

Setting the Scene: An Image Maker 80 Years On

Valerie Hunton

...and when I take a break, I come over to my table, and that is what I saw (the photo below secretly taken by Rex Hunton). And in that moment, I began to laugh, tingle, and it seemed like everything in me resonated with: That is me now. I Am It! That's It!



Then the very next day, I did something I've never done in my life – I went to look for a canvas, 'coz I've never really worked on a set canvas. I went into the ship chandlery shop, and there is this man that I really like – he's a ship chandler like my father – and he has brewing stuff and ship chandlery and paint and ropes and he's an old Olympic Games rower. He says what do you want of me today?

And my gosh, there in front of me, was a museum canvas – that means it's good quality canvas and already stretched – and I knew in my mind's eye the proportions were exact, *exactly* right. So I came home and I started to draw me.

Now what surprised me is it took me right back to when I was at art school. It took me to the reading, writing, and arithmetic of being an art student. In those days, it was perspective, being able to really draw and to paint well. Somehow I knew that all those things in my kit of life experience were going to be required to do this. So I started work and it was just, tick, tick, tick.

I have a light-filled room, so there was light. I worked with the colour and I left open, like an empty stage, the rip in the shirt. So it took quite a long time to set the scene for Minnie and Mickey to appear. I worked extensively with the shirt. Whereas once it would have been working on the flat. No. This had to have more dimensions than that. A lot of skill to produce it. Then the next step would be my own body shape, and that was very important to me, very, very important to me; that somehow my body be seen as I perceive it to be now.

Then came the next quandary; I've got the shirt, how will I put the paint on, you know?

Valerie, what a dumb question; put it on with your palette knife the way you did your smock 50, 60, 65 years ago.

And then of course, I got into the space of the empty canvas and this piece here [the square piece of paper coming out of the circle canvas] is the expansion of whatever might be and I don't even know what is going to happen here. So it was just fantastic.

Then it began to dawn on me how much it was really beginning to represent me. My smock that I've worn ever since I've been in the Pacific – an old shirt of Rex's – reminded me of my very beginnings as an art student when we wore smocks for five years and never washed them; end of your five years, with paint and oil scrapped all over, they would stand up all by themselves. There was my smock!

Another thing, there was my stool, and always – because I am short – a stool has always been an extension of my body. So there was my stool. And on the floor there where two tops of some canvases that actually I had been working on right then because they were my neighbours playing tennis at

night, black and white; my very neighbourhood, the very outside of my door. My community. Everything was there.

The other thing was, I was holding a pencil. A pencil is sometimes in preparation. Often I would never use a pencil but I had on this occasion – a pencil. Now the next thing was my hair. I now have curls and I've loved curls for the last five years because they make me sprout from the middle. And here at this time I was due to have my eight monthly curls; we were waiting. I virtually had everything in place. Mickey and Minnie had emerged on the stage with the curtains drawn. Rex had been away and he comes back and there they are in front of him on the stage. There! It was a great moment. We celebrated – there they were!

Then in the week of waiting – don't touch, wait, wait – and the hairdressers are all warmed up. We take another photo of the unfinished canvas and the hairdresser sees what's going to happen, and all the hairdressers were there and the whole salon was abuzz because of the hair that was going to emerge and be in the painting. I had about a four hour session where they all sprung to life.



I came home and with my brush I grew the hair, curl by curl, onto my painting. So at this point, I'd like to recapture some of that joy. In fact, I'm tingling as I know that it's in the other room and I'm going to bring it out and it's going to be me, in the painting; and that's what's going to happen..

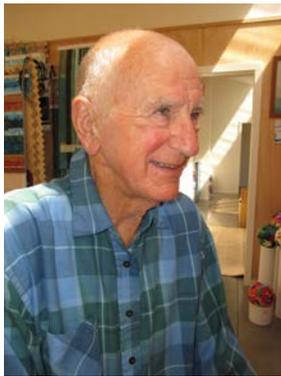


Every time I see it, I love it anew because the things I see deepen every time. I see how firmly I have secured the emerging painting to the wall. I see the easiness of my wall to attach things to. Nothing gets destroyed by it. It's the right surface in my art studio. I see my own skill at being able to portray the light in the whole image; that is both representative of what is outside and absolutely representative of what is inside me – the levels of light. I see with love, real love, my smock, and probably with even more love, I see the fine line between the panels in the wall. And I notice that I have exaggerated the nails that actually hold it together. In this wall they are small but as the studio extends and goes along the length of the house, they become cleats. It is called the Buckingham wall because Les Buckingham the builder was very, very close to Rex and myself and we wanted him to let us see the construction of it. So every cleat he put in by hand and we were there and

Mike the architect was there, and they were very ceremonially put in. I see that I have the Buckingham wall from out there also in here in the painting with the stepping stones of how the whole thing is hung together by the cleats.

And then, of course, what I look at now, are my fresh curls that day, and thinking of all the jollification and how I love them and how I painted them the next day, how a neighbour came in and said, "I don't know how you do that. You can actually run your fingers through it and look how they match with the split in the shirt; they've got curls too."

It has led onto another self-portrait. But this one I believe is going to be the missing link, or the key, or the opening, or the scene setter for the event that is going to be held in March of next year (2016) at the Kaan Zamaan Art Gallery. It's going to be called *An Image Maker: 80 Years On*. It's going to be about what actually emerges with the people, the images, the written words, conversations. But suddenly when I see this one [Valerie is looking at her self-portrait] I am speechless, no words, it's the right thing at the right time [she laughs with delight]. Both of us, would I be true to say...? [Valerie turns to Rex] Oh maybe you could say something Rex...



Rex Hunton: Yes, I enjoyed it. In fact, right from when I walked through the door and saw her working there with the rip in the old shirt showing Mickey and Minnie Mouse on another shirt underneath, I secretly took a photo she didn't know I was taking and then I printed it and put it on her art table so she would find it. The reaction I got was well worth all the effort. Of course she liked it, she has painted it and there's been a lot of effort and emotion gone into that because it's one of the important paintings

that she's done; and she's done a massive amount of paintings...

Valerie: Never a self-portrait.

Rex: Never one that features the fun and the life and the skills that this one brought in. So it's been good for me and I'm glad I took the photo.

Valerie: What about the day you saw Minnie and Mickey, suddenly on the stage? What was that like?

Rex: Great. The day that I walked through and saw the rip, I had a little chuckle.

Valerie: Also the day when you came in and they were painted and you said they're here at last! You've done it. It was knowing just the right moment: setting the scene for them, the timing and the flow seemed very important and none of it was worked on very quickly. I could go on and on about it but I think you have to see it. It's really seeing it.

I think it's quite important that in the painting that I've done called *The Big Leaves* (started before, and completed after, the self-portrait) everything was created in the opposite way. I had created a new surface which was my New Zealand version of the tapa cloth surfaces of the islands. I drew nothing. I knew nothing about the surface. It worked like a dream. It was a very strong connection with the Pacific. And everything was freeform. There was no pencil line in it. It emerged as it was.



And then I thought, oh my gosh, there's something I've got somewhere that needs to come out. These were part of a big series of work I did that were all cut-outs. They were about the birth of a child. In the North Pacific, they had the birth mat, and the child, and they had the *limen imen seri*, the blue lizards, who protect the child. Most of the rest of that cut-out series has gone but I knew I had some of those lizards left somewhere.

So here they are. They were freeform out of the circle. They were in the flow and the colour of the Big Leaves. They are the protectors of new life.

It happened.

