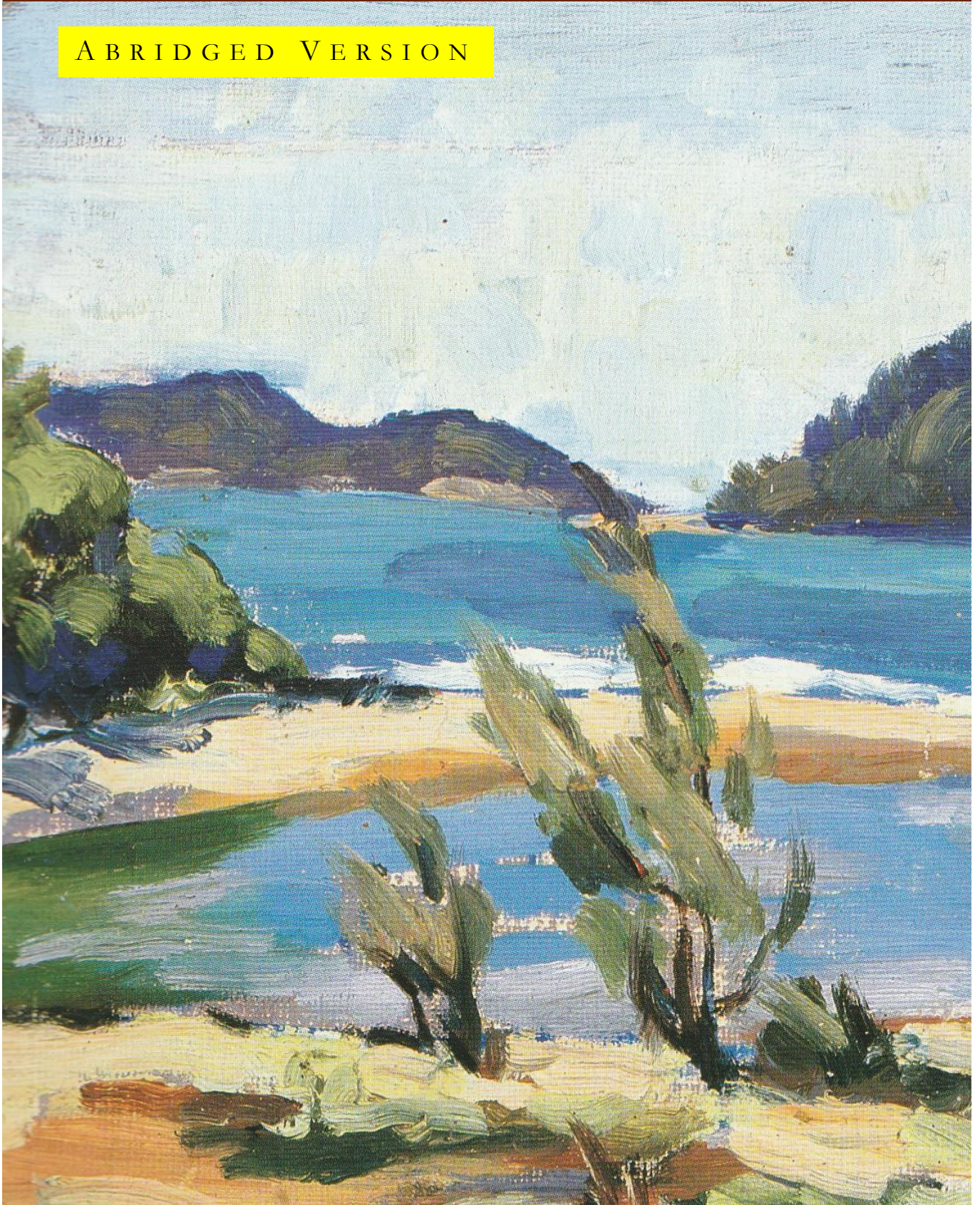


ARTISTS of the ISLANDS

ABRIDGED VERSION



VOLUME 2:

THE COHEN SISTERS: VAL & VON

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This is the abridged version of the full story.

