

A VIBRANT HEART

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NEVER MIND HOW TO PRONOUNCE IEFJE BOISSEVAIN'S NAME (IT'S IF-E-YEH). ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IS THIS: HER GALLERY WILL MAKE YOUR DAY...

They just make you feel good: Bright and unconventional, these tiles are a fun way of uplifting the spirit.

The light drains from the remnants of a Friday at the end of a long, steamy week in the city. Taking a stroll down Spence St, we cross at Grafton.

And, then, in an oasis of dazzling light and startling primary colours, UnderArt gallery assails us, its front window an animated display of flamboyant, vital art, a welcome sight indeed.

Outside the gallery, plants soften the pavement's hard angles, while an easel with canvas relaxes nearby. Gallery owner Iefje Boissevain steps out with warm greetings and smiles – a reassuring contrast to the artistic mafia and hard-faced customer service lurking in pockets of the city. Iefje gestures to the array of sculpture, paintings, jewellery, and ceramics.

"The buying public needs to appreciate the talent we have on our own doorstep," Iefje says.

"A bad day for me is when people walk into the gallery, then ask where to find the shopping mall. I mean, do people really prefer buying mass produced rubbish rather than local, quality work? They don't even take a look inside here, that's what ticks me off. How is it better to buy stuff pumped out by a machine?"

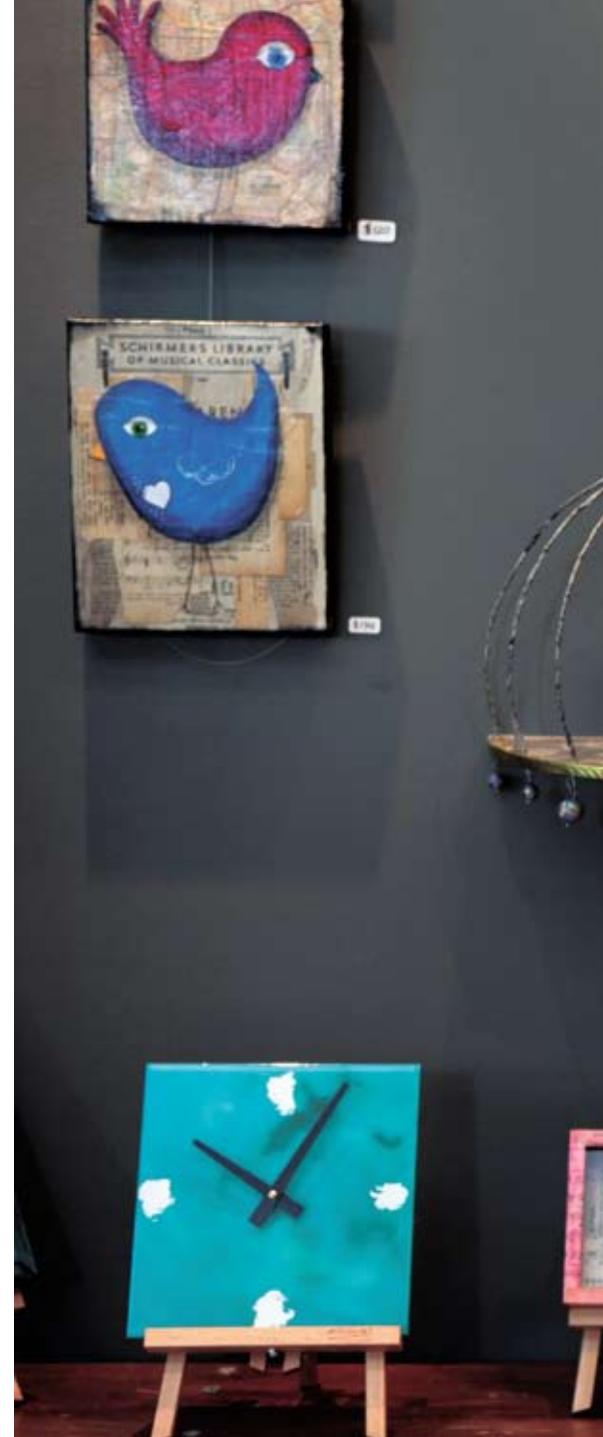
"Locals need to support locals in order for this town to survive. We don't need to gamble everything on tourism any more."

