



BIRGITTE HANSEN

Much of Birgitte Hansen's working life has been spent as an artist to the trades unions, painting murals and banners, working in large scale — 'the bigger the better'

It was with trepidation that I arrived in Blackheath on the day before my 47th birthday. The movers had left my stuff at night with just a bed on the floor and so here I was, beginning a new life. Why, eighteen years ago, did I buy this bright pink house on a busy 4-lane highway that no-one else wanted? After a successful, very productive and high profile career in Newcastle I had dreamed of nature and a new start. I was tired and had run out of steam — and so had Newcastle. That city was on count down to the closure of BHP. I had lived there for 22 years, completed a Diploma in Art, brought up my son, divorced, bought and renovated three houses and survived a serious accident.

Cigarette Girl is lifesize, painted on a door

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'BH' or similar initials.



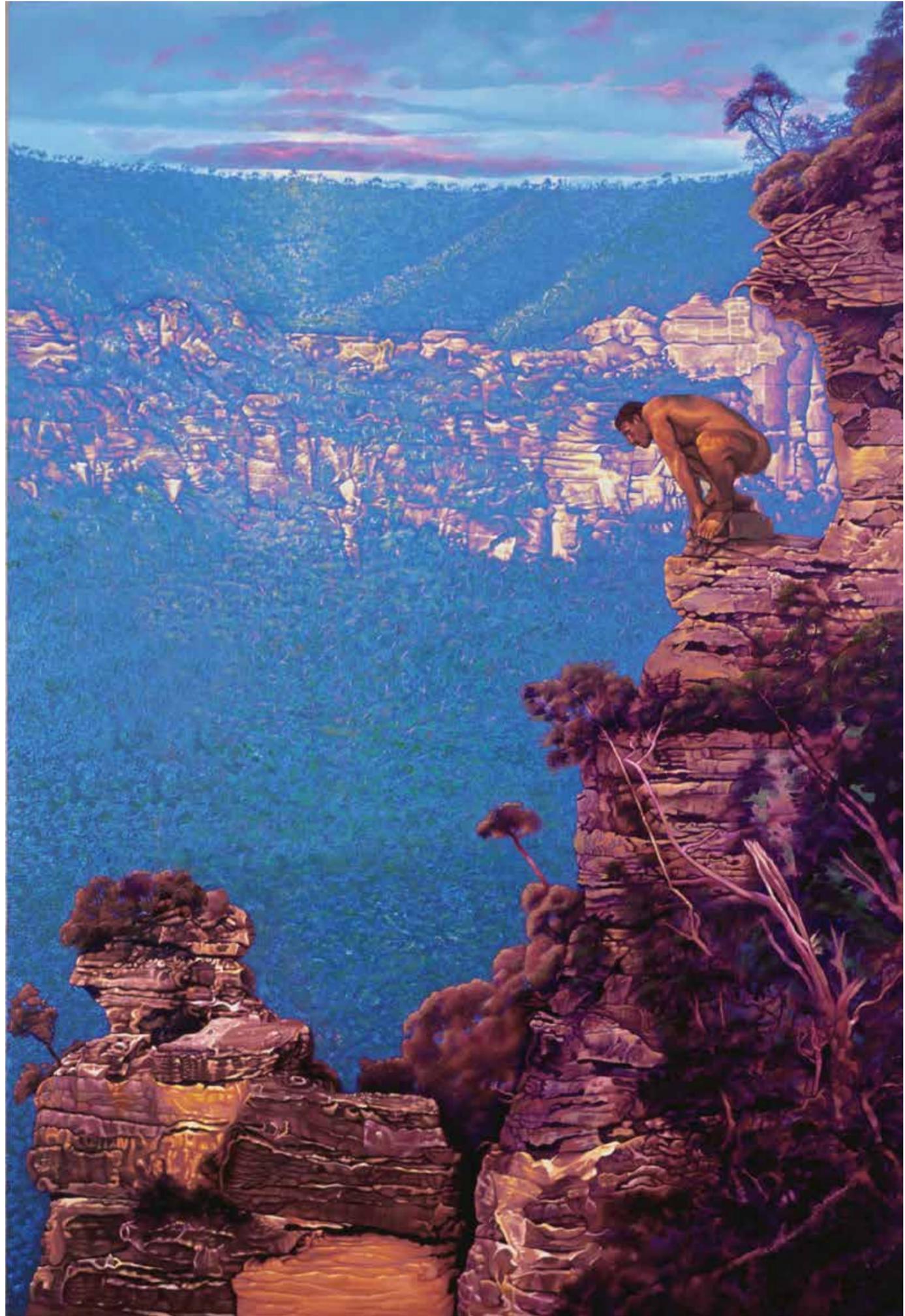
"Monsai Boulders" 2002.

