

# FIGURATIVE FREEDOM

Rhondda Walters came to painting relatively late in life but she revels in the freedom of expression the form offers her. She talks to BRONWYN WATSON about her exhibition.

**I**T was while working on a series of commercially successful pencil sketches that artist Rhondda Walters suddenly said to herself: "This is dreadful. I'm sick of it and I'm bored."

She decided to abandon her rather lucrative career and set out to discover what she calls "creative art", the results of which are now showing at the Holdsworth Galleries in Woollahra.

It was 20 years ago that Walters, who is now 60, discovered her talent as a visual artist. And it was her introduction to the famous teacher and artist, the late Desiderius Orban, that changed her. So impressed was Orban with Walters that she became his teaching partner at his art school.

"We were very close," explains Walters. "I got to know him extremely well. Sometimes he was an angel but, gosh, he was a devil of a man as well. A lot of the students used to go away in tears. But going to Desiderius Orban was the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

Walters's current exhibition of paintings, drawing and collage concentrates on the human figure. Her works include collages of crumpled papers covered with wood stains and acrylic paints, and collages composed of dozens of snaps from old family photo albums damaged by water.

In her paintings she also often uses a technique of cutting out pieces of canvas which she then places on a neutral background.

Over the years, reaction to Walters's work has, as she explains, been mixed.

"I pick a theme and I go to town



Rhondda Walters with her work, *The Models IV*. Picture by KYLIE PICKETT

within that theme with different colours and textures and mediums," she says. "A few years ago people had never seen this before and they were a little bit afraid of it and they didn't

accept it as readily.

"When I tried to get an exhibition one gallery said to me: 'Oh no, your work is all different. This will confuse the public and your critics will say

you don't know where you are going.' This used to be the reaction but it's not any more and people are finding that it's really exciting because it's different."

Walters's work has often been described as theatrical, a description she initially found upsetting.

"At first I was a little bit hurt about that because I associated it with the chorus line, or something that was a bit cheap or a bit false and not sincere," she says.

"But now for the first time I can see the theatrical side in this exhibition loud and strong. I've also thought about it and I am a musical, theatrical person and it really means that I'm painting from within and that is what good art should be."

Walters describes herself as a "jack of all trades". At one stage she thought she might try printing and enrolled in a silkscreen class, but this turned out to be a disastrous experiment.

"I couldn't take the boredom after being so free," she explains. "In painting, if something is wrong you can throw paint at it and what happens from the accidental throw can open a whole new world to you. All of a sudden you can see something divine happening out of this accidental thing."

"In fact I say that my most beautiful children are born from desperation, from where a painting doesn't work."

Walters finds that throwing paint around can be extremely therapeutic.

"There is no work of art created without freedom," she says. "I've thought and thought and thought and there is no way that I'm aware of that one can gain this freedom without playing with paint, just sloshing it, just letting go and not worrying about the result."

"Every now and then I get the urge to paint something that is a rebel painting, the black sheep in the family because it doesn't fit in - it's just an odd one."

"But this is the wonderful thing about art. We are free to do anything in the world that we want to do and we don't even have to show it to people. It's wonderful."

Rhondda Walters's exhibition, *Love of Life*, can be seen at the Holdsworth Galleries, 86 Holdsworth Street, Woollahra, until January 30. Phone 32 1364

# From many things come art

By SHEILA BROWNE

**F**OR artist Rhondda Walters, a former student of legendary painter Desiderius Orban, art is about freedom, experimentation and, above all, sincerity.

"I'm always trying new things," she said, showing some of the dozens of her works stored in the studio - a converted garage - at her Killara home.

"I'm always thinking 'I wonder what'll happen if'. I do a lot of playing and experimenting and I do have a very vivid imagination. I just take it from there."

Walters, a dynamic 60-year-old who believes anyone can be an artist given the right encouragement, has an exhibition, *Love of Life*, at the Holdsworth Galleries, Woollahra.

The powerful paintings in the exhibition are based on the human figure and include a variety of techniques, especially collage. Her colours are subtle - coppers, browns, greys.

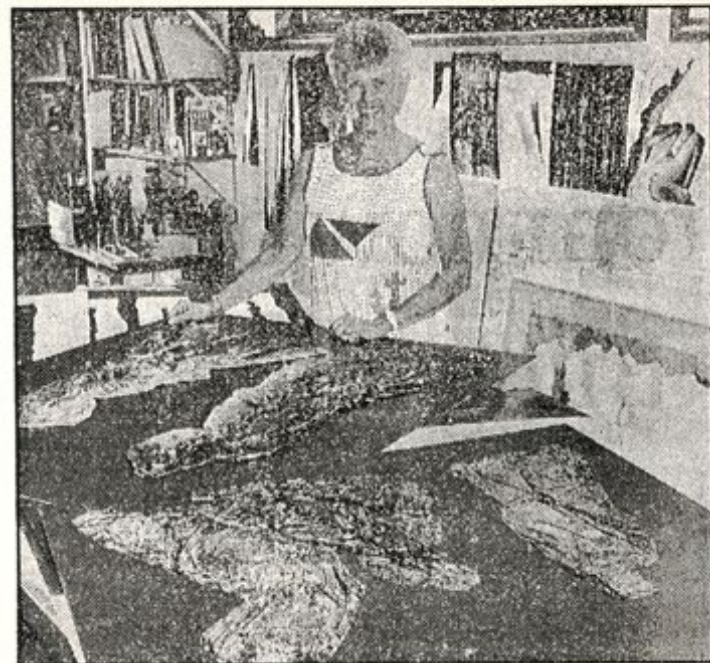
"I can't be a slave to current fashions such as raw colours, pornographic art or the trend to just slosh on the paint," she said.

Walters said any material may be used in collage - fabric, burnt paper, bark, the handmade paper she "mushes up in the blender and soaks in the bath", even the stained eggshells she dries on the kitchen windowsill, then crushes.

"You can do so many things with collage that you can't do with paint - the added dimensions and crispness of edges," she said.

"Picasso started collage and made it fashionable in 1912, but the public is still very wary of it, unfortunately."

"I think they associate it with kindergarten pasting. And they're afraid that it may all fall off - but



Rhondda Walters... vivid imagination. Picture by MARTIN J. BRANNAN

there's no way it will because it's done with a heavy glue."

She has held more than a dozen exhibitions - this is her third at the Holdsworth Galleries.

Although she looks like "a typical North Shore housewife", to use her own words, her life has been varied and creative.

The theatre dominated her early life. She has been dancing, singing and playing the piano since the age of three.

She topped the State in her piano exams when she was 15 and performed in musical comedies with J. C. Williamson's. Later she raised two children and performed with the Mosman Musical Society.

Walters turned to art 22 years ago, first with Lindfield teacher Jan Bravery and later with Desiderius Orban, the Hungarian-born artist who had an extraordinary influence on the Sydney art scene up until his death in 1986, aged 101.

Walters was associated with Orban for 13 years, eight of them as a fellow teacher in his city studios.

"He was an incredible man - an angel and a devil. As a teacher he was tough - he could have people in tears," she said.

"But he was also kind, a thorough gentleman and had a great sense of humour. His attitude was: 'Forget the result, don't worry what people think, just play with paint.'"