

Brushing up the county

At the heart of art stands the painter with brush to fashion the world around us. And, at the heart of the Whitford art scene is Helene Henare, as JON RAWLINSON discovered.

If a picture's worth a thousand words, despite her late start, Helene Henare should be a millionaire by now!

However, the Whitford-based artist prefers her expression be directed by inspiration rather than commercial concerns.

"I started selling my work virtually straight away; it just took off," she says.

"I kept thinking how I'd love to make a living from painting, but the pressure to 'be commercial' soon set in. I was painting things I thought people would like, rather than necessarily what I would like to experiment with."

Thankfully, despite working fulltime, Helene is now able to concentrate on painting her way.

"If you're relying on art to provide an income, you need to spend time marketing and being a bit commercial in approach. Unfortunately, the freedom to dabble is a luxury," she says.

Well-known primarily for her landscapes and seascapes – including a number of local, rural scenes – Helene has lived for 20 years in a converted barn in Whitford. However, art was not to play a role until she reached her forties.

"I didn't really apply myself enough in art class at school, which is a shame. I've always loved art, but didn't really know I wanted to pursue it back then.

"Many years later, a woman I was working with studied art at night school. I saw how much her work was improving so I thought, 'if she can do it, so can I!'"

Taught by local painter, John Horton, Helene says she received expert tutelage.

"John was fantastic! He saw



promise and encouraged me greatly. His best advice was just to keep on painting, because you learn more as you go.

"That's still fitting, with each painting I learn something, whether it's a new technique or approach. I'm influenced by John, but I've seen a lot of other works which I really love.

"There are different styles I'd like to try, but there's no one artist who influences me; I prefer to hone my own style."

While Helene agrees life experience is beneficial to an artist, passion always comes first.

"Art can be taught, but people need to love it and have a flair for it first; it's passion that makes a good artist. On the other hand, people tend to have more time to practice and improve when they're older. And time is so important."

Primarily drawing inspiration from her picturesque surroundings in Whitford, and other areas such as the Coromandel have also influenced her work.

"Some paintings are impressionistic, but a lot are 'quirky' – I call them quirky because I don't know how else to describe them! I use artistic licence throughout my work," she says.

"I enjoy all of New Zealand, really. I love the bush and sea – particularly when they're in the same scene. They offer peace-



Above; Helen Henare with Mt Ruapehu In The Summertime; left, Reflections Of Howick Beach; below, Sandspit In Shelley Park.

Main photo Wayne Martin

ful settings which remind me of family holidays and what I feel this country is really about.”

With paintings selling for between \$300 and \$2,400 (depending on size and complexity), and pieces now in private collections in the UK, USA, Spain and Australia, Helene has met with success.

In addition to countless local exhibitions, her work has been displayed abroad, even gracing the walls of Agora Gallery in New York.

She is currently in the planning stages for exhibitions later this year.

