Colours of the Territory

NINA BATTLEY'S ABSTRACT ART IS INSPIRED AS MUCH BY HER EXOTIC CHILDHOOD AS IT IS BY HER BRIGHT AND BREEZY TOP END ENVIRONMENT.

STORY + PHOTOS **KERRY SHARP**

RICH MEMORIES from a childhood lived on three continents and world travels as an adult have helped map a celebrated career for Top End abstract artist Nina Battley. Nina was born in Germany to an East Prussian mother whose family fled its homeland during World War II. Nina's family later spent four-and-a-half years in Jakarta in Indonesia and two years in Teheran in Iran before immigrating to Western Australia in 1978. Each new location held a special place in Nina's heart and vivid memories influenced her creative adulthood.

"We had a beautiful childhood in Indonesia, playing with other kids in the straw huts and going out to the islands in our little boat," Nina says. "My father worked with an old sailor who let us stay in his bungalow and go canoeing in the beautiful clear waters there."

In her child's mind, Teheran was breathtaking mountains, skiing and great food. "Unfortunately, political unrest during the Shah's regime escalated into civil war and we had to pack up and leave the country quickly," Nina says. "We were relieved to get away safely."

Favourite Indonesian aspects – such as the tropical environment, outdoor lifestyle and exquisite food – are what Nina and partner Peter Graf also love about Darwin. They met in Perth and Austrian-born Peter, an audio engineer and cameraman, shared Nina's desire to escape her comfort zone and explore new horizons.

"I was working for my father's corporate travel company and had to travel to Darwin on business in 2004," Nina says. "Pete came too and we went bush in a campervan for a few days and absolutely loved it. We decided Darwin was for us. A year later, we'd sold up and moved here."

Nina, a sibling to brothers Jesko and Ilja and sister Nicole, followed in the footsteps of her mother, who was a graphic designer in Germany and studied fine arts and became a painter after immigrating to Perth. Nina graduated with a Fine Arts Diploma from the West Australian School of Art and Design in 1992.

"I always painted in my spare time and did quite a few exhibitions but I needed to do more," Nina says. "Once in Darwin, I decided to give art a red-hot go and it's been fantastic."

Nina was exhilarated by the popular response to her first Darwin solo exhibition at Harriet Space – now Cross Cultural Art Exchange (CCAE) – in 2007 and other successful solo shows followed. "That first Darwin show was special because I was in a career-changing phase in a new place and, with no job distractions, I could dedicate an entire year to painting for that exhibition," Nina says. CCAE's Paul Johnstone was excited by Nina's work from the day she first walked into his gallery. He describes her paintings as beating to the pulse of life in the tropics. "The phrase, 'lost in the moment', is commonly applied to Nina's work," Paul says. "Her dynamic and intriguing paintings draw the viewers in to where they get lost in a myriad of lines and spaces. For example, her depictions of buffaloes twist, turn and intertwine but ultimately reveal the solid shape of these regal animals, staring out from the canvas, curious of the viewer." Nationwide interest in Nina's works intensified after she featured on ABC TV's *Sunday Arts* program last year.

Nina sees painting as an experiment where she 'ices' canvases to convey deeply layered and complex messages. "I compare it a bit to cooking – to taking a risk diverting from the recipe," she says.

She works from a bright and breezy pre-Cyclone Tracy house that was an empty shell inhabited by possums and other wildlife when she and Peter took it on as a renovation challenge.

"Bush camping is a big part of our lives and I always take the sketchbooks so I can reproduce things from nature when I get back to my studio," Nina says. "We're surrounded by so much tropical colour and wonderful outdoor elements."

Nina loves working with colour, texture, shapes and symbols to create layers that turn the patterns she sees in rocks on a foreshore or garden leaves into a story. Some subjects are figurative – such as the buffalo in her sell-out series of exhibitions and commissioned paintings now hanging in both modern city apartments and station homesteads around Australia. This quirky theme emerged from her fascination with the working buffalo in Indonesia's rice paddies, and the bleached horns and skulls found in the Top End bush.

"The idea was particularly ignited when Peter worked on a television story about a buffalo whisperer training Top End buffalo to go to Aceh in Indonesia to replace working animals lost in the tsunami," Nina says. Paul Johnstone says her buffalo abstracts appealed to a whole new audience. "They've been incredibly popular, probably because people can relate to the imagery, with buffalo being so synonymous with the Territory," he says.

But she prefers loose layers and line work to feature at her next Darwin solo exhibition in September. "It represents the rhythm of life, fertility, motherhood, the change of life and lots of other aspects that are part of the journey," she says. Nina says she wants to keep doing what she's doing for as long as she enjoys it. "I want to keep painting and succeed at it," she says. "It's probably everyone's dream. When you work as long and hard as you do, it's much more enjoyable to be doing something you love."

