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# Bold colours, dark topics and a message of hope

**Steve Dow**

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Janne Kearney always wanted to be an artist. But her dream failed to blossom for decades because of working-class limitations, family and financial commitments and self-doubt in her talent.

Kearney, 61, grew up the youngest of five children in public housing in Norlane, a suburb of Geelong, in the 1960s and '70s. Her mother died when she was nine and her father, who had little education, encouraged her to leave school in year 11 to get a job.



Janne Kearney became an artist at 43 and has gained dozens of finalist places in major competitions.

JASON SOUTH

“University wasn’t even an option,” she recalls. “Art school was just a dream that was beyond reality.”

So, aged 16, Kearney took up a painting and decorating apprenticeship with the Ford Motor Company in Geelong. The only woman among about 50 apprentices that year, she says she was abused and harassed daily.

“That was absolutely brutal,” she says. “It was physical, mental bullying. Just about every form of bullying you could imagine.”

Kearney sought help from what was then the Industrial Training Commission, set up to oversee apprenticeships, but she says an officer there bluntly told her: “Look, if you think I’m going to upset the apple cart for one f---ing little girl, you’ve got another thing coming.”



Kearney's *There's a rainbow after every storm*. The work depicts musician Tilly Baker. S.H. ERVIN GALLERY

Her attempt to raise the workplace issues outside the company prompted threats from co-workers.



“A couple of the men warned me, ‘You don’t know what you’re dealing with here, girlie’, and ‘You’re putting your nail in your own coffin’.”

So, after 18 months, Kearney quit her apprenticeship. The experience built resilience in her. “I suppose it made me not put up with as much shit that I might have,” she says.

Over the following decades, Kearney and her husband Mick, who she began dating when she was 15, raised their two children while renovating the family home in Geelong, aspiring to give their daughter Tegan and son Jake a stable foundation and better education.



Kearney in her Geelong studio ahead of her Midsumma exhibition, *Eye Candy*. JASON SOUTH

Kearney worked in a paint shop, mixing paints, while dreaming of making art. Finally, at 43, after Mick, an engineer, encouraged her to pursue her dream, Kearney felt emboldened to quit her retail job and dive in.

Since taking the career plunge, the self-taught artist has gained more than 80 [finalist places in major art competitions](#), including twice in the BP Portrait Award at London’s National Portrait Gallery.

But just before the COVID lockdowns, Mick received a terminal cancer diagnosis. He died in 2021. “It was a really devastating time,” Kearney recalls quietly.

Today, her vibrant brush strokes seem to belie losing the love of her life. Kearney’s latest body of portraits, [Eye Candy](#), honours queer community resilience, with subjects such as Melbourne performer [Art Simone](#), a contestant on *RuPaul’s Drag Race Down Under*.

The series deploys rainbow flag motifs. “Conservatives often fear the rainbow, so that’s why I got bolder with it,” Kearney explains. “I find it really concerning, this right-wing swing. A lot of my art is really pushing against it ...

“It’s almost the dying throes of the white, middle-aged male. They’re not going to go out quietly; they’re going to go out kicking and screaming and drag along some of the disenfranchised male youth with them. “We’ve just got to keep pushing against them – we’ve got to be as loud and as obnoxious as them, and in many ways that’s what my art is.”

This rainbow road began with Kearney’s 2015 series [Dystopia](#), when Kearney delved into the underground of graffiti art, subtly deploying rainbow flag elements to include the presence of the LGBTQI+ community, with whose struggles Kearney felt kinship in the lead-up to the 2017 marriage equality postal vote.

Now, almost every painting in *Eye Candy* “links back in some way to having some autonomy, whether it’s having your own sexuality, or just the ability to be who you want to be, using the rainbow theme through all the images to help get that message across”.

The works are a world away from Kearney’s earlier paintings of abandoned factories and decaying landscapes that spoke to her early struggle with powerlessness, although her sense of freedom in subject was evident as early as her 2011 body of work [7 Deadly Sins](#), which explored sex-positive feminism. Each portrait in that collection depicts a woman in confident control, oblivious to judgments of her body and choices.

Now, while Kearney prepares to move to a newer house in Geelong to downsize and be closer to her son and daughter, her ongoing project is not just to provoke the opponents of sexual and creative freedom.

Hope, too, is an essential part of her artist’s tool kit, she says. It’s “something over the last couple of years I’ve been looking for and clinging to”.

**[Janne Kearney: Eye Candy](#) is at Flinders Lane Gallery from January 23 to February 10 as part of the Midsumma Festival.**

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The subject in *The Art of Drag* is Jack Daye, aka Art Simone. JANNE KEARNEY



**Steve Dow** is an arts writer for The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).