

# Five Chief Justices, five portraits, five men

By Anita Angel, Curator, Charles Darwin University Art Collection

Danelle Bergstrom's commissioned portraits of Northern Territory Chief Justices pay tribute to five distinguished lawyers and five singular men. Each has left (and leaves) his mark on the Far North in terms of leadership, commitment to judicial independence and service to the profession and the community.

An esteemed landscape and portrait painter, Bergstrom was selected by the currently serving Judges of the Supreme Court from a series of nominated candidates in late 2007. She became the first 'artist-in-residence' at the Supreme Court between May and August 2008. Four factors governed her commission: its commemorative aspect, formal context, physical location in the Territory's highest Court of Law, and a time span encompassing five Chief Justices – one deceased, three retired and one currently presiding. The aim was not to reproduce a 'likeness' of each, clothed in the emblems of office, but to capture their essential characteristics at a given moment in time: a contemporary evocation or recollection of the subject's individual qualities as a living portrait – not a 'still-life'. As a series of Chief Justices past and present, the five paintings are also collectively unified by common 'judicial characteristics', described by Bergstrom as being 'those qualities essential in the person who holds such office'.

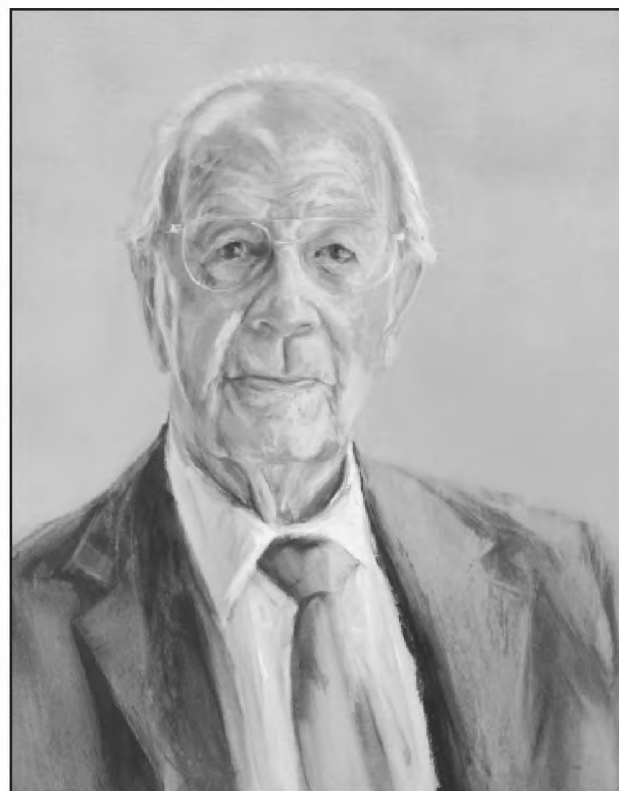
All of the portraits were painted 'on location' in the Supreme Court, begun – with one exception – in the presence of the 'sitter'. The scale of each painting, and size and placement of them as a five-panelled polyptych, were determined at inception, in accordance with the installation site's spatial principles.

The aim was to create five individual works as one continuous sequence 'summoned together as a whole'. The execution and resolution of each and all turned on Bergstrom's extensive training and experience as a portrait and landscape painter of mood, feeling and thought. Her modus operandi embraced a sensitive and selective analysis of biographical and anecdotal information drawn from secondary sources and private conversations. Above all, the paintings evince her perceptive and intuitive observation of the subjects' physiognomy, personality and character traits. In the case of Sir William Forster, family, friends and colleagues were consulted for visual and biographical information, including Lady Joanna Forster and His Honour the Administrator, Tom Pauling AO QC. Justice Angel provided a suitable tie and posed, on demand, for a study of the subject's hands.

