

# Sylvia Serville

## *a journey of self discovery*

Growing up in New Zealand with artistic parents, Sylvia Serville had doodled and drawn small caricatures most of her life, but when debilitating epilepsy prevented her from being able to drive or seek employment outside the home, she decided to explore her creativity to find ways to supplement the family income.

This proved to be a turning point in her life in ways she could not imagine.

It all began in 1991 where she began creating large collage works of her oil pastel drawings and found there was a market for her work.

In 2000 she began to draw, for the first time, using graphite on paper. Still living in New Zealand, she began a 40-strong body of work around the theme of the 'Stolen Generation' which she completed upon moving to Australia. For up until this time, family oral tradition had informed Sylvia that she had Aboriginal blood through her great grandmother 'Wee Mum', believed to have come to New Zealand from Tasmania in the 1800s. Sylvia surmised that "Wee Mum" may have been part of the stolen generation.

This series of drawings was exhibited in Perth in 2002 at Indigenart – The Mossensson Galleries.

Sylvia delved deeply into the plight of the Aboriginal people and became passionate in expressing a respectful and sensitive dialogue of the Aboriginal experience in her art, winning awards on the way. Soon her art was attracting a price-tag of up to \$7000.

At the time Sylvia said, "I had no idea of my heritage while growing up in New Zealand, but I was always a restless soul and had a strong feeling for the land".

You can imagine her shock when she discovered that "Wee Mum" was not aboriginal at all but a descendent of the Native American Indians from the Wampanong people near New York. In the late 1600s about 500 members of the Wampanong Tribe were shipped to the island of Bermuda where they basically became slaves working in the salt fields.

Bermuda was a hub for the slave trade of people dispossessed of their land and heritage from Africa. Sylvia now believes that Wee Mum may have been part-African, courtesy of the African slaves who were also held there.

She disclosed this to the galleries that showed and sold her art. Following her disclosure, she was virtually banned from showing her art in shows about the Aboriginal culture. At the time she was also undertaking a BA in Indigenous Australian studies and after finding that she was not Aboriginal and discovering the political incorrectness of being a European painting Aboriginal stories, she withdrew and switched her degree to Visual Arts.

Having grown up with epilepsy and experiencing the embarrassment of having seizures at school and, later, in more public places, Sylvia knew what it felt like to feel ashamed and marginalized. Being called an 'imposter' once again marginalized her, and she fled to her daughter in Dannevirke, in New Zealand, to ponder her future. Plummeting into a 'deep hole', she could not paint for almost a year.

However, Sylvia has managed to overcome this set back, and on returning to Brisbane, she is thankful that she has, once again, found herself creatively, and because of her love for indigenous races, has started a new series depicting the Polynesians in the Brisbane area. Her affinity with these peoples is enhanced through her husband's and children's Maori heritage.

Sylvia's involvement in the Sparks of Creativity research project, came about through a chance encounter between Jim Chambliss and her brother, while kayaking in New Zealand. Jim talked about his research into artists with epilepsy, and her brother told him about Sylvia.

For Sylvia, epilepsy is something that she has felt acutely ashamed of and her memories of public humiliation are



Artist Sylvia Serville with her award winning work *Totems & Icons*

not pleasant. She did not want to be reminded that she was an 'epileptic' and chose not to disclose it, and consciously kept it out of her art.

When Jim approached her, she said she was forced into thinking about her epilepsy and answer some pretty searching questions to assist him. It was then that she decided to 'come out of the closet' and started to talk about it.

Sylvia acknowledges that this will come as a shock to some people who think that they know her, but for her it has been quite therapeutic to finally bring it out into the open. "I am now no longer ashamed and hope that by talking about my epilepsy publicly I can help inspire or educate other people with the condition", she said.

Sylvia submitted a favoured work *Totems and Icons* for the Creative Sparks exhibition and was judged the winner of the Purchase Award sponsored by Epilepsy Australia. This work is now in owned by Epilepsy Australia and will be included in the exhibition when it goes on tour in 2010.

When you view the art of Sylvia Serville you can't help being drawn to her subjects and the layers of meaning that her work reveals. It has a connectedness that speaks to you of a shared experience of loss, dispossession, injustice, resilience and hope.

Now we know why.

Sylvia's body of work, awards and achievements, and exhibition history are available on her website. [www.sylvia-serville.com](http://www.sylvia-serville.com)