For Del Kathryn Barton, a prolific practice that spans drawing, painting, film and photography, is the gateway to an inner universe — one ruled by boundless imagination and the need to follow creative curiosity to its inevitable ends.

By Sammy Preston

“The house went up like a bomb,” says Del Kathryn Barton. The two-time Archibald Prize winning artist is recalling the time her childhood home was set ablaze. It was the day of her first public exhibition, a body of work conceived up to that point. “I was alone, I was warned away from Sydney city student life to dwell in the quieter realm of my family’s sweeping bushland block. I was thrown out into the front lawn, and dying to think about things like photo albums,” she says.

“We lost everything. It was such a catastrophic experience,” she adds. “It thrust me back out into the world. I suppose I feel that’s where my journey as a professional artist, or however you want to categorise it, really started.”

Perhaps somewhat symbolically, it’s Barton’s relentless, fiery imagination that has forever been the spark and the burning hot core of her work. Peering into the layered, explosive composition, you are straightaway transported into the narrative of a rich cosmic netherworld, an “adult fairy-tale” as she would have it. “From quite a young age, not only did I love drawing anyway and drew obsessively, I lived a very fertile life of the imagination,” she says. “I absolutely believed in unicorns, I had fairy friends.” The essence of a lush, generative Australian bush, drawn from that childhood, permeates almost every scene, too. Her statuesque space goddesses wear geckos and peacock feathers as hairpieces, while others careen cocktails and write lists.

For Del Kathryn Barton, the image is the portal to an inner universe — one ruled by boundless imagination and the need to follow creative curiosity to its inevitable ends.
We’re sitting in the centre of her Paddington studio, surrounded by a new set of near-complete canvases featuring her signature mystic mothers. One is riding a red cloud nebula, submerged in a galaxy of luminous blue and gold planets. The piece is just one of a few set to be shipped to Berlin for MAD LOVE, a group show of Australian talent Barton has been tasked with curating. Opening in June of this year at Arndt Art Agency (A3) Gallery, and featuring new works by friends Ben Quilty, Paul Yore, Dale Frank and more, the show is driven by stream of consciousness-style prose that Barton composed herself. The last line reads, ‘BODY as unmitigated surges of light and energy, just briefly, but oh, such, such, such, love, mad, mad love.’ “It’s a rhythm,” she says from behind thick-framed black glasses, her hair whipped into a sculptural knot on the crown of her head. “It’s something I could make work for the rest of my life - and maybe I am.”

Along with this, the artist’s loaded 2017 calendar includes ‘r u a bunny?’, her first solo exhibition in the United States at Albert Benda Gallery, and a group show in Vienna. There’s also a survey exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria at the end of the year. Titled ‘The Highway is a Disco’, the show will be a “career highlight” for Barton. "I’m giving everything I’ve got for that," she says. At the time of writing however, Barton’s second short film piece has just debuted at the Art Gallery of South Australia. And while her creative energy is far-reaching and anything but siloed, it’s film as a medium that’s especially ignited her passion of late. “Drawing is still to this day the most integral, core part of my practice. It’s the most immediate - I think very well with my hands,” she explains. “The eruption of the inner life, and the conceptual life comes up most freely and most honestly through working with my body. Certainly translating that way of working into film has been challenging, but I do feel that I have found a way to do that.”
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