

Fremantle Arts Review

MONTHLY ARTS DIGEST. VOL. 2, NO 6, JUNE 1987. PUBLISHED BY FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE



Inside:

- ★ Perth in the 1940s
- ★ Peers or peers?
- ★ Award winning writers
- ★ Heather Nimmo

'A Maverick in the Perth of the 1940s ...'

In the second of an occasional series of articles on the Perth arts scene in an historical context, ELIZABETH DURACK offers some reminiscences. She talks about the importance of the time for her own work, and reminds us about some other key personalities.

For our world the 1940s was a time of war and peace. For me it was a decade of intense activity in both my personal life and my career. Three new books were added to the 'Mary & Elizabeth Durack' publications of the 1930s, and between the years 1946 and 1950 I held 11 solo exhibitions — five of them in Perth, the others interstate.

My marriage in 1939 to Sydney journalist Francis Clancy had lifted me, temporarily as it turned out, from the confines of Western Australia, and I spent a couple of enlightening years in the wider psychic dimensions of 'the Eastern States'. The reprieve was only brief, and then circumstances, and possibly some intrinsic factor, had me moving all over the map and then deposited again in Western Australia way back where I started from — on the banks of the Ord River in the east Kimberleys.

As a result of this I was only briefly in Perth throughout the 1940s. However, via a chain of letters with my sister Mary who had married and settled there in 1938, I was able to keep in touch with what was going on. Through this correspondence I learned that while Perth may not have been a cultural Mecca, or a ferment of the arts, neither was it a complete cultural desert.

At the outset of hostilities many activities had been placed on 'a War footing', and the city's isolation decreased somewhat as interstate and Allied personnel moved to and fro.

Mary's own literary world revolved around the newly formed branch of the Australian Fellowship of Writers. Katharine Susannah Prichard, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Gavin Casey, Tom Hungerford, J K Ewers and Mary were all foundation members. It became the centre for established and aspirant writers, a number of whom were drawn into 'the War effort' in one way or another. When H G Wells visited Perth just after the War, the Fellowship gathered in force to welcome him. He was the first of many international figures that it would host over the years.

Professor Fred Alexander was appointed head of Army Education, and among other things he encouraged the theatre which actually flourished during the War, with city theatres and venues on campus at the University of WA presenting a continual flow of programmes. Many of Perth's actors and actresses started to make their way at this time. Nita Pannell, playing Maggie in *Hobson's Choice*, drew record crowds for months.

Then, playing a vital role in social adhesiveness and communication, was the ABC Women's Programme, conducted by Catherine King. This weekly programme went State-wide, and before the days of portable radio, work on farms and stations would stop as bush people, men as well as women, came indoors to listen to the wide-



Elizabeth Durack with her current series of paintings. Photograph: Tania Young

ranging topics discussed and to the interviews with famous people such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Sybil Thorndike which were a feature of the programme.

Music lovers formed a coterie of their own, and a number of music clubs — notably the Kylie Club and the Oriana Ladies' Club — flourished. At the Karrakatta Club, Red Cross fund-raising concerts were held. Flora Bunning, Norah Crisp, Lorna McKean, Ida Geddes, Alice Muir, Alice Carrard and others performed there. Mary seems to have attended most of these occasions.

Ernest J Roberts was the WA Orchestra's resident conductor and Vaughan Hanley its leader. Flora Bunning and Marianna Korwill set up the Chamber Music Society and after a tentative start it commenced regular programmes. Just post-war the ABC musical tours re-commenced and many international stars — among them Lotte Lehmann, Claudio Arrau, Lili Kraus

and Malcolm Sargeant — performed to capacity audiences at the old Capitol theatre.

As for the 'Fine Arts' in Perth at this time, it would appear that the War exerted something of a benign influence upon them. As in other parts of Australia a number of artists found themselves more securely placed than ever before as they became engaged in camouflage projects — merging acres of military camps into the landscape — or on vague assignments as official War artists. In this capacity, Dobell turned up on the wharf at Fremantle in 1943.

Both the WA Society of Arts and the Perth Society of Artists survived the War. The Cremorne Gallery was set up in 1939 by Elizabeth Blair-Barber, and managed by her artist friends. This gallery in Hay Street was adjacent to Margaret Saunders' studio where she gave lessons in the 1930s after her arrival from Ireland. Both Mary and I attended a few of these divertissements. Newspaper House in St George's Terrace was a popular

Cover Story

venue for exhibitions from 1933 until the late 1950s. The Claude Hotchin Galleries opened in Hay Street in 1946, and I exhibited there on a number of occasions.

Although most of the artists who fled to Australia in the '30s and '40s from war and persecution in Europe settled in Melbourne and Sydney, a few found their way to Perth — Elise Blumann and Louis Kahan being notable among the latter. Kate O'Connor returned from Paris in 1955.

