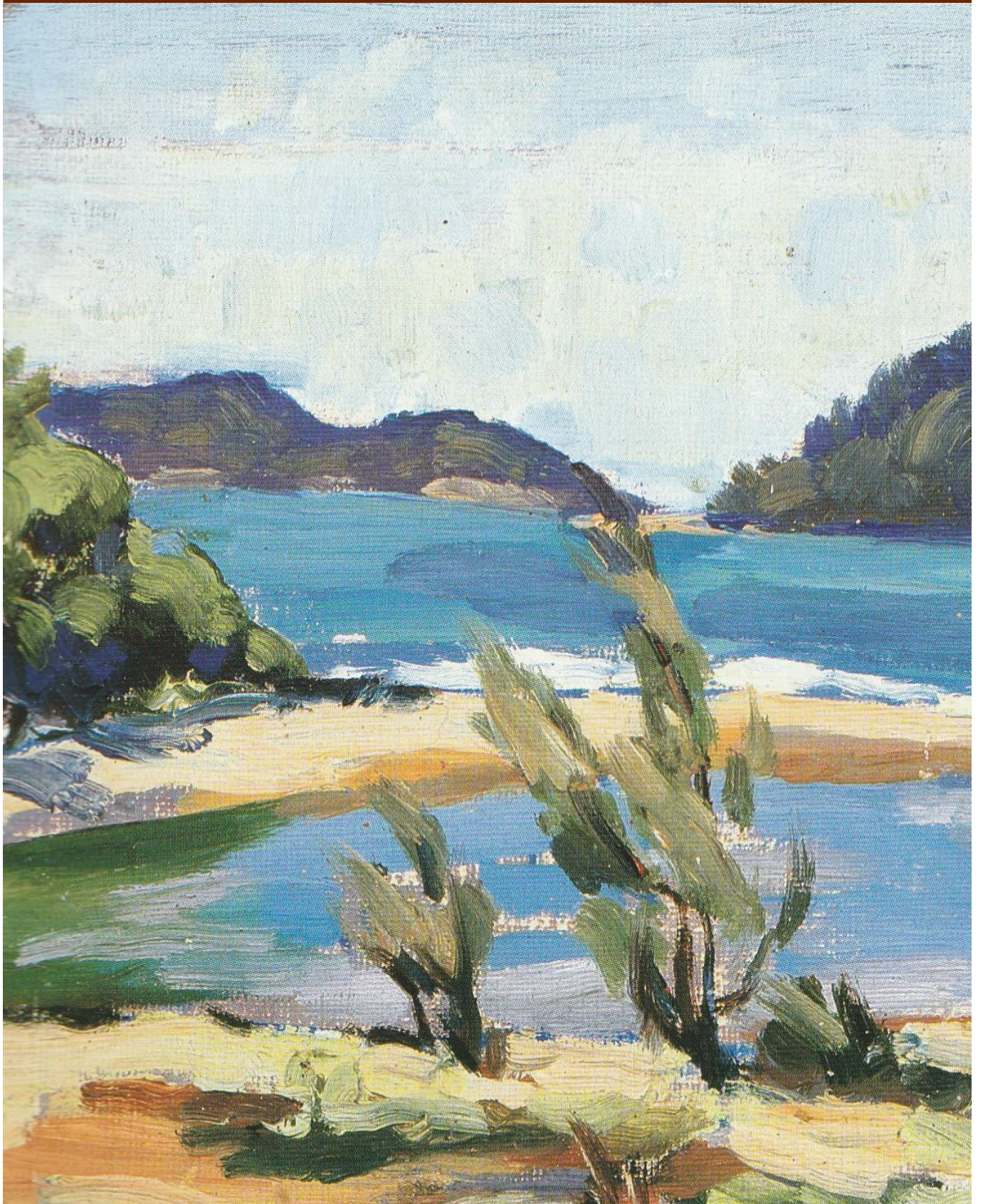


ARTISTS of the ISLANDS



VOLUME 2:

THE COHEN SISTERS: VAL & VON

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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.

