

Detecting Art: An interview with ex cop turned artist Janet Joyce

Art captivated her after labouring as a managing cook, having a daughter, marriage breakups, ten years in the NZ police force, training to be a detective, and a year spent recovering from M.E. in 2000. Born in Blenheim in the late 1960s, into a Christian home (the artist relates to consciously being a Christian herself from an early age) Janet Joyce was good at art and sport (Nelson Girls and Burnside High School, Christchurch) both of which she found an expressive release. Almost 20 years later, she quit detective studies and the force after her recovery from illness when sensing a call to the arts that was first engendered at high school. She is now in her fourth year of a BFA (Painting) at Design and Art College NZ.

A year out from art school, while in her mid-thirties, Joyce suffered the death of her father and during her first year at art school, her grandfather also died.

Two Figure Large Work, Janet Joyce, 2004, oil on stretched canvas, 1000 x 1600 mm.



J.S.: Did those paternal deaths have an impact on your art career?

"No. I hadn't long started arts school when my grandfather also died. He'd been a fisherman, had loved the water and I spent a lot of time rowing, but I was already on my course."

So, what motivated you into the arts?

"I took a step back from training to be a detective because of my illness. While on that path, I sensed a calling in art, and decided to go to art school. I hadn't done any art in 17 years, since high school. My decision to quit the force and study art surprised everyone and me but there was also a broad acknowledgement and support for that move."

What is your passion and what inspires you artistically?

"I'm in love with oil and colour and abstract expressionism, particularly mid-20th century American abstract expressionists. I love Colin McCahon. I'm enjoying playing with the etymology of words, using text as a compositional device, a

way of expressing the subconscious."

Is that something that derived from your love of McCahon?

"No. I enjoy the way McCahon expressed his spirit in his work using text, which was as much an aesthetic as anything else, but I also enjoy writing. I use it as a compositional tool. A year ago I was quite against the use of words in paintings. I hate that saccharin sweetness of some words in contemporary decorative art."

Why did that annoy you?

"I don't like it being so obvious or the cliché of words (love, peace, faith, hope). The words in themselves, when you really look at them are fantastic, but not if they are portrayed in a surface way. If I use those words I want to delve into the deeper meaning, the history of the word."

So, was the superficial element of it as a decorative motif?

"Yes. I play with the history of words. I explore connections between words and play with free-flow writing that examines the subconscious coming through into the conscious and then I analyse that deeper and deeper."

I noticed in your works in *Word About* a reaction to the computer age. Does that relate to a whole dynamic of a love for words?

"It is a reaction. I don't like the tool of the computer in art; the way it removes artists from their media. I like a person's signature or their personality being seen in their writing. I'm currently using my own handwriting and to me that is a form of self-portraiture. It reveals flaws in a person and that makes a connection with other people, of trying to accept differences."

What other themes and ideas infuse your art practice and thought?

"I'm interested in philosophy and psychology, and recently theology has been finding its way into my work. Those three studies are coming together, using my words."

Janet is one of ten artists featuring in the next Chrysalis Seed group show, titled *Night and Day* (9 March - 2 April, CoCA) and will exhibit two large works. *Orange and Black*, painted on recycled canvases stretched over board from the 1970s, uses text and handwriting ("I run," "I walk", "I'm here"). It is autobiographical, a personal cry, a stand in a landscape form. The title relates to the primary colours in the work, which began as landscapes with the words "orange" and "black" repeated over the work as a compositional structure. *Two Figure Large Work* (which Joyce says is a deeply personal work about a specific relationship not being accessible) is also strong in text but features two silhouetted figures. Working through the art, it became evident to her it was more about a spiritual presence with the artist the whole time, a revelation of God or Jesus who was linked to her.

John Stringer