*I thought I would do a take on men:
men being competitive with each
other, wrestling and with the illusion
they are as big as mountains*

Opposite and below:
Three Brothers, 2002, 120x150 cm approx, photo Adrian Baljeu
Originally there were 3 figures, brothers, and the painting was a take on the Three Sisters, but it didn't work. It was part of an exhibition at Gallery Lane in Leura entitled 'Wrestling' which was based on a 1930s booklet I had bought for a dollar. I had finished the mural 'Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?' and thought I would do a take on men: men being competitive with each other, wrestling and with the illusion they are as big as mountains. The effects are Scandinavian—gods and myths. I like to create stories using myths and symbols within a painting. I have spent a lot of time alone and I communicate my ideas through my work.
Left: *Mountain Boulders*, Reinis Zusters mural, Katoomba Street



Reinis Zusters





Above: *Suicide Man*, 110x140 cm approx, photo Adrian Baljeu

My work here has been influenced by the timelessness of the mountains landscape and mankind in relationship to it, our personal struggles, vanity, illusions and the effect this has on our battle to be like gods in relation to the eternal aspects of the landscape. The man in the painting was a Russian diver competing at the Olympic Games and shows the total and absolute effort in his face and his despair as he tried to perform a last dive for a gold medal. After a lifetime of skill and commitment he failed. I recognised this in myself: no matter how hard I tried or wanted something I would never win 'gold'—nor would most of us. The branch around him is an arc of compassion. The bigger picture is of our lemming-like path to the edge of the cliff balanced by nature—the rocks, the lizard and the endless horizon. The sound of this painting is the scream of that supreme effort, the wind and the faint sound of a long-ago aboriginal corroboree as the landscape of this timeless land that we have tried to dominate outlasts us.

Opposite page: *Golden Touch*, 2011, 170 x120 cm

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I had been a foundation member of Newcastle Printmaker's Workshop, Newcastle Community Art Centre, Carrington Resident's Action Committee and active in the art and working life program under the umbrella of the Workers' Cultural Action Committee, a subcommittee of Newcastle Trades Hall Council. I had slept on footpaths on Hunter Street in order to paint a mural, and had produced so many banners for May Day that they called it Gitteday (Gitte for Birgitte). I had worked extremely hard during these years, proving that you could make a living from art and have a social impact. I had become the most high profile and prolific visual artist in Newcastle, but times they were a-changing and I was looking for new challenges.

I have always walked my own path as an artist. I always found my work and my personality did not fit with traditional art galleries. I love working on a large scale — the bigger the better. The challenges of solving the designs and executing them suit me. I have the ability, concentration and the tenacity to get up each day and plod on to completion. I am by nature an introvert but enjoy working with the public and organizations. I love coming up with ideas and creating a visual language to enable them to present themselves to their members and the public. My aim is to elicit an emotional response and so I play with my perfectionist and thoughtful tendencies. I am very proud of my murals and Trade Union banners.

Renovating odd and unusual houses has also been part of my life. When I began looking for a house in the fabled Blue Mountains City of the Arts I first saw a house on the highway at Leura. I thought: 'Yes, I could make myself known from the start. I could let everyone know that I have arrived. That would suit me.' I saw it as continuing my family's tradition of owning a shopfront house. I had been brought up living behind the shop as my parents were shopkeepers and skilled artisans. That was on Parramatta Road in a mixed grocery shop. In Newcastle my three houses had all been shops. But Leura was out of my price range, there was nothing suitable in Katoomba and someone suggested Blackheath. The estate agent showed me a couple of houses but they were not suitable without a studio and then I saw the pink house. Noisy, cold, unfenced, in need of money and work, but an old shop with the false façade — perfect for a mural — and studio space. I bought it very cheaply — it had been on the market for a long time. It had nearly been a gallery but the application to Council had not been completed. And suddenly it was mine. So I did what has always worked for me. I started in one corner of one room and worked myself out. I had some help to fix the bathroom and kitchen but then ran out of money and did the rest myself.

I returned to Newcastle when I was commissioned to paint four murals for the closure of BHP in 1999 and so became part of that amazing closure. Back in Blackheath I painted a mural on the front of my new home and called it 'Mary quite contrary, how does your garden grow?' It was my calling card and a way of saying hullo. Suddenly I was launched into huge controversy. I started receiving threatening anonymous letters in my letterbox, people were parking out the front and I felt frightened. I phoned the local paper and suddenly everyone





This painting is based on the idea of historical eras: geological and natural era moving into aboriginal, then the archway of the colonial and Victorian period looking across the water to the present—a time walk through a painting.

Left:
Marine Symphony, 2004-6, reworked a number of times, 120x180 cm approx, photo Adrian Baljeu

I had been in Sydney at The Rocks looking for ideas to enter a art competition based on this area. I came across a strange archway built of bricks with nothing but a rock face behind it. I was intrigued and three paintings resulted. This one is based on the idea of historical eras: geological and natural era moving into aboriginal, then the archway of the colonial and Victorian period looking across the water to the present—a time walk through a painting. When I look at this work I can almost hear the water, the gulls and music from the Opera House. This has been one of my most popular paintings.

