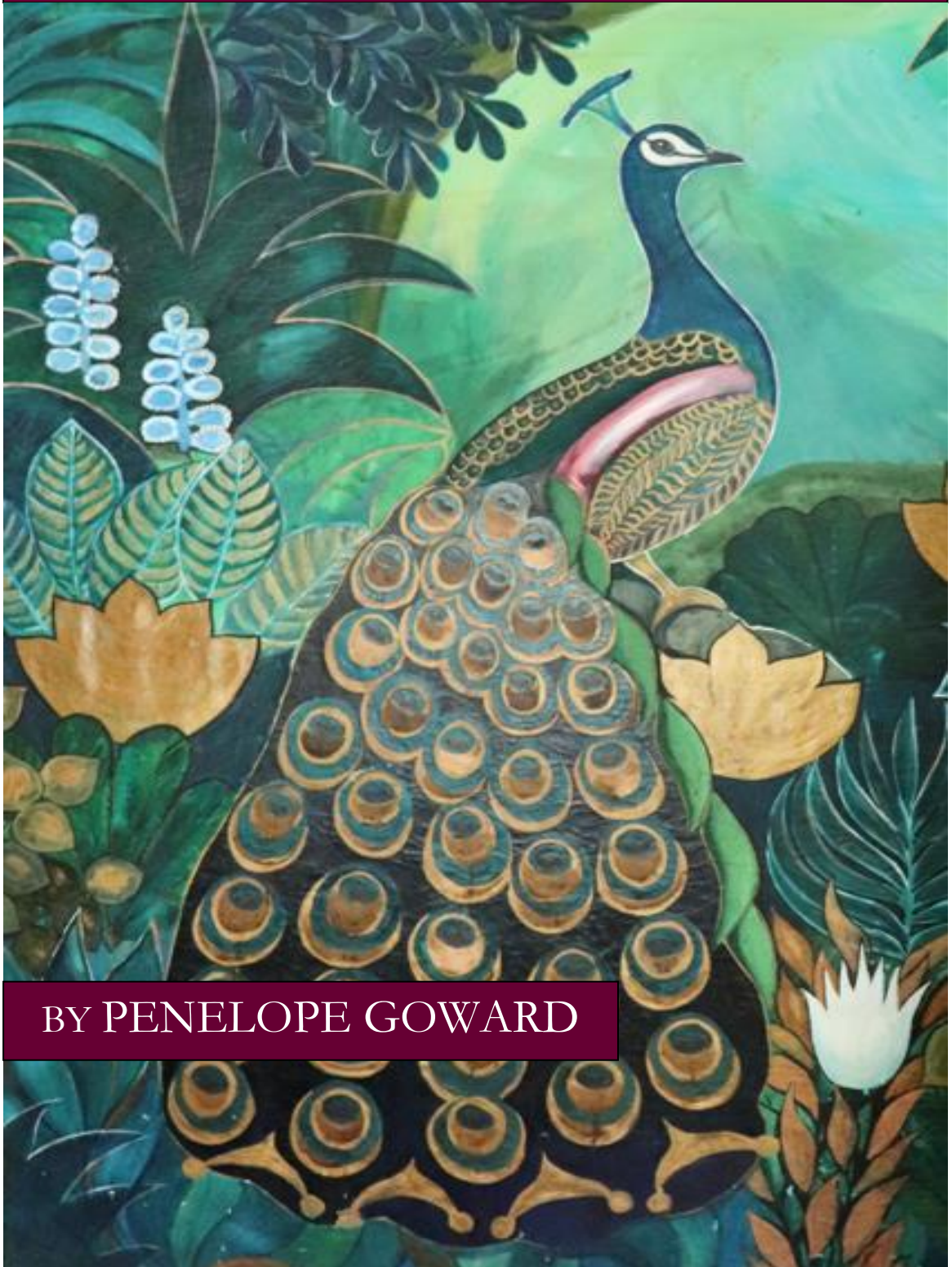


REBECCA ARNALL-SMITH

WOMEN ARTISTS OF MISSION BEACH VOLUME 2



BY PENELOPE GOWARD

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To capture the story of Rebecca Arnall-Smith, Drs Penelope Goward and Valerie Boll interviewed the artist on 01 November 2021. Penelope wrote the story and worked with Rebecca on it.

