

A DIFFERENT WAY TO THE FUTURE

JULIE DOWLING'S ART IS MORE THAN
POLITICAL, MORE THAN PORTRAITURE, AND
MORE THAN SUCCESSFUL. **JUDITH MCGRATH**
COMPILED THIS PROFILE ON AUSTRALIAN ART
COLLECTOR'S MOST COLLECTABLE ARTIST 2002.

Julie Dowling rolls her "office" chair from drawing table to bookcase and pulls an old leather-bound tome from the shelf. It's a Canadian missionary manual from 1884 used to "assimilate" the natives. She pats the volume and says: "I de-colonise old stuff like this. I like working with borderline souvenirs, a kind of 'Australiana meets a viscous kind of colonialism'. I swim in that and try to make friends with it." Then reaching into a folio she smiles as she brings out a shop's delivery list dated 1951, and says: "I found it on the verge. I like using ephemera like this."

Born in inner city Perth, Dowling grew up in the outer suburb of Redcliffe when it was mostly bushland. When one section of Redcliffe became a local dumping ground it had a major impact on Dowling. She'd go "bush hunting" with her nanna and they'd find old books, Bibles, health manuals and the like. "That's how I learned about art. It was a form of gathering information on the fringe, learning from it, knowing you have intelligence but not being able to access it. We'd translate the prejudice we felt by finding wadjala [white] information that was dumped, learn from it and use it. Mum calls it the 'keyhole effect' where you have a piece of ephemera and it takes you into a realm that was from our community first."

Her community, culture and family are all important to Dowling; it is what informs her art. She speaks openly and honestly about her family's past tribulations and current problems. She admires artists like **Robert Campbell Jr** because he painted to inform his family first, then his art extended out to include others. "I work from the family and see how far it goes but your individuality is all about how you fit in the family." To exemplify she tells of when her grandmother had a stroke it was the artist's responsibility, as the oldest unmarried granddaughter in the family, to care for the matriarch. Her being an artist of note was sec-



Julie Dowling, *Tigermoth*, 2001, acrylic and red ochre on canvas, 120x100cm. IMAGE COURTESY: ARTPLACE.
Opposite page: Julie Dowling sees her art as an extension of her family's history. PHOTO: BILL SHAYLOR.

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ondary to her familial duties and she had no problem with that fact. "What I have to grapple with is people's perception of us. They tend to confuse biology with culture. My heritage is Irish, Russian, Jewish and Aboriginal. I identify with indigenous, not as a political act but because I live in my community. I was brought up in a big Yamatji family."

Dowling sees her art as an extension of her family's oral history. "It's a cultural thing. You know the stories; you carry them with you and pass them on to the younger generation – if they'll listen. Then you become a part of them." Of the stories she says: "They always come back to the land. Land has an underlying importance and is spoken about with reverence." Some of her land, red ochre from Lake Moore, is kept in a plastic container in her studio and is used in her work. But Dowling is not a landscape artist; instead she prefers to paint figures, to record their humanity.

She says portraits have a long history of recording only the gentry, while colonial portraits of indigenous people were a means of recording data on a race that was considered soon to be extinct. "My grandfather was named after the colonial artist **Robert Dowling**, he was the artist who painted **Truganini** and a whole group of them together. It was a colonialist tool, a way of saying 'these people are dying, you should smooth the dying pillow'. When I was a teenager I waltzed into the South Australian Art Gallery one festival day and there was a picture of Robert Dowling's

painting, it freaked me out. Ever since then I've been coming to terms with colonial art and how it's regarded as valued history."

Her images tell a different history, one more valued by Dowling because it's one of survival. "We maintain our sense of culture, our sense of place because we're informed by survivors."

She tells of her nanna being raised in a Catholic orphanage yet denied Christian charity; of her mum living in a white neighbourhood and maintaining a perfectly manicured lawn outside while living with fear and "bad things" behind closed doors; and of herself and her twin sister **Carol** who, as fair-skinned Aboriginals, knew two kinds of prejudice. These complexities come to the surface in her art.

As a portrait painter, Dowling presents images of herself, her family members and relatives she has heard about but may never have met face to face. "I'll be sitting with someone and they'll start talking about one of our mob. They'll describe how he looks, talk about his personality, attitude and demeanour, and tell the stories." She laughs and adds: "We're very descriptive us Yamatji mob, it takes us two days or more just to tell a decent yarn." When the unseen subject is placed in a group portrait, he will be recognised by members of the family and the picture becomes part of the oral history. By painting a portrait, Dowling brings that individual into the public realm and the process breaks down barriers within her community. Others come to her, tell her their stories and she records them along with her art. She feels as if a dam has burst,

that her family is finally able to talk about things.

Besides her nanna and mum, who were “good at art but were held back because they were Aboriginals,” Dowling mentions a particular teacher in high school who encouraged her in her art. It was a time when, as a teenager, she was coming to grips with her identity and recalls: “There were two of us in the class, a wadjala and me. She taught us different. She had the other girl paint flowers and stuff and gave me subjects like **Ghandi**, **Martin Luther King** and **Nelson Mandela**. She told me to use my art as a tool of identity.”

Dowling appreciates how **Albert Namatjira** identified his country in his paintings and how he used the colonialist tools of art, its methods and media, to celebrate his country. His people recognised their land in his work, so generations after him continued to paint their country in the same way.

