



ARTS

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Going beyond Brack

Painter Helen Maudsley reflects on a long and storied career, writes **Lyn DiCiero**

Mention the name of Melbourne artist Helen Maudsley and people will most likely say: "Who?" Mention her parallel moniker of Mrs Brack, wife of John Brack (1920-1999), who created instantly recognisable paintings such as Collins St, 5pm, and the mental light bulbs are bound to pop furiously.

Recovering from a hip replacement, the 85-year-old won't be here for the opening of her first solo exhibition in WA this weekend but she will be arriving not long after. "I gather everyone who exhibits gives a talk, so I'll do whatever's required," she says from the Niagara Galleries in Melbourne.

Born in Melbourne in 1927, Maudsley was taught as a teenager by Winifred McCubbin before attending the National Gallery Art School in the 1940s and the Victorian College of the Arts in the 1960s.

A regular exhibitor since the 1940s, her recent shows include a retrospective at McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park in 2006. In 2007, her work was included in Cross Currents: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, curated by the late John Stringer. Her first WA solo show, Helen



DIALOGUE Artist Helen Maudsley.

Maudsley: The Landscape of Being at the Fremantle Art Centre, includes works from 1991 to 2011, the title of the exhibition capturing the essence of her psychological exploration. But it's the often long, contradictory titles to her paintings she refers to as essays, which might catch viewers off guard.

"People sometimes think they're a bit funny but they're meant to be an entree card as it were," she says. "Forty years ago, a psychologist friend of mine said the titles I gave weren't helpful, so since then they've always been about the intricacies of the work."

Her method of working is not for the faint-hearted. About eight drafts in gouache develop the work, before a week is spent transferring it to tracing paper and then finally on to canvas to be completed in oil.

Maudsley says her style is difficult to describe. "You would have thought by this stage I would have an answer for that. I'm always bewildered by the question. I work with the discipline of the rectangle and what you can do with it. How it has all its natural pushes and pulls you go along with or resist."

Music is a big part of her life, and a big part of her art.

"Early in my life I had to make a choice between art and music. I did each for a year before making a decision, so a lot of the kinds of intervals I make in my works are very like musical ones."

Most of all she hopes people engage with the work and spend time to let it speak to them.

"It's a dialogue between the art and the viewer. You don't want people just to glance and make an opinion without looking closely."

We talk about her late husband, about her donating one of his works to the Ian Potter Centre last year, saying she wanted to give them away before they ended up on the tip.

"It's the same for any artist.

They fall to bits over the years if you don't look after them and you can't expect other people to look after them. Artists' works do end up at the tip. It's horrible to think of but that's what happens."

A few days after our interview, she sends me an email in which she says she doesn't wish John Brack to be mentioned in this story. "The exhibition isn't about me or my family," she writes.

"It's about What I Do as an artist. I am aware that 'the public' is only interested in the lives of artists, and that female artists are identified by their partners. Male artists are treated differently. Please leave my private life out of the public space."

It's an old-fashioned perception from another era but somehow I don't think John Brack is likely to be airbrushed out of her history anytime soon. **©**

Helen Maudsley: The Landscape of Being opens at Fremantle Arts Centre on Friday evening and runs until July 21. Maudsley will talk about her work at the gallery at 6.30pm on Wednesday, July 3. Entry is free.



COMING TO GRIPS Nichola Renton and Adam T. Perkins in a close encounter.

Streetcar rings true

THEATRE

A Streetcar Named Desire

By Tennessee Williams

Chrissie Parrott Arts

REVIEW **ROBIN PASCOE**

The industrial roller door of Chrissie Parrott Arts is open to Maylands' creeping cold and the sounds of passing trains as the audience huddle closer around the makeshift stage.

The set for Circle in the Sand's production of A Streetcar Named Desire is rudimentary but adequate. But this is a successful production anchored in detailed, thoughtful acting and direction. It is a pleasure to see strong acting choices which respect and celebrate Tennessee Williams' seminal text of cultures clashing in post-World War II Louisiana.

When the faded Blanche DuBois (Nichola Renton) arrives to stay with Rose, her younger sister, and her husband Stanley (Adam T. Perkins), she finds life in the Elysian Fields quarter of New Orleans a far cry from her cherished remembered Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi. She is at odds with the choices made by Rose to marry Stanley. In the heat and roughness of the surroundings, Blanche's world crumbles and falls apart.

Renton gave a tightly strung performance charting Blanche's alcoholically fuelled degeneration, stripping away the lies and deception, to her final removal to an institution.

There was close attention to detail in gesture and body and consistent use of accent. Renton showed light and shade in the unravelling of insecurity and memory, particularly in the scenes

Saucy Spiegelworld packs an eyeful

