

# Real riches to be found in an enduring and abstract vision

In an era of fleeting fads, Ann Thomson's works invite quiet contemplation, writes **Joyce Morgan**.

**A**nn Thomson didn't lack for art books in her childhood, when her father ran a Brisbane bookstore. But those she encountered did lack one vital element. "Nothing was illustrated in colour," she says.

But the absence of illustrated art books in the 1930s and 1940s had its advantages for Thomson.

"A lot was left to the imagination," she says. "The imagination grew in those circumstances, it wasn't spoon fed. Imagination is a big part of going further with the subject matter."

Thomson has been feeding her artistic imagination for half a century as an abstract painter and sculptor. In an era of artistic fads, she has been unwavering in her vision.

"I have just found a path that is mine," she says.

Prolific and disciplined, Thomson is already at work when I arrive mid-morning at her home and studio.

A chook pecks at the grass outside the studio, giving a farmyard feel to Waverley in the eastern suburbs. The ambience is extended in her studio, in which old farm implements lie on shelves awaiting

rebirth in her art. Her works for her latest solo show have recently left her studio, a former lemon butter warehouse in which she has worked for the past two decades. "It feels empty at the moment," she says.

Nonetheless, works on paper are strewn around the floor and canvases lean against walls. There's a sense of energy, that this is an engine room.

"I try to work every day. It's a pattern you have to stick to because one day gives to the next and the next," she says. "It's like there's a thread between you and your creative self."

Thomson's evocative works, many of which are in major collections, invite quiet contemplation and reveal themselves slowly.

"Creating something is more letting go than thinking," she says. "It's like a meditation. I first noticed when I left art school that I'd hear this kind of humming sound. I just put a tune into my head that goes round and round and nothing else can get in."

Thomson set her course as a nine-year-old schoolgirl when her art teacher set up a still life for her class.

"There was something in me that knew how to paint. I never looked back. That's when I decided I wanted to be an artist. Even though



Photo: Dean Sewell

'I try to work every day. It's a pattern you have to stick to ... It's like there's a thread between you and your creative self.' **Ann Thomson, artist**

there have been many obstacles. I've always known what I've wanted," she says.

Her parents were opposed to her going to art school. When she eventually moved to Sydney, she could not, at first, afford to attend. While her male contemporaries were carousing at the Paddington artists mecca, the Hungry Horse, Thomson was there working as a waitress.

"The path wasn't as easy as for men," she says.

Such was her determination to

practise her art that, as a young mother, she would get up in the night to paint.

"I just had to. I couldn't think of any other way of doing it," she says. "It's amazing how you can do things. For me, it's a necessity to be an artist."

Thomson studied at East Sydney Technical College, now the National Art School, and has combined her practice with a long career as an art teacher. She has never been afraid to work on a large scale. Her biggest

work to date, her 1992 sculpture *Australia Felix*, which evoked exploration and maritime discovery, spanned 11 metres.

"I like big, I've worked out how to do it," she says.

*Australia Felix* is among the works from across her career in a lavishly illustrated publication, the first by Tim Olsen Editions, which also includes essays by David Malouf and Terence Maloon.

Invariably described as an abstract artist, it is not a label Thomson uses. "I don't feel as though I am totally abstract," she says. "I might abstract something but I don't just paint shapes."

She fetches a work of muted swirling colours that she painted after a visit to New Zealand.

"It might not say New Zealand to you, but it started something in my mind that becomes a visual memory," she says. "Everything was moving - clouds and mountains."

Approaching 70, Thomson has never forgotten the visits she made as a young artist to Ian Fairweather on Bribie Island.

"He wanted to make paintings that he hadn't seen before," she says. "That's what I want to do. Something I've never seen before."

*Inscapes* by Ann Thomson opens at Tim Olsen Gallery tonight. Ann Thomson by Anna Johnson is published by Tim Olsen Editions, RRP \$80.