Rebecca is a beautiful, petite and softly spoken woman, but she is more than this. Rebecca comes from an adventurous and resilient family. Her artwork is large and all-encompassing, her interests many, and her connection with the rainforest and all its creatures are what inspire her and her art.

Rebecca's family of origin is English and South Irish, and they came here, some as convicts, in the early to mid-1800s and settled in the Newcastle and Parramatta areas in New South Wales. Her parents met at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney, her father studied sculpture and her mother fine arts. Rebecca's grandfather, John Rule, was an illustrator for the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, in the 1930s and 1940s. He was particularly known for his comic strips, and devised a regular segment called *What if?* He was also a fine artist and exhibited regularly in Sydney and South Australia. It is no wonder then that Rebecca became an artist. In fine tradition, Rebecca's two daughters are both artistic. Her youngest daughter, Zerena, has sold several nature paintings of the Northern Territory, where she now lives.

Rebecca was born in Sydney but as a five-year-old child, her parents decided to go to London for a year to visit the many art galleries and museums and become part of the art scene. It was the 1960s and England was experiencing a post-Second World War transformation, partly due to an economic spurt and *baby boom*. It was an exciting time to be in London. Initially, they planned to live in London but at that time, even as it is now, it was too expensive, so they bought a house in Rochester, which was only half an hour by train from London. They lived there for several years before buying a 300-year-old cottage that needed renovation, near the historical city of Canterbury in Kent.

Rebecca arrived at Mission Beach in 1982 after she had been living in Thailand for a year teaching English. She had returned to Sydney and realised that she missed the tropical scenery and lifestyle of Asia and so set off for Cairns looking for commercial artwork or even tutoring work. Rebecca stopped in at Mission Beach along the way and was offered a job on Dunk Island, working at the resort, where she met her future husband, Frank. Coincidentally, she attended school in the town of Sandwich, and Dunk Island where she worked, is named after John Montague Dunk, the son of Lord Montagu, who was Cook's patron, the 4th Earl of Sandwich and the First Lord of the Admiralty. Frank and Rebecca were together on the island for eight months before Rebecca went to England, to visit her parents.

Rebecca had fallen in love with Frank and returned to Mission Beach so that Frank and she could travel around Australia, which they did for five years. During that time, they lived in the town of Denmark for a year, in Western Australia, where they married, and later they had their first daughter in Geraldton. After that, they moved to Karratha, Western Australia, for one and half years, and then enjoyed six months travelling extensively around Western Australia. But Mission Beach drew them back. It was the 1980s, and according to Rebecca the lifestyle at Mission Beach was laid back, everyone seemed to be an artist or carry a guitar around for a campfire get-together under the stars at the beach.

Rebecca lives in a large, open-plan timber house on 40 acres of tropical rainforest near Mission Beach. It was designed and built by Rebecca's husband and herself and they have lived there since 1989. When they started to design the seven-metre living room space, they decided to design it around Rebecca's large painting of a tiger that was in turn inspired by the poem by William Blake, *Tiger, tiger burning bright*,

in the forests of the night. The main house and studio are separated by a wide, covered deck-walkway, powered by solar, and the only sounds are the trees swishing in the breezes and birds and insects. All of this creates a perfect place for an artist who is in accord with nature.

