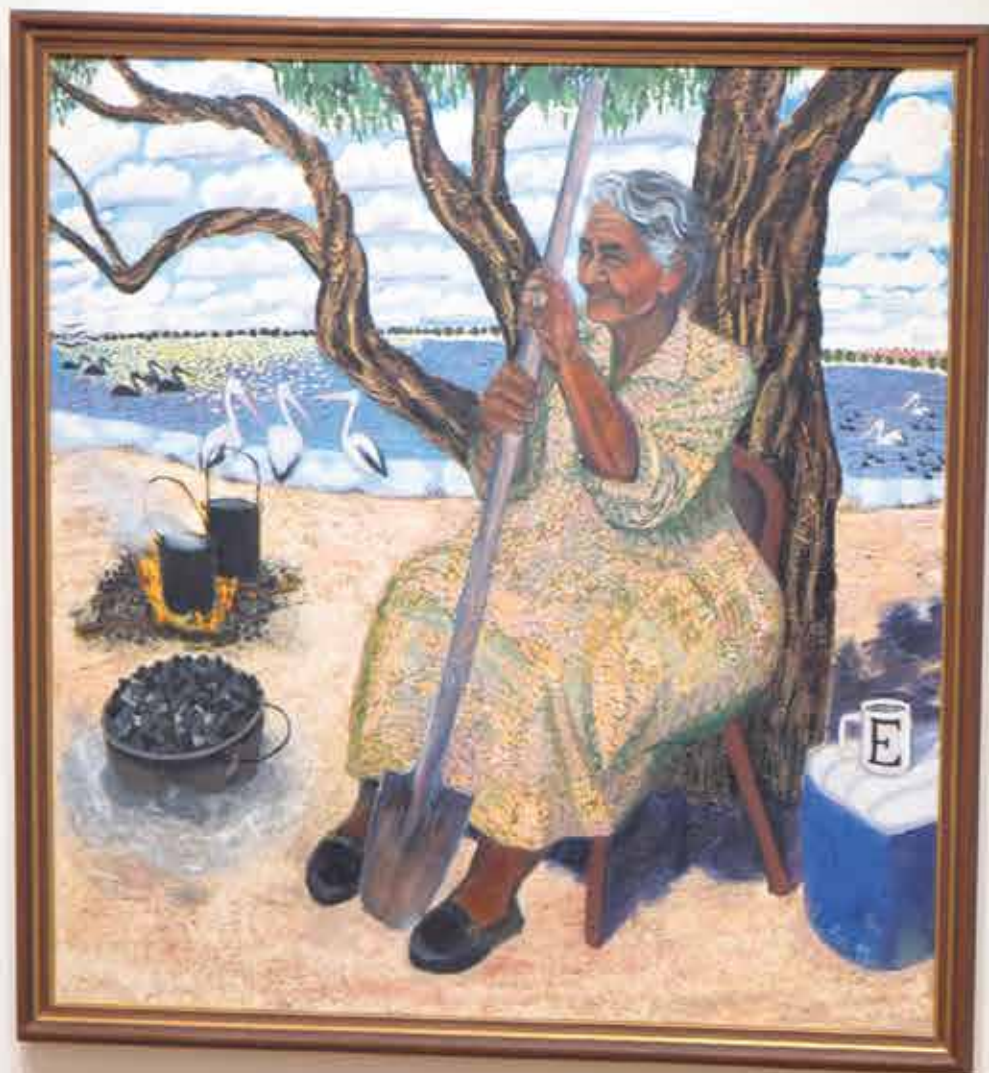




# Spotlight

people, arts & heritage



## Grounded

Karin Donaldson's  
Wilcannia Life in Painting

PICTURE: Dan Schulz

arts and culture

**KARIN DONALDSON** p16-17

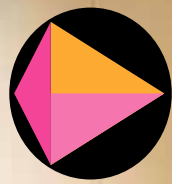
heritage

**WONDER OF WUNDERLICH** p18

poets corner

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Karin Donaldson  
**GROUNDING**  
My Wilcannia Life

**Artist Karin Donaldson, Suzanne Hall and Dennis Williams beside Karin's portrait of Bob and Rita Wilson. Suzanne and Dennis were close friends of Uncle Bob and Aunty Rita.**

**PICTURE:** Supplied

# Grounded

## Karin Donaldson's Wilcannia Life in Painting



**'New Day, New Growth' 1993 by Karin Donaldson. PICTURE:** Dan Schulz

Dan Schulz

**It was in the late seventies that Karin Donaldson had the opportunity to visit the far west when a friend had been positioned as the parish priest in Wilcannia. "I took the opportunity to go and visit and I was just entranced by the old people that were living there at the time," she remembers.**

Having completed her painting studies at the National Art School in Sydney and after being involved in the founding of the Harrington Street Artists' Cooperative Gallery, Karin became increasingly dissatisfied with the urban culture of the east coast and the competitiveness of the art world, "I had an instinct against competition, even against putting myself forward. I wanted to live something much more low-key, but with a richness of experience and meaning."