INTRODUCTION

Volume One of *Artists of the Islands* was the story of artist Noel Wood who came to Bedarra Island in 1936 and stayed for sixty years. Volume Two is an introduction to the stories of two other notable artists who came in 1938 to live and practise their art on Timana Island just north of Bedarra.

Valerie and Yvonne Cohen were known to their friends and family as *Val and Von*. They arrived on Timana in 1938 and stayed during World War II, as did Noel Wood. Dunk Island was seconded by the RAAF for a radar station in 1942 and no visitors were permitted, which meant the three resident artists could paint and explore the islands uninterrupted. The troops on Dunk Island liked to visit the girls on Timana. After Valerie married in 1951, the Cohen sisters came to Timana Island less frequently. They leased it to different people but still visited.¹

Yvonne Cohen and Valerie Albiston lived for many months each year for over 30 years on Timana Island.

In 1965, Deanna Conti moved to Timana Island from Melbourne with Bruce Arthur. They were weavers and leased the island from the Cohens and made and sold tapestries. After they parted company in 1974, Bruce leased five acres of land owned by Spenser Hopkins on Dunk Island. He named the property *Hunger Ridge* and established a studio and an artist colony there, staying until shortly before his death in 1998. Deanna stayed on at Timana until it was sold by the Cohens. She remains in the district, living on the mainland and now works with kiln-formed glass.²

Another successful island artist who lived on Bedarra Island for a while was Helen Wiltshire, who lived there with her husband, Steve, and their first two children from 1975 before moving to Bingil Bay in 1979. She continued to live part-time on the island in the 80s.

This volume focuses on the Cohen sisters of Timana Island, who led interesting lives and contributed greatly to the rich diversity of our district's culture. Valerie (as *Valerie Frankel-Cohen*) often wrote articles that were published in several newspapers as well, so was an author too.



Some of the many islands in the Family Island group. Image copyright © *Lincoln Fowler Photography*, Brisbane.

¹ James G. Porter, *A Family of Islands: Dunk and Bedarra Island group, North Queensland*, Boolarong Press, 2000, P. 71.

² Shane Fitzgerald, Ross Searle, Glenn R. Cooke, Anneke Silver, Cathy Stocker; *To The Islands, Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery Exhibition*, Townsville, 2013, P. 47. Accessed July 2022 at: https://issuu.com/percpin/docs/to_the_islands_final_for_issu

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.



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.



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:³

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:⁴

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 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

³ *Cairns Art Gallery* collections, Accessed July 2022 at: <https://www.cairnsartgallery.com.au/collections/the-catch>

⁴ Gavin Wilson, *Escape artists, modernists in the tropics, Cairns Regional Gallery*, 1998, PP 21 – 25.

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.

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



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.

Exhibitions in Townsville (2013), and Cairns (2014), named *To the Islands* were curated by Ross Searle of the *Perc Tucker Regional Gallery* and 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.

Shane Fitzgerald, project manager for the exhibition, commented in the catalogue:⁵

Little has been celebrated of these artists over the years yet their impact on Australian art still resonates today. Many notable practitioners visited the idyllic and remote Dunk, Bedarra and Timana Islands over the years ...

⁵ 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

Curator of the exhibition, Ross Searle, added:

They [the Cohens] settled on Timana Island and maintained a close friendship with Noel Wood. For the next 40 years, the sisters spent time between Melbourne and the tropics, developing their reputation as early pioneers of the Modernist Australian painting movement, inspired by the northern landscape.

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 lush 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.

Catherine Stocky, Director of *Cotham Gallery 101*, spoke of the different styles of the Cohens:

Because the Cohen sisters' careers have outwardly paralleled each other they are frequently discussed together, however, an examination of their paintings shows how individual their work is.

