

At one end of Jenny's studio is a large portrait of her husband, Jack, who recently passed away. She painted it only months before he died and it hangs, appropriate with Jack kindly regarding the artist at work - as he did in life. "Jack prepared all the MDF boards for my work," says Jenny. "I could paint all I wanted to and he'd look after me." OPPOSITE: Jenny Sages.

LIVING TREASURE: JENNY SAGES

TRUTH SEEKER

She started painting full-time at 50. Nearly 30 years later, Jenny Sages is still deciphering the deeper layers of people and places, writes **Elizabeth Wilson**.



Jenny Sages is always collecting words of wisdom. When she reads or hears something that strikes a chord, she grabs a piece of paper and jots it down.

Her studio is dotted with these notes to herself - pinned to the walls, propped up on easels - all echoing the aphorisms of authors, artists and philosophers. Transcribed in her flowing, elongated handwriting, they read like mantras or warnings, or both, especially the one that reads: "No one should be an artist unless they really can't help it."

"They [the quotes] are there to keep me honest," says Jenny.

Her studio is in a large loft a few stairs up from her kitchen and dining room - but when Jenny, 77, is here, immersed in her art, she enters another world. In this light-filled cathedral-like space, she feels inextricably pulled towards the ancient landscapes of Arnhem Land rather than the here-and-now of Sydney, where she lives.

She often spends weeks absorbed in a single work, making mesmerising markings on specially prepared MDF boards - scarifying and then rubbing the incisions with oil and pigment - as an ode to the beloved 'rock country' she has visited every year for the past 23 years.

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"I love travelling into the interior," says Jenny. "It makes me realise I'm just a blink of an eyelash in time. It calms me, the age of it all."

Jenny is admired in art circles as a painter who straddles two genres: in addition to creating abstract landscapes she is a masterful portrait painter.

A previous winner of the Wynne Prize for landscape painting, her work regularly features in the annual Archibald Prize for portraiture. She has been hung in the Archibald 19 times, including this year with her portrait of her husband, *My Jack* (opposite), runner up in the People's Choice award. The National Portrait Gallery has three of her portraits on display - author Helen Garner, the late ballerina Irina Baronova and late Aboriginal painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

"Jenny's portrait of Emily was the first portrait purchased by our gallery," says Dr Sarah Engdow, historian and curator at the National Portrait Gallery. "The sincerity of the engagement between Jenny and her subjects - and this is the case for all of Jenny's portraits - is the strength of her painting."

Not bad for someone who started painting in earnest at the age of 50. "A lot of people make a big deal about the age thing. But I'd been drawing all my life," she says.

Jenny was born in China in 1933, the only daughter of Russian parents. Her father was a silk merchant in Shanghai until 1948 when the threat of Chairman Mao's armies taking over saw the family move to Sydney. Jenny, then 14, attended Sydney Girls' High School and then studied art at East Sydney Technical College until she was expelled - a fact that didn't (and still doesn't) faze her. Instead, she set her sights on New York.

"At 17, I just went off to study art in New York for three-and-a-half years. I don't know why or how my parents let me go," she says.

She returned to Australia via the Middle East and Israel, where she met the love of her life, Jack Sages. They moved back to Australia and created a life together - a central focus of which was their daughter Tanya, now 42. ➤

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< Back in Sydney, Jenny worked as a freelance fashion illustrator for *Vogue Australia*, among other magazines, for 30 years until she decided to take up painting full-time. She has been a fixture on the Australian art scene ever since.

"When I moved from fashion drawing to painting, there was no stopping me. I used watercolours, oils and gouache. I produced and produced," she says.

Jenny is one of Australia's leading exponents of the encaustic method of painting. This involves slathering MDF boards with molten wax that cools to form a textured, opaque coating; this waxy coating then becomes the base for all her paintings. "I etch into this base and then rub some oil and pigment into it to create my little markings," she says. "The beauty is that no two surfaces are the same. Every surface has its own life and own challenge..."

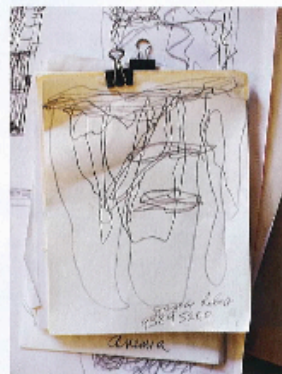
Jenny also uses these wax-coated boards for her portraits and she loves the way they bring depth and character to her subjects' faces.

Most of her subjects are people in the arts – authors, fellow artists and dancers – whose work she admires. "It's usually someone whose work I love. Then I pursue them and then we become friends and I paint them," she says.

At the age of 77, is there still the urgency to paint? Jenny is baffled by the question. "Painting is a refuge for me. I'm constantly working."

"I was listening to an art critic the other day who said it was an incredible privilege to be an artist because you get to discover the outer limits of your talent and freedom, you get to see the world from a high place. I agree with that. I get to see the world with different eyes. Art is everything in my being." **H&G**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Jenny at work etching into one of her wax-coated boards. "The repetition of the markings is soothing, like using prayer beads," she says. Some of Jenny's preliminary sketches. Her studio is filled with light and tools of the trade. One of her abstract landscapes. "It's not literal, but I recognise this place," she says. A photograph of the rocky desert country Jenny loves so much.



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