



Spotlight

people, arts & heritage



arts

The river lands some new talent

Verity Nunan with her 'gam' Brian Nunan. The two underwent a spiritual and artistic journey along the Darling-Barka river. Read about their journey on page 16 and 17.

PICTURE: Dan Schulz

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The river lands some new talent

Dan Shulz

At last year's Nunan family Christmas former architect turned painter Verity Nunan knew something wasn't quite right with her grandfather.

The Nunan's are a family of artists. 89 year Brian Nunan or 'Gam' as he is affectionately known, is a landscape painter who spends at least three months of each year out bush, connected to outback Australia, spending time on cattle stations and traversing Australia's mighty inland waterways. For Gam, it is a spiritual as well as an artistic practice. "Gam talks about his 'mate'." Verity explains, "His 'mate' is this presence he is connected to through the bush. He only finds this presence when he's deep, remote, alone and in wild places. It's an overarching spirit that he gets to revisit again and again to fill his cup."

At Christmas, Gam's distress over

the ill health of the Darling-Barka was palpable. "Gam has been talking about the Darling for a really long time," Verity said, "He's been travelling up there for 40 years, so he's seen it in all of its ways. It got to a point where I could see in his eyes that he was sincerely worried." Gam's expeditions into outback Australia are always made solo but on this particular journey, Verity felt she had to go with him. "It was his distress that I was tapping into and I thought, okay, let's see what's going on out there. Show me what you know."

The two left Castlemaine in late April, travelling in two four-wheel drives, loaded with paint and canvas. The strategy was to follow the Darling-Barka as much as possible, passing through station properties to find moments along the river that had little evidence of human occupation. There they would roll out their canvases and paint together.

"I've lived on river systems before and they've got such an energy to them but there's something about the Barka that is so welcoming, habitable and romantic. It is like a warm hug."

While Verity had never travelled the Darling-Barka, she is no novice to the story of Australia's ailing river systems and the communities that rely on them. In early April she exhibited portraits of people living on the Brunswick Heads river system at the Lismore Regional Art Gallery and in October, she begins her doctorate at Griffith University, research centred on the theme of human connection to wild places along inland rivers and what they can teach us about our identity. Travelling with her grandfather was a scoping mission to learn, not only from Gam's connection to the Darling River, but to develop her own connection, exploring her own experiences through painting.

Among the ancient red gum forests clinging to life on the banks of a struggling system, Verity felt her perspective begin to shift as she painted. "When you find a natural clearing that feels so habitable, there is a sense of deep belonging. You feel like you're part of the system and I think that's become one of my biggest concerns, the way we always keep humans separate from our ecosystems, especially when we make policy and legislation. When you spend time in wild places like the Darling-Barka it reminds you that you're actually a part of a system."



Some of Verity Nunan's artworks in her studio in Broken Hill.

PICTURE: Dan Shulz

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Barrier Truth

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“At this stage, I’d been painting on the river at a scale that was appropriate to carry around in a car but I was filled with this huge country in me. I needed some big scale work done.” Artist Verity Nunan has done just that in her studio in Broken Hill. PICTURE: Dan Shulz

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Verity began painting the variable forms of the river redgums, trees she thinks of as witness bearers. “That’s where so much of the story is kept. When you touch them and sleep beside them, you realise that they hold so much knowledge, so I ended up using them as metaphors for the past, present and future of what I saw was happening to the river.”

Verity’s weary trees swim among a deep black background, red scribbles suggesting acts of violence and unwanted presences, severed from belonging. “I needed to get out the sense of urgency because it just feels like the river is saying it could all go under. So there’s a bit of forecasting there that is threatening and alarmist.” Her paintings are haunted by Australia’s turbulent relationship towards the land and its Traditional Custodians as well as the ongoing enslavement of natural systems to economic expansionism.

A sliding baseline of ecological health in the lower Darling that Gam along with local residents had witnessed over the last thirty years, a decline the world

was recently exposed to by localised extinction events such as the fish kills at Menindee.

A story that Verity suggests is written in the trees, some of which began life on the river long before the arrival of European settlers. “It wasn’t my job to superimpose any of my ideologies onto this place. I am just a small messenger for a big story.”

While it was supposed to be three months travelling to the top of the river, Gam and Verity’s trip came to an abrupt end after a month, when the elder Nunan’s vehicle broke down in Wilcannia. After encouragement from her grandfather to engage Broken Hill’s thriving art scene, Verity ventured alone to Broken Hill while Gam made his way back to Castlemaine. “At this stage, I’d been painting on the river at a scale that was appropriate to carry around in a car but I was filled with this huge country in me. I needed some big scale work done.”

Broken Hill “felt right”. Verity was introduced to Susan Thomas from the Art Exchange who assisted her with a two week residency which allowed her to begin to paint at the scale she had

envisioned for the story. She has now moved into an Argent street studio space, supported by a group of community members who, having recognised the genuine curiosity and passion in the young artist, helped her clean and renovate the long-abandoned studio.

“The Broken Hill community has embraced me completely. It’s been like a big, warm hug.”

For some readers the story about the power of the Darling-Barka to bring visitors into potent communion with the land will be familiar. It is also a recognition of the extraordinary community that is Broken Hill, one that is always willing to support and nurture individuals, to assist them in participating in the collective storytelling of the far west.

For Verity there has also been an emerging subplot, “...the beautiful relationship that has emerged between Gam and I. We weren’t that close before, now we call each other every day and I’m so grateful for that intergenerational chat, because our older people have so much to teach us and we have so much to teach our older people.”

“**...there’s something about the Barka that is so welcoming, habitable and romantic. It is like a warm hug.**”

Verity and Gam plan to hold an exhibition of the work they’ve developed from their time on the river in Broken Hill at some point. And while she has no idea how long she will stay, for the moment she feels like she’s “in exactly the right place at the right time. I have no foresight into output, I only have do what I have to do right now, which is to make the work.”

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