

[Home](#) / [Lifestyle](#) / [Arts & Entertainment](#) / [Art](#)

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[SAVE ARTICLE](#) | [PRINT](#) [REPRINTS & PERMISSIONS](#)

Elizabeth Durack, an overlooked Australian artist and author



The work of Elizabeth Durack is revisited by Elena Douglas.



Elizabeth Durack with 'Erosion' at the Athenaeum Gallery, Melbourne, 1961. Photo courtesy John Cato.

by Elena Douglas

Responding to Germaine Greer's provocative 2003 Quarterly Essay, "Whitefella Jump Up", Professor Marcia Langton asked important questions about Australian identity. Greer suggested Australian identity, vernacular, speech patterns, attitudes and ways of being in the world were all really the product of settler engagement with Indigenous Australians. She proposed, therefore, a pathway to an independent nationhood was to acknowledge this influence.

In reply, Langton ventured the alternative of a "post-colonial patriotism". Perhaps, she suggested, Australians might value Aboriginal culture if it arose from "a sense of this culture as being a part of their own heritage and their own historical legacy, not just that of exoticised and demonised others". For Langton, what happened on this land is a shared legacy. The true meaning of reconciliation, then, is the journey to mutual ownership and of the embrace of Aboriginal culture.

Langton challenged Greer for her failure to recognise the emergence of a "distinctive Australian settler voice that speaks of a deepening attachment to place and locality as the core of identity" that has emerged in Australian literature. Her point: that "the Aboriginal attachment to places inherited from many generations of ancestors and

shaped by kinship, descent, culture and religion, does not preclude settlers from engaging with the land they love". In fact, Langton articulated, "might it not be honourable to acknowledge frankly the frontier history that gave the white Australians their ascendancy, their control of the land and resources that have made them so wealthy".

Elizabeth Durack (1915–2000), painter, essayist, cultural ambassador, is a powerful exemplar of such awareness. Her art explored, over a lifetime, how to reconcile the dispossession of the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley. In this, and in much else, Durack was a pioneer.



Elizabeth Durack in 1997. Robert Garvey

Born into one of the pastoral families who opened up the north-west of the WA region in the 19th century, her life would take a singular course. From her father Michael – a founding pastoralist, politician and entrepreneur with a reputation for decency toward Aboriginal peoples – she and her sister Mary inherited a love of the Kimberley and station life.

The romance at the heart of Elizabeth Durack's life was her deep appreciation of the ritual, ceremony and art of the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley and Pilbara. Her defining purpose was to share her knowledge, intimacy and love of this unique people and their culture. Durack was one of the first Australians – and certainly one of the first Australian women – to pursue this ambition. She was explicit that her art was created within a context: it is, she said, a "tangible witness to the deep debt that I owe to the First Australians – indeed not only myself but previous generations of my family are indebted".

Durack's work meets Zola's definition of art as "a corner of nature seen through a temperament". The authority of the landscape of the Kimberley, its magnetism, its overpowering colours and narrative force defined Durack's work and never released her. The Kimberley was her corner of nature.

In the early 1930s, with a group of Aboriginal people, guardians of country, Durack stepped from the piercing sunlight into a cave and was overawed by walls covered with hand-drawn images of her companions' ancestors: images made thousands of years ago. Her awareness that she had witnessed something astonishing – beyond anything she learnt in her Loreto Convent education or in her year studying art at the

Chelsea Polytechnic in London in 1936 – never left her. Sixty years later, Durack described this as one of the great art experiences of her life.

Her depiction of the unfolding human story in northern Australia – the characters of the landscape and the social and economic change that stirred and ruptured their world – reveals her temperament: fiercely intelligent, empathetic yet analytic, as fluent in idiom as ideology. Through Durack's remarkable oeuvre, Australians may approach difficult questions about our country and its culture that trouble us still.

Durack is a national artistic treasure. There have been 64 solo exhibitions of her work. Most were in Perth, including a major mid-career retrospective at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1965, while some were in the 'East-states'. Durack was one of only three women artists exhibited in the iconic 1961 exhibition *Recent Australian Painting* at Whitechapel Art Gallery in London alongside Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Fred Williams and Brett Whiteley. Her work is held in collections such as the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, The National Gallery of Australia and the Vatican.

Durack's early work offers entries into the mind of the painter she would become. *Prelude* (1948) hints at the themes that resonated in later life; the series marks an evolution into a more fluid, less figurative visual language and introduces a later theme: the eternal circularity of the human story. This early period reflects the time she spent in her studio on the Ord River. Her delicate watercolours, landscapes, and character and family studies reflect a lyrical world; they are an elegy of sorts for a perhaps not gentler, but a slower, world. Many are also political, especially in their treatment of Indigenous themes. It bears remembering that during this period, Aboriginal people were not citizens of Australia.