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 developed a loving relationship with Noel Wood, who lived on Bedarra Island and influenced them both. She described their relationship as *a great love*. Their island paintings had a dreamy quality about them, whereas their paintings of the cane fields around Tully had a strong Indigenous cultural presence. During World War II, many restrictions were placed on them. Consequently, they exhibited and sold their paintings in Melbourne and their first duo exhibition was in 1941 at Riddell Galleries and the reviews were highly positive.



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.

Catherine Stocky observed the way that the Cohen sisters operated:⁶

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 ...

From the early 1940s, the girls brought their paintings south with them. 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.

Due to changing circumstances in their lives and Valerie marrying Melbourne psychiatrist, Dr Norman Albiston in 1951, they visited the tropics less and less, but their paintings still reflected the vibrant colour of the tropics.

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

⁶ 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

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.



Friend, Mrs Stening of Potts Point with Von recalling good times in a painting of Mrs Stening done by Yvonne on Timana.⁷

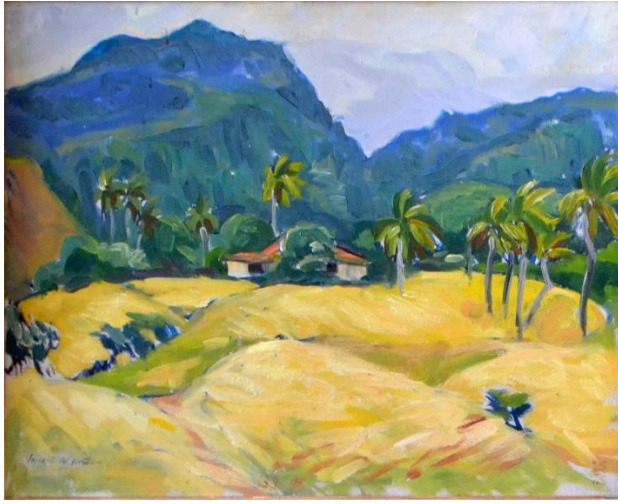
The Cohens participated in at least six exhibitions between 1940 and 1961 where their works were shown, sometimes in group exhibitions. They featured also in four group exhibitions between 1991 and 2014. In the *To the Islands* exhibitions, the curator, Ross Searle, exhibited ten of Yvonne's paintings, seven of Valerie's and eight of Noel Wood's, so he rated the Cohen sisters highly and was able to access their works.

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 *Crutbers 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.

⁷ *Who goes where? The Sun* (Sydney), 05 May 1946, accessed on *Trove*, July 2022 at: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/229461054?searchTerm=Artist%20Yvonne%20Cohen>



Valerie ALBISTON, *Pioneer's house, Bingil Bay*, 1949.



Valerie ALBISTON; *Boatbuilders* Courtesy of Christie's.



Yvonne COHEN, *Bingil Bay (far north Queensland)*, circa 1960s, oil on board, 40.5 x 49cm; 52 x 61cm, City of Townsville Art Collection. Gift of Valerie Albiston 2005.

Further Reading

To The Islands – Art Gallery Exhibition catalogue, Townsville, 2013,
https://issuu.com/percpin/docs/to_the_islands_final_for_issu

