

Portrait of a Lady: Sir Ed's widow thrilled with watercolour painting

Mike Mather · 11:31, Oct 16 2020



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Lady June Hillary had the company of her great-grandchildren Zoe, 6, and Birdie Roughan, 8 at the unveiling of her portrait at the Welcome Swallow gallery in Hamilton.

Her late husband Sir Edmund Hillary is one of the New Zealanders most frequently depicted in art, be it in gigantic street murals, a bronze bust in Te Papa, or on the face of every five dollar banknote printed since 1992.

But how does Lady June Hillary feel about finally being immortalised in a painting herself?

“Oh, I think once is definitely enough,” she quipped at the ceremony at Hamilton’s Welcome Swallow Gallery on Thursday, where her likeness in watercolours was unveiled before an invited audience of more than 100 people.

Lady June Hillary’s broad grin gave away the full story: She was thrilled, she said, both with being honoured in such a way, and the exactness with which Waikato artist Rebecca Dowman-Ngapo had recreated her likeness. The artwork was commissioned by the Gilson Family Trust – specifically Welcome Swallow trustee Clive Gilson, who is a long-time friend of the Hillary family.

“I’m extremely happy with the turnout and the reaction,” said Gilson. “And why not? The painting is absolutely superb, both in terms of its composition, and in how it captures the essence of its subject – her whimsical nature, her kindness and, indeed, her beauty.”

Dowman-Ngapo said she had been spending her time during the Covid-19 lockdown to hone her portraiture skills and stay connected to people. The resulting work caught the attention of Gilson, who called her “to tell me he had an amazing opportunity”.



SUPPLIED

Lady June Hillary chats with artist Rebecca Dowman-Ngapo during Thursday's unveiling event.

“This is such an amazing event today. I am not sure how I can top this. Clive definitely has a lot of contacts though, so I might just hang out with him a bit more.”

The self-taught, Otorohanga-based Dowman-Ngapo had been working as a full-time artist since 2017, and most of her works depict aspects of contemporary New Zealand and daily life. Her influences include famed New Zealand watercolour artist Nancy Tichborne, US-based Ali Cavanaugh and Mario Robinson.

Sir Edmund married the then June Mulgrew in 1989, whose husband Peter, a close friend of Sir Edmund, had been killed in the Erebus disaster in 1979.

Sir Edmund's first wife Louise and their daughter Belinda died in another plane crash, near Kathmandu Airport, in 1975.



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About 100 invited guests packed the Welcome Swallow gallery for the unveiling.

Lady June Hillary visited Antarctica three times; took groups of women to Nepal to trek through the Himalayas; and through the work of the Himalayan Trust in New Zealand spent many years working on raising funds for Nepal.

When Sir Edmund was the high commissioner to India, she also ran many of the committees that underpinned the work of the commission.

The unveiling was also attended by media luminaries Mark Sainsbury, who acted as master of ceremonies, and Tom Scott, another close friend of the Hillarys.

The portrait will remain on show at the gallery for the next few months, before it makes its way to Auckland Museum, where it will take pride of place as part of the Hillary Collection.

