

Cheryl Bridgart, *The Eye of the Storm*.

A thread runs through it

Cheryl Bridgart -
The Eye of the Storm

-BY ANSIE VAN DER WALT-

The mangled, half-burned and twisted sheet metal stirred in the wind – the only object which could still be swayed by the breeze – the grass and trees were gone. After the roar of the fire, the silence felt eerie. Everything was quiet. Black and quiet. Then the birds came back.

“They were able to flee the fire, to fly to safety, but they were the first to come back, bringing with them bursts of colour among the blackness. And hope of new beginnings.” Cheryl Bridgart recalls the destruction on her 6th generation family farm due to the Pinery bushfire in November last year.

Bridgart dreams, and stitches, in vivid colour. Her signature freehand embroidery portraits have always been known for their vibrancy and heart-warming joyfulness. Portraits with soulful eyes and expressive lips, combined with flamboyant birds and animals, express Bridgart’s infectious joy for life. But that’s not the whole story.

Bridgart’s story is not in just one portrait – it is told across her whole body of work. The last series of works – she completed before the fire – are sombre, ominous and sad. Bridgart explains, “I was becoming overwhelmed by all the evil and sadness in the world. I saw black birds, sad and worried faces – a world without colour.”

Spending more time on the farm, getting away from the world, landscapes started appearing

in Bridgart’s dreams and embroideries. “I am a portrait person – eyes and faces, but the landscape presented itself in my work.” Waves of olive groves, farmland and rolling hills washed over the portrait faces. And slowly some colour came back. Greens and yellows. The black birds were still there, but they came with olive branches.

After the fire, the loss, the sadness, and the blackness came home. Reflecting on the loss of her property, her family heirlooms and memories, Bridgart saw hope in the return of the birds. They came back and immediately started nesting in the mangled remains of the shed. New life triumphed over destruction.

As she stitched through her sadness and grief, more colours slowly returned to Bridgart’s work. Reds, blues, greens. The broken shed and the black birds are still there, but they are smaller and now keep to the background. The vibrant birds and the colourful faces are back.

As Bridgart and her family rebuilt their shed and their new life, her latest work, and her latest life-chapter, *Whispers of Passion*, has two faces. Man and woman. A couple. “Adversary brings people closer. Sadness brings intimacy.” Bridgart’s dreams and stitched portraits are once again filled with colour. The colour of hope and joy.

Bridgart’s new body of work, *Laced with Dreams*, will be on display at her studio in Beltana House, as part of the SALA Festival in August. She is a member of Well Made, a Guildhouse initiative.



Ansie van der Walt is a freelance writer specialising in fibre art and textile
ansievanderwalt.com
thefabricthread.com

The People Who Belong to This Land

-BY JANE LLEWELLYN-

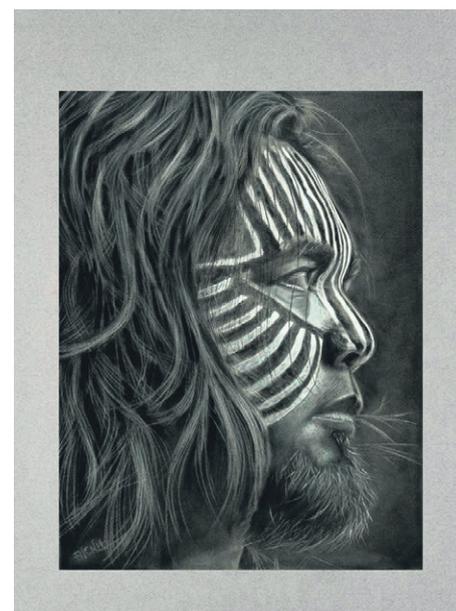
The last time the *Adelaide Review* caught up with Damien Shen was in 2014. He had just held his first exhibition at Artspace Gallery at the Adelaide Festival Centre, launching his career. Two years ago, one of his goals was to see his work hanging in one of the major state galleries. This dream is soon to become a reality, as the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) has acquired Shen’s photographic series *On the Fabric of the Ngarrindjeri Body – Volume Two*.

The works will be included in a forthcoming group exhibition, *Resolution: new Indigenous Photo Media*, touring five states, opening at the Tweed Regional Gallery in September, and finishing at the NGA in 2018. While Shen can tick that off his to-do list, it’s not all that’s going on. He recently signed to Mars Gallery in Melbourne, and in October he is heading off to the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection and Study Centre in Virginia (USA) to undertake a month-long residency. He also currently has a body of work, *The People Who Belong to This Land*, on display at the Town Hall Gallery in Adelaide to coincide with the 2016 NAIDOC Week celebrations.

While some of the works on display at the Town Hall Gallery were part of the first exhibition at Artspace Gallery, there are some new additions of portraits he sketched during the exhibition. There are also a couple of lithographs and an etching.

The body of work is very personal for Shen, documenting and exploring his genealogy and identity. “Drawing your family and having it received with that much enthusiasm is quite surprising,” Shen says.

Having these portraits of his family hanging at the Town Hall Gallery is an



Self Portrait # 2 – Charcoal and pastel (70 x 50) 2014.

honour for Shen. “I didn’t get wrapped up in the building as bricks and mortar but more what the space means to me,” he says. “It’s the space everyone gathers in before the NAIDOC morning tea and award presentation. A huge part of the community will see the works.”

The prints on display came out of a printmaking workshop he did in 2015 at Cicada Press alongside Queensland artist Tony Albert. One of Shen’s first sketches – after he returned to drawing – was of One Pound Jimmy (Gwoya Jungarai – who features on the \$2 coin) taken from one of Albert’s installation works he saw at the Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art.

When Shen found himself alongside Albert at the printmaking workshop he decided to sketch Albert in the same pose as One Pound Jimmy. “While it’s not a deeply cultural piece or anything, it’s more about serendipity,” he says.

Shen believes that the key to his success has been hard work and that if he keeps working hard then more doors will open. While drawing got him on the map, Shen is a multi-disciplinary artist working with photography, printmaking and painting.



Damien Shen: *The People Who Belong to This Land*
Town Hall Gallery
Until Friday, August 19

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(right) Wendy Wright, Isobel McGarry & Andie Marten



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Gallery M
Marion Cultural Centre
287 Diagonal Rd
Oaklands Park SA
P: 08 8377 2904
E: info@gallerym.net.au

www.gallerym.net.au