Cairns Art Gallery

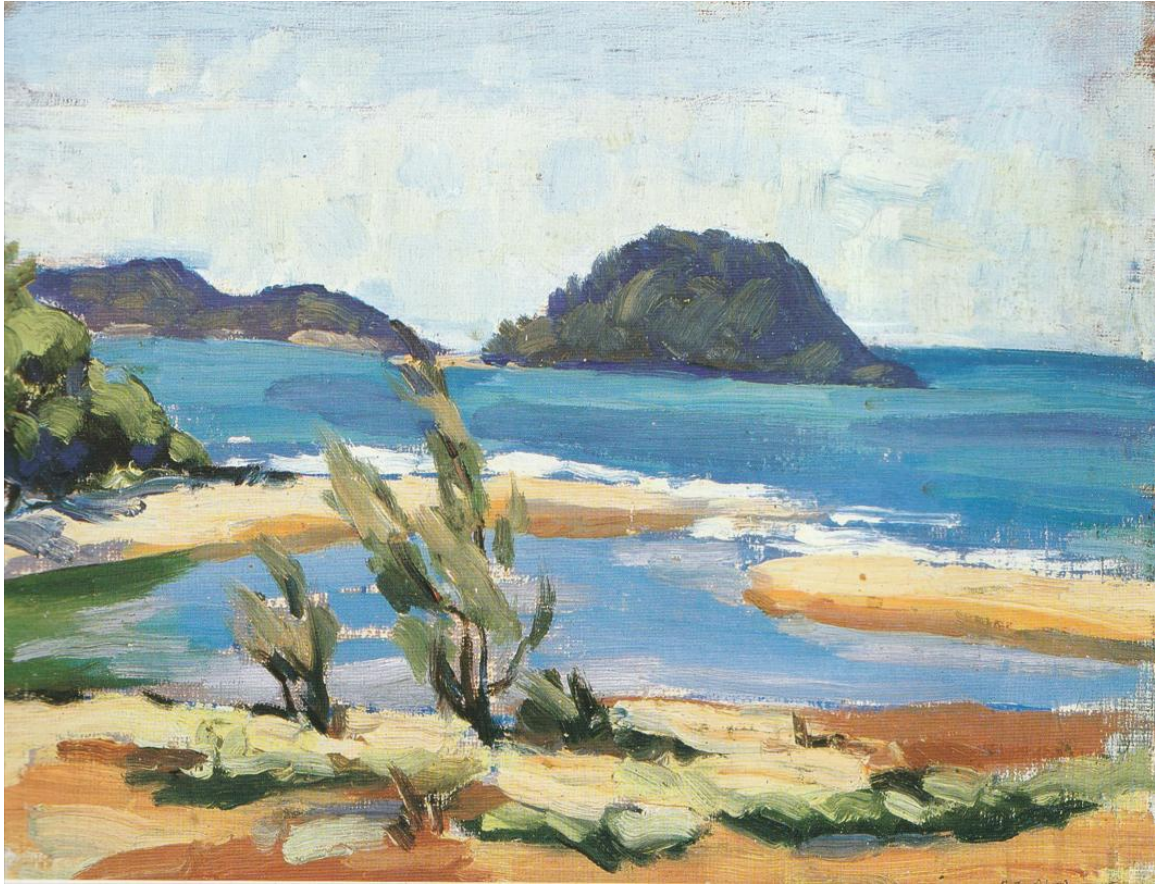
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10157476283491176&substory_index=0&id=55510056175

<https://www.cairnsartgallery.com.au/whats-on/exhibitions/Northern-landscapes>

Art Sales Digest

<https://www.aasd.com.au/artist/4480-yvonne-frankel-cohen/>

James G. Porter, *A Family of Islands: Dunk and Bedarra Island group, North Queensland*, Boolarong Press, 2000.



Valerie ALBISTON, *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.

OTHER ARTISTS

Several other artists visited the islands at the time or stayed for periods and created some works there. The stories of Deanna Conti and Helen Wiltshire will be told separately at some stage, and we must not forget the other artists of the islands.

Frederick Leslie Roy Delgarno 1910 - 2001

Roy Dalgarno, a social realist artist from Melbourne, best known for his depictions of Australian workers and working conditions, met Noel Wood in the early 1930s and worked for five or six months on Bedarra Island with him. In December 1940, they exhibited their works together in Brisbane.

Roy wanted to stay longer on Bedarra and wrote an account of his great disappointment at the break-up in his autobiography:⁸ He was not allowed to return to Bedarra Island because of war restrictions, not because he and Noel Wood had any falling out. Roy Dalgarno was certainly a well-regarded artist but was only on Bedarra for a fleeting moment.

Bruce Arthur 1921 - 1998, Weaver



Bruce Arthur weaves and entertains.