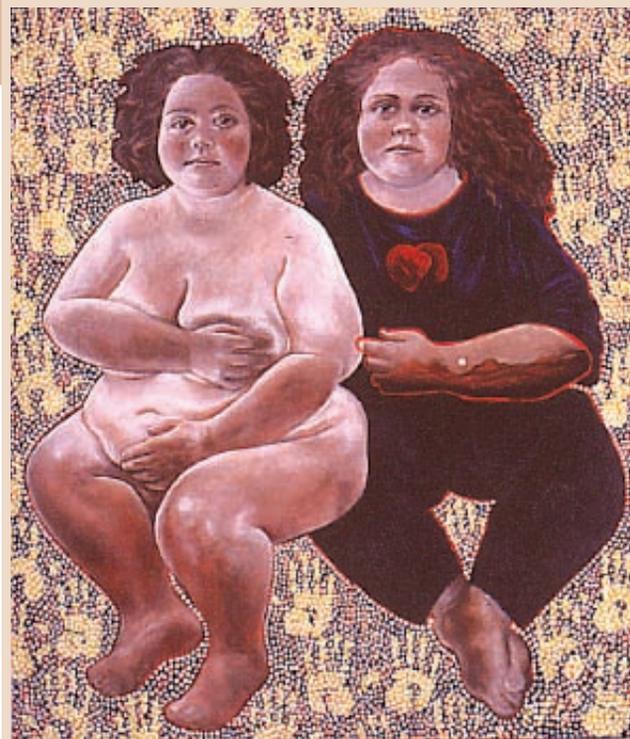
Each of Dowling's paintings is an arena for personal, communal and political reconciliation. Dowling re-employs tools of colonialism to make her art. By accessing words, photographs, documents and social constructs that defined indigenous people as ‘the other’, the artist is able to initiate a conversion process, a decolonisation of the history of her people. Text may be employed in a painting but the derogatory words once used to debase are over ridden by the innate dignity of the figure. Photographic images of unknown women designated as members of a “dying race” are appropriated as proof of cultural survival.

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Official documents intended to regulate and assimilate, or to isolate and decimate, or to sanction accepted “usages” of Aboriginals and their land are referenced, causing the viewer to reconsider what was once deemed politically correct. And then there’s Dowling’s unique form of artistic reconciliation of motif and method. She successfully combines those symbols of indigenous spiritual beliefs with religious icons from the Christian world. She employs ancient red ochre mixed with modern acrylics to produce a multitude of dots, from which emerge powerful black faces sculpted in western chiaroscuro.

The artist approaches each painting with a specific concept, one that grows out of considering the mechanisms of dispossession such as mining, farming or government institutions. “I try and get it down to a singular **theme**, a lot of my paintings have a central motif in them, a colonial tool like coins or guns or a steering wheel. Even in the portraits, you’ll find there’s some tool of emphasis in it; that’s essential. That leads on to the figure itself.” When painting the figure, alone or within an historical narrative, Dowling purposely employs the highly dramatic baroque style of realism, and says: “When a viewer is confronted with an indigenous face in my painting there’s a lot of other things happening. You’re facing your own encounters with indigenous people, that’s if you’re a white person. For a black person it’s acknowledging history. I never want it to be easy.”

Julie Dowling’s art is informed by her family, she respects her cultural history, conceptualises where she sits in the broader community as a fair skinned Aboriginal, and employs the tools of colonisation to reveal the story of her mob to anyone who will listen. She is the first woman in her family to gain a university degree, an artist well situated in her generation and in touch with her time. She is prepared to reach back into the past to show all Australians a different way to the future. ■



Julie Dowling, *Budimia - Broken Hearts*, 1997, acrylic, ochres and blood on linen, 142x122cm.
IMAGE COURTESY:ARTPLACE.

Born in 1969, Dowling is of Badimaya/Yamatji language. She was educated in Perth, earning her Diploma of Fine Art from Claremont School of Art in 1989 and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Curtin University of Technology in 1992. Twin sister Carol proudly proclaims: “Julie is the first in the family to get a degree.”

In 2001, she was a finalist in the Archibald Portrait Prize. In 2000, she won the Mandorla Award for Religious Art, was a winner in the 17th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, was a finalist in the NAIDOC Aboriginal Artist of the Year and had a work included in the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize.

She has given lectures at forums and festivals, held solo exhibitions in Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne, and been included in numerous group shows both nationally and internationally.

Dowling’s work is politically and personally motivated as she draws her subjects from recorded colonial and personal oral histories.

Chris Deutscher, of Deutscher Menzies in Melbourne, says of Dowling that she is highly regarded by museums and employs very unique personal imagery. **Justin Miller**, of Sotheby’s states: “This indigenous Australian’s paintings resonate with soulful insights, they seem almost metaphysical.”

Technically superb, Julie Dowling’s recent paintings will, in time, be ranked in importance alongside **Arthur Boyd’s** *Half Caste* Bride Series of the 1950s and the finest **Fred Williams** paintings of the 1960s and 70s.”

In his profile of the artist in issue 14 of *Australian Art Collector*, **Bruce James** says of her style: “It propels the paintings into the realm of religious *ex votos*, and returns art to its authentic dimension of magic and myth.”

Dowling’s work is included in the collections of the Art Gallery of WA, Curtin University, Murdoch University, Artbank, National Native Title Tribunal, Kerry Stokes, Charles Sturt University, Kelton Foundation California, Kent-McNeil Inc. Canada, Flinders University, University of Southern Queensland, National Gallery of Australia, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Reconciliation Council of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, and other public and private collections.