Selling originals by the most exciting artists on the scene – everything at UnderArt is a one-off piece – do not go asking for prints because there is none.

Iefje says business is good, but the boom years are now but a distant memory.

"Let's just say I am happy with where UnderArt is at right now," she says. "I am an optimist and hope we've been through the worst time in the economy. In Kuranda, market stall holders are lucky to earn in a week what they used to earn in a day in the '80s and '90s. But life is full of hurdles and you have to jump over them. Don't let the hurdles stop you doing what you want. A positive mental outlook gets me through."

Iefje's story began in the mid-'80s, when she started making gumnut jewellery and selling it at markets and craft shops in Cairns. To win a free market stall at The Pier markets, she brandished a glue gun, body paints, diamante and crazy-coloured hair dyes festooning herself in outlandish decoration and doubling her



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takings into the bargain. So, the next week, she did it all over again, and then again and again.

"I copped flak from the other market stall holders, who said, 'come on, dressing up was so last week,'" she says. "But I took no notice. In the end, my pictures were plastered all over the promo fliers for the market inviting people to come along and look at all the 'colourful characters'."

"It must have cost me about \$300 in body paint to win that place on a 15 bucks-a-week market stall."

Iefje recalls how her then-to-be husband, John, had first spotted her at the markets. "He said to his girlfriend, 'look at that lunatic over there'."

She laughs when thinking back to the initial stages of their relationship, when she accompanied John to visit his short-sighted uncle in New Zealand. Iefje wore her hair cropped tight with a giant marigold in



Practical and fun: This whimsical, fun and bright tea set by Tanya Ashworth brings colour to any kitchen.



Colour in the city: Iefje Bolssevan and her UnderArt Gallery bring a splash of colour to the city heart.

her hair. "The old boy opened the door saying, 'well, I know who you are, John, but who's the bloke with the earmuffs on?'" she says.

And it's Iefje's unconventional outlook on life that continues to steer her entrepreneurial spirit to succeed in whichever venture she tackles.

In fact, her disdain for the 9-5 had Iefje leaving Cairns for the Sunshine Coast in the '90s, where she built a successful bridal jewellery business going on to sell at 55 stores across Australia and becoming the fifth biggest business of its kind in the country.

Satisfaction comes from promoting local artists and receiving positive feedback from happy customers.

"I enjoy putting other artists on a pedestal," she says. "It's easier to promote their needs first. I think you need the attitude from hell to talk yourself up all the time. I never say no to an artist, but it has to be contemporary artwork. I'm not into political, morbid, Jesus-Christ-hanging-on-a-cross sort of stuff. Most of that type of work is just the emperor's new clothes anyway. I do what I like in my gallery and also what I think people will like."

UnderArt, which opened its doors at the tail end of 2009, now consumes most of Iefje's time, so much so that she recently postponed the chance to exhibit in Santa Monica, California. But she admits she still finds the challenge of creating bespoke art for home interiors too hard to resist.

She says the future for business in the city belongs



Attractive drawcard: Iefje was well known for a colourful reputation in her younger days.

to those store owners who offer the best service: "Cairns has to pull up its socks. In the current financial climate, shop owners must work harder and offer better service. If you do that, and your product is good, there is no real excuse to fail. Let the proof of UnderArt's success be in the comments book."

The book is a sea of effusive praise from visitors from around the world: there are smiley cartoons drawn by Japanese girls, flowers from Taiwanese travellers, hearts and kisses, and scrawls from young children.

And then I spot one from Jess, of Clifton Beach, who encapsulates the prevailing mood. "Fantastic," it says. "Walking in here made my whole day brighter. Amazing work! Good luck and keep it up."



Creature with character: Cockatoo by Garry Greenwood is one of the distinctive local artworks.