



## DOSSIER: JOY HESTER

JOY HESTER WAS A WOMAN – A FACTOR  
WHICH RENDERED HER ART GROSSLY  
UNDERVALUED FOR DECADES.  
STORY BY JANINE BURKE.

Joy Hester, *Girl*, 1957. Brush, ink and watercolour on paper, 49.9 x 75.5 cm. © JOY HESTER, 1957/ LICENSED BY VISCOPY, SYDNEY 2001. IMAGE COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA.

Joy Hester was the only woman member of the Angry Penguins, Melbourne's wartime group of expressionist painters that included her first husband Albert Tucker and her friends Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and Danila Vassilieff. Hester also had a close friendship with arts patrons Sunday and John Reed who, from the 1930s, had opened their home Heide to painters, poets and musicians.

Hester's expression as an artist was as radical and as intense as her life. She chose to draw and rarely used oils. It meant she created a space for the development of her vision separate from her circle who favoured easel painting. Her medium was brush and ink and her usual method of working was to sit on the floor, either in company or alone, and rapidly produce up to 20 drawings.

Artist Neil Douglas said: "Joy would sit on the sofa in front of the fire in the big, soft atmosphere of the [Heide library] before dinner or after dinner, conjuring magical visions with pen and brush. Right out of her imagination, very hot, came these strange drawings of people which were most hauntingly beautiful and evocative, almost ghost-like."<sup>1</sup>

Hester's subject was the human face as metaphor for the human condition and she fearlessly pictured emotional extremes: alienation, terror, loneliness, madness, the ecstasies and the perils of love. Typically, Hester's art is raw, complex and challenging. Aside from her friends, Hester found no appreciative audience during her lifetime. Sunday Reed, in particular, was her warmest and most consistent admirer. Reed bought Hester's work, encouraged her to produce more, and supported her financially.

Hester was a beautiful, exuberant and unconventional woman whose short life was marked by battles with illness and poverty. Born in 1920, Hester died at 40 after contracting Hodgkin's disease,



LEFT: *Peace: Joy Hester holding Sweeney, Robe Street*. © BARBARA TUCKER, COURTESY LAURRAINE DIGGINS FINE ART.

BELOW: Joy Hester, *Two Girls in the Street*, ca.1941. Watercolour, pen and ink, 28.4 x 38.8 cm. © JOY HESTER, 1941/ LICENSED BY VISCOPY, SYDNEY 2001. IMAGE COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA.



a cancer of the lymph glands, but she managed to produce an oeuvre of several hundred drawings, some oil paintings and around one hundred poems. As a woman, her reputation suffered from the prejudice of her time.

When I began my research in 1977, several of Hester's male contemporaries said in amazement, "Bert's girlfriend? You're writing a book about Bert's girlfriend?" In the 1970s, key drawings from the *Faces* and *Love* series were worth \$300-400. That began to change after I curated a retrospective of Hester's at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1981. Since then her prices have steadily grown. In 1999, Hester's *Girl with Book* (1956) was sold at Christie's for \$250,000 and while this is an unusually high price for Hester, it indicates that when major works come on the market, they are eagerly sought.

Hester studied at Melbourne's Gallery School in 1937-38 where she won the drawing head from life prize. But the school's rigid, academic curriculum soon began to bore her. Like fellow students Nolan, Noel Counihan and Arthur Boyd, Hester looked for inspiration elsewhere. In 1938, when she met Tucker, he had already been noted as a promising painter by two of Melbourne's most influential tastemakers, critic Basil Burdett, responsible for curating the groundbreaking 1939 *Herald* exhibition of French and British art, and George Bell, critic for *The Sun*, who ran Melbourne's only modernist art school.

Tucker was a powerful and articulate personality, self-taught, disciplined and gifted, a robust intellectual whose artistic concerns were also political, social and moral. "He's a genius!" Hester declared to her friend Pauline McCarthy.<sup>2</sup> In 1938, Hester ran away from home to live with Tucker.