Mary had written *The Way of the Whirlwind* when we were together at Ivanhoe Station before we left for England on a meat boat from Wyndham in 1936. The text and drawings of our earlier books concerning station life in the Kimberleys had been quite factual but *The Way of the Whirlwind* was more a fantasy that fused Aboriginal myths with a story line — to the annoyance, we learned later, of the anthropologists. It was three years on before I did the illustrations for this book which was published in Sydney by Consolidated Press in 1941. It sold well during the War, and after Mrs Roosevelt mentioned it in her 'My Day' column when she was in Australia in 1943, I recall American troops actually queueing up to buy it outside a Brisbane bookshop.

When Henrietta Drake-Brockman visited Sydney from Perth not long after I was married, she gave a party at her Pott's Point apartment. It was there that I met William Dobell. He was a rather dull sofa-side companion who kept repeating, ruefully, that I was lucky to be able to make some money out of my work. This was about 18 months before his meteoric rise to fame and fortune.

Dame Mary Gilmore who, despite her poor eyesight, was an avid newspaper reader, sent a message that she would like to meet me. Between three and four of an afternoon she used to hold court in a rather dingy and very cluttered apartment in the heart of Kings Cross. She was then 75 years old. When I think of her now, I do not know if I see her with my own reminiscent eyes or those of Dobell as he presented her in the portrait — I do know she was not wearing gloves.

When travelling north via Alice Springs in 1943, I met Albert Namatjira out of Hermannsburg Mission — both he and his paintings were already famous. His mentor Rex Battarbee was also at the mission acting there as a Security Officer. Back in Alice Springs I just had time to do some drawings for Mrs Abbott's Red Cross calendars before boarding Eddie Connellan's plane, then the only inter-station link through to Wyndham. My brother Kim was then at Carlton Reach on Ivanhoe Station where he had just set up the first Agricultural Research Station in the Kimberleys, from which all subsequent development generated.

Later on when I was living in Brisbane, I did the illustrations for Mary's poem — *The Magic Trumpet*. These included among others my first small tentative desert landscapes. This book was published by Cassells in Melbourne in 1944.

Then, just after the War, I was back in the north again. It was in the little war-bedraggled town of Broome that my work — bold images and portraits on a scale not attempted by me before — simply took charge, and the moorings that had previously held me to the written word were cast off. Without realising it at the time, this new



Elizabeth and Mary Durack at an exhibition in 1949

development was to prove another ball game altogether from the wholly acceptable one of two sisters — *a la* the Rentouls — enjoined in artistic pursuits. Painting, easel painting above the amateur level was, I learned, largely a Men Only Club, and women who tried to enter did so at their peril. For those who entered unwittingly the hazards were even greater.

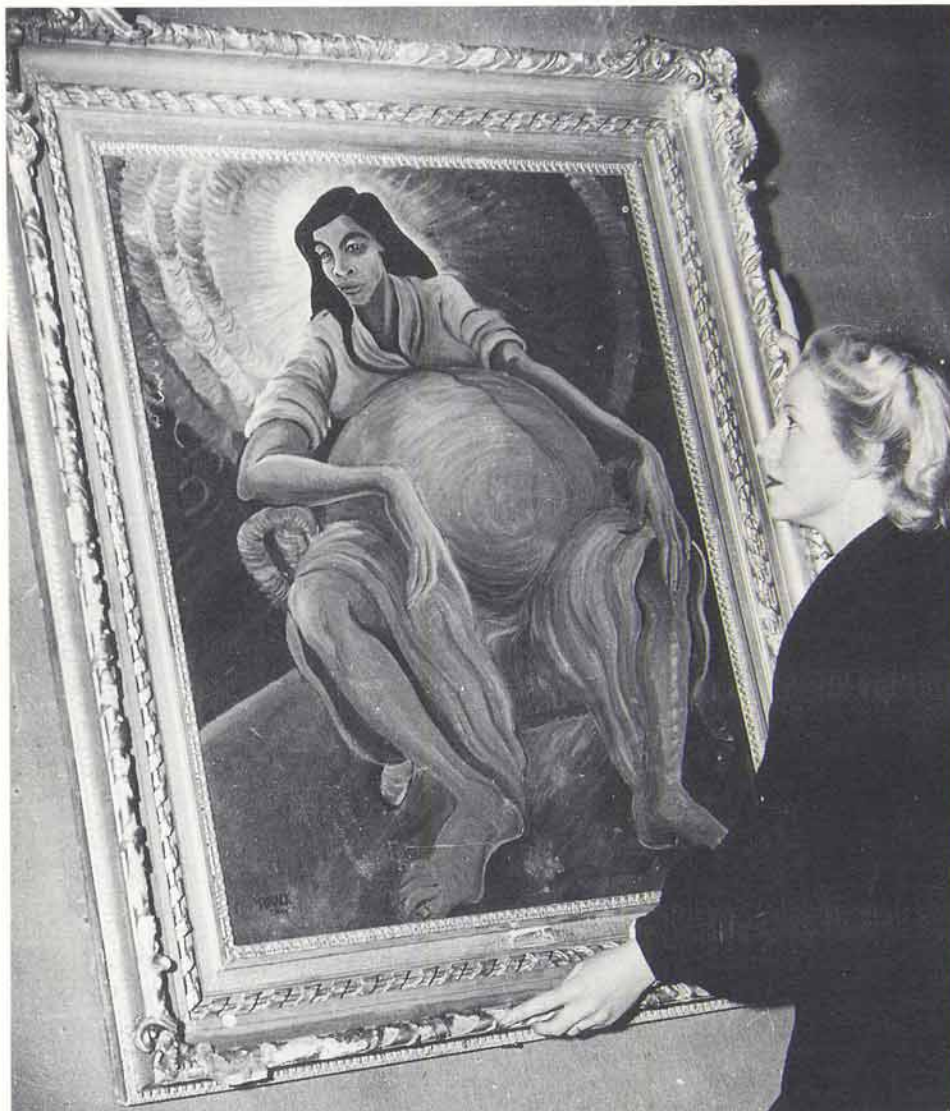
The large set of paintings and drawings from my time in Broome was first exhibited at the Art Gallery of WA in August 1946. Dr Battye and Robert Campbell, in a slightly bemused state — 'We've never seen anything like this before . . .' — cleared out the whole lower gallery for the display. Encouraged chiefly by Keith George who bought my 'Old Diver' to support his assumption, I set out for 'the Eastern States'. All went well in Melbourne — this city has always been receptive to my work — and the leading critic there gave the exhibition high praise. Sydney was another story. My paintings were the antithesis of 'The Charm School' presided over there by Paul Haeffliger and his minions . . .

