

AN ANGEL *a Day*

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ARTIST HANNA KAY INTERPRETS ANCIENT BURIAL RITES

IN A SMALL TOWN in the Upper Hunter Valley, there is a ripple-iron house with an unusual plaque, written in Hebrew, outside the front door. It translates as 'King Koresh Street', which was the street in Tel Aviv where Hanna Kay and her husband used to live.

Hanna is a softly spoken, gentle soul, with a cap of greying hair that cups her round face. It is hard to reconcile the contradictions that her appearance and presence offer, when placed against her earlier life in Israel. Hanna was born in Tel Aviv and it was her experiences as a conscripted soldier fighting in the Six-Day War in the Sinai desert that jolted her awareness and led to a life of art.

She was devastated by the vision of dead soldiers and the memory of the smell of burnt bodies submerged in hot sand. On leaving the army, she began to use the language of art as a means of expression, to bring a different awareness to her life.

She began her wanderings around the world in 1971 when she moved to Europe to further her artistic pursuits. After studying and exhibiting in Austria and Germany, she relocated to New York where she lived and worked for almost a decade, learning how to be an artist while juggling the demands of social and family life.



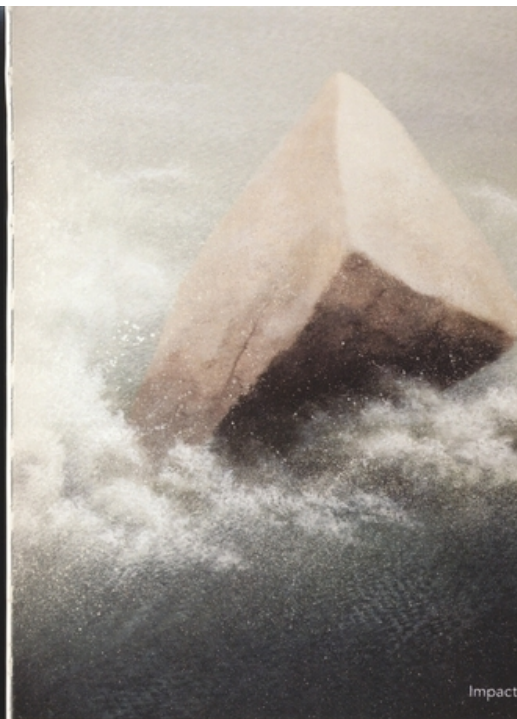
Hanna Kay and her clay angels



In 1989 her journey brought her across the world to Australia, settling in Sydney for a decade and then moving to the Upper Hunter Valley. It is here in Australia that Hanna says she has flourished, the land enabling her to become fulfilled as an artist.

At the rear of the property is her studio, a cavernous building that once existed as a stable: her "studio to die for". As you enter, the space is full of light and music. There are numerous canvases on easels, all in different stages of development, "each with its own rhythm, each an adventurous journey of arranging, spattering and gathering". The air is filled with the smell of oil paint and turpentine, "the smell reminds me that I exist," says Hanna. The only external sounds are the barking of dogs and the occasional train on its way to Armidale.

Hanna's creativity is inspired by the natural world around her. She is a gleaner and collects her material from this unique pastoral setting, a valley cupped by ranges that hold it gently, refreshed by the river running through it. Hanna has absorbed the landscape around her while walking by the river or sitting on her back verandah watching the birds chatter as they assemble their nests.



Impact



Refuge



Army of Angels

She focuses on tiny details and meticulously transfers the images to the canvas with care and gentleness. Hanna has completed a series of works entitled 'Habitat', the story of nests, highlighting the dichotomy between the nest as a place of refuge and creation and on the other hand, a temporary and fragile structure. A work from this series won the Muswellbrook Open Art Prize in 2007.

Hanna is also fascinated by the notion of contradictions, of concave and convex shapes, the space left by objects, the traces left by the imprint of a tyre or a track – transitory markings on the land. One of her preoccupations is with water, a facet that so dominates the psyche of the people of this valley and this dry continent. Hanna explores the notion of water as it reflects and transforms images, acting as a divider between worlds.

As a wanderer herself, Hanna is interested in the wanderings of others, and she completed a series of works in 2008 titled 'Undertow', commissioned by the Maitland Regional Gallery and inspired by the old Jewish cemetery in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland from 2009 to 2012.



Hanna's first language is not English, so it is with awe that one discovers she is also a writer. Her book *Notes from the Shed* was published in 2007 and is a journal detailing the seasonal changes in the landscape, attempting "to make connections between the metamorphosis of the imagination and that of nature". She says that she lived between languages and did not pursue writing as she could not obey all the intricate rules of grammar that English demands. Art offered her an easier form of expression, with no need for translation or pedantic rules.

In 2014 Hanna held an exhibition called 'Trajectory' in the Muswellbrook Regional Arts Centre, an exhibition that demonstrated a darker side to her work as it depicted the polarising impact coal mining is having in the Upper Hunter. Her canvases displayed exploding rocks, dust and craters. Included in the exhibition was 'Random Moments', an assemblage of 42 individual works produced in 2014.

In 2012 Hanna first visited China where she observed the ancient imperial burial pits in Xi'an containing the Terracotta Warriors. She was also stirred by the Longmen Grottoes with the thousands of carved stone Buddhas and inspired by the lusciousness of the gold rooms in the Labrang temple complex in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. She returned a number of times to China to extend her research and became motivated not only to create works of art from these experiences but also to begin a PhD with these works as the main thesis.

Her studio reveals the elemental ideas for her creations. There are screen printed images on rice paper hanging in one corner; in another a repository box with small animals; and then there are the angels. Hanna says that when she was looking for an equivalent symbol for the Chinese warriors she decided that she would make "an army of angels". She had never worked with clay before. She looked at the mound of clay for half a year, but "nothing came". After a crash course in ceramics, she found the right form and colour and now she makes an angel a day so that by the time she has completed her PhD she will have 1000 small black angels to incorporate into her vision of the significance of burial practices.

This latest endeavour encapsulates the metaphors that fascinate Hanna Kay. Her artworks, together with her writing, give us an insight into the paradoxes of the natural world, the contradictions that give texture to our lives. www.hannakay.com