Tucker, proficient as both painter and draughtsman, proved an exemplary role model. By the end of 1938, Hester had quit the

Gallery School and began attending life drawing classes at the Victorian Artists Society (VAS). *Head of a Woman* (c.1938, National Gallery of Australia), produced at the Gallery School, indicates Hester's ability to render form in a realistic, detailed, highly modelled and academic manner. Tucker remembered Hester's early drawings as "very, very ordinary."<sup>3</sup> But once she started at the VAS, where Tucker was class monitor, her drawings matured rapidly and she gained a distinctive, fluid, expressionist style. "I thought, she's really got something there," Tucker said.<sup>4</sup>

Soon Hester emerged as a confident draughtswoman, a response to the stimulating creative freedom that life with Tucker provided. Works such as *Female Nude* (c.1939), *Male Nude* (c.1939) and *Nude Study* (c.1939) are monumental forms with fluid almost sculptural volumes, heavily modelled then outlined in brush and ink. They are among Hester's first works that have a plastic power independent of the small area they cover. Hester's rapid style of execution may have been influenced by her other mentor, the Russian expatriate Danila Vassilieff, whose calligraphic paintings were done on the spot in the streets of Darlington and Fitzroy.

But the decisive influence for Hester was not painting but film. In 1945, when the Allies liberated the concentration camps, Hester saw the first film footage of Ravensbruck and Auschwitz. No other Australian artist made Hester's choice. She began drawing the Holocaust. Like Susan Sontag when she first saw Holocaust photographs, Hester's was a negative epiphany. First she produced rapid brush and ink sketches taken directly from the film footage like *Mother and Child* (1945) where cadaverous bodies hang from gallows. But the shift occurred when Hester stopped describing the condition of the victims and located the experience in their eyes.

An emphasis on the eye and on psychological tensions featured



LEFT: Joy Hester, *A Frightened Woman*, 1945. Brush and ink on paper, 31 x 21 cm.  
© JOY HESTER, 1945/  
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COURTESY JANINE BURKE.



FAR LEFT: Joy Hester, *Lovers*, ca. 1956. Watercolour, brush and ink on paper, 75.3 x 55.5 cm.  
© JOY HESTER, 1956/  
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COURTESY NATIONAL  
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in Hester's earlier work but *A Frightened Woman* (1945) takes those elements and seizes them like a clenched fist. Gazing fearlessly at the viewer, the woman shares her experience of horror, of the limits of endurance, with us. Her eyes are reduced to strange, star-like configurations as if, after what she has seen, the act of seeing normally is no longer possible. Unusually for Hester, she signed, dated and titled the drawing, signalling how important *A Frightened Woman* was to her. It was the best work she had done and signalled a fresh, powerful and mature vision.

An unsettling influence on Hester was the birth of her son, *Sweeney*, also in 1945. Hester did not want to have a child and unhappily tried to adjust to her new responsibilities. As she realised her potential as an artist, she wished to escape from motherhood and marriage (she and Tucker had married in 1941). Her next series – *Incredible Night Dream* (c.1946), inspired by Cocteau's book *Opium*, and *Gethsemane* (c.1946) inspired by Sunday's handmade doll of the same name – are images of hallucinatory intensity where face and body are ravaged by inner emotions.

Early in 1947, Hester's life changed dramatically. Tucker was in Japan for three months as a foreign correspondent when Hester met *Gray Smith* with whom she fell in love. She had also been ill: a lump had formed on her neck and she had a hacking cough. When Tucker returned, John Reed told her what Hester did not know: a specialist, after diagnosing her condition, had given her three

months to live.

Before Tucker had the opportunity to tell Hester, she burst out with the news about her relationship with Gray Smith, and fled the house, leaving their son Sweeney with Tucker. Within days, Hester had left Melbourne for Sydney with Smith where she underwent successful treatment for the disease, which went into remission for seven years. Tucker took Sweeney to Heide to be cared for by the Reeds. Later, Hester and Tucker, the latter most unwillingly, agreed for the Reeds to adopt Sweeney. Tucker left for Europe and America where he would spend the next 13 years.