A visitor to Dunk Island in 2005 was quite taken with the weaver, Bruce Arthur:

*One visiting painter describes how ‘... even in his late 70s, Arthur would have wild parties ... People would come from all over the place to meet this man and he would entertain them for days’.*⁹

Bruce had been ranked as the fourth-best Middleweight Wrestler in the world and represented Australia in the 1948 Olympics in Britain. After leaving Timana in 1974, he created a fascinating commune on Dunk Island and attracted many young women to stay a while and help him with tapestries. He mainly copied works provided to him by artists, converting them into his popular, chunky woollen tapestries.

⁸ Stephen Moline, *Red the Book: 1940: The Ds*, accessed online, August 2022 at: <https://redthebook.blog/1940-%E2%80%A2-copy-the-ds/>

⁹ Amanda Woodard, *Fantasy Island*, *The Guardian*, 30 October 2005, accessed on Trove, July 2022 at: <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2005/oct/29/onlocationfilminspiredtravel.australia.guardiansaturdaytravelsection?page=all>

Several artists commissioned him that way and his tapestries sold widely and are held in private collections in several countries.

In 1973-74, he worked with notable Australian artist, Fred Williams, creating a tapestry version of Fred's *Rainforest Bedarra Island IV* painting. The tapestry he created and the image he worked from are held in the Townsville Art Collection at the Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery in Townsville.

Bruce excelled as an entertainer and party animal and had a strong following, living life to the fullest on his hippie commune on Dunk. Without a doubt, he created indelible and enjoyable memories for many who joined his commune and lived on the islands for over 30 years, weaving and entertaining.

In 1983, Bruce was interviewed by Michael Fessier when he came to visit Noel Wood and Deanna Conti.¹⁰

Arthur's place was a little off-kilter, compromised, stranded in that hippie no-man's-land between admirable backwoods and unfathomable, pointless deprivation. The sign on the path ... said, ominously, that if we had come this far we should certainly come no further before ringing the cowbell that hung from a coconut palm. This would warn the artist of our approach. Arthur, leaving a small circle of friends ... was a little wary of our visit but, perhaps calculating the commercial value of it, warmed a little...

As a well-advertised attraction of Dunk Island, Arthur had on hand a clipping he had preserved in a plastic folder from the August 1980 issue of the Australian Family Circle. The article began: "A holiday on the barrier reef island of Dunk wouldn't be complete without a visit to Bruce Arthur's."

His own rustic little world was lit with oil lamps during the long nights, nights made more bearable by his many books, the company of a slender young lady called Robin, and, he was embarrassed to admit, a battery-powered television set. He had lived the pioneer's life for years, extolling the virtues of his artistic endeavours and good company, food, conversation, booze, sex. The art that lined his work-living space was eclectic, woven from designs invented by many Australian artists and not especially distinctive.

Several artists stayed for short periods on the islands. **Fred Williams OBE (1927 – 1982)** was a celebrated landscape artist and he produced works in 1973 and 1974, after visiting Noel Wood on Bedarra Island and Deanna Conti and Bruce Arthur on Timana Island.

Michael and Neura Hall purchased half of Bedarra Island in 1950 and stayed for about six years and both did some painting. Michael came from Canada and was a commercial artist. Michael and Neura exhibited some works in 1953 in Melbourne: *The Age* critic panned the art while *The Herald* article avoided mention of the art and spoke only about the lives of the artists. Later that year, they exhibited with Noel Wood in Brisbane and received mixed reviews.

