

Artistic Nomads

From Australia to Italy, Bali to Hong Kong, artists Shona Nunan and Michael Cartwright have followed their dreams around the globe, and show no sign of stopping. **ALISON MARSHALL** reports

Michael Cartwright with *Journey*, the 50-metre painting that decorates the Capital M Beijing restaurant, in China

MANY SPEND THEIR LIVES CHASING A DREAM, BUT FOR A fortunate few, like travelling artists Michael Cartwright and Shona Nunan, reality appears almost ideal.

The couple has embraced life with fervour. “I always believed I was going to be an artist,” says sculptor Nunan from the couple’s studio, in the heart of bustling Hong Kong. “But I was just not sure exactly what I was going to do.”

Resisting the temptation of an easy humdrum existence, the pair travelled the world to further their art — sometimes in trying circumstances.

Nunan says that her work, in bronze and marble, is greatly influenced by her childhood. “When I was about 11, my father took an early retirement from teaching to follow his artistic dream, bundling the entire family into a Land Rover and heading up north of Darwin [in Australia],” she remembers.

“There was an old Aboriginal settlement, and we lived there for 12 months like desert hippies in an old army blockhouse. It was fantastic,” she recalls fondly. “Everyone thought my father was mad, but those experiences had a great impact on my work.”

While the couple labour side by side, their art is very individual. Working in a wide range of mediums, Cartwright’s creations are all about the balance of life, whereas Nunan’s influences are more subterranean, an insight into the soul.

Originally a sculptor, Cartwright started exploring other mediums after a serious car crash in 2001 made it difficult to stand and sculpt. His work now spans a broad spectrum. “Some galleries are quite excited they can’t pigeonhole me,” he laughs. “I work in mosaic, glass, plaster or paint on canvas. If you feel you have to work in a certain medium then that becomes your palette.”

“Art is my passion, it’s not a job. I’ve never done a day’s work — but it is tiring doing so much of nothing!” he adds.

The pair first met when they went to art college in 1981, marrying three months later. The wedding had to be kept quiet as the lecturers frowned on anything less than total focus on one’s craft. Yet they looked at putting down roots, and buying a house.

When the news got out, one of their tutors, a former student of the famous British artist Henry Moore, told them not to be so middle class, and urged them to go around the world and follow their dreams.

“We sold everything we had and went to Carrara, home of the great

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marble quarries in Italy, where artists like Michelangelo had worked for years. It was the most amazing experience. We didn’t have any plans other than to be great artists,” says Nunan.

While Nunan sculpted, Cartwright taught art, to bring in some much-needed money. Though his heart yearned to be back in the studio. “It was tough. We had a house, but it was winter and there was no heating,” says Nunan of their time there, living like the archetypal artists, freezing in the garret.

“All artists dream about being great, but it’s another thing following that dream,” she adds. Although times were tough, Cartwright remembers it with affection. “It was a bit like when people say they work hard, but don’t realise how hard they work because they love it so much,” he says. “Although we always wondered where our next money would come from.”



Left: Nunan with *Guardians* plaster for bronze, commissioned for the entrance to the Warrambool Regional Gallery
Below: *Torso* by Nunan, recent purchase of the Museum of Art, Hamilton Regional Gallery, Australia



Michael Cartwright working in the studio on his painting, *Journey*

Eventually, they returned to Australia and exhibited together in a gallery run by Nunan’s father, Brian. The same tutor that had urged them to follow their passions, was now building a house in Canberra and living in a tent on the site. Joining him in a two-man tent of their own, Cartwright worked on the house in exchange for free meals and wine, for both of them.

A year later the couple moved into an abandoned house — and began working on its repairs and setting up their studios, in addition to actively exhibiting in Melbourne and Sydney. Soon after this point, Cartwright carved his first large marble sculpture.

PHOTO: JACQUE CARTWRIGHT (NUNAN WITH GUARDIANS)

Commissions quickly began to come in. These are now mostly from corporate clients and private collectors, many avid supporters. “Our collectors are some of our greatest friends,” says Nunan. “How can you not love someone who loves your work?”

For artists, the internet makes maintaining visibility and accessibility easier. The couple now thinks nothing of working on a large installation then airlifting it to a client, like Nunan’s four-metre sculpture, or a 50-metre painting by Cartwright, bound for China.

When life in Australia became stifling, the pair packed up and took their sons

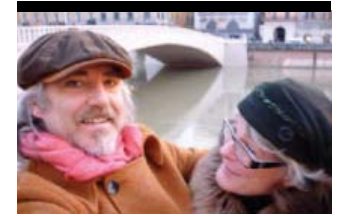
to Ubud, Bali. Then the family headed to France. Since then, the adventures haven’t stopped, and today the couple’s work can be seen across the globe.

“We are very lucky,” says Nunan. “Our journey has been incredible. We’ve been to beautiful places and met incredible, unusual people that are amazing.”

Despite some uncertainty, life has been rich and varied so far. But both artists are always hungry to learn — relishing any fresh opportunity to travel to new places.

“We need another adventure, but we don’t yet know what it is,” says Nunan, smiling conspiratorially. “So we are just waiting to see.”

GLOBAL ARTISTS GAME CHANGERS



MORE ABOUT CARTWRIGHT & NUNAN

TRAVEL

Travel broadens the mind but not necessarily the luggage needs. Having accrued a wealth of travel experience, the couple agree that if they had to pick one necessity, it would be their sketchbooks.

FAMILY

The couple’s two sons are also artists. Jacob, the elder, is among other things, a composer, clarinetist and photographer. To counter the hustle and bustle of daily life, he has a part-time job in Tuscany, Italy, working in an olive grove, encouraged by his father to savour life’s every moment.

Their younger son, Sollai, is a sculptor, writer, performer and carver. At the point of writing, he is currently carving alabaster in Montreal, Canada.

NOTABLE INSTALLATIONS

Passage — for Singapore Expo
Journey — for Capital M Beijing restaurant
Setting Free the Golden Carp — for Yew Ching Foundation in Hong Kong
Guardians — for the Warrambool Regional Gallery in south-west Victoria, Australia
Harvest — an edition of eight sculptures; the proceeds of which went towards the construction of schools for underprivileged children in China through the charity known as Seeds of Hope