Karin found that place in Wilcannia. "I realised that these people could lead me more deeply into my own humanity, that it was going to be very important for me to immerse myself in that heart culture."

She moved her life and art practice to Wilcannia in 1980, befriending the older people who would become her spiritual companions.

"I just wanted to be near them to sit with them and learn. They had grown up in the bush, in families that were doing station work, living on their country, eating mainly wild foods, speaking traditional language. There was such a quality of quiet, sane humanity, living a simple life with a strong relationship with nature and other people. I found it very energizing and it showed me another way of being."

Karin has spent the last 41 years living and working as an artist in Wilcannia

and she is exhibiting a selection of work from the last four decades at the Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery. The exhibition, titled *Grounded: My Wilcannia Life*, is an expression of Karin's deep love and appreciation of the land, waters and people of the far west. She traverses across many mediums, styles and themes, from her inner-spiritual journey as a practising Catholic, to portraits of close friends - honouring their story and way of life - to subtle political work expressing the grief and chaos of environmental degradation.

Her portraits of friends include Jim Whyman, Ethel Edwards, and Bob and Rita Wilson, each with an extraordinary story of life in the far west. "I've never regarded myself as a portrait painter but I've painted portraits of people that have meant a lot to me as a way of honouring them."

The idea of painting her close friends Bob and Rita Wilson came to her one day when she heard the incredible story of their relationship, "It suddenly struck me what an amazing couple Bob and Rita were. This couple were so devoted to one another and yet so different."

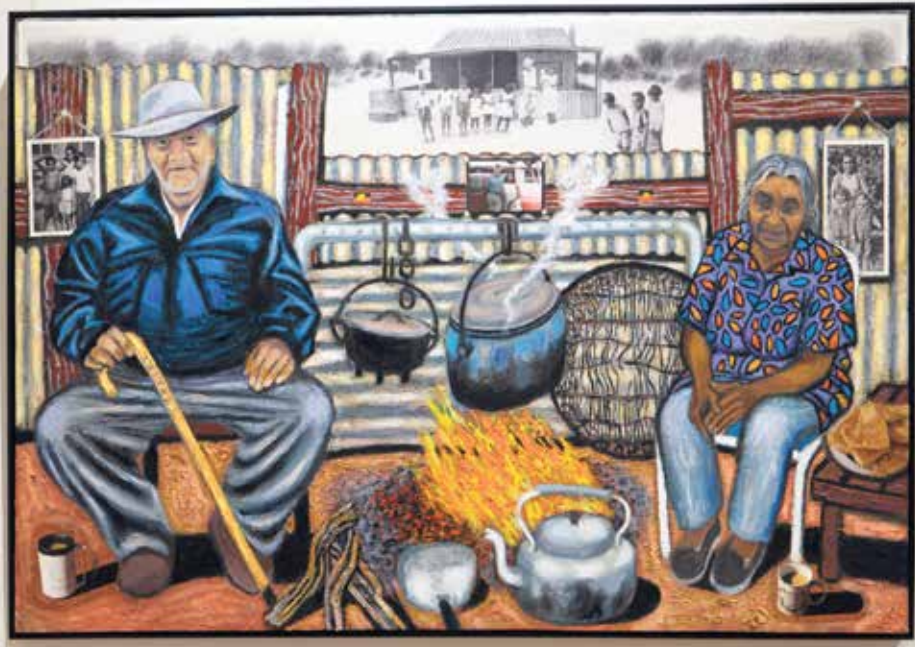
While travelling through the far west for work, Bob Wilson met the love of his life, Rita Webster in Menindee, a young Paakantji woman. They were soon married and Bob built a small tin house on the banks of the Baaka River from second-hand materials, "It was a really simple house with no electricity or running water. They had to rely on rain water and river water, and they cooked and washed clothes over a fire. When I was planning the painting, Uncle Bob said he wanted to be painted next to their fire where they had their outdoor cooking area. He was quite clear about that - he wanted Rita and himself to be seated either side of the fire."

