

## LEILA HUNTER

af Marianne Gross  
udgivet i *akvarellen* 4-2012

Leila Hunter is a mixed-media artist who lives and works in New Zealand. During her recent visit to Europe I had the opportunity to meet her for an interview and a look at some of her work. In her profession as a nurse as well as in her painting life Leila has made good use of her acute sense of observation. She can immediately see whether a person is happy or sad, is well or ill, when taking in the overall impression this person gives. The colour of the skin, the glow of the eyes, the tension in the muscles - all of this is so obvious to her. This sense of observation comes along with a genuine and profound interest in other people. Early on she chose to a nursing career, but the creative arts have nevertheless played an important part in her life.

She has always been skilled at drawing, partly due to her fine sense of observation. When drawing a person she really sees the proportions, the tilt of the face, the size and angle of the various body parts etc; but at one point in her life she got into zen drawing. This involves looking at more than the figure itself, seeing the person from the inside you might say, so as to create a portrait of the personality more than the physical appearance. The point is definitely not to paint a caricature, but to convey universally recognizable characteristics into a portrait of an individual.

Leila lived in the Tropics for 8 years, accompanying her husband who worked as a construction manager in Samoa and Papua New Guinea. Living overseas gave her more time to paint and she was inspired to draw and paint people. Her portrait of the native New Guinean at a "sing-sing" is from that period. A "sing-sing" is a gathering for the local tribes, where they all meet up dressed in their traditional clothing to sing and dance. Of course this guy is absolutely gorgeous with the bright facial paint and costume, but what takes the prize in this watercolour is the pack of cigarettes tucked in by his waistline. You can just see the top of the package sticking out by his belly. Apart from observing this detail it is quite typical of her sense of humour that she included it in the painting.

Once back in New Zealand, Leila found it hard to keep on painting as she returned to full-time work along with raising a family of 3 sons. In her line of work she encountered many old people, who were a great source of inspiration. Many people see the elderly as poor poor old things just sitting around waiting to whither away. Leila saw a great resource: lifelong experience, funny stories, and interesting tales just waiting to be told to someone who would listen. Leila would show her interest. She could come over to a person, sit next to him and say: "I've got a minute of spare time, so I thought I would come and see *you*." After this one minute, Leila would have a very clear view of which kind of person she had been sitting next to. Was it one with a "contracted" or an "expanded" personality? Leila has this theory from her grandmother: a person will either contract or expand when growing old. Either they contract and become bitter and self-centred or they will be warm and continue to love life and other people. Leila of course met both types in the rest homes. She heard a person complain: " My sister just died, so who's going to buy my bananas now?" This is the most best example of a contracted personality. The complete

opposite type is the person who said: " Isn't it wonderful? I'm 94 and I'm still making new friends older and younger than me."

Portraits naturally followed on. Leila made a point of looking, listening, and learning. She collected the statements of these elderly people and worked from notes, photos, and drawing. she took photos of them as well as made paintings and drawings. For these lovely portraits she uses ink and watercolour. She now has a large collection of drawings and quotations from the elderly people who were in her care. She is working on publishing this collection and is happy to share a few here.

These days Leila still paints portraits but now in a more experimental way. She often uses mixed media or makes collages but she still concentrates her themes around the studies of human nature, pin-pointing the essence of the individual, thus transforming it to a universal observation. Her favourite subjects include biblical characters. Most of these are archetypes and can be instantly recognized by their name. Combining the heavy reference to well-known characters with a humouristic approach or an unusual twist as she does in a refreshing and funny manner, is a way of making us laugh and at the same time take a deeper look into ourselves and our lives.