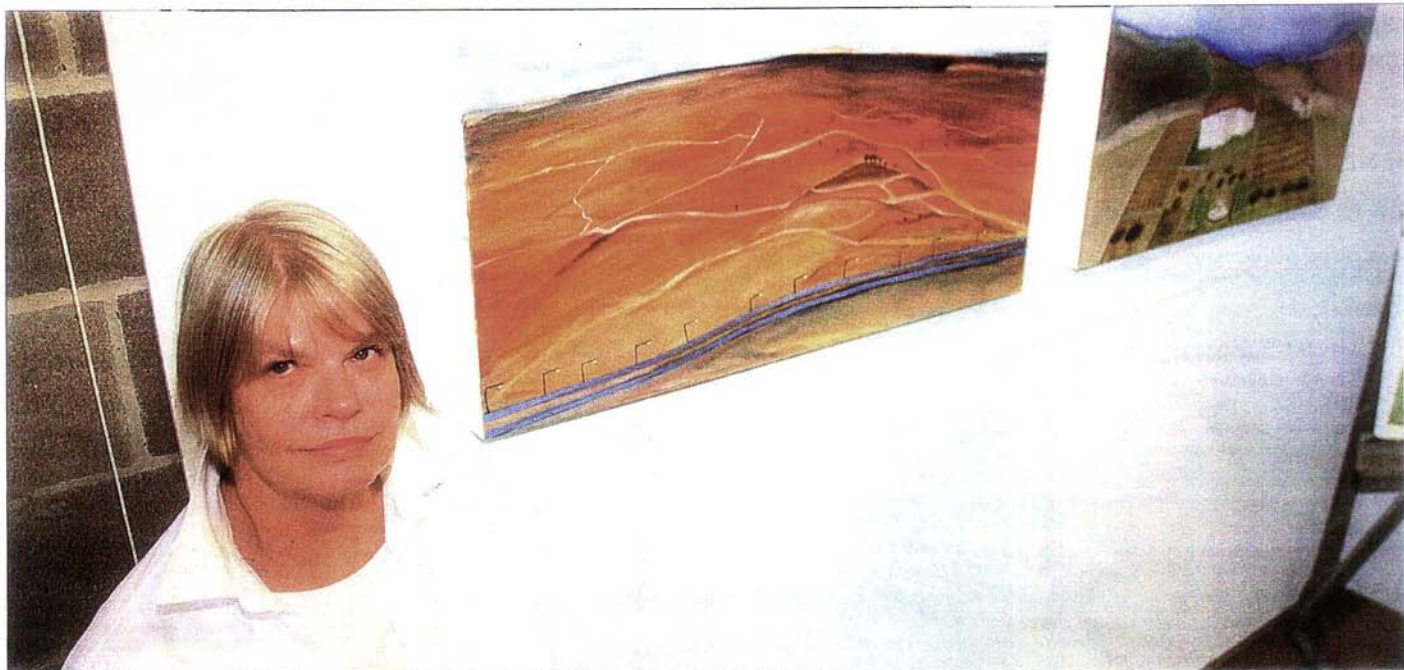


## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT



ALL READY: Canberra artist Brenda Runnegar's exhibition, *Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy* opens at the ANCA Gallery, Dickson, on January 18 and is the culmination of three years' work and travel.

# Fantasy in mixed visions

Brenda Runnegar's lush landscapes of Italy contrast starkly with harsher scenes of a fire-ravaged Canberra, Jennifer Kingma writes

**C**ANBERRA artist Brenda Runnegar has developed her own creative and interpretive language of Italian gardens and local landscapes.

Her exhibition, *Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy*, which opens at the Australian National Capital Artists' Gallery in Dickson on January 18, will reflect the individual style of an artist whose love affair with the water and lush green of the formal Italian gardens contrasts with a fascination for the colour and form of the dry Canberra landscape after the 2003 bush fires.

Runnegar is completing a Master of Fine Arts degree at Monash University studying part-time while working full-time at the National Library of Australia.

Her art practice has developed steadily since she graduated from the Queensland College of Art in 1997 with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours).

Eight weeks of research at the Monash Centre in Prato into Italian gardens — while on a fellowship in 2004 — has informed the exhibition.

## Today's Picks

■ The National Portrait Gallery has *Clifton Pugh — Australians*. Until March 26. Open daily, 9am to 5pm. Old Parliament House. Phone: 6270 8236. *Glossy 2: Faces, Magazines*. Now. Until April 9. Open Wednesday to Sunday, 10am-5pm. Commonwealth Place Gallery on the Lake.

■ Graham Charlton Gallery has Australian landscape paintings in oils. Permanent exhibition. Open Tuesday-Sunday, 10am-5pm. Gold Creek Square, Nicholls.

Through her art she has tried to depict the feelings of neglect and melancholy that she associated with the gardens, but she has also tried to capture some of the mysterious haunting beauty and magic of the place.

"In Italy it was the light," Runnegar says. "It was summer. I don't know whether it was pollution or haze but the colours were muted and soft. With my Canberra paintings, I'm not painting the bushfires as such, but more the aftermath of the bushfires. I was just totally astonished at the bare brown hills."

*Clearing after the bushfire — Canberra* is a series of paintings she completed in 2004 and they will form part of the exhibition at ANCA. The paintings show the quiet stillness of the landscape in the aftermath of the fires when the only interruption to the bare, sparse hills was an occasional glimpse of a contemporary city building, which adds a surreal quality to the landscape.

After the fires when everything was being cleaned up, put in piles, burnt and taken away, Runnegar saw strange surreal scenes that didn't look like burnt landscape. She began taking photographs and making lots of pencil sketches.

Interestingly her Italian series of paintings began with a series of biro sketches.

"I like to distort what I see and make my own symbols and collage of ideas. If you look at my paintings they don't look anything like the original landscape. They're fantasy."

She paints in oil on masonite. She likes smooth surfaces and works her paint so that it resembles thin layers of watercolour.

You will see statues in her work based on the stone statues she saw in Italy.

She turns them into mythical creatures, neither human nor animal, but a combination of both using her own distorted language.

She likes small detail rather than big vistas. "I want to look down on to the landscape

so that I have a bird's-eye view of what I want to paint, which is something the Renaissance painters did. That way you can see the whole landscape and I like that. It's a bit like map painting."

Runnegar considers herself as "a bit of an outsider".

Her work has been influenced by the naive, sophisticated work of contemporary artists such as Noel McKenna and has changed now that she is getting into fantasy with more complex detail. She particularly likes the juxtaposition of the naive and the sophisticated.

"It's hard to say that I have a specific style. I want to make something that's mine and not derivative — be influenced by others — but not their style."

"Some people may look at my work and say it's too naive and she can't paint what she sees [but] I'm trying paint what I feel rather than paint the scene as it is. The camera does that very well."

*Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy* is the culmination of three years of work and travel and Runnegar says feedback will be important to her.

■ *Landscapes of Desire and Melancholy*. January 18 to 29 at ANCA Gallery, 1 Rosevear Place, Dickson, Wednesday to Sunday, from noon to 5pm.