**Continued on page 17**



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**...I realised that these people could lead me more deeply into my own humanity, that it was going to be very important for me to immerse myself in that heart culture**



**Karin Donaldson's 'In a World of Possibilities' 2014-2021 featuring Bob and Rita Wilson. PICTURES: Dan Schulz**

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Karin's portrait of Bob and Rita is alive with history and memory; the mounded hot coals of the cooking fire speak of the many family meals cooked on the banks of the river, and Karin has painted the grilling plate bent and twisted with the history of its use, Rita having cooked countless scones and Johnny Cakes with it. "It took me seven years to complete that painting, it was quite complex to do.

"I tend to work slowly on anything, even small pieces. I work for a while and then put it away and then come back to it fresh again. That's so I don't get bogged down or start painting out of theory or aesthetics. I think it's really important to trust your own intuition and if I keep working on something for too long I start making decisions that don't come from the truest part of myself."

In the portrait of Bob and Rita, a corrugated iron fence provides the background to the couple, and over the fence, in the distance, there are photographs collaged into the painting; historic pictures of the Wilson family and their first home on the banks of the river.

"I thought what we should do is look over the fence into their past but rather than paint the past, which might look as if I was just making up a fairy story, I thought it should be made of real photographs of their house and family."

Karin has also collaged photographs of Bob and Rita's special mugs which sit in the red earth beside their chairs - a Caltex mug for Bob and a souvenir mug from Tasmania for Rita - speaking to the culture of food and conversation that sustained their family life and friendship with Karin. These photos are worked into the image with paint and are not immediately noticeable as photographic images until, upon close examination, this very real history emerges from the paint.

Working across mediums and



**Karin Donaldson's Portrait of Jim Whyman between two landscapes works.**

techniques, from ceramics and collage to lino-print and painting is part of Karin's use of art to explore the invisible structures of reality, "I don't experiment with techniques for the sake of it, I experiment with how to express a subject. I sometimes start with a monoprint or polystyrene print that is uncontrolled, or something I've intuitively scribbled, something that has its own life. I like to begin a bit out of control because life can be out of control! And then I want to draw something meaningful out of the chaos."

Many of Karin's works are complexly layered, using mono-prints, soft pastels, collage and even weaving. They stand out as extraordinary explorations of the mosaic-like complexity of natural phenomena, cherishing the particular qualities of sitting beside the river, or appreciating the life of an old river gum. "The beautiful thing about being an art-maker is that through the art you can enter into a relationship with the subject. When I'm sitting out in the landscape drawing, there is a bond being created with me and that place. The artwork is like the memory of a moment of communion with the landscape. For

me, it resonates with being fully alive with this moment, in this place."

Karin's show is a sustained and serious exploration of her relationship to the land and people through art, drawing on a genuine admiration for 'the old people'. It is full of difference, accident, care and intuition, and tells a story of her life as a witness, caught between two cultures, an outsider wrestling with the meaning of her personal connection to the land and our collective journey as Australians. Talking about an experience she had as a child, overcome by the ecstasy of belonging to country, she said, "I could never belong to that land as fully as the countless generations of Aboriginal children who'd been reared, not only to love that land but also to know the sacred stories and take on traditional responsibilities for the land's well-being. But it's still possible for each of us to feel a oneness with the environment that nurtures us.

"I am thankful for the sort of life that has let me do this kind of art. What a privilege to be out in this beautiful landscape. What a privilege to share my daily life with my Wilcannia friends and neighbors." ■



**Karin Donaldson's sculptural works with a portrait of Ethel Edwards among explorations of land and country (left).**



# A Poem for Ray Cook

By Wilhelm Ruff

A giant of the English tongue  
Has left and never will return!  
The Hill, the world has lost a man  
Whom everyone will mourn.

He was a publisher, made books  
And newspapers at first;  
Young writers he encouraged  
And even helped me with my first.

He was an asset to each event.  
With his deep knowledge hed converse  
About most fields with confidence,  
And his wit he freely did disperse.

The young ones loved him, stood around  
And listened to each word he said;  
His intelligence shone always through.  
Especially when he spoke in jest.

Because most the things he said made  
more Than just one point. You tried to  
see What he did mean: not easy oft For  
normal folks like you and me.

With youthful curiosity  
Increased his knowledge to his fill,  
Was up-to-date with world events  
And proud to live in Broken Hill.

He was a mate, he was a friend,  
He was the friend you wish youd had,  
Was on your side and loved you true  
You just could not but love him back.

We all thank Barbara, his wife:  
Who helped him through his latter years  
And Celwyn too, his talented son  
Who made him proud and loved him dear.

Poetry shows the magic in the world,  
Said Ray; as always, he was right.  
There'll be no other of his kind  
Not in my, or anyones life time.

If you'd like to submit a poem for publishing consideration, please email to [editorial@bdtruth.com.au](mailto:editorial@bdtruth.com.au)