her huge and somewhat eclectic reservoir of knowledge about the Aboriginal world. Pivotal is the notion of the two great song and dance cycles – *Mulunga* and *Djanba* – she believes operate throughout the whole of Australia.

"Djanba and Mulunga are two mythic figures who presented themselves through elaborate song cycles and dramatic enactments," she says. "Mystery and uncertainty surround them. However, as regards their nature and character there is no doubt or inconsistency. Djanba is the spirit of cooperation and reconciliation – pragmatic and didactic, ameliorating and pacifist. Mulunga is the spirit of vengeance and retribution – militant and arrogant, polarising and pugnacious."

By the turn of the last century she says both cults were circulating widely, but the spirit of Mulunga (the destroyer) she sees as holding sway these days. Djanba, she says, lives on, making varied and odd appearances from time to time, but "as a shadow of his/her former self and remembered for the most part only by old Aboriginal men such as Albert Barunga, Darby Narngarin, Argyle Boxer and Chunuma in the Kimberley, and Eddie Burrup in the Pilbara."

Are the paintings and words of "Eddie", then, her most powerful means of getting the message of Djanba, the quiet conciliator, across? "Yes, I see it as working within the spirit of reconciliation – as *gissa gissa* – arm in arm, within mutual respect, within progression together, within unity. This is why I was so very shocked at the misunderstanding of the works and my reasons for doing them. And it is why I will continue to paint for Eddie as long as I'm able."

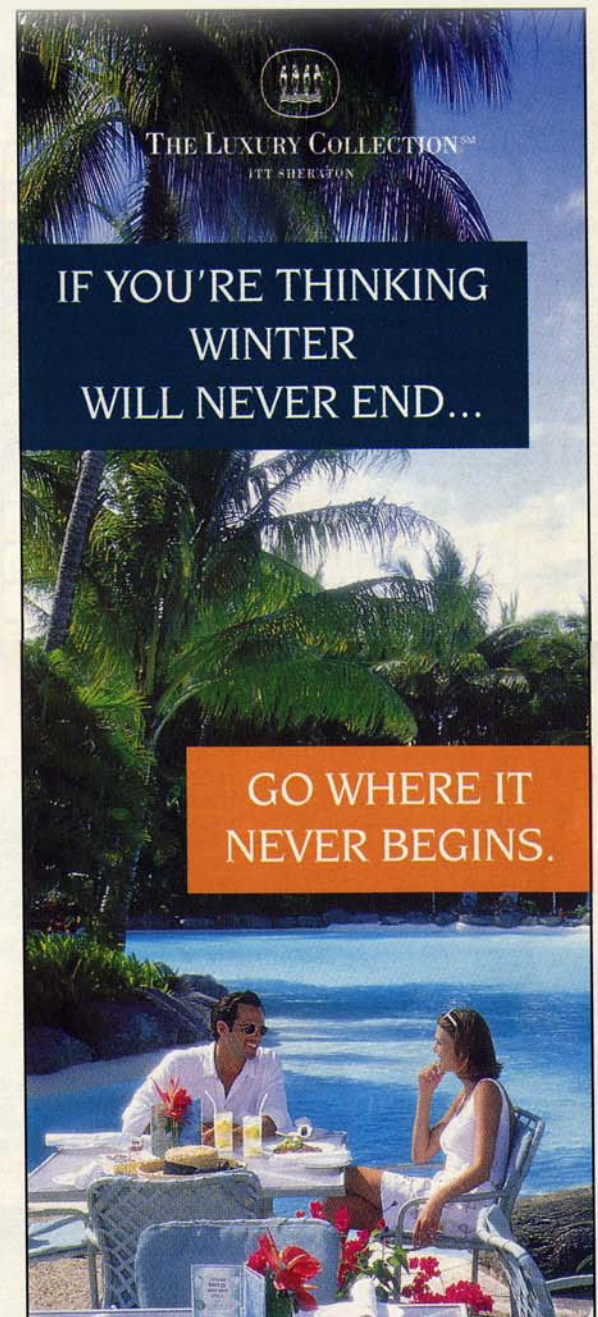
Next she says she would like to see Eddie – his art and story – on the Internet. A rather surprising statement until one considers that in many ways Eddie is the perfect Internet proposal. For nothing has allowed us greater freedom of personal and artistic invention than the Net. We can re-invent ourselves – change genders, ages, appearances,

give ourselves new histories and character traits – and create as many fictional characters as we want. Artistically, Eddie would become only one of a growing number of such "virtual reality" personas.

On a less fanciful level, there is also something particularly apposite about Eddie's emergence at such a pivotal time in the reconciliation debate. And unlike the authors of Ern Malley's poetry who deliberately set out to prove a point about what they saw as the absurdity of abstract poetry, and Helen Darville who adopted the whole character of her alter ego, Helen Demidenko, Durack had no intent to lampoon or deceive. Her motivation derives entirely from the desire of an artist to reflect a genuine experience through art. There are those, such as the Art Gallery of NSW director Edmund Capon, who support this view entirely, maintaining that it is a perfectly legitimate form of artistic practice. Others will continue to be outraged by Durack, seeing her actions as both high-handed and another example of cultural appropriation. Yet others will say it is a great tribute to the power of Aboriginality that a non-Aboriginal will be thus affected.

But one thing is sure – for those who have lived, black and white intertwined, for so long – such issues can never be so clear-cut nor so simply assessed. And for the rest of us, her actions and the reactions they provoked may lead us to contemplate the implications of imposing a rigid ideology on artistic expression – the free practice of which one would hope remains the inalienable right of every artist. □

Durack would like to see Eddie's art and story on the Internet. 'I will continue to paint for Eddie as long as I'm able.'



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