

## Radical artist and campaigner for justice

**ELLEN JOSE 1951-2017**

*Ellen Jose was not only a groundbreaking and radical indigenous artist, she was a lifelong anarchist and campaigner for social justice.*



*Ellen Jose, indigenous artist and activist Photo: Supplied*

**By Joseph Toscano**

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Aueswau Ellen Jose, a pioneer in Australia's urban indigenous art movement and a radical activist, anarchist and social justice campaigner, died on June 2 at Cabrini Hospital in Malvern, surrounded by her husband and children. ("Aueswau" is a term that is used in the Torres Strait community to address an Elder.)

Ellen was born in Cairns on April 17, 1951 to Catherine Butler and Gregorio Jose, descendants of Torres Strait Islanders living on Iama, Mer, Erub and Ngurupai islands. Ellen's ancestry was also connected to England, the Philippines, Portugal and the Cape Verde Islands in West Africa.

Her parents separated before she was born. Her father, "Gorrie", had no more children. Catherine remarried and had five more children: Georgina, Leanne, Carolyn, John and Gordon.

In a 1992 interview in *Land Rights News* about her seminal exhibition *Black Diggers Ghost Fighter*, Ellen said: "My father's war experiences contributed to his tragic life and early death in 1982. These experiences permanently scarred him and directly and indirectly have had a profound effect on my life and his family.

"Through the exhibition I hope to show the effects the war had on my father and at the same time acknowledge the forgotten contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people made towards the Australian war effort during World War Two."

Her mother, Catherine Archer, who received an Order of Australia Medal for services to hockey, died in 1994. Ellen lived with her mother, brothers, sisters and stepfather in Cairns during the 1950s and '60s. She attended Parramatta State Primary School and Cairns State High School. She was an accomplished hockey and vigoro player as well as a competitive marching girl.

Ellen attended the local Methodist Church, was a "Ray" and taught Sunday School as a 14-year-old. She sang at the church and was instrumental in introducing contemporary music to her church in the mid-1960s.

Ellen left home at 16 when she found employment as a ticket writer and window dresser at Myer in Cairns. She was the first indigenous woman in North Queensland to hold a job that interacted directly with the public, and was proud of the fact she received male wages for her work.

Ellen Jose had plans for herself and her children. In an interview with Christobel Botten in *The Age* in 1989, she said: "My way of surviving was to give myself a challenge. When I achieved that challenge I would aim for another one."

Looking for new challenges, she initially moved to Brisbane and obtained a Certificate of Applied Art in 1976 at the Seven Hills Art College. Ellen moved to Melbourne in late 1976, completing a Diploma of Fine Art at the School of Art and Design at Preston Institute of Technology in 1978 and a Diploma in Education (Secondary) at the Melbourne State College for Secondary Teaching in 1979. She worked for Aboriginal Education in Victoria and continued to take singing (opera) and piano lessons.

Ellen's career as an artist is what defines her. She mastered oils, calligraphy, watercolour, photography, ceramics, video art, film, installation art, print-making (woodblock and linocut), drawing, murals and book illustrating. Ellen lectured in fine art as a guest lecturer at Monash University in Melbourne and as a permanent lecturer at Deakin University (1991-1994) in Geelong.

She worked as a secondary art teacher in Melbourne and was a guest lecturer in Japan, China, Brisbane, Cairns and Canberra.

***All people can maintain their own distinct and separate cultures while living together in peace.*** Ellen Jose

Ellen had 18 solo exhibitions as well as multiple group exhibitions, too numerous to mention. She was the first Torres Strait Islander to hold a solo exhibition in this country and the first Torres Strait Islander to obtain a fine arts degree.

William Mora, of William Mora Galleries, on hearing about Ellen's death wrote: "Ellen was a pioneer in the urban indigenous art movement pioneering political art to raise issues long ignored, and it was my honour to be able to show her work in my gallery over many years.

"Her art will live on despite her passing and it was a privilege to have known her. History will remember her well."

Of Ellen's 1991 exhibition *In Search of Lost Innocence*, Martin Flanagan wrote in *The Age*: "The 17 watercolours and ink drawings that make up Ellen Jose's exhibition can be read like a poem."

A quarter of a century before childhood sexual abuse became a national issue, Ellen wrote: "This exhibition highlights a problem that is going on around the world, a problem that crosses racial, cultural, geographical and time barriers – childhood sexual abuse. This universal problem must not only be addressed it must be stopped. This exhibition is my attempt to break the silence."

In an interview in *The Australian* with Kylie Davis in 1989, Ellen stated: "My work is a fusion of cultural techniques, designs and patterning emphasising the fact all people can maintain their own distinct and separate cultures while living together in peace."

In a 1990 interview with Heather Harvey in the *Cairns Post* she said: "I do draw on my indigenous background but I am trying to develop my own philosophy and style. My work is a fusion of all the techniques I have learnt."

As she became older, wearied by the hypocrisy of the world and the art world's fixation on the mundane and the trivial, her art became more bold and powerful.

In 2003 Paul Gray interviewed Ellen in the *Herald Sun* about her exhibition *A Fact is a Fact is a Fact: Up Yours Windschuttle*, sparked by her anger at the historian's denial of massacres. Ellen said: "Windschuttle seems to be rewriting history to suit himself, and people like John Howard support it."

Gray wrote: "Her paintings show the violence in symbolic language, using eye-catching splashes of bright red, symbolising blood, and signs including a Christian cross, traditional Torres Strait ceremonial gear and isolated human body parts."

Ellen's work is represented in public and private collections in Australia and overseas, including the National Gallery of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, the National Museum of Australia and too many other collections to be listed.

In 2009 she was awarded the Eureka Australia Day Medal (EAM) for more than three decades of radical activism. Her long list of accomplishments include being co-founder of the Libertarian Workers for a Self-Managed Society (1976), the Anarchist Media Institute (1986), Australian Anarchist Centenary Celebrations Committee (1986), Reclaim the Radical Spirit of the Eureka Rebellion Celebrations (2002), Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner Commemoration Committee (2006) and many, many other campaigns and activities.

Ellen was the chairperson of the Victorian Wongai Torres Strait Islander Association 2001-2002 and a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board of the Australia Council 1996-1999. She did all this and much, much more while raising four children, Cheryl Jose, Benjamin Jose, Libera Toscano Sasmana and Joshua Jose Toscano while battling all the health issues related to 40 years of insulin-dependent diabetes.

The way Ellen lived her life can be summed up in the conversation we had with her doctors who advised her against going to Iceland in 2015 to fulfil a childhood dream. "Quality of life, not time on earth, is my quest," she said. We went to Iceland in 2015,

we chased the Northern Lights – Ellen was the first Australian who had ever had dialysis in Iceland.

We will all miss her.

\* Dr Joseph Toscano was the partner/husband of Ellen Jose for the past 43 years.