Below:
Another work from the *Marine Symphony* series: this time looking into the future after climate change. Photo Adrian Baljeu



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Eight Hours, 2007, 8m x 8m mural honouring the history of Unions NSW, Sussex Street, Sydney, photo James Murphy
I was approached by Neale Towart to design this mural for the rebuilt Trades Hall depicting the history of the Union, May Day, political involvements, Peace and Green movements and Union achievements.

Murals and Banners

I have painted 33 murals around Australia — public art, community art, commissions, and ceramic tiles, indoors and out. My murals have achieved a considerable public profile and clients have included architects, interior designers, councils, community arts centres, service clubs, pubs, townships, businesses and museums.

I work through a collaborative co-operative design process to a finished mural. I love working on a large scale and enjoy the challenge of designing, fabricating and driving the project to completion.

My first major mural was for the Civic Theatre in Newcastle which I started in 1979. I was part of the resurgence of community and public art during the 1980s and 90s. Remember the huge murals in America? It was often about giving communities a public voice and profile and bringing art out to the street. It's all about collaboration skills, working as a team, designing around a

brief, being prepared to put your life on hold while these mammoth monsters need steering. Each one had its own highs and lows. There are many issues to be solved as well as a great need for endurance. Weather conditions when working outdoors dominate the schedules and rain can be unexpectedly heart breaking.

I have worked with unions in Australia since 1983 producing single and double-sided banners: 16 single and double-sided 'naming' banners and 15 single 'issue' banners. I have enjoyed painting these banners which have evolved into a complex development of images, able to reflect historical and current aspects of each union. These banners have been exhibited widely in Australia and overseas including in an exhibition in Scotland celebrating banners of the world. The Building Trades Group banner was reproduced in *Australian Painting 1788-1990* by Bernard Smith with Terry Smith, Oxford University Press, 1990.

knew. I was the front page story: the local council and the general public all became involved and the legend of my house began.

It is the first house you see as you arrive in Blackheath. Whenever, I returned home, I would turn the last bend and see the house ahead of me, it was always a relief. 'Oh I'm home, it's still there.' That's what I will miss — coming home around that corner. I painted the house two times. The timber part of the mural did not stand up to the Mountains weather and I redesigned the top of it for its final paint. I repainted it at the beginning of 2016 and this last mural I think of as my final gift to the Mountains.

My best known murals completed during my time in the Mountains include high profile projects such as 'Mountain Boulders', a major mural commissioned by Blue Mountains City Council in Katoomba Street, Katoomba based on a painting by Reinis Zusters. Another mural, titled 'Reverence' in 2006 was a community mural in Waratah Street, Katoomba. I was the designer and joint supervising artist with the late much admired Vernon Treweek. In 2007 I painted 'Eight Hours' (see left) a massive 8m x 8m triptych mural at the newly renovated Sydney Trades Hall for Unions N.S.W. in Sussex Street, Sydney.

I exhibited in 2004 in 'Land out of time — The Blue Mountains Landscape Then and Now' at Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest. And I was shown in 2008 in the Salon des Refusés at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney.

'Misty Bluegum Forest' is a mural for Blackheath Public School which was completed in 2008. Last year I painted a mural for the Miners' Union at Cessnock.

In Blackheath I have run art classes for adults, children and people with disabilities. I am writing these words with my house on the market. Another final front page story has appeared in the local Gazette and I am in the process of saying goodbye to my pink house. The crab apple trees and waratahs have given me their best displays and in just a couple of weeks I am returning to Newcastle. Again I have a shopfront house there which I am going to convert into a neighbourhood gallery, with classes, workshops, a studio and living quarters. I will be closer to my son Simon Chawner and granddaughters Celine and Chloe and with a blank canvas to fill in I hope I have the mature age blossoming of my art, to play and to contribute to my society. My Blackheath adventure is now complete and I wish all a fond goodbye.

Birgitte Hansen

Below:

Waiting: In 2015 I was commissioned by the CFMEU Mining Division to produce a mural for the CFMEU Mineworkers 20th Anniversary Memorial Day at Aberdare where 1,800 local mineworkers killed at work are commemorated on the Jim Comerford Memorial Wall. This commission took me back to Newcastle and I realised that I wanted to return. The mural tells of the families, workmates and community waiting to hear news about the fate of the miners. Waiting at the top of the pits is long associated with mining and the emotions involved for a husband or wife, child, family, friends, community or workmates. Again I worked to the edge of my abilities to produce this mural and like the diver portrayed in *Suicide Man* I tried my utmost.





Portrait Peter Adams

*It is the first house you see as you arrive in Blackheath. Whenever I returned home, I would turn the last bend and see the house ahead of me, it was always a relief. 'Oh I'm home, it's still there.'
(Photo Adrian Baljeu)*



'Misty Bluegum Forest' mural at Blackheath Primary School, 2008

