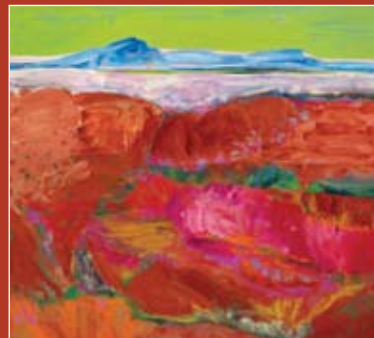


Jo
BERTINI

an instinctively
Australian Artist

Story: Kate Cope Images: Jo Bertini



Nominated as a finalist for the past two years in the Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW, Jo Bertini's art has come full circle. As a young, budding artist in the early 1980s, Jo eagerly left Australia for Milan and all the opportunities that Europe offered culturally and artistically. After being firmly ensconced in Italy and France for ten years, a brief visit to Australia saw Jo experience a 'shock of recognition' that Australia really was 'home'.



In addition, Jo's grandfather, Robert Cotton, was a renowned photographer and her mother is sculptor Anne Ferguson. "It was sort of the family business," says Jo. "Everyone in the family was artistic and creative and everyone had studios and exhibitions. I thought that doing art is what everyone did." So while Jo certainly feels she had a choice in regard to her own career, with such a sympathetic environment and easy education, becoming an artist was very much a natural progression.

Going back a few generations, her family originated from Broken Hill and Jo vividly remembers the red sands and red deserts. "As kids we spent every weekend in Oberon so there was a very strong connection to country through both my parents and their families, all the aunts and uncles and cousins. Everyone was always out in the country."

Perhaps it was this 'connection to country' that Jo experienced as an adult returning to Australia from Europe in her early 30's. Sadly, her grandmother's illness and subsequent death brought Jo back from her established life in Italy. Thinking she would only stay a few weeks, it was such a traumatic time that Jo found herself on a plane to Alice Springs to 'get some air'. What happened next changed the course of her life. "I went out to Ayers Rock and did a couple of trips out bush, out into the centre. It struck me how extraordinary the landscape was and how I had become so European. But I wasn't, I was Australian. I just remember getting off the plane at Alice Springs, going out into the desert and experiencing the red sand and the plants and the smells. I got such a shock of recognition that I remember just crying and crying and thinking, this is home."

Jo did return to Europe for about four months but felt a sense of claustrophobia that she had never experienced before and knew then that she would have to return home for good. "I think it was a functional instinct and artistically I just felt my place was back here. I didn't really understand why, but I knew the reason for my return was the landscape, the desert, the central areas and the Australian bush. I didn't know what kind of paintings I was going to make but I knew that I'd had my time and education (in Europe) and it wasn't enough for me anymore. I had this incredible urge to get back and walk around in the centre of Australia and walk around in the bush – it was just something I needed to do."

As

an artist in Europe, Jo was provided with access to cultural and artist treasures as a matter of course.

While studying at the Brera Academy, the major school of art in Milan, she completed the Fine Arts degree she had started in Sydney by correspondence and was also working as an illustrator for medical journals and children's books. Jo was curious about Italian history and culture and revelled in the opportunity to visit galleries where it was possible to view Picasso's original drawings taken straight from his sketchbook. "The sort of education I had in Italy and France was very European, very historical—a classic education with a lot of emphasis on the genius of the past," she explains. "Now, when I'm teaching art, I'm so grateful for that classic education because it was so rigorous."

Jo's artistic path was also influenced greatly by her childhood, where she was surrounded by her artistic family. While still based in Europe, Jo spent time with her aunt and uncle in New York. Her aunt is artist Judith Cotton, and her uncle, Yale Kneeland was chief conservator with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I used to go over to New York and stay with them and then he'd take me around the Met at night when it was closed. My uncle would say 'Oh, we've got a Van Gogh exhibition on at the moment, let's go and have a look' and he would turn on all the lights and we would go and have a look," remembers Jo.





profile *JO BERTINI*



Since that time, Jo has produced an extensive body of work that reflects her passion and sense of belonging to the Australian landscape. Jo has held solo exhibitions in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Bathurst as well as being part of

numerous group exhibitions nationally. In 2001 she was Artist in Residence with The Bundanon Trust and in 2003 with The Bathurst Regional Art Gallery. In 2004 the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra purchased a portrait painting by Jo of indigenous artists 'Kitty Kantilla and Freda Warlapini – Milikapiti'. Jo has received many art prizes for both her portrait and landscape paintings and her work is included in collections both nationally and internationally. With a BA in Literature, Jo is also a respected writer as well as a generous and technically skilled art teacher.

But the role Jo most enjoys currently is that of expedition artist with Australian Desert Expeditions, a group that uses pack camels to undertake scientific and indigenous research in Australian desert regions. As the expedition artist, Jo's role is to record scientific findings by mapping out specific sites of interest and providing the sort of detail that the human eye and hand can convey, providing insight that a digital image may miss.

The time spent in the desert also provides Jo with the inspiration and 'source' material for her own paintings. Jo's relationship with the desert is strong and deep, as she explains. "What it (the desert) does for my work is provide the solitude and the space to actually be in the environment that I have a connection to. There is so much information for me out there artistically and so much inspiration that even if I walked around the desert every day for the rest of my life I wouldn't have enough time to paint all the paintings I need to paint."



It's this connection to the land that Jo finds so fascinating, not only in terms of her art but also in regard to how the land affects people. "When people go out to the desert, they go from being a certain type of person. I went from being very European, in an urban, educated way—quite an internalised and conceptual sort of person. When I went out into the desert, I became desertified, completely changed by the desert. You become practical, and everything

is about your senses, your experience, your connection with weather, with landscape. It's all very immediate and instinctive. That's what desertification is, a relationship that is a symbiotic and constant dialogue between landscape and people. That's what our history and our science are about, and that's what Australian Desert Exhibitions is about, and that's what my work is about—it's about this relationship."

It seems that the sense of peace and wellbeing that the Australian bush invokes have provided the perfect environment for Jo, an instinctively Australian artist who continues to produce such wonderful interpretations of both landscape and people.

MORE INFORMATION

Jo Bertini's artwork can be viewed at the Tim Olsen Gallery, Woollahra, Sydney

www.timolsengallery.com

www.australiandesertexpeditions.com.au

