

The CHARM of SUE SOO

Since she first picked up a paintbrush in 1981, after she lost her husband Ken, Sue Soo has painted compulsively, as well as doing knitting - especially blackberry stitch - and crochet. Her 'sudden passion' for painting surprised and then delighted her family, and has continued to attract many other artists, curators and collectors since then. Some of her dedicated fans, such as art curator Jill Trevelyan, photographer Andrew Ross, and artist Anne Marie Verbeek first saw her paintings propped up against the front window of her home in Onepu Street, Kilbirnie, opposite Wellington's bus depot.

Sue Soo called Anne Marie Verbeek her 'artist friend', because she has never thought of herself as a 'real' artist. She thought Jill Trevelyan was 'crazy' to suggest that she could have an exhibition of her work in Gary Freemantle's One Eye Gallery in 2001, but has had several very successful exhibitions since then. This Mahara Gallery exhibition brings together work made over many years - although mostly it is undated - and lightly 'surveys' the great breadth and richness of Sue Soo's prolific creative energy and output.

She has mostly made art with what other people often consider 'rubbish' or throwaway material, such as corrugated card, supermarket cardboard boxes, remnant pieces of fabric and wool, and pumice picked up from the beach. She really enjoys the making process itself, and does not concern herself with where her ideas come from: "I just make it all up ... it's all in my head!" Her resourcefulness has extended to making sculptures of free-standing figures out of recycled card and No Gaps filler, which she then paints.

Sue was born in China in 1926 in Pong Woo village in Poon Yue district, and came to New Zealand in 1940 as a war refugee, when she was fourteen, with her mother and brother. They stayed with relatives in Taranaki Street, Wellington. She married Ken Soo in Christchurch in 1946 and they had market gardens around New Zealand, including at Levin, before finally returning to Wellington in 1979 following Mr Soo's illness.

Sue was kept busy raising their five children, and didn't start making art until she was in her fifties. She told Jill Trevelyan in 2004: 'When you paint you forget your loneliness. You can cry for the moon, but the moon won't come down. You've got to have something to do, then you forget yourself.'

Sue Soo's ideas, imagery, technique and colours are all her own. They appear to draw on her memories of growing up in China, mixed in with other Western influences, and her feelings about love. The paintings exude character and vitality: they celebrate life, while some also convey a sense

of yearning and loss. Her favourite subject is groups of ballet dancers, who perform with civility, tenderness and restrained passion.

Within this group, Sue Soo also often depicts couples, in a romantic spirit. The 'swooning couple' is a strong motif, the woman's head thrown back in stylised abandon. Within a limited range of positions, gestures and facial detail, she conveys a great deal of expression and human emotion.

Anne Marie Verbeek 'appreciates the freshness, honesty, and real strength of Outsider art' and describes Sue Soo as 'New Zealand's iconic Outsider artist, our own Grandma Moses' (she was a renowned American folk artist who died in 1961). Like her, Sue Soo has had no formal training and paints in an apparently simple child-like way. Another comparison is the French *naive* painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), who painted characterful animals, plants and landscape in a vivid way. Sue Soo's animal and human characters seem to float untethered in imaginary landscapes, or dance across flat planes of colour, with the addition of a single branch of flowers, a bloom-covered tree or a grid-like fence. A visual poem is evoked by these economical means.

Sue Soo has had solo exhibitions at One Eye Gallery, Paekakariki (2001); the Michael Hirschfeld Gallery, Wellington (2004); and been included in group exhibitions of Outsider Art at the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui (2003) and ROAR Gallery, Wellington (2009).

We owe special thanks to curator Jill Trevelyan, whose enthusiastic support has enabled Mahara Gallery to mount this show drawn from a substantial archive of Sue Soo's work; and also thank Joy Wilkie – for her extended support in realising this exhibition - and to Anne Marie Verbeek – for sharing her stories as well as the Sue Soo artworks she has cared for, and Catherine Scollay and Lynda Chanwai Earle for all agreeing to loan much-loved works from their private collections.

Mahara Gallery also gratefully acknowledges Lynda Chanwai-Earle and Asia Downunder Television for permission to show her short film 'Sue Soo' (2003), and Andrew Ross and Photospace Gallery, Wellington, for permission to show Andrew's photographs of Sue Soo.

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Mahara Gallery