The four living judicial subjects can testify to never



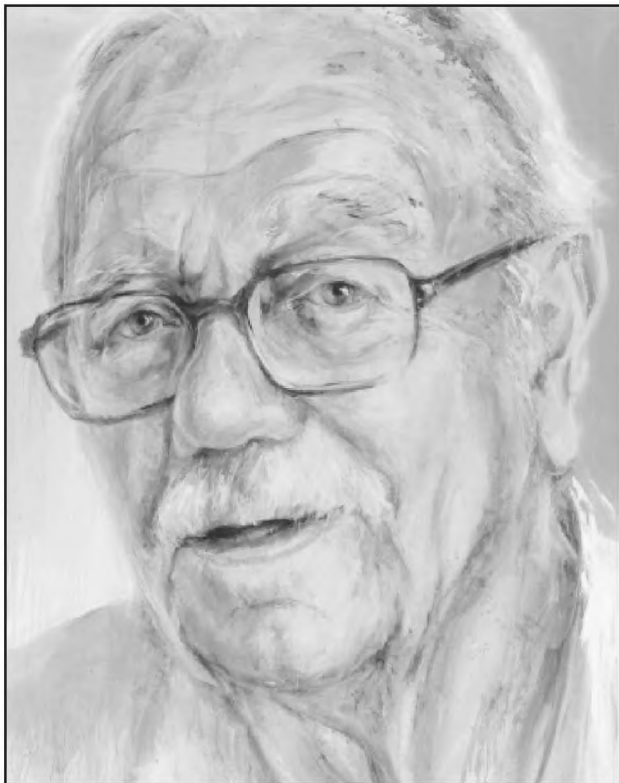
*Danelle Bergstrom, Portrait of The Honourable Sir William Edward Stanley Forster 2008*



*Danelle Bergstrom, Portrait of The Honourable Kevin Fredrick O'Leary 2008*



having been requested to ‘sit still’ for Bergstrom, either at home or in the studio. The artist preferred to observe them ‘on their feet moving around as well as sitting down’ – a process she controlled or commanded at will within the creative space where she held ‘court’. A unique, dynamic and personal engagement with each subject was established,



*Danelle Bergstrom, Portrait of The Honourable Austin Asche AC QC 2008*

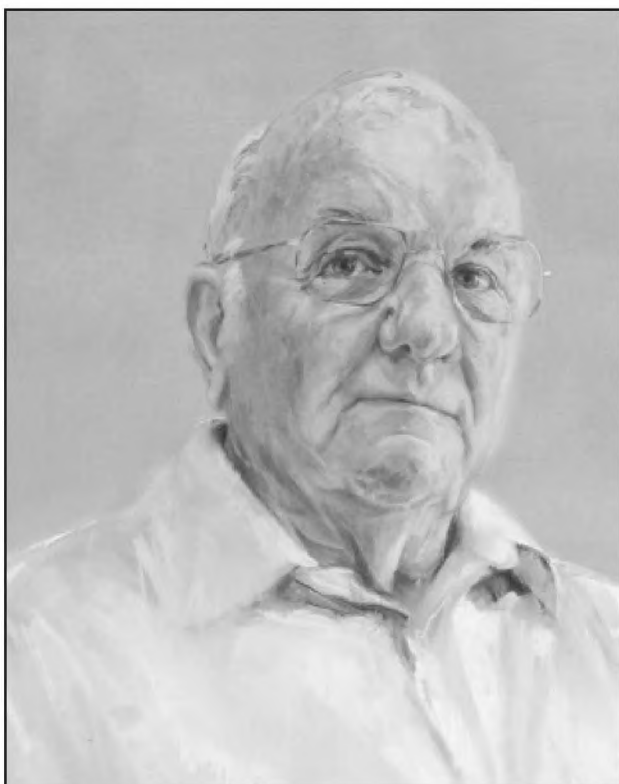
ensuring she could ‘paint with them in her head’ once they left the studio – remaining connected to the artist’s paint-loaded brush in an unbroken link until the portraits were completed. Sketches, journal notes and photographs acted as aide-memoires and probing devices to get beneath their skin – to the bones, muscles, thought tissues and feelings of each man – resurfacing on the canvas support as facial contours and physical signifiers in a human landscape. Smaller portrait paintings were also created before and during the major commissioned works – as ‘limbering exercises’ and as independently-resolved paintings in their own right.

On 29 November 1991, by Proclamation enshrined in the plaque outside Court 1, the Supreme Court building was ‘surrendered and delivered to the judges of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory for the purpose of the administration of justice in and for the Northern Territory of Australia’.

Bergstrom’s portraits recognise the fact that the Court is not the building, but the judges themselves – including those appointed to lead it. For the first time in the Northern Territory, the human side of our Chief Justices has been given enduring individual form and collective recognition through art, and a legal precept, sometimes forgotten, has been powerfully and visibly reaffirmed.

**All images courtesy the artist; photographs by Christopher Knight, Digifilm Australia.**

**Dimensions of each portrait: 6 x 5 feet.**



*Danelle Bergstrom, Portrait of The Honourable Brian Frank Martin AO MBE 2008*



*Danelle Bergstrom, Portrait of The Honourable Brian Ross Martin 2008*