

BEYOND WINGS

Helen Read is many things: artist, qualified nurse, pilot, charity fundraiser, curator, adventurer, businesswoman.

But above all she is a Territorian committed to bringing to the wider world the depth and diversity of Australia's rich Indigenous art and culture.

“When I was about seven years old we used to have a strange wooden object on our mantelpiece at home. I was fascinated by its shape, smoothness, and edges, not realising it was a boomerang – and a wing.

“I just knew then I was going to come to Australia and work with Aboriginal people.”

Helen came to the Northern Territory after working in Nigeria, not far from the Biafra War zone, to work as a nurse pilot for the Pintupi Homelands Health Service in the Western Desert and was horrified at the state of Indigenous health.

“It was worse than Africa – kids were literally dying of malnutrition.”

She flew cultural custodians and community health workers over desert country between clinics – often taking people to the air for the first time – and was taught to see Indigenous land, from the far horizon to straight below.

It was what traditional healer or “ngangkari”, Dockata George Tjapaltjarri, called “learning you up”.

Helen saw the country as paintings, the paintings as culture, coming to understand that language and land were the same. She fell in love with

the beautiful, meaningful artworks that the artists created and that their company, Papunya Tula Artists, would carefully photograph, document and take to town.

Having trained in fine art in the historic English city of Bristol, Helen wondered why Aboriginal art was not widely celebrated on the world stage.

“How could children be dying for want of food, adult life span be so short and health so pitiful while living in Australia?

“Apart from being people, the wealth of knowledge and the creations of such intensity and spirit were all around. It didn't make sense.”

In an effort to help bring recognition and aid, Helen founded Palya Art Tours, surely one of the most unusual travel companies in the world.

Over the next few decades, Palya Art Tours flew many prominent Australians – politicians, national and state gallery directors, philanthropists, medical personnel and business people.

Travellers have written back saying they were deeply moved by the experience. One wrote: “I feel that I've put my finger on the pulse of the nation.”

Helen came to understand that fifth and sixth-generation Australians had never met an Aboriginal person. And people often didn't realise that Indigenous people speak their own language, let alone that there are 120 or so languages and that it is not uncommon for someone to speak six or seven languages, with Australian English on top.

“I try to make visitors feel comfortable about what they don't know. They've come, they are doing something about it, and they are being hugely rewarded by the people they meet and the art they are seeing.”

The artwork styles change with every community, along with the country, and language spoken.

Helen, winner of the Australian Gourmet Traveller Jaguar Award for Excellence in 1999, says: “Fellow travellers love meeting people, seeing the country from the air and ground, and then recognising the paintings.

“They say they feel so privileged to have met cultural custodians and traditional owners of some of the most breathtaking country they've ever seen. Many say, ‘I didn't realise Australia is like this’.

“People have gone on to contribute to Indigenous communities in many and varied ways, from speaking well of their experience and the people they have met to sending clothes and even financing irrigation systems; from pushing for phone lines to be installed to spending thousands of dollars buying art from the artist-owned art centres.”

Helen founded Palya Art in 1994 following demand from Palya Art Tour travellers and other clients for Indigenous artworks.

Palya has two meanings in the Pintupi language: good and as a greeting.

All the paintings in Palya Art are given a file – “like a patient would have” – which serves as an important archive dating back well before the digital world.



HELEN TAKES PAYING GUESTS ON A REMARKABLE FIVE-DAY JOURNEY ACROSS NORTH-WEST AUSTRALIA. **"PEOPLE SAY THEY FEEL SO PRIVILEGED TO HAVE MET CULTURAL CUSTODIANS AND TRADITIONAL OWNERS OF SOME OF THE MOST BREATHTAKING COUNTRY THEY'VE EVER SEEN"**



TOP: HELEN READ IN FRONT OF NGUKURR ARTISTS WILLIE GUDUPI AND MOIMA WILLIE'S PAINTING. (UNTITLED) 1610 X 1790 MM ACRYLIC ON LINEN. ©THE ARTISTS AND PALYA ART 2015. PHOTO: BRIDGET MCDONNELL
 ABOVE LEFT: HELEN PREPARING TO FLY FROM WALUNGURRU TO HOLD KIWIRRKURA CLINIC. C180. PHOTO DENNIS PONT.
 ABOVE RIGHT: PALYA ART EXHIBITION FORTYFIVEDOWNSTAIRS MELBOURNE 2015. WILLIE GUDUPI AND MOIMA WILLIE PAINTING FAR WALL. ©THE ARTISTS&PALYA ART2015

Palya Art exhibits internationally and nationally “in person” and with an informed curation of collectable artworks available on the online gallery at www.palya.com.au

Helen takes paying guests on a remarkable five-day journey across north-west Australia – flying thousands of kilometres via Indigenous communities, from Melville Island to Yirrkala, Lajamanu and Ampilatwatja to Haasts Bluff, Warrmun and Wirrimanu.

“People love to buy art on their journey – and the money is obviously well received by the communities. But the art tours are about much more than the money.

“The lack of resources and the conditions can be confronting for visitors but meeting the artists and family members, flying relatively low across landscapes and seeing the art being created, as well as spending a night in Indigenous communities, can be enormously rewarding.”

She says the scenery is breathtaking and the cultural atmosphere enriching.

Helen has always loved art and has staged several major exhibitions through Palya Art and also with her impressive collection of Indigenous works, which are a form of diary.

Most of her collection is held at Flinders University Art Museum in Adelaide and used for research and education.

Helen, who gained her commercial flying licence in Albury after a scholarship from the Robin Miller Dicks Memorial Foundation, has flown many people with means and influence in an effort to help broader Australia become aware of Indigenous cultures and living conditions.

“It’s wonderful to see so many fabulous Indigenous artworks up on the walls – in homes, galleries, offices and public spaces. Bring it on.”

Helen operates five-day air art tours from Darwin and Alice Springs. Her Palya Art Tours also tailors individual journeys on request in consultation with the communities and artists. **TQ**

Contacts for Palya Art Tours:

- E: palya.art@palya.com.au
 - W: www.palya.com.au
 - Twitter: twitter.com/PalyaArt
 - LinkedIn: Helen Read Darwin Pilot
 - Google +
 - Facebook: www.facebook.com/palyaart
- Art sales by appointment and on-line:
palya.com.au/the-palya-art-online-gallery

“PEOPLE LOVE TO BUY ART ON THEIR JOURNEY – AND THE MONEY IS OBVIOUSLY WELL RECEIVED BY THE COMMUNITIES. BUT THE ART TOURS ARE ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN THE MONEY.”



LILY NUNGARRAYI YIRRINGALI JURRAH HARGRAVES
WOMEN'S DREAMING. ACRYLIC ON LINEN.
1800 X 1500 MM 2014. ©LILY HARGRAVES,
WARNAYAKA ARTS AND PALYA ART 2015.
PALYA.COM.AU/THE-PALYA-ART-ONLINE-GALLERY/