

TILLOU FINE ART

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EDWINA WHITE

Interview by Tina Brown

Ask anybody to name the epicentre of the contemporary arts scene and almost unquestionably New York will be the choice. While this sky-scraping metropolis of creativity is internationally influential, it seems the artistic band of Australians making their mark on one of the great cities of the world is undeniably, growing. Opened eighteen months ago by a Bundaberg native, Gigantic Artspace (GAS) is a funky antipodean gallery in the hip Tribeca district. GAS recently drew affirmative attention hosting ACROSS and DOWN, Sydney-born Artist/Illustrator Edwina White's debut solo show in New York City.

It is 7:30pm in Brooklyn and on the eve of Edwina's trip to visit family in Australia; the New York Art Directors Award recipient is enjoying 'wine o'clock' in her light and airy apartment-come-studio. Recovering from the resounding success of the multimedia exhibition, her confidence is suitably buoyed by the influential Australian, European and American private collectors who invested in her witty work that played with words and images.

The inspiration for her first NYC solo appeared on New Years Day 2005. With a great admiration for writers and strong narrative, the vivacious and good-humored 35yo was scouring the January 1st edition of The New York Times before stopping short at its crossword. She resolved to artistically answer each of the fifty-seven 'bizarre and strange' clues in her own way.

Properly deals with after an exhumation - a menu of fancy dishes that incorporated truffles; Ham's equipment - a video of the artist using two chopsticks to help herself make overly broad facial expressions while she was talking; and Hit of the Party - a pinata, the ingredients of which will remain secret until it lives out its destiny. The latter work was one of only a few that did not bear the bold red dot symbolising it was sold. "Because I choose to keep it," Edwina excitedly announces in her delightfully girlishly-tone laced with raucous laughter, "I'm going to have a party. We're going to smash it and celebrate the end of the show and the fact that nothing is ever really too precious! "

Edwina's refreshing ability to run at her fears, embracing life's wondrous offerings, all while not taking things too seriously, was evident from an early age. Against her parent's recommendations, she originally aspired to become a full-time parachutist, then a cartoonist and actor, before dabbling in everything from radio to theatre and even spruiking at Grace Bros. Finally she committed to Visual Communications at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) where she "worked hard but experimented with context", graduating with the University Award and the Folio Award for Illustration. So respected was her work and artistic philosophy that for the next four years, Edwina taught at UTS.

She recalls, "Back then computers had really dud programs, which I am still affected by. I still don't use a computer to make my pictures."

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The self-confessed Luddite's florid and playful character-based work is bowerbird in style and medium, reflecting her belief in the "God of small things". Edwina's signature illustrations vibrantly incorporate drawings, old paper, text, found objects, sound, and animation in an experimental collage making her artwork instantly recognisable. It initially cemented her standing in the design world in 1998 at her Australian debut solo exhibition, *52 Pick up* based on fifty-two original painting/collages and accompanied by a purchasable set of cards. The decks quickly reached cult-like status in Australia and New York and the rollercoaster ride began.

Since then, the illustrator and designer's 'pictures' have graced a bevy of major international publications: *Print Magazine* Selected Best, *Creative Review* (UK), *Vogue*; *GO*, *Flaunt*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire UK*, *E/le*, *Oyster*, *Remix*, *Juice*, *The Australian*, *Weekend Australian Magazine*, *Financial Review*, *The Bulletin*, and *The New York Times*. Popular and unique, her style has even beautified *Skipping Girl*, *Brokenwood* and *Viking Children's Books*, while *Yen* recently selected her for *Curvy2*, a collection of the hottest female illustrators and graphic designers from twenty countries around the world.

Four years ago Edwina arrived on New York's doorstep with two suitcases and a smile. She likened it to starting school again, an unfathomable school where the competition is stiff and plentiful. Although she now manages to live out her passion whilst firmly entrenched in the New York lifestyle, Edwina refreshingly announces she has yet to experience her greatest achievement. "That's what keeps me going. I think I'd be in a bit of trouble if I'd had my greatest achievement too early" she laughs, "I'm like a greyhound with the rabbit at the end trying to chase it down...just running as fast as I can."

Most importantly, through this fast-paced race her art has taught her to be free of the materialistic. She is liberated by the idea she could artistically live by a pencil and a bit of paper borrowed from the people around her. "It's that happy accident and the untrained stuff that I come to that is very interesting." Illustrating this point, Edwina recalls a recent escapade through the streets of New York and one of her favourite moments to date.

"I had been invited out by a friend on his motorbike. The night before *The New York Times* rang and said, 'You have a page but we need it by tomorrow afternoon.' I was thinking, 'No! It's the only day I can go on the bike!' So that night I stayed up late and did five or six sketches while watching a movie with friends. It was all very lovely. I woke up in the morning and checked my email to contact the Art Director's office, but they wouldn't be in until 10am. By that time I'd put on a helmet and we went off to East Harlem, the Met, Whitney and all these different places.

"I'd jumped off the bike at lunchtime and called The New York Times. They'd decided on sketch number one. We pulled up to this cafe and I ordered an espresso and a peppermint tea. The sun was pouring in through the window'. I just traced the sketch I had jammed in my bag and used the materials that I had to step it up a bit, by inking it in with the coffee and the tea. I waited for it to dry. We got back on the bike and delivered it to The New York Times on time."

Remarkable experiences like these do not disillusion the artist on her work's significance, as she is quick to confess, "Nothing that I do is very important." Explaining this statement, Edwina emphasises that her pictures have yet to affect and change the world. Her focus and greatest challenge for the years to come is to provide insight and break down ideas, hopefully to empower people in all decisions from self--medication to how to vote properly. She cares because "There's just so much stuff to do!" Like escaping to the beach every couple of weekends to get her fix of the horizon... Like experiencing firsthand the mental effects of a European winter and summer solstice... Like building her own house and becoming a great parent one day... Like eventually owning a dog named Handsome... Like smashing that pinata to pieces...

As a neighbour calls out through the door inviting her out for dinner, Edwina leaves me with her cryptic and playful words of wisdom: "We all amount to nine litres of water and \$23 worth of chemicals. Stretch. Oh, and think like a cat if you are heading for a fall."