



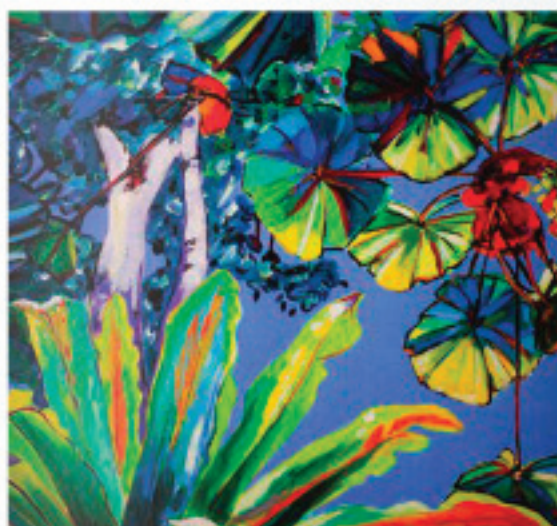
living colour

THE TROPICAL LANDSCAPES OF NORTH QUEENSLAND WILL BE ON DISPLAY AT A NEW YORK ART GALLERY THANKS TO ONE LOCAL PAINTER.

WORDS CARLA CARUSO PHOTOGRAPHY SKYE BREE MILLARD

**“I SEEK THE
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SYLVIA DITCHBURN



EXHIBITING at a gallery in the Big Apple would be a pinnacle for any artist. For Townsville painter Sylvia Ditchburn, who specialises in tropical landscapes, the milestone just happens to coincide with her turning 70.

"I am very pleased to have reached 70 – even though I'm still in denial and can't believe I am that age," Sylvia says with a laugh. "To still be in good health and able to pursue my passion, as well as exhibit overseas in amazing New York – wow, I never imagined that would happen!"

Sylvia's works will feature alongside that of 11 other artists in an exhibition, *Out From Down Under & Beyond: Fine Art From Australia and New Zealand*, at Agora Gallery from May 11 to 31. The gallery approached her after coming across her work online. Sylvia and her husband, Ken, will head over for a swanky reception at the gallery on the 16th – the pair's first trip to New York. "Just being there will be exciting – seeing my work hung up in this amazing gallery and also having a look at all the other absolutely amazing galleries in New York, like the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art," Sylvia enthuses.

Not that globe-trotting is anything new for Sylvia, who is behind the Sylvia Ditchburn Fine Art Gallery in Ogden St and has honed her craft for 35 years. She's taken up artist residencies in Beijing at the Red Gate Gallery (scooping a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics fine art exhibition), at legendary late painter Arthur Boyd's Bundanon property in NSW's Nowra,

and in Uluru. As well, she was asked to do a solo exhibition at Russia's State Art Museum in Tomsk after her work was seen at an APEC convention in Port Douglas. She also travelled to the Soviet country with Ken for the launch.

"We got treated like royalty," Sylvia remembers. "I didn't have much vodka before I went, but I certainly got to taste quite a number of varieties while there! Alan Carpenter, the then Premier of WA, was also in Tomsk at the time and asked to open my show. As a result of this connection, there was coverage on world TV. It blew me away to see my work profiled, watching morning telly in the unit we were staying in!" The Russians were most impressed with the blue skies featured in her work. "They wondered if it was blue skies from morning to night here and I said, 'Well, when you're out in Central Australia, yes, you do get blue skies like that all the time.' They were probably quite startled by that, because Russia is quite a different landscape – a lot of birch trees, which are beautiful, but it doesn't have the colour of Australia."

The eye-popping hues of her work are largely inspired by her childhood in the small, south-east Queensland town of Allora. "My father, Herbert Volker, was a very keen gardener and always used to plant annuals, poppies and brightly coloured flowers. I guess it's an innate quality, but that's where I feel I was first drawn to those colours," Sylvia says, adding: "The main focus of my work is on the environment, plants and landscapes, because I like fairly dramatic things.

I always say, 'I seek the sublime in nature – the beautiful things, the grand things'."

Mainly, she paints en plein air – in the field – crisscrossing Oz in search of subjects. According to Sylvia: "I like to get my inspiration directly. I find I get a freshness and spontaneity that enhances my artwork. If I just rely on photos, it doesn't have the energy in it."

With a secretarial background, Sylvia says "it was only after my children [Anna and Adrian] were a little bit older that I was able to concentrate on painting." Her husband's posting to North Queensland with Telstra saw them eventually settle in Townsville.

Not that living regionally has ever clipped her wings. As well as her artist residencies, Sylvia says: "I like to go and see art shows in Sydney and Brisbane when they're on, because it tends to close in on you living in a regional centre. You really do have to broaden your horizons as an artist – and I can only do that myself. No one else can do that for me."

As for parting words for aspiring artists, Sylvia advises: "You can't hide your work under the bed. People need to know about you [such as by having a website]. And you have to believe in yourself. It takes time to develop that confidence in what you want to do and how you want to do it, but you can't be idle." No one, of course, could accuse Sylvia of doing that.