

Judy Cassab: Portrait of an artist's life lived to the full

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November 09, 2013 12:00AM



Caption: Artist Judy Cassab in her studio at home in Double Bay, Sydney; her long career is to be celebrated with exhibitions in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.

Picture: Sam Mooy

ASK double Archibald winner Judy Cassab if she still paints and she will respond: "I paint practically every day in the studio."

Her answer is the legacy of a lifetime doing just that but Cassab's son John Seed says his mother in fact sketches only occasionally these days, when she gets together with her friend and fellow artist John Blackman.

The 93-year-old Holocaust survivor, mother of two and pioneering portrait painter grapples with memory loss but her remarkable working life is about to be celebrated with an 11-venue exhibition across three cities.

At the Sydney Opera House, a small display will be bookended by Cassab's familiar portraits of Joan Sutherland and Robert Helpmann. Canberra's National Portrait Gallery will hang 18 of her likenesses, among them Frank Packer, Margaret Whitlam, Margaret Fink, Nugget Coombs and a couple of self-portraits.

City of Sydney will hang her portraits of former mayors Harry Jensen and Nicholas Shehadie.

On the 60th anniversary of Cassab's first commercial show, Seed has facilitated the

display of more than 100 works.

Shehadie's wife, NSW governor Marie Bashir, will launch festivities next Saturday at Eva Breuer commercial gallery in Sydney; from March at Mossgreen in Melbourne a different exhibition is planned.

"This is the kind of thing that usually happens after someone dies but we want to do it while Judy can still enjoy it," he says.

"There's going to be lots of adulation and why shouldn't she be there for that?"

Cassab painted her first portrait at 12, then became only the second woman to win the Archibald Prize in 1960 with a painting of her friend, artist Stanislaus Rapotec. She won again in 1967 for her likeness of artist Margo Lewers.

Seed has for more than a decade been his mother's agent and carer. He is reading to her the diaries she wrote during the Holocaust years when she survived by assuming her maid's name. She also wrote of her arrival in Australia with her husband and two young sons and her celebrated painting career.

Former Art Gallery of NSW director Edmund Capon said Cassab painted landscapes and other subjects in later life.

"But in portraiture she excelled because she loves people and is interested in them," Capon says.

Cassab painted two portraits of Capon and he said she chatted incessantly throughout the sittings.

"She was always asking questions," which Capon said made sitting for her enjoyable and led to her renowned portraits.