Cover: Clipped portion only from Valerie ALBISTON's *To the islands, Timana*, 1950, 20 x 25cm, oil on canvas on board, Cairns Art Gallery Collection. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by the artist and Yvonne Cohen, 1999.

VAL AND VON

VALERIE FRANKEL ALBISTON NEE COHEN 1911 – 2008

YVONNE FRANKEL COHEN 1914 - 2004

The Cohen sisters, *Val and Von*, as they were commonly referred to, were two of several female artists who lived on the islands off the coast of Mission Beach, more particularly Timana Island. They were three years apart but were very close. Valerie started her career as a journalist and travel writer, but both had painting classes with their father and had travelled extensively with their mother in Europe and USA to study art. In 1935, they had art classes with William McInnes, Louis McCubbin, Murray Griffin (RMIT) and John Rowell and learned much from their friend and fellow student, Roger Kemp.

On their second trip to Europe in 1937, they were in England for the coronation of King George VI. In 1938, Valerie, disappointed in love, travelled north and discovered Timana Island. She contacted her sister Yvonne to join her, which she did. The sisters built a small home on the island, and it even had a flushing toilet though they only had rainwater tanks as a water supply. For the next 40 years, they spent time living on the island for long periods and usually stayed in Melbourne during the monsoon season.



Painting 1: Yvonne COHEN, *The Catch*, 1945, 38.7 x 48.7cm, oil on canvas on board, Cairns Art Gallery Collection.

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gift Program by the artist and Valerie Albiston, 1999.

Painting 2: Yvonne COHEN 1914 – 2004), *The straw hat (self-portrait)* 1946, oil on canvas on board, Rockhampton Museum of Art Collection.

Purchased through the Rockhampton Art Gallery Trust 2002.

Cairns Art Gallery's Collection has five of Yvonne Cohen's paintings including, *The Catch*, with a quote from an interview with the artist:¹

When you had bad weather you couldn't get fish or oysters. If you were lucky enough to catch a fish a decision was made whether to paint it or eat it!

Independent art curator, Gavin Wilson, worked with the *Cairns Art Gallery* to create a successful exhibition aptly named, *Escape Artists: Modernists of the Tropics*. This was the first exhibition by the gallery to tour nationally (1998 and 1999) and it featured 24 artists who had escaped life in big cities to create their works in North Queensland. Among the artists chosen to be exhibited were some of our district's most notable artists: Noel Wood, Yvonne Cohen, and Valerie Albiston.

In his catalogue, Gavin Wilson spoke of their art:²

Noel Wood's Dunk Island c. 1946 and Yvonne Cohen's Mango Trees 1945, both exhibit a passion for the pure use of colour. This direct intuitive approach reveals an affinity for the work of the

¹ *Cairns Art Gallery* collections, Accessed July 2022 at: <https://www.cairnsartgallery.com.au/collections/the-catch>

² Gavin Wilson, *Escape artists, modernists in the tropics, Cairns Regional Gallery*, 1998, PP 21 – 25.

Fauves. But the great difference between the two artists is temperament. There is an edge to Wood's work. ... One gets the impression that in all this profusion of life and apparent sense of freedom, is a doubting, troubled individual.

*On the other hand, Yvonne Cohen displays a bright optimistic temperament that revels in the elements on offer. Her vigorous use of colour reflects the joy of living in the most idyllic of circumstances. Cohen's effective use of colour prevents the work from tottering into the facile. In the best of Valerie Albiston's painting we see a reductive process at work. Albiston shows an interest in cubism, particularly the work of George Braque. Her probing, analytical approach to the problem of eliciting meaning from the tropical landscape, as in *Timana Island, 1945*, derives from her skill in deploying line and mass all within a narrow colour range.*

Wilson rated these artists highly enough to place them alongside some of Australia's most renowned artists in this key exhibition.



Painting 1: Valerie COHEN, *Mango Trees*, 1945, 45.5 x 50.5cm, oil on cardboard, City of Townsville Art Collection.

Purchased 1986 with the assistance of North Queensland Cement Ltd.

Painting 2: Valerie ALBISTON, *Along the track, Bingil Bay*, 1950, 45 x 53.5cm, oil on canvas on board, Cairns Art Gallery Collection.