In Sydney, Hester produced *Faces*, arguably her finest series, and *Love*, as well as writing poetry. She communicated constantly with Sunday Reed, sending her letters, drawings and poems, while Reed sent Hester money, books and gifts of clothes and food. The *Faces* are witnesses to Hester's terrifying journey through a life-threatening illness, often inspired by Smith. Hester told Reed:

"I would like to tell you about Gray's face but I don't think I can except to say he himself is like every drawing I have ever done ... It is quite a wondrous face and changes so swiftly and subtly ... I have tried to at times to draw a face in the process of change, not one side or the other or both sides but the fleeting mobile moment in which one sees for the first time the person and this 'first' time appears all the time in Gray's face."<sup>5</sup>

In the drawings, fear and loneliness are relieved by the quality of revelation, present in the staring eyes, an awareness that, even during the dark night of the soul, a companionable humanity can be discovered. The *Faces* are not angels or spirit guides but reflections of a human being in *extremis* – to Hester, an indestructible force.

Returning to Melbourne in 1948, Hester and Smith bought a small property at Hurstbridge, before moving to Avonsleigh in the Dandenong Ranges in 1952. Despite having been warned by doctors about the dangers of having children, Hester gave birth to *Peregrine*, a son, in 1951 and *Fern*, a daughter, in 1954. After Fern's

birth, the symptoms of Hodgkin's disease re-appeared.

Sunday Reed bought Hester and Smith a house in Box Hill so Hester could be close to the treatment she required. Reed was unfailingly helpful and concerned, encouraging Hester to think positively. "When you were first so ill, I know the deep ray helped you to get better but it did not keep you well for eight years. YOU kept YOU well and I know that you will find a way to keep you well again," Reed told Hester.<sup>6</sup> "You have always given me so much pleasure because you bothered to follow what my silly dreams were," was the reply.<sup>7</sup>

For the first time at her Box Hill home, Hester had a separate studio. She increased the size of her works, used colour to greater and more sustained advantage and began regularly signing and dating her works. *Lovers* (1956) speaks of an experience of love so dark that the title takes on ironic overtones. Hester alludes to the violence of passion, not its pleasures, depicting the overwhelming and potentially destructive power of love. Perhaps Hester, fighting cancer once more, was reflecting on the costs of love in her own life.

Another major theme Hester explored was that of childhood and major works include *Two Girls in the Street*, *The Child and Girl* (all 1957). *Charles Blackman*, together with Perceval, Boyd and *Robert Dickerson* had also explored the Child in their paintings. Hester's *Child*, derived from sharp and loving observations of her own children, is an innocent victim of the adult world but retains its own vitality, truth and independence. Bold, sensitive and moving, the *Child* drawings number among Hester's most convincing works.

Blackman and Hester also became good friends, and lived within

close proximity to each other. The younger artist had much to learn from Hester who enjoyed Blackman's company and his kindred sensibility. But Hester, through distance and illness, was somewhat removed from the Melbourne art world. Professionally it was a dispiriting time for her. Her solo show in 1950 at the Bookclub Gallery received bad reviews and no sales. In 1955, newly arrived French emigrants Georges and Mirka Mora offered Hester an exhibition at their café in Exhibition Street. It generated slightly better reviews but again there were no sales.

From the late 1950s onwards, Hester's condition continued to deteriorate and she was frequently admitted to hospital. She died at the Alfred hospital on December 4, 1960. In 1963, the Reeds curated a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and Design which they had founded and, for the first time, Hester received favourable reviews.

*Joy Hester and Friends* is showing at The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, from 1 September to 28 October 2001.

#### NOTES

1. Janine Burke, *Joy Hester*, Greenhouse Publication, 1983, p.71.
2. Pauline McCarthy, Taped Interview. Hawthorn.
3. Albert Tucker. Taped Interview. 12.4.1982. St Kilda.
4. *ibid.*
5. *Hester*, op.cit., p.105.
6. Janine Burke (ed) *Dear Sun: the letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed*, William Heinemann Australia, 1995, p.262.
7. *op. cit.*, p.269.