

Desert heart

Artist Jo Bertini spent a decade travelling and studying overseas, only to discover that her heart's inspiration lay in the dry, rugged deserts of Australia's timeless interior.

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Jo Bertini



Artist Jo Bertini has become a passionate advocate for the conservation and understanding of Australia's interior. Her wild, dark curls, arresting green eyes and sun-kissed complexion belie the city setting in which we meet. Even in her suburban home, Bertini seems like someone who is most comfortable sleeping under the stars in a swag. Her shoes come off within five minutes and conversation swings from her immediate surroundings to her love of the desert.

Bertini's most recent exhibition, at Sydney's Tim Olsen Gallery earlier this year, was the result of an extended stay in the Simpson Desert. On that particular journey, 18 camels carried provisions for about as many people, who travelled on foot from a departure point south of Alice Springs. It was a life-changing experience for Bertini, whose show, 'A Desert Within', captured the lonely, vital essence of the centre of Australia.

"I lay in the gibber plain [a naturally occurring flat sea of reflective volcanic rock] and thought, 'I'm at the source of everything. I am right at the heart of this country.' What more could anyone possibly want?"

As an artist, Bertini found the experience of peace she discovered in the desert to be transforming. "I'd spend

all morning drawing, looking at the landscape and just talking to myself, reflecting, emptying myself of all the urban ego stuff. I'd look up and there was this incredible luminous sky that goes on forever, and at the top of a dune a line of camels. I'd just think, 'Oh my God, who gets to do this, in the middle of Australia?' It's just extraordinary."

Bertini is soon to embark on another walk in the Simpson Desert, beginning in the north-east corner of South Australia. It will take her and a group of researchers in a diagonal direction across the state, following the creek systems and tributaries to Lake Eyre in SA's south-west.

On an expedition, Bertini works from just before dawn until sunset. "I am flooded with all this information about colours, shadows, camels and light, and I just think, 'Quick!' I have to grab this stuff and madly consume it. Anything just to get it down. I know I've lost 70 per cent of it, but I hope that a lot returns when I get back to the studio."

Born into a family of artists (her mother is sculptor Anne Ferguson; painter Judy Cotton is her aunt), Bertini spent her after-school time at various education facilities where her mother taught art. She was encouraged to take classes herself. "I didn't realise at the time that it was good

because I just wanted to be at someone's house eating chocolate biscuits. Instead, I was up to my elbows in clay."

Now, she considers this education to be an enormous gift. "Once you have all those skills and they become second nature, that's when you can turn your back and really explore your own territory," she says.

At 18, desperate to experience firsthand the exotic locales she'd explored in the novels of Lawrence Durrell, Bertini left Australia and travelled extensively, supporting herself with children's book illustrations, botanical illustrations and portrait commissions.

"In Europe there is so much history and so much reference, it became a little bit claustrophobic," she recalls. "I wanted to do my own thing and I was constantly thinking, 'How can an Australian girl ever be capable of creating something that's worth anything while [she's] surrounded by all this genius?'"

The flexible nature of her work allowed Bertini to travel throughout Europe, Africa and parts of Asia – travels that inspired her work, including a children's book published when she was 21, *A Man and His Camel*, about endangered animals along China's Silk Route.



Previous page: *Old Camel Road – Pilbara*, 2007, oil on canvas, from Bertini's recent 'A Desert Within' exhibition. Clockwise from top left: *Sacred Mountain, Pilbara-Himalaya*, 2006, oil on canvas, hangs over the fireplace, keeping company with various framed works on paper; treasured portraits of Bertini's two children, *Timothy and Antia*, 2006, oil on canvas; the artist in her element, *Sand Country Corridor*, 2007, oil on canvas.



Above left: Bertini's suburban family home in Sydney takes in views of national parklands, a lush green counterpoint to the desert landscapes that inform much of her recent output. Above right: a kaleidoscope of images and inspiration, notes and memories covers a wall of the studio. Opposite: in her paint-splattered apron, Bertini stands before *Duelling Moons*, 2007, oil on canvas. The artist's work is represented in prestigious galleries as well as private and corporate collections, including Canberra's National Portrait Gallery and the Macquarie Bank Collection.

"Perhaps a camel walked over my mother's pregnant stomach," she laughs, "because I've always loved them." Among the works in her recent exhibition was a cast bronze sculpture of a camel. "I'd love to do more of them," she says.

On her third visit home in a decade, Bertini chanced upon a trip to Australia's dusty interior. It was a journey that struck an immediate chord and changed the course of her life. "I was overcome by this homesickness," she recalls. "I suddenly thought, 'I don't want to be a foreigner anymore.' I hadn't spoken English in 10 years and I realised how connected I was to the Australian landscape. I came back to Australia and it's this great land of empty, primitive opportunity. I can create my own world here."

So she packed up her European life and returned, brimming with knowledge gleaned from long days studying and imitating the European masters' works.

The most difficult thing for Bertini to reconcile with her love of the outback is the enforced isolation it brings from her two children, aged 14 and 10. Being a working mother is tough, she explains,

and was particularly so when her children were little. "I'd have physical yearnings for them, but I've built [the] children into the way I work. It's hard, but you do it – women have always done it. And what is the choice? You either don't have children, or you don't have a career, and you don't work. How can you not? It's like saying, 'Don't read anymore, don't be creative.' How can you stop someone? You can't, so there is no choice, really. I just kept being creative and I had children."

Having children has also transformed the way she works. "Before I had kids I was a lot tighter. Now I take enormous risks in my studio and am less inhibited, because I have to be more disciplined in my life. The work is fast and furious."

Her studio is on the ground floor of her Mosman home, located at the bottom of a steep hill fronting national parklands. The cottage has remained largely unchanged since she bought it with her businessman husband, Anthony, 15 years ago, although some of Bertini's serendipitous finds have required that the house be modified to fit them. She might chance upon a door in a rubbish heap, or an old stove on the side of the road.

The work created as a result of her forays into the wilderness is scattered around her home: stark colours, scratchy lines and bold brushstrokes echo the rugged landscapes Bertini has immersed herself in. She merges layers of colour in ways that reflect centuries of underlying history. In a suburban dwelling, the paintings seem almost a metaphor for Bertini's disconnection from her city environment. "I often find myself counting down the weeks until I can get back to the bush," she admits.

In this little corner of Sydney, Bertini applies her knowledge of the European masters to her own work, inspired by the centre of this continent. Although there are still a few things she'd like to see – an exhibition at the Louvre, for example, or the Russian permafrost – her appetite for foreign travel has abated, and in its place is a deep, steadfast love of Australia. "When I'm out in the bush, I think, 'What more could I want in life?' It's the best gift you could be given. I feel such a sense of belonging and absolute fulfilment. There's no equivalent sense of peace; it's perfect." ●