Rebecca told us many stories about her journey to being an artist, one of them being about her art lessons as a teenager. Her parents had paid for her to have lessons with an English Impressionist Artist where she learned about colour. Rebecca said, *She was very strict. If I mixed colours on my palette, she would say, 'that's mud, wash it off, and keep your colours pure* much to Rebecca's dismay. In her late teenage years to her early twenties, she studied Fine Art and Art History at the University for the Creative Arts, Rochester, England. This included subjects such as oil painting, life drawing classes, sculpture, photography, printmaking, and the history of art. After studying, she travelled around Europe to visit many of the well-known centres of art in France, Greece, Italy, and Spain. Her favourite European artist consequently is the Frenchman Henri Rousseau. Rebecca considers that he is one of the few artists who has attempted to capture the vast and abundant greenery of the jungle. After exploring Europe, Rebecca travelled to Asia, where she became fascinated with tropical scenery and vegetation. This became the inspiration for her artwork and up until 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic, Rebecca and her husband would visit Southeast Asia every year. Surprisingly to Rebecca, when she visited Bali, Indonesia, in 2012 for the first time and showed photos of her paintings to the Balinese people, she was told that she painted like them.

Rebecca sees herself as an artist and considers it her profession and occupation. Drawing and painting are what she has done since she was young and what she has studied. But she also has many interests, especially playing the guitar and composing songs and using nature in the words of the songs. Frank and Rebecca grow their food and she enjoys creative cookery with fresh ingredients. They both love the water and regularly spend nights staying out around the nearby islands on their boat.

Rebecca draws on the tropical environment and rainforest for her inspiration as an artist. Being surrounded by nature and tropical rainforests is very important to her art. Rebecca's style attempts to capture the abundance and vibrancy of colour and form in the tropical rainforest. Many people find rainforests exotic and even slightly dark and disturbing. But for Rebecca, it is a delight to discover all the different green hues on one plant. Although the animals and birds of the rainforest can be large and multi-coloured, they blend harmoniously together into the greens of the forest. As part of her dedication to the rainforest, Rebecca has been part of wildlife rescue for many years and raised and released many orphaned wallabies on her property. She has never owned a pet dog or cat because her husband and her believe that they would alter the wildlife ecosystem where they live. They have also been involved with C4, Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation, an organization in Mission Beach, to do tree plantings, as well as being involved with helping cassowaries survive after cyclones in conjunction with the Department of Queensland National Parks and Wildlife.

Rebecca has concentrated on painting using oil-based paints. She has tried painting with other mediums, but to her, nothing has the same vibrancy as oils. Rebecca is also of the opinion that oils are more suited to the tropical climate. Rebecca's paintings are large, approximately two metres wide and one and a half metres high. The idea is to encourage the viewer to feel as if they are walking into the painting. Rebecca wants every artwork she creates to be special, and because they are large and painted in combination with her many interests, they take a long time to paint. It is just something she loves to do, not for financial gain but creativity's sake. When she paints them, she usually works on one small area at a time, like a tapestry, so that each part of the painting can be viewed as its own work of art, separate but a part of the whole. Eventually, as the painting is finished, the trees, leaves, flowers,

animals, birds, and even the sky in the background become drawn together as they do in nature. In harmony. At present she is working on a stylised painting of two tropical birds, Lady Amherst's pheasants, in oils on canvas, with a tropical background, but also using gold paint to capture the features on their tails.

Rebecca has exhibited and sold paintings around far north Queensland, including Kuranda, the Tablelands, Cairns, and Mission Beach. Her commissioned work has included a camping shop in Mission Beach where she painted a waterfall and rainforest scene as a backdrop to a tent and camping display. The other was in a dive shop in Malaysia, where they wanted an underwater scene blending into a rainforest. Rebecca has not entered art competitions simply because she prefers to paint on large canvases, and often the requirement is to enter with a smaller size.

Rebecca is a multifaceted person who has many interests and hobbies, all of them creative. One special interest is that she enjoys to garden and growing tropical flowers such as heliconias and gingers. Rebecca told us she sometimes wonders if *I am an artist who gardens or a gardener who paints*. It is understandable then that when we left, she said: *I couldn't live anywhere else*.

To contact Rebecca Arnall-Smith, please email Mission Beach Historical Society: info@mbhs.com.au



Artist REBECCA ARNALL-SMITH with *Peacock Splendour*, oil on canvas, 2017.



Rebecca ARNALL-SMITH, *Tiger in the forest of the night*, oil on canvas, 2018.

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Cover image: A clip from an image of *Peacock Splendour*, 2017 by Rebecca Arnall-Smith.

