

THE SATURDAY PAPER

Edition No. 183 NOVEMBER 18 – 24, 2017

PROFILE

Motherhood saw artist Del Kathryn Barton wholeheartedly embrace colour, but her work's mystical and frenetic style – on show in a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria – emerged from the troubled inner life of her own childhood. "It was a very rich part of managing my anxiety growing up, growing these deep internal creative places. It gave me a lot of fortitude." By *Miriam Cosic*.

Artist Del Kathryn Barton's atheistic devotion



Del Kathryn Barton

CREDIT: EUGENE HYLAND

Cosic, Miriam. "Artist Del Kathryn Bartons Atheistic Devotion." *The Saturday Paper*, 18 Nov. 2017.

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“Strangeness,” Baudelaire said, “is a necessary ingredient in beauty.” Certainly strangeness has always been part of Del Kathryn Barton’s life, as her wiry, frenetic, vaguely mythological artworks – more drawings with colour than paintings – attest. The many-breasted women, the naive children, the liquid Bambi eyes, the minutiae of the decorative detail, the strange beasts and sinuous vines and leaves, the snakes and baubles, the plump flowers and open vulvas, the fractured collages and the paeans to motherhood: all those quirks of her style, recognisable from 20 paces, come out of an imagination formed by the terrifying hallucinations and strange voices that haunted her when she was a child. They still lurk on the boundaries of her world but are tamed pharmacologically and, she says, by an adult perspective that allows her to observe and rationalise when they howl from the edges.

Her exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, containing 150 works, is the largest of five showings of important women artists running over summer. Barton may surprise visitors who know her mostly from her Archibald Prize-winning portraits: the 2008 winning self-portrait of herself with her children, *You are what is most beautiful about me, a self-portrait with Kell and Arella*; her portrait of Hugo Weaving, simply titled *Hugo*, which won in 2013; and her 2011 entry, *Mother (a portrait of Cate)*, depicting the actor Cate Blanchett and her three sons.

Her hallmark style manages to be at once sentimental and scary, decorative and challenging, its apparent superficiality masking vital subject matter. “The only reason to make art,” she says, “is if you can’t live without making it.”

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"I AM A LOVER AND I ALWAYS FALL HARD FOR PEOPLE, BUT THE WAY THAT I LOVED THE CHILD WAS UNLIKE ANYTHING I COULD HAVE IMAGINED."

Barton's childhood on a farm in East Kurrajong, near Penrith, New South Wales, was unusual. Her parents were teachers and committed Christians, and her father's passion was the family house he was building on 20 hectares at the end of a kilometre-long dirt road, surrounded by another 200 hectares of lush forest. The actual family lived on site in tents while this was going on, and Barton refers to pictures of her mother stoically washing her hair in a bucket and cooking on a camp stove.

Del – the eldest of three siblings but excruciatingly, debilitatingly shy – was enduring her "thing", as she calls it. "I would have hallucinations, I would hear voices," she says. "My psychiatrist wonders if it was a kind of fitting, in my brain. It's possible that schizophrenia might have been a diagnosis, too. When I would have an episode, I was completely debilitated. I was not able to function. The whole world would move and surge in very weird ways, and sounds were apocalyptic, screaming voices. I was terrified and I would just be put to bed."

She wasn't diagnosed at the time, her mother preferring holistic approaches. She already loved drawing, however, and when she was recovering her mother would put her in a darkened room lit with candles and give her paper and coloured crayons. "She was a Steiner teacher, so she had paradigms around connectivity and creativity. She taught me to turn fear into creative expression. It was extraordinary – you had all this energy going out and you're building something at the same time."

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The other help she had when she was young was from her imaginary friends, although she finds the term too silly to use. “Up until my teenage years, I was very innocent and very naive and very gullible,” she says, and tries haltingly but fails to describe those friends. “In my mind I would travel with... There was one companion I had... I did believe in spirit entities, though I don’t now. But it was a very rich part of managing my anxiety growing up, growing these deep internal creative places. It gave me a lot of fortitude.”

She had a kind of bravery, a wildness, in other ways, mostly to do with her own body. She loved to be naked, until her father put a stop to it when she was 11. “We had a number of dams, but there was this one that we called the clay pan. The water was white because it had all this white-grey clay underneath it and one of my greatest pleasures was to go over there alone, and strip off, and cover myself in this white clay and imagine that I was a primordial bush girl. I would let it dry in the sun and then dive into the water and rub it off... It was all very experiential and I was always bringing my own created and imagined narrative to those physical experiences.”