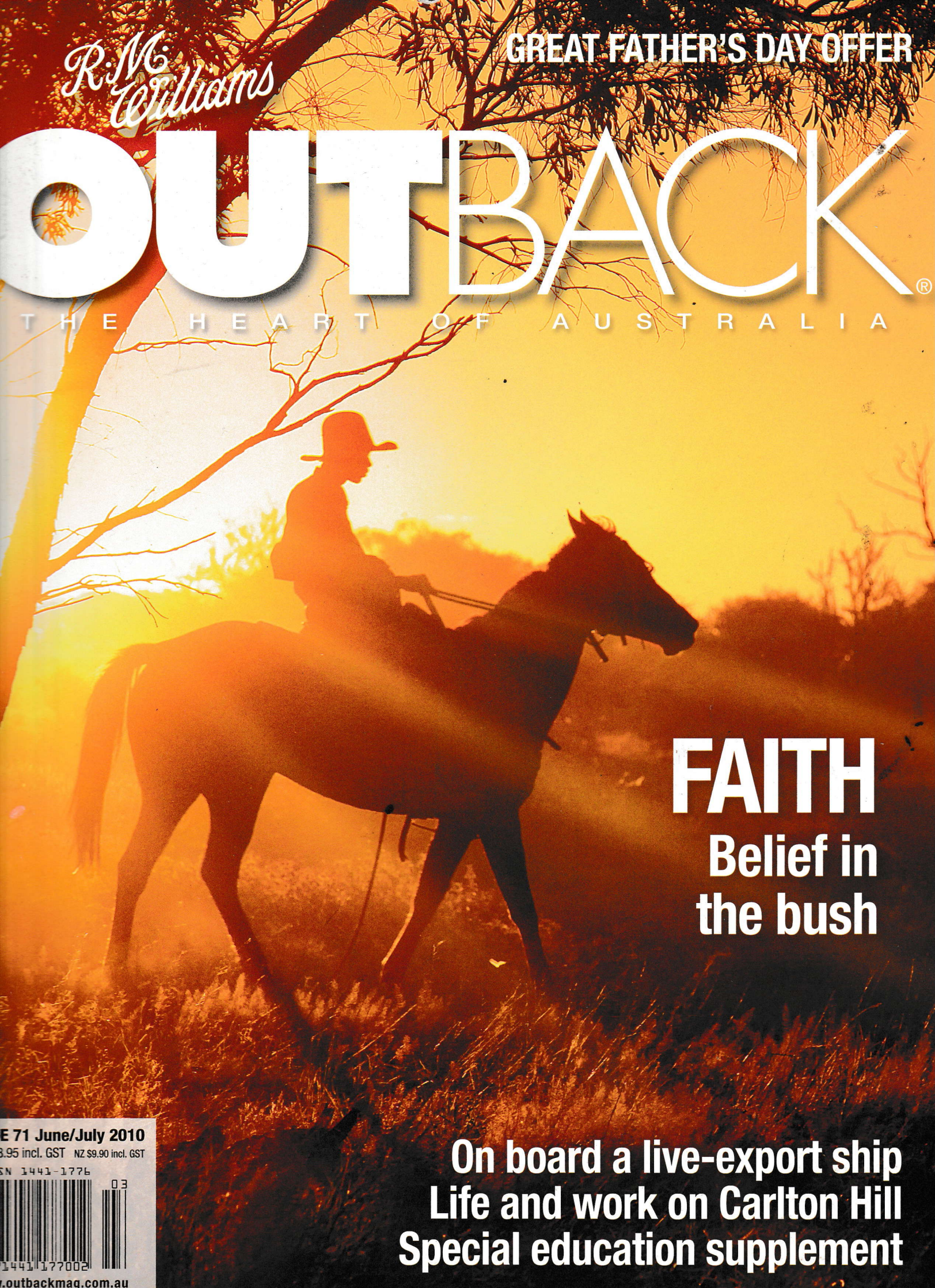
CLOCKWISE: Nina Battley's Tortilla Buffs; Nina (below) in her Darwin studio and 'Icing' the canvas.

R.M. Williams

GREAT FATHER'S DAY OFFER

OUTBACK®

THE HEART OF AUSTRALIA



FAITH
Belief in the bush

On board a live-export ship

Life and work on Carlton Hill

Special education supplement

E 71 June/July 2010
8.95 incl. GST NZ $9.90 incl. GST
SN 1441-1776
03
1441 177002
w.outbackmag.com.au