Anne Zahalka, Mandy Martin (detail), 1990.

Deeply ethical and beautifully human

MANDY MARTIN

November 1952 - July 2021

MANDY Martin has always been a socially committed artist whose art was designed not only to appeal to the senses but also to engage the intellect and to stir people into action. Her art engaged society, spoke of its challenges and addressed the existential threats that it faced.

Born in Adelaide to Peter and Beryl Martin, where her father was a professor of botany and her mother an accomplished watercolourist, Mandy Martin completed her art training at the South Australian School of Art.

From the outset, she adopted a political and feminist stance in her art, working closely with left wing causes and the union movement.

She noted in retrospect, "Most of the artists like myself had turned their backs on conventional art modes and we'd favoured mass-media forms of communication like video, photography and screenprinting rather than painting which we saw as an elitist and anachronistic activity."

She was part of Progressive Art Movement in Adelaide and exhibited with Ann Newmarch and Robert Boynes.

She subsequently married Boynes and they had two children, the dancer, Laura, and artist, Alexander.

She made memorable posters that protested against Australian involvement in the war in Vietnam, US imperialism in all of its manifestations and that expressed solidarity with the working class and the struggle of women for equality.

On coming to Canberra, Mandy Martin taught at the Canberra School of Art between 1978 and 2003. As a teacher, first in printmaking and then in the foundation year, she was an outstanding success. Many people credit her with "saving" them, being an inspirational mentor and a beautiful, warm and compassionate human being who developed in students a life-long passion and engagement with art.

As a deeply ethical person, her art celebrated all that was beautiful in the human spirit and in our natural environment.

As an artist, the Canberra years were a period of search and exploration and ultimately led to national and international success and a very high profile in the visual arts.

Although her sense of social commitment never left her, it did mature, evolve and adopt a more profound expression.

She also became an exceptionally active member of the Canberra arts community exhibiting widely, engaging in various arts organisations and frequently supporting young emerging artists.

Her earliest delicate drawings of her immediate Canberra neighbourhood were soon superseded by bold oil paintings that she exhibited at the Solander Gallery in Canberra in 1980.

It was with oil paintings - some on a monumental scale - that Mandy Martin established an early national reputation. In 1987 she completed a truly huge painting commissioned for the Main Committee Room at the new Parliament House in Canberra.

This was to become one of the most famous artworks in Australia where the image is known to most Australians, but the identity of the artist is only known to a few.

This painting, measuring almost three metres by over 12 metres and titled "Red Ochre Cove", acknowledges Tom Roberts' big picture, "The Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by H.R.H. The Duke of Cornwall and York, May 9, 1901" (1901-03).

It is a powerful, almost apocalyptic intense landscape that radiates a red glow and seems to evoke a primordial past and point to an industrial future.

Increasingly in her paintings Mandy Martin tackled an industrial landscape with beautiful thick impasto brushwork and a lush chromatic palette.

She constantly referenced some of the major figures in art history, especially Salvator Rosa. Apart from being represented in most major Australian public art galleries, her work is also represented in the Guggenheim Museum New York, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Nevada Museum of Art, Reno.

In 1995 Mandy Martin moved to the small village of Mandurama, southwest of Bathurst in NSW, where she lived with her second husband Guy Fitzhardinge.

Increasingly, her art became preoccupied with the environment and the global threat from climate change and she was an active participant in all three Climarte +Art + Change festivals.

In 2008 she was appointed as an Adjunct Professor in the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University, Canberra.

Some of her work took the form of large-scale installation pieces, some executed in collaboration with her son Alexander Boynes, and she continued to paint with increasing fluidity and urgency right through until her death after a lengthy struggle with cancer.

Mandy Martin's legacy is enormous as an artist, teacher and environmental warrior. She was bold, prolific, passionate, and determined to make a difference through her art.

As a deeply ethical person, her art celebrated all that was beautiful in the human spirit and in our natural environment.

She felt strongly that it is the role of the artist to inspire others to join in the struggle to restore our faith in the dignity of people and the sacredness of country.

- Sasha Grishin