

CULTUREFIX

BLACK
BEAUTY

Pictures: Richard Hatherly

A lifetime defined by horses and our relationship to them inspired this exhibition.

BY KRISTY SYMONDS

GROWING up on a wheat and sheep property in Manangatang, Victoria, artist Roslyn Nolen had always been surrounded by horses, but it was a portrait session with Black Caviar that ignited her equine passion.

Nolen was one of 10 children – nine girls and a boy – and her dad was a horse trainer. Having shared a horse with her sister, Kate, the girls were encouraged to ride competitively from a young age.

"It was a very rowdy household," Nolen says, laughing. "He taught us to have a healthy respect for horses but to keep a safe distance from the young ones in his care. We were made to actually compete when we were quite young and I was never that competitive really, and so I never really felt comfortable in that sort of setting (due to) the fact that I was quite fearful of horses. I got thrown a few times."

She says her fear held her back from becoming a strong rider. Her brother, Tal, and his wife, Margaret, lived on the farm next door, and her sister-in-law soon encouraged her to develop her artistic talents.

"My brother's wife had a huge influence on me as a child," she says. "My mum was incredibly busy, as you could imagine with 10 children. So my sister-in-law, she had the time to spend, particularly with the three youngest in the family, and she was incredibly encouraging."

Nolen recalls being in awe of Margaret, who was also a talented artist.

"I thought she was some sort of movie star when I first met her," she says. "And that bond was really good."

Even from a young age, Nolen recalls having a passion for portraiture, which she says was fuelled by her interest in people.

"I think it's because people are such complex beings and I really like pulling part of that complexity out," she says.

"So my portraits are quite soulful."

Maintaining her love of portrait painting and working with mixed media, as well as going on to get a fine-art degree from Bendigo College of Advanced Education and becoming an art teacher, Nolen moved to WA in 1997 and is settled here with her family of five children.

She says her artistic journey

came full circle when she was invited to paint a portrait of Margaret's son, jockey Luke Nolen. Her nephew had been given the opportunity of a lifetime, to ride famous racehorse Black Caviar, and she produced portraits of the pair in 2011, with Luke sitting for her at his home in Melbourne.

"Marg was really interested in that journey because she had taken me on that journey in my youth, so it was an extension of that and that was a really nice connection," Nolen says.

"That really did reignite something from my past and so I reconnected on that level."

Though she had contact with horses only sporadically after childhood, Nolen says that, remarkably, the portrait sessions helped her conquer her lingering fears of them.

"From that time, with each subsequent painting that I do, I feel like my fear has dissolved considerably," she says.

"And I've become a lot more engaged in them and I've spent quite a lot of time around them. It was very nostalgic and I just

saw them in a different light. I didn't see them as something to be fearful of but I saw them as all powerful and very connected and very authentic."

Gradually, Nolen began spending more time with horses and their riders, with equestrian artwork becoming her focus.

This year she spent a weekend with Horse Vision Centre in Busselton to become more familiar and comfortable with the animals.

"I find that relationship between horse and rider extraordinary and I can see why it's so rich," she says.

"Horses just have this amazing ability to read people really well."

She will showcase 18 pieces she has created since 2011 as part of an exhibition to coincide with the 2013 Australian Interschool Equestrian Championships, which are being held in WA for the first time.

➤ Up Close, Oct 2-6, 9am-5pm daily, WA Equestrian Centre, Brigadoon.



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