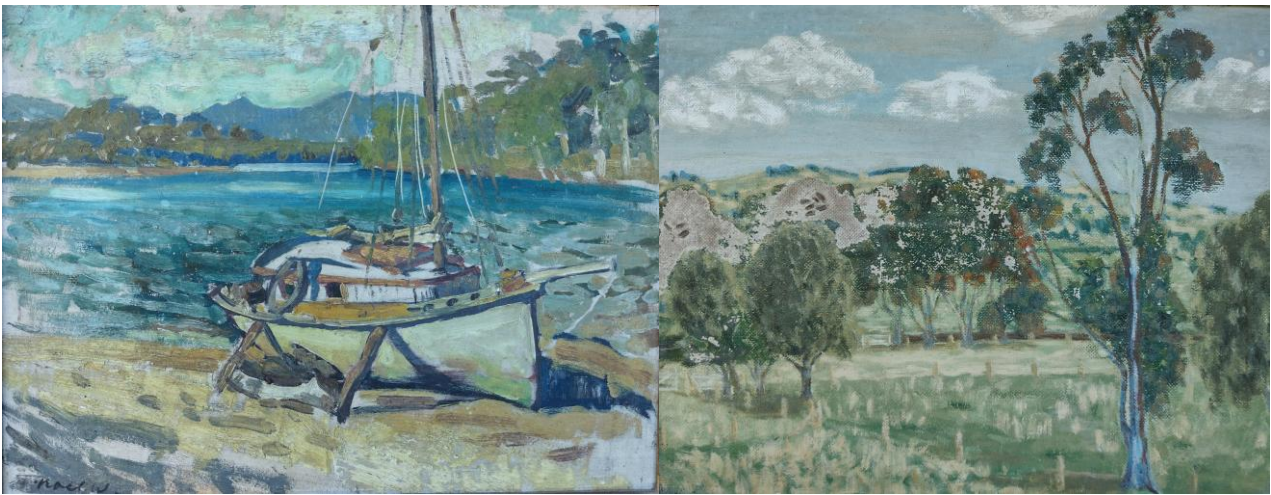
For seven years, artist **Janey Pugh** lived with Noel Wood on Bedarra, but we have no information on the art she created on the island.

¹⁰ Michael Fessier Jr and Katherine Holden, photographer, *Private Islands: On the Road to Mehetia, Part Two, International Islands Magazine*, Volume 3, No. 5, Nov/Dec 1983.

Susan Kirk, a silversmith, and jeweller, also lived on Dunk Island near Bruce Arthur from 1984 until 2011 and continued Bruce's commune after his death in 1998. That story also needs to be discovered.

Other people lived on the islands and did a little painting but did not sell their paintings regularly or have them exhibited at notable public galleries. **Hope (Sibella) West** stayed on Bedarra Island before settling at Mission Beach in the 1950s.¹¹ She painted landscapes and Noel Wood quickly created an oil painting and gave it to her.

Notable environmentalist, **John Busst** lived on Bedarra Island for 15 years and dabbled with painting, but only managed to exhibit solo once at a commercial gallery in Melbourne when his *chum*, Prime Minister Harold Holt asked them to do so. *The Herald* art critic panned the paintings savagely.¹² Noel Wood did not rate Busst as an artist at all and never exhibited at major public galleries with him as he did with others who were on the island. However, John Busst was so successful as the leader of the Save-the-Reef and saving the NQ rainforests campaigns in the 1960s that he needed no extra string to his bow; his contribution to the planet was massive and he is remembered for that.¹³



Noel WOOD, a painting given to Hope West, image courtesy of Bob West.

Hope (Sibella) WEST, Landscape. Image courtesy of Bob West.

Further Reading

James G. Porter, *A Family of Islands: Dunk and Bedarra Island group, North Queensland*, Boolarong Press, 2000.

Michael Fessier Jr and Katherine Holden, photographer, *Private Islands: On the Road to Mehetia, Part Two*, *International Islands Magazine*, Volume 3, No. 5, Nov/Dec 1983.

¹¹ Ken Gray, *The West Family: The Story of Bob West and Family*, Mission Beach Historical Society, H023, 2022, PP. 5-7.

¹² Ken Gray, *The Artful Activist: How John Busst Saved the Great Barrier Reef*, Mission Beach Historical Society, H007, 2022, P. 35.

¹³ Ken Gray, *The Artful Activist: How John Busst Saved the Great Barrier Reef*, Mission Beach Historical Society, H007, 2022, PP. 33 – 38.