Despite a spate of publicity concerning this exhibition which centred, however, less on the paintings themselves than on the

social issues that my portraits revealed, very few, apart from some small drawings, sold, and extremely pressed financially by this time (it was long before the advent of 'the Grant' and all that), I beat a retreat back to old Ivanhoe. In flight from the bucolic atmosphere there at the homestead and the attenuated 'smoko' conversations, I built a bark-shade studio on the bank of the Ord River near the cement crossing. It was an idyllic set-up.

Here the work poured forth onto huge canvases — the swag cover paintings — few of which survive today, for most of them were rolled and went up in smoke when the Ivanhoe homestead burned down on September 4, 1950.

Here, too, it was that the major themes of my work began to take shape. I moved from oils to watercolour and developed in this medium the intricate relationship between the Aboriginal people and the landscape — an aesthetic analogy that has been a continuing refrain through the years. I explored the anatomy of movement — figures into landscape/landscape into figures. I poured 'the harvest of the eye' into 'the mill of the imagination' as, walking through the bush with the blacks, harmonies of shape



Elizabeth and 'The Broome Madonna', 1946. 'Portraits on a scale not attempted by me before simply took charge.' Athenium Gallery, Melbourne.

and line and colour fused and flowered before my eyes. This study of the Anatomy of Movement has been an on-going preoccupation of mine. The tensely-developed images of my 'Discoverer and Explorer' series that I was to show in New York 30 years later stem from this time.

Here it was also that I formed a unique artist-to-artist relationship with old Jubbul. He was a Northern Territory native living temporarily at the Ivanhoe bush camp adjacent to the river crossing and my studio. The Kimberley natives were great muralists, but they did not paint on bark or create ground patterns as in the sandy desert areas. What I learned from Jubbul came to light later in the large mural sequences of the 1950s — free adaptations and personal improvisations of bark and ground paintings. I suppose old Jubbul would be the only real art teacher I ever had. His keen interest day after day to see what progress I was making with some of the big canvases was both delight and stimulation. These were days of sheer magic. Later on I called one of the mural sets 'Love Magic'.

All this, to a large extent (although I exhibited there, and quite successfully),

made me something of a Maverick in the Perth of the 1940s and more of an outsider than the overseas artists starting up then.

'The pastures of passionate perception' upon which I had been browsing for so long, in so much isolation and so far removed from any urban centre, set me apart. What I was trying to express or, more accurately, what was trying to find expression through me, was removed from the work of my contemporaries. Over the years the condition of being out on a limb has become my norm. This may have worried me back in the 1940s but 45 years on I enjoy it. Even to this day I know little of who Perth artists are or what they are up to although I do know that, like coffee beans in Brazil, there are now an awful lot of them.

I am always up to my neck in my own work. If I have a salient characteristic it is my ability to work alone, deriving sustenance from my corner of Nature as seen through my temperament. I must be the classic loner, but whether or not this has enabled me to travel the faster I don't know. Perhaps it may become clearer after my next exhibition that I shall be calling: 'The Rim and beyond . . . '.