Durack's work is an expression of the deep humanity that binds us all. Pieces that emphasise the abiding love and aspiration of mothers and grandmothers for their children were painted at a time when Durack's own children were young. *The Grandmother* (1946) captures that that universal maternal theme – the intimacy between kin and child – depicted with exquisite empathy by a young mother.

The later work of the 1970s and 1980s reflects Durack's disenchantment with the social and economic forces reshaping Australia. This theme manifests in her portrayal of the emotional and spiritual strength of Aboriginal culture in the face of harsh and contradictory government policy. The *Rim* sequence, *The rim of our brittle and disintegrating world ...* (1975–1995) is notable for this. It echoes the themes of her masterpiece, *The Cord to Alcheringa* (1953).

Elizabeth Durack's sensibilities unfold in episodes: her first reflections on life in the Kimberley and its landscape, then on a nation in political and economic upheaval, and, ultimately, the creative destruction intrinsic to the cosmos itself. In work that ranged from intimate, sentimental portraits of children to the family portraits of mid-life, to panoramas of social and economic upheaval and, finally, the grand cosmic vistas of the soul in later years, she quested and experimented, seeking revelation and insight.

Critics and art historians have neglected Durack. She was a boundary rider; her art explored many genres and she did not conform to the dominant narratives of Australian art history. Being a female artist in the 1950's did not help. Nor did her location away from the metropolitan centres of Australia (apart from a brief stint as a newly-wed in Sydney) – both characteristics that prejudice inclusion in the Australian canon.

Neglected, too, are Durack's pursuits as an author and essayist. In her essay-length review of *Countrymen: the life histories of four Aboriginal men as told to Bruce Shaw* (1987) – the oral reflections of four East Kimberley elders, Mandi Munniim, Banggaldun Balmirr, Bulla Bilinggiin, and Jeff Djanama, whom Durack knew as boys – she identifies the 'haunting quality' of their pidgin English. "Just as James Joyce was able to capture the rich mosaic of Irish myth and legend, blend it with classical prototypes then unite the whole, per medium of Irish vernacular, so too do these four 'Countrymen' draw one into a fabled world midway between fact and fiction peopled with characters – some real, some mythic, yet all homogenised when put through the blender of a uniquely Australian idiom," she writes.

Then there is the enigma of Durack's final artistic chapter, her Eddie Burrup affair. In the 1990s Durack painted a series using the name Eddie Burrup. Eddie – her invention, muse, daemon – can be heard rumbling through the pages of her biography. Durack said that he was offstage, waiting for his cue. Her use of pseudonyms was established: in the 1980s she wrote essays as Ted Zakrovsky, "an Australian writer who has spent a lot of time recently among Aboriginal people".

Eddie Burrup provoked Durack's most vigorous work and freed her to approach a higher plane of inquiry and expression, but when she entered the work into an Aboriginal art competition under his name, she signed a warrant for her destruction in the art world. There was furore over her "appropriation" of Aboriginal culture. It was called "the worst kind of colonialism". She later recanted, revealing the truth through a friend in an art magazine. But her reputation never recovered.

The mean-spirited have defined this period as the desperate act of an old lady, conscious of her own fading light and jealous of the attention lavished on Aboriginal painters. More plausible is that after a lifetime of intimacy with and privileged access to Indigenous culture – even to men's ceremonial business, something attributed to being white and therefore sexless – of careful observation, painting what she saw and internalising what she heard – Eddie Burrup rose to speak and paint for himself.

The ego of this clever, worldly, old white woman was gone. Burrup, the enigma and muse – a medley of the men of the land that she loved – moved her brush to paint the Ngarangani, what we now mechanically call the "Dreaming" (W.E.H. Stanner's term the "everywhen" is better). This place of past and present, approached elliptically, is where Durack's story dwells.

In the notes to the exhibition *The Art of Eddie Burrup*, presented by the Australian gallery owner Rebecca Hossack in London in 2000 shortly after Durack's death, the Ngarangani is described as the "once shared human orthodoxy ... overtaken by the march of history aeons ago everywhere on the globe with the single exception of one large island in the Southern hemisphere where it endured more or less intact right up to 26 January 1788". This is the deep mystery that could only be encountered and entered through the invention of Eddie Burrup.

All countries have their seers and storytellers. Sadly, in this country, we neglect some of our best. Elizabeth Durack gave us all she had: art was her life, her daily practice, her purpose. Over 70 years, her inspiration was her lifelong encounter with a people and the culture of a place. Hers is a pioneering patriotism. No one will witness the world like Elizabeth Durack. She painted a vanishing corner of nature – seen through her empathetic and generous temperament. Hers was a pioneering vision of reconciliation that ought to endure.

Elena Douglas is founder and chief executive of Knowledge Society an agency working with universities, think tanks and researchers. An auction of paintings from the estate of Elizabeth Durack will be held on March 22 in Perth.

AFR Contributor

