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The Secret Life of Doris Baertschi

New Lynn resident Doris Baertschi painted in secret while her family slept and continued to have a private life as an artist for decades. Now 85 years old she has created almost 300 finished paintings.

Since the pop-up exhibition of Doris Baertschi in October 2015 was just down the road from us, I soon found out that a Swiss artist was showing her life's work. Together with my two boys we visited the art gallery and were amazed by her colours and vibrancy. "It's modernist; it's bright; it's pure joy." We would stand in front of every piece and the boys would comment on their favourite detail – they would find a Swiss cross here, a fir tree there, some snow every now and then and one painting even had the changing of the guard. But mainly Doris's art is abstract and colourful and has nothing to do with Switzerland. I was simply fascinated by her story and wanted to share it with you.

Born in Switzerland in 1930, Doris was raised in Zurich and as soon as she was allowed to leave home she ventured to London where she began her love affair of fine art. She visited museums and art galleries at every opportunity she had. She was drawn to artists that faced hardship – Van Gogh is one of her favourites. In the 1960's her adventurous spirit brought her out to New Zealand where she eventually started painting for the very first time in her life.

Just a few days after her arrival in Auckland, she met her soon to be husband at an Auckland Swiss club function. They were married soon after, which apparently she always regretted. Now settled, Doris felt the passion to start painting, but her husband was very unsupportive and due to financial reasons didn't allow her to continue her hobby and told her it was a complete waste of time. She needed to be a housewife.

Late at night though her creativity and visions bubbled over and she was compelled to paint again. Doris waited until her husband and three children were fast asleep before setting up her paints in another room. There, for a few hours at least, she could find her freedom again – only ever until 2-3am since she needed to be up with the kids again in the morning.

She painted in darkness for many years before the couple divorced and she set off to make her very own home in West Auckland, complete with an entire art room of course – freedom at last!

Doris paints almost every day. She still has trouble getting to sleep due to her vivid images of colours in her head. With eyes closed, she imagines herself painting a blank canvas. Holding on as best as she can to the colourful images, she knows she must be quick to capture fragments onto paper the next morning with brushes and vibrant gouache. For Doris this is real passion which she describes as "a world without boundaries".

By now she had accumulated almost 350 paintings and she asked her son Marcel to take a few down to the local framers "State of the Art Framing". Doris just wanted a simple frame to make her artwork 'glow' more vividly. Lance, the framer, explained to me that more and more paintings were dropped off for framing, when Doris's son Marcel one day asked him what the best options would be for preserving these paintings long term. This started the conversation rolling and once Lance and his partner Suellen heard the incredible story behind these artworks, they were inspired to set up Doris's first art exhibition. Apparently it took a bit of convincing – Doris's confidence in her art was completely crushed by her husband years earlier and she didn't think anyone would ever be interested in her paintings.

Did she get a surprise! According to Lance, Doris will go down in history as no artist in NZ had ever sold so many paintings in such a short amount of time. She sold 38 in the first day and 118 during the 3 weeks of her pop-up art exhibition in New Lynn. Most paintings were priced at \$290 with "State of the Art" framing her artwork at cost price only. When asked what she was planning to do with the money she just said: "I'll buy myself a cream cheese cake, which I always say is too expensive, but I will now." And of course she will need to get some more paint and brushes. Apparently she has never ever returned back to Switzerland but would be curious to see what the street she grew up in Zurich looks like now.

Doris explained to me that she has bad arthritis and only one finger left that she can really use to hold the paint brush properly. But still the pain does not stop her from picking up the brush almost every day – painting is her life.

Thank you Doris for allowing us to talk about you and your fascinating story.

Tanja Latham-Zurbrugg

Doris inspired so many people with her art that State-of-the-Art Framing is producing a coffee table book – no doubt we will let you know when it's been printed and is on sale. What a heart-warming story!



DORIS BAERTSCHI