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# ARTISTS

SUSAN  
DOROTHEA  
WHITE

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## BY SUSAN KENDZULAK

Susan Dorothea White was born in 1941 in Adelaide, South Australia to an artistic family; the left-handed artist grew up in Broken Hill, an isolated mining town in outback New South Wales. By the age of 15, she chose to be a visual artist rather than a pianist; yet, musical composition plays an important role in her art. Reviewing her paintings, prints, drawings, and sculptures is like looking at a visual diary of her life. Her art journey begins in childhood. For the budding artist, plein air sketching and painting of the desert landscape and portraits of family members lovingly rendered became the core of her work. As she married and birthed children, her imagery focused on domestic scenes, and portraits of babies and elderly family members. Portraying the young and old for White is one of her passions: "I love the elderly and children. They are very much alike. They accept who they are and live entirely in the moment."

Inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," White painted "*The First Supper*," swapping the biblical figures with women representing the multicultural society of the artist's homeland. Replacing the Christ figure with an Aboriginal woman proved contentious to some, as the piece was defaced – the Aboriginal woman's face gouged out of the wooden panel – while it was on view in Germany at the Augustana Hochschule, Neuendettelsau. "*The First Supper*" was prompted by the divisive 1988 Australian Bicentenary, a celebration commemorating the 200th year anniversary of the arrival of the country's white settlers, in which the Indigenous protest was best exemplified by the slogan 'White Australia has a Black History, Don't Celebrate 1988'. Even though "*The First Supper*" has become White's most popular work, with numerous reproductions in books, and used in lectures, she says that her two sculptures "*Lost for Words*" and "*It Cuts Both Ways*" are better representations of where she currently is and what she does as an artist.

(right) **Paul, Hot Summer Night**  
oil on composition board,  
48 x 36in., 1965



# SUSAN DOROTHEA WHITE

Susan White  
1965

(facing page) **The First Supper**  
acrylic on panel, 48 x 96in., 1988

(below) **The Anatomy of Dr. Freeman**  
acrylic on panel, 48 x 60in., 2012

(bottom) **Noah's Rocket**  
acrylic on panel, 48 x 96in., 1978-80



However, it is difficult to condense White's oeuvre into just one or two key pieces, as the artist has an entire lifetime of work, and in a wide range of media including painting in oils, acrylic and watercolor; printmaking in lithography, woodcut, block print, and etching; sculpture in bronze, stone, woodcarving, and mixed media.

What ties many of the works together is also one of the salient features of White's work, be it two-dimensional painting and drawing or three-dimensional carving, which is her masterful delineation of hands. "I don't believe all artists have to draw, but drawing is my particular skill." And drawing forms the foundation of her prints, paintings and sculptures.

The two sculptures "*Lost for Words*" and "*It Cuts Both Ways*" consist of hands meticulously carved from wood. Unlike her paintings that embrace family and home life, the sculptures comment on the socio-political reality of her homeland. In an interview with *Artvoices*, White discussed her love of wood and stone carving. "I relate to the reduction of carving, rather than building up." She praised the meditative qualities from having to work slowly in wood.

As her sculptures tend to take on a macrocosmic view of the world, while many of her paintings take on a microcosmic one, it is jarring to view "*Cul de Sac*," painted in 1972. Here, White depicts the stark social reality of the slums of Sydney during the 1960s-70s. The eerie small painting, not autobiographical, depicts a wild-





eyed woman with her small children on a desperate search for firewood.

Not all of White's works are so bleak. By the 1980s after building up a strong portfolio of anatomical drawings and professionally rendered portraits and landscapes that were inspired by traditional Chinese landscape painting, White comes into artistic stride, allowing her sly humor to shine. This is best seen in "*Seated*," a self-portrait where White's superb technical proficiency is understated as she allows her playfulness to take over. The painting shows her elongated arms (drawn in accurate perspective) writing at a table cluttered with notebooks and a half-eaten apple, and her sandaled feet surrounded by a cascade of blonde tresses, which literally allows the viewer to embody the artist's perspective.

With such impeccable drawing skills, it is easy to see why White was commissioned to write the book titled "*Draw Like Da Vinci*" (published by Cassell Illustrated, London 2006).

Being left-handed, White easily identified with the Renaissance master, as she could easily discern how a penciled shadow was delineated by a right-handed artist compared to a left-handed one.

At first glance, the painting titled "*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Freeman*" appears ghoulish as a group of skeletons, some with brains exposed and muscles intact, surround a white-lab-coated physician who holds forceps to the dissected corpse on the table. However, the sense of morbidity evaporates once you realize the significance of anatomical drawing practice from artists such as Leonardo and Rembrandt to White's work, and that she, and her physician husband jointly taught anatomy drawing classes for 8 years at the dissecting laboratory at The University of New South Wales.

Trained as a pianist, White thoroughly enjoys playing Bach's fugues. A fugue has a theme that is repeated many times in different parts. White translates the fugue in music into art,

in what she calls fugal compositions. She says: "If you're going to do a portrait, take a photo. But if you're an artist you can tell a story." And that's what she excels at telling stories about her loved ones. In these fugal compositions, based on her classical music training, a figure is repeated in variations, encompassing several time frames simultaneously. In the painting "*The Magic Pudding*," she portrays her young son reading a beloved children's storybook. It is a visual composition, yet shows how the musical fugue repeats the same theme without being repetitive. As she says, "Musical composition patterns are similar to painting patterns." And the repeating themes are not only found in musical fugues and artworks, but Susan Dorothea White shows us these patterns exist in life, and especially in a life well-lived.

Visit Susan Dorothea White's comprehensive website <http://www.susandwhite.com.au> to see more of her artworks.