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by the artist and Yvonne Cohen, 1999.

Exhibitions in Townsville (2013), and Cairns (2014), named *To the Islands* featured works by Yvonne Cohen, Noel Wood, Valerie Albiston, Fred Williams, and Deanna Conti with one by Roy Dalgarno and one by Fred Williams and Bruce Arthur.

Curator of the exhibition, Ross Searle said:

Cohen's [Yvonne] painting, like that of her contemporary, Noel Wood, was more intuitive in conception and showed a far more vigorous approach and use of colour and feeling for design in its treatment of the luscious vegetation. They were after all living in the most idyllic of circumstances, and were profoundly influenced by the environment.

While not all of the artists associated with this exhibition are household names, they produced highly original works of art in what is a little known period of Australian art history. ... the creative energy of Wood, Cohen, Albiston and Conti remains unparalleled and little appreciated in the national context. For decades these artists produced strikingly original works of art. ... indeed the work of Noel Wood and the Cohen sisters is quite remarkable and their reputations as pioneers of the Modernist Australian painting movement remain underappreciated. There continues to be a wholesale underappreciation of regional artists to the overall canon of Australian art.

Art critics differed regarding whether the sisters had similar or different styles. John Harcourt of *The Age* said they had a *strong similarity* while Kenneth Wilkinson of *The Herald* found them quite different and preferred Yvonne's paintings saying, ... *their touch of passion places them in a sphere higher than that of Valerie's faithful reportage.*

One art critic was highly complementary of the *To the Islands* exhibition but reflected that the best works of the Cohen sisters and Noel Wood were not represented in this show.

Yvonne had a loving relationship with Noel Wood, who lived on Bedarra Island and influenced them both. She described their relationship as *a great love*. They exhibited and sold their paintings in Melbourne and their first exhibition was in 1941 at Riddell Galleries and the reviews were highly positive.

Catherine Stocky observed the way that the Cohen sisters operated:³

Unlike Von, Val didn't keep her sketches ... She recalled that on the island they didn't work together unless there was someone there they both wanted to draw and although she says they didn't influence each other's work they were certainly each other's best critic ...

They were favourably reviewed in the popular daily newspapers and sold to appreciative audiences in Melbourne and Sydney.

The Argus, Melbourne, met with Yvonne and Valerie in 1944 and wrote of them saying:

Yvonne and Valerie are not just lotus eaters, and their island is not simply a refuge on which to laze. They are artists, and both are considered among the most promising of our young painters. Charming to look at, Yvonne, dark, with perfect features, and smooth hair; Valerie, slight, fair, petite, and blue-eyed.

Valerie and Yvonne were women of independent means, who were well-connected in society and, unlike most of the island artists, did not need to sell their art to make a living. Their paintings were popular and sold well and they were always generous, starting in 1940, when they donated paintings to the Red Cross, then in 1941 they donated all proceeds of their exhibition to the war effort.

Yvonne died at 89 years of age and Valerie at 96 years. Their considerable estate was largely left to the Salvation Army, but some funds were donated to create a trust for the Victorian College of Arts' Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development. This fund provides an annual award of \$5,000 for an outstanding Aboriginal artist of 30 years of age or under. Wurundjeri Elder, Aunty Joy Murphy was the person to bestow the awards initially.

The Cohens participated in at least six exhibitions between 1940 and 1961. They featured also in four group exhibitions between 1991 and 2014. Yvonne was still painting in the 1980s.

They have their works in several public collections including those of the City of Townsville (*Perc Tucker Regional Gallery*), the *Cairns Art Gallery* and the *Cruthers Collection of Women's Art* at the University of Western Australia. That is Australia's largest public collection of women's art.

The *Heidi Museum of Modern Art* in Melbourne holds one of Valerie Albiston's paintings and 30 of Yvonne Cohen's works, with one painting by Noel Wood that was owned by Yvonne. They were all donated to the Museum by Valerie.

³ Shane Fitzgerald, Ross Searle, Glenn R. Cooke, Anneke Silver, Cathy Stocker; *Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, To the Islands Exhibition Catalogue*, 2013, accessed July 2022 at: https://issuu.com/percpin/docs/to_the_islands_final_for_issu