

Paradox of Elizabeth Durack

By MARIA PRERAUER

IN the early 1960s, a visiting Russian writer called Daniel Granin found himself in Western Australia in an all-white parlor full of what he called "fashionable imitation antique furniture" partaking of coffee with the elegant Durack sisters.

When Elizabeth invited him up to view her paintings he recalls being somewhat alarmed. He had no time to waste on pretty "cop-art" nothings.

The "nyet" was already on his lips (as he was to report later in Moscow's multi-lingual weekly *New Times*) when he caught sight of her hands. To his surprise, far from being dainty and lily-white they were "big" and "tired" — the kind he had seen on weavers in factories. This so intrigued him that he changed his mind.

But when he entered the studio he went into shock. Durack was in her social realism period, and there, crowding in upon him were works of such power he doubted whether even their creator realised their colossal impact.

There were "Aboriginal children standing hand in hand on skinny legs", reminding him of blockaded Leningrad. "Only instead of snow and icy pavements, here was parched and dirty desert. Cluttered with empty tins and refuse."

A once strong and handsome



The rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world . . . 1974, gouache on paper

race, he wrote, wandered aimlessly like ghosts amid hovels of sacking and boxes — a host of people standing on the threshold of non-existence.

This story, retold by Patrick Hutchings in *The Art of Elizabeth Durack* — a handsome picture book covering six decades and 60 works, 43 magnificently reproduced in full color — is particularly revealing. Not

so much for what Granin saw in the paintings, as for Durack's complete repudiation of it.

His interpretation, she says, both surprised and amused her. She was anything but a crusader with a social conscience fighting the cause of Aborigines. She was not horrified by dereliction, just fascinated. She liked the look of

makeshift mia-mias and tattered wind-moulded trousers and was delighted by "the sight of dogs so lean that they reveal their entire bone structure".

Even allowing for any political over-reaction, this statement seems only to add to the paradox that is Elizabeth Durack. The paradox becomes even more puzzling when, as in this volume, it is possible for the first time to gain an overview of her work.

Even a brief flip through is enough to establish that she has tried, used and ultimately discarded a bewildering variety of styles and schools. Which, one might ask, is the real Elizabeth Durack?

Is it the Drysdale influenced *Breaking Colts*, where wildly bucking horses fly through the air, necks arched, open mouths screaming in protest? Or *Figures in a landscape* where violent swirls of red, pink and white attack barely visible black shapes against an electric blue sky of which Jackson Pollock might have been proud?

Or the van Gogh-like *Old Broome Church*, rising from a half-tamed garden of white flowers and dark banana palms? Or the Dobell inspired *Broome Madonna* with the swollen belly, round as a globe, erupting from the shapeless blue gown? Or even the women's mag sugar of *The Kid*, depicting a wide-eyed Aboriginal girl cuddling a little white goat?

A closer examination, however, reveals that all are in fact true Durack. There is in each of them, whatever the style of the moment, something entirely individual and

completely Australian. West Australian even.

Indeed, the key to her artistic philosophy was most likely implicit in her reply to Granin. In almost every work the Aboriginal influence is clear. But not in an obvious or simplistic way. It seems to go much deeper than that. It probably comes from her having been exposed to their art from an early age.

What she seems to have been striving for, above all else, is some kind of universal Dreamtime — or sometimes Nightmaretime — in which, as in the legends, everything from stones, trees, sky and landscape, to animals and man are part of the one entity, each as important as the other.

Basically it is the shapes themselves, or the shapes in motion, that seem to have obsessed her. In her latest paintings, for example *Dampier* from the series *Explorers and Discoverers*, they are reduced to the barest and most telling of abstract symbols — a stark composition of giant blobs of black acrylic invading a glaringly white background.

At least, that is the impression left on one reader by this magnificent and reasonably priced book. If it is wrong, no doubt Elizabeth Durack will once again express herself in surprise and amusement.

THE ART OF ELIZABETH DURACK, introduction Patrick Hutchings; Angus and Robertson, \$24.95.



Erosion, 1954, oil on Masonite, from *The Art of Elizabeth Durack*