

LYN HARRISON

TELLING HER STORY

*What does the caravan mean to me? Living free...
true to your own instinct.*

LYN HARRISON is a wellknown Blue Mountains artist with a dedicated following of collectors. This year's series of about 20 works in acrylics which she calls *Flight and Balance* had already been enthusiastically previewed online by many people and some had been sold even before the gallery doors opened.

Many artists anguish about what to paint next and what might be a fresh take on their genre. Is the market for landscapes saturated, will buyers want portraits of people they don't even know? Lyn Harrison is an artist whose life and art are completely enmeshed. She does not seek out her subjects, they find her. The messages and themes running through her work are like characters in a play. They tell a story, what we imagine to be her story—the expression of this artist's life as she lives it day to day. Her works are funny, they are moving, they are poignant, they are frightening, indeed sometimes very frightening... Forget about the medium. This is not about paint applied from the end of a brush.

Many of us as we reach a mature age begin to reflect more on our lives. We seek out patterns, reasons, meaning. Mostly we rely on our memories and sometimes on our dreams. We consciously as well as subconsciously order our experience and file away the records. For an artist like Lyn Harrison, memories and dreams and daily experience feed her work; she minutely explores the detail of her unique life and weaves her stories. Some

of her narratives will be more difficult for an observer to interpret than others. Lyn says that the meaning is for the beholder to decide.

In her visualisations of the life within, the vehicles Lyn uses for her stories are an eclectic collection of personal symbols. One of the most significant of these images is the caravan. I noticed some years ago that the caravan was different colours, usually green and yellow, but now it has changed to pink, although not always!

Lyn says of the caravan:

I think the caravan began to emerge about 2004 or 2005 and by 2006 had become a dominant image in my work. The particular caravan that I was using was a small toy I still have from my childhood. It used to have four black horses, all made of painted metal, but they were lost forever in a sandpit when I was four. Over the years the caravan and my little pink house have morphed into a pink caravan ... What does the caravan mean to me? Living free, outside the restrictions of convention, a bit wild and free to roam, true to your own instinct, but at the same time contained, a little oasis of tranquillity in the wide world of chaos.

Does any other image conjure up so well that which is desirable and longed for? Is this an image which has always been embedded in our human consciousness? It symbolises freedom so perhaps it was only once people became sedentary that the freedom to roam, having been lost, reappeared as a longing, a need. It is said that the natural



Five Past

inclination of human beings is the nomadic life. And of course there is also the human longing for flight.

Not all of Lyn's symbols are as benign. Indeed, even her caravans do not always seem like safe havens. In *Journey to the Interior* in 2006, a lumbering, hairy creature almost the size of the caravan can be seen pulling the little yellow-roofed green-painted vehicle using what appear to be huge leather straps. Is the caravan being hijacked

or is it being saved from some invisible threat? Has the caravan become a burden which can only be dragged slowly along?

In Lyn's latest exhibition, *Flight and Balance* what is most striking is the lightness of feeling, the exuberance, the crazy pinks and reds, the cockatoos and, of course, the tiny pink—or is it still sometimes yellow and green?—caravan. Lyn's red-haired alter ego, at various times



wearing ballet slippers, or black gloves or pink tutu, is happier and more light-hearted than we have previously seen her. There are red shoes with bows and a bottle of perfume, the tutu flung carelessly aside and a pink leg kicking the air, a teapot and mugs, a wine bottle with two glasses.... And yes, here is a glimpse of a familiar blue chair. We observe a contented and well-lived life. Our heroine is at one with her world.

Lyn's faithful dog and her mostly blue steed (although sometimes it is red) also accompany her this year, giving their usual stalwart support as participants or simply by watching from the sidelines. But am I right about the so-called faithful dog? Perhaps it is not a loyal friend at all. My first introduction to the dog over 20 years ago caused me some concern when I saw him being tossed like flotsam and jetsam amongst the tall buildings of an alien city (a memorable exhibition of Lyn's work at Sweet Foray Gallery in Katoomba). I wasn't at all certain that Lyn's dog was friendly. Perhaps he too has mellowed over the years or perhaps it's just that he prefers this setting, colourful and magical, to that frightening cityscape. He is sometimes a black dog and sometimes brown and he does have sharp teeth. He is certainly not the stereotypical 'black dog'. Lyn



says: ...the dog has many guises and personas and a long time ago I did a painting called 'Fear of the Dog' so we've had a love/hate relationship and have now come up with a happy acceptance.

Lyn's work is savoured best in totality although, as with most artists, keeping a record of a lifetime's work was never easy, until now, so much of it will only linger in our memories. Like reading a familiar and well-loved author, Lyn's language becomes increasingly familiar and her plots and dreams form narratives.

The artist's *raucous friends*, the sulphur-crested cockatoos, have a leading role in this exhibition. These are timely arrivals since here on the Blue Mountains we are presently experiencing the pleasures and the challenges of sharing our wild environment with these in-your-face creatures. A comparatively rare sight in towns in the past, they now descend in gangs; they are noisy and boisterous, they can be destructive, they care for no-one and strut in, right under the cat's nose. Landing on the water bowl sends it flying. I'm talking about my cockatoos, not Lyn's. With hers she takes flight and joins in the fun!

Katoomba poet Mark O'Flynn was awarded a residency at Hill End a while ago and the outcome was a humorous



*Above: Evening breathed in and out
Opposite left: Her heart was light
Opposite right: Up*



and evocative collection of prize-winning sonnets in which he addressed some of the best known works by artists associated with Hill End. A number of these sonnets appear on the pages of this issue. They do take the mickey, but at the same time they make us think about the meaning we find in a work of art, and in many cases I think there is more meaning, and often more colour, in a Mark O'Flynn sonnet than in some artists' rather drab renditions!

After reading Mark's clever and humorous sonnets, I looked again at Lyn Harrison's new paintings and I thought, how rich these are! How much they contain— they are clever, funny, freaky, warm and poignant. They tell a story and, after all, isn't that what we want a good painting to do?

Carolynne Skinner



Left: Some of Lyn's caravans

Below right: Just Another Long Road to the World

Below left: He could feel the sound of an accordion on his chest

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