When she finished school, she enrolled at the College of Fine Arts (COFA) at the University of NSW. She had been to Sydney before but the size and the bustle of it had brought her undone. She knew, however, that she had to become an artist. She managed to cope, with ups and downs, and graduated three years later.

Then disaster struck. It was 1994. She had hired a small commercial gallery space in Sydney. At home in the country, she was packing her “old bomb” with her pictures to take them to Sydney when the house caught fire. She was alone. It burned to the ground, taking her paintings with it. Her position on it now is philosophical, although she suffered severe post-traumatic stress at the time. “Everything burned but it pushed me out into the world and I’m really grateful for that,” she says. “And you learn to process things. And no one died – someone could have easily died in that fire.”

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Like a phoenix, she rose from the ashes. Her ascent in the Sydney art world was rapid. The storied, larger-than-life Sydney dealer Ray Hughes took her on when she was still in her mid-20s and soon persuaded her that drawing was her strength though it was deemed old-fashioned at the time. She met the man who would anchor her emotionally in the world, financial services executive Chris Plater. When their first child, Kell, was born, the world and her work exploded. He is now 14 and their daughter, Arella, is 13. “It was about trying to find a way of trying to transfer the line onto canvas because I really wanted to work with colour after I became a mother,” she says. “I had the most profound need for it. An abundance of it. All these new emotions and this intoxicating in-loveness.

“I am a lover and I always fall hard for people, but the way that I loved the child was unlike anything I could have imagined. It spoke so deeply to very wounded places in me. The sun had just risen.” She pauses, and delivers one of her irresistible shrieks of laughter at the pun. But what does colour have to do with those maternal emotions? “Colour is about abundance and about the blossoming of so much potentiality. And again – this sounds so sentimental, I’m shy to say this – but to be in service. That sounds so friggin’ Christian. Looking after a little person is tough – I don’t want to romanticise it for one minute – but everything about him...”

The core of everything we know her for now, and the colour, came out of motherhood: “The marrying of the colour, and the filling in, and the density and the generosity of the surface...” Her film work, *Red*, takes the concept of motherhood, of femininity and of a predatory power rarely associated with the female, to an apogee. Premiered at the Adelaide Festival, it is based on the lifecycle of the redback spider. The female is larger than the male and once he has inseminated her she consumes him. Weirdly, he helps the process by positioning himself to be eaten.

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An intense Cate Blanchett, wielding sharp scissors, is the human mother. Actor Alex Russell and Barton's daughter Arella are her family. The dancer Charmene Yap, who now calls herself the "grandmother" of the Sydney Dance Company, performs the spider in a mask so suffocating she had to work in two-minute bursts, holding her hand up to stop when she was losing her breath. The soundtrack is driving industrial music by Tom Schutzinger. Everything about the film – the story of its making, the finished product – is intense and mesmerising. It is highly sexualised, like so much of Barton's work, but far from pornographic. Barton has fielded questions about a perceived misandry in the film, which she says is "a total misinterpretation of what this is because the man offers himself to the woman. It's very nuanced and very layered, very complex. It also has very deep beats around life, death, the mother, sexuality, aloneness in the universe."

A month before Barton travelled to Melbourne to hang her new show, her own mother, to whom she was close, died of pancreatic cancer. She had gone slowly, over two years, and Barton had rung her every day until the end. She had also worked like a demon to finish the show. "I haven't had a day off in months and months and months," she said, two days before leaving for Melbourne. "Chris, my husband, has been incredible – my mother's death, the show – I'm so, so blessed."

One of the major pieces in the NGV show is a "devotional" work to her mother. It is a sculpture made of Huon pine and silk, called *At the foot of your love*. The pine has been sculpted into the shape of a conch shell, which, of course, is an empty home, reflecting the absence in death of the occupant. The fabric is a collage of collages, some 200 assemblies of scraps of fabric and pictures cut from magazines and many other sources. Barton shared a love of fabrics with her mother, and of quilting. The collage was painted on fine silk, "the quality of an Hermès scarf", she says. "The idea was that I wanted to make the world as the biggest handkerchief for the oceans of tears for departed mothers." Tears run down her own face in a counterpoint to her peeling laugh, and both run through our conversation. The underlying sentiment, she says, is "I love you and I thank you and I farewell you".

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I mention the Christian overtones the work evokes – a reverse Pietà, paintings of the death of the emblematic mother, Saint Mary – then quickly assure her I am an atheist, just as she is, and that, of course, it is all about atoms and energy in space. “That’s such an amazing mind-fuck, what more do you need?” she says, and that cockatoo laugh rings out while her cheeks are still wet.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Nov 18, 2017 as “Living colour”. [Subscribe here](#).



Miriam Cosic
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