

Outback Queen paints the land

Sally Nicol

ARID country artist Annabel Tully grew up in the western suburbs of Brisbane. She now lives 1200km further west in the Channel Country but still considers herself to be in the 'burbs. "I'm only 80km from Quilpie," she explains with a bubbly laugh.

What makes her location interesting is that she's opened a new art gallery there. While not quite the place you'd expect to find a steady stream of clients, Tully says business couldn't be better.

"We're on the main tourist drag out west through the Channel Country. The tourists are dropping in all the time. They love it."

The gallery is set within the grounds of the historic Tully family homestead, Pinkilla. It's one of the original properties settled by the pioneering Durack, Tully and Costello families as they worked their way north from Victoria, opening up vast tracts of sheep and cattle country. It's a saga recorded in Mary Durack's book, *Kings in Grass Castles*.

Keeping the history alive, Tully has named her gallery Grass Castles. Walking into the gallery almost induces sensory overload. Large canvases depict a contemporary view of the raw and rugged landscape. The works are a glimpse into the world Tully has adopted.

Growing up on 8ha in Brookfield Tully led a tomboy existence. There were mud fights with her two brothers. They climbed trees and built secret hideaways in the scrub. Her adventurous streak never waned and later, teaching degree in hand, she headed west to "live life and explore a bit".

It was while she was working at the Charleville School of Distance Education that she met fifth-generation Channel Country pastoralist Stephen Tully. For him it was love at first sight. However, it took Stephen another three years to muster the courage to make a move - he had to follow Annabel to Ireland to pop the "big" question.

In 1999, Stephen married his "Queen of the Outback", a title Annabel won in the Royal Flying Doctor quest a few years earlier. "I'm the last reigning queen and I've got the tiara to prove it," Annabel laughs. "The year after I won they changed it into the Spirit of the Outback Awards and opened it up to males."

Title still intact, Annabel happily



SURVIVOR ... Annabel Tully recreates the colours of the Outback that she fell in love with as a young woman. Picture: Danielle Lancaster

settled into life on the 93,000ha grazing holding her husband's family operates. However, three years of crippling drought wasn't the only adversity the young couple had to face.

Two years ago, while pregnant with their second child, Annabel was diagnosed with breast cancer. "I was diagnosed when I was 37 weeks pregnant. Basically Sophia was delivered at 38 weeks and I was having breast surgery at 39½ weeks."

Annabel returned to Pinkilla to recover and then began travelling backwards and forwards to Brisbane for chemotherapy and radiation treatment. "I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm coming up to my two-year check-up next month, so hopefully that will be my clean bill of health. I'll be back to life, back to normal."

Annabel couldn't have gone through the ordeal without Stephen. He took over looking after little Lachlan and Sophia while running a drought-stricken property. "He and Sophia are

best buddies because they had that initial bonding right from the word go," she says.

The health crisis provided a turning point for Annabel. "I just said 'right, it's now or never girl. If you want to do something for yourself then you do it now and you give it a go'."

So this year she held her first art exhibition in Quilpie (which was a sell-out), opened her Grass Castles Gallery and then ran a half marathon.

"I'm mad I know, but it was my way of saying this rotten bloody thing can't beat me. You can survive and life can be good after it all."

She is working towards her next solo exhibition, *Kindred Spirits*, which will open in Longreach next April. This series of Channel Country paintings will deliver a strong message.

"In my works I want to project that the people actually living here have a kinship with the land that is just as good if not better than the people who were here before us."

The Tullys, like many rural families, are frustrated by the intervention of government and bureaucracy in the running of their rural enterprise.

"We are trying to work with the land rather than against it," she says.

With a self-conscious chuckle she sighs, "Very profound isn't it?"

What Annabel Tully is struggling to convey in words comes across vividly in her paintings. She uses the raw earth mixed with an acrylic medium to create a sense of place in her works.

"I just couldn't see the sense of making those beautiful arid country colours out of a plastic tube," she says.

Annabel isn't one for neat drawings on blank sheets of paper. All her initial sketches are art works in their own right, painted on to flat tin. "I take an Esky and an ironing board for an easel and I tootle off into the paddock and paint there." She then comes back to her studio/gallery to recreate her sensitive yet dynamic landscapes on canvas.

This former Brisbane girl is now a woman of the Channel Country. She now shares her husband's deep relationship with the land and through her painting is allowing us to share it, too. Here is a Queen of the Outback who will never give her title up.

To find out more about the Grass Castles Gallery log on to www.annabeltully.com