

Colourful days of parrots and roses

THE most famous supporter of the bright bold paintings of James Fardoulys is Barry Humphries, who commissioned a portrait of himself from the Brisbane artist to use as the cover image on his 1968 *The Barry Humphries Book of Innocent Austral Verse*.



James Fardoulys | Australia 1900-1975 | The start of Burke and Wills 1860 (detail) 1972 | Oil on board | 77 x 93cm; 88 x 101.5cm (framed) | Gift of Barbara Blackman through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 1998 | Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Humphries is shown leaning in to the canvas, staring straight at the viewer, while behind a riot of Australiana kitsch fills the landscape: koalas, cockatoos, kangaroos, emus, kookaburras, a naked Aboriginal woman, a drover behind a gaily fleeing white bull.

In his catalogue essay for a new exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery, curator Glenn Cooke explains how Humphries saw examples of Fardoulys's naive paintings at the Contemporary Art Society's annual show, purchased several, then wrote to the artist to commission the portrait.

Humphries's secretary Edith Tye also commissioned a painting about the same time of St George fighting the dragon, and artist Leonard Brown, who eventually came to own the work, describes how St George was copied from an image of a rodeo rider in a newspaper.

Brown's catalogue essay is an affectionate and grateful reconstruction of the context in which Fardoulys briefly made a splash on the Australian art scene. Fardoulys, Sam Byrne, Charles Callins, Henri Bastin and Irvine Homer became known as primitive painters, the Australian equivalent of Grandma Moses and John Kane in the US.

This Greek from Kythera, who migrated to Queensland in 1914, when he was 14, and drove a taxi most of his life before devoting his last 15 years to painting, "illuminated people's lives", Brown writes. "His paintings were like mini-bombs going off, jumping from the wall, making the Brisbane version of the new modernism appear very self-conscious."

There have been a couple of airings of works by Fardoulys since his death in September 1975. In 2007, his painting *The Story of the Nativity* in the Northwest was part of the *Art and the Horse* exhibition at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery, and five works, including one of his beloved grey cat, were hung in a show of Australian naive art at the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery.

The National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra, has three Fardoulys works, crowded scenes of cattle and sheep mustering in fantastic lurid landscapes (with one, *Douly Prowling on the McIntyre*, incongruously teaming naked Aborigines fishing beneath galah-infested trees with that same cat).

The Queensland Art Gallery has in its collection the even busier painting *The Start of Burke and Wills 1860*,

where the customary naked natives, parrot-infested trees, sundry dogs and a stray kangaroo are joined by the expedition's camels. This 1972 painting was given to the QAG in 1998 by Barbara Blackman.

One of the better-known Fardoulys works in this exhibition of 50 paintings, which is part of an Xstrata Coal three-year sponsorship of the Queensland Artists Gallery in QAG, is *Blue Roses*, now in Sydney dealer Ray Hughes's collection. It was once, very briefly, owned by the man who played a significant part in championing Fardoulys.

According to Cooke, Roy Churcher visited Fardoulys in his West End home in 1963 with the intention of buying *My Cat* (Douly again) for pound stg. 5, which he duly did. In the corner of the room was a painting of *Betty the Barmaid*, which Churcher could not resist.

The story goes that he used the family's Christmas spending money to purchase *Betty*, but when his own *Betty* (who later became director of the National Gallery of Australia) saw what he had done, she made him take it back to the artist for a refund. The artist thought it was the subject matter that had offended, so he transformed *Betty* into a flower-seller, the bottles behind her becoming blooms, and the painting was retitled *Blue Roses*.

Fardoulys was fond of blue roses; they reappear in a 1965 painting called

Tchaikovsky's *Waltz of the Flowers*, on which no one has been able to shed much light, especially on why it features the Queen and a horse in one corner, in front of a giant Aboriginal head beneath a strange configuration of red rocks.

Brown describes seeing paintings by Fardoulys in that same year, 1965, at an annual art show held in Brisbane's Botanic Gardens.

These works and those of the young and boldly innovative Roy Churcher were, Brown says, "thrilling, a challenge to my first-year art student prejudice."

In 1961 Churcher, along with Bernard Schaffer from the University of Queensland, had started the Brisbane branch of the Contemporary Art Society, a group whose revolutionary energy ignited an era that changed forever the indolent, anti-cultural country town so memorably described by David Malouf in his novel *Johnno*. Brown, who later entered a seminary before returning to art, recalls the life-drawing classes Churcher organised at the studio in St Mary's Hall at Kangaroo Point by the Brisbane River. The hall was also the site for Art Society "happenings", with members sitting on the floor in the dark, "up to their necks in shredded paper".

Brown first met Fardoulys in 1967 when he was taken to the artist's house in the Greek-dominated West End by

Norman Staines, who acquired a degree of notoriety two years later when he was arrested for obscenity as he performed in Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed*.

Brown was struck by the kindness of Fardoulys and also his sense of certainty as he explained to the younger man exactly how to paint a sky as though "there could not possibly be any other way an artist in his right mind would ever attempt to paint the sky".

Fardoulys was included in Geoffrey Lehmann's 1977 book *Australian Primitive Painters*, written at the request of and with assistance from Charles Blackman, who was an enthusiast of such work.

Blackman wrote in that book about how the work of Kane and Grandma Moses had first aroused his interest in naive art. "Their paintings seemed lit from within and radiating outwards, making life real for themselves in their pictures," he explained.

Lehmann and Blackman interviewed Fardoulys a few years before he died, when he was quite ill but still living in his West End house with his second wife, Claire. His first wife, who died of cancer, had been a carnival ventriloquist when she was young, and for a few years Fardoulys had toured the outback with the troupe.

He told Lehmann and Blackman he had "always been a dreamer, never satisfied". Historian Denis Conomos notes that Fardoulys was one of many Greeks from the island of Kythera, and their cafes "dotted the countryside of Queensland". Fardoulys first went to work at the Olympia Cafe in Warwick, then at a similar establishment in Stanthorpe alongside his older brother.

Conomos suggests it is "hard to believe Fardoulys would have ceased being influenced by his Kytherian background". Brown also believes Fardoulys's flat and simple style may have been influenced by Greek iconography, although the painter was reluctant to admit this when interviewed by Lehmann and Blackman.

"I do not think Greek icons in churches when I was a child have influenced my work," he said.

"I want to put a bit more crudeness in it."

James Fardoulys: A Queensland Naive Artist is at the Queensland Art Gallery until June 20.

Article from *The Australian*



James Fardoulys | The rains come to the deep barren country 1966 | Oil on board | 88 x 88cm | Private collection, Melbourne