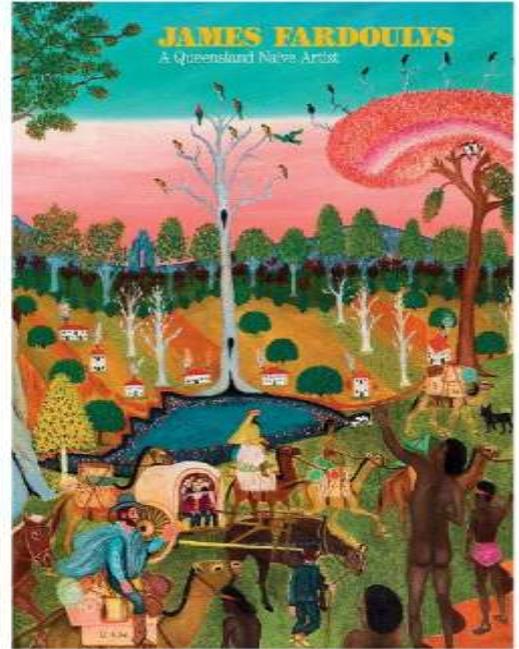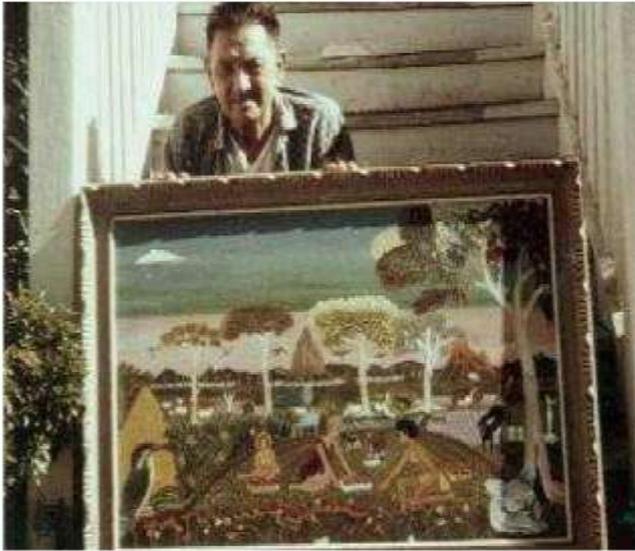# James Fardoulys: A Kytherian Naïve Artist

The artist, James Fardoulys Exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery

Over the weekend of 17-18 April 2010 a number of us from Sydney flew to Brisbane to view the James Fardoulys art exhibition.

The exhibition occupies one gallery in the Queensland Art Gallery near the heart of the impressive cultural centre of Brisbane in South Bank. For this writer, it was his first time in Brisbane since the World Expo in 1988 and, it must be said, Brisbane and the South Bank area have come a long way. It was a very pleasant stay, highlighted by the visit to the Art Gallery.

The exhibition brings together 40 Fardoulys paintings, many of which have not been publicly displayed before. It is free to the public and runs until 20 June 2010.

The amply-illustrated catalogue of the exhibition is well put together and has a strong emphasis on Fardoulys' Kytherian connection. The lawyer-turned-historian, Denis Conomos, contributes a chapter *Kythera to Queensland: A Story of Greek Migration* which places Fardoulys in the wider context of Kytherian settlement in Australia or, as Conomos writes, so as to inform those readers "seeking to know more of the rock from which James Fardoulys was hewn".

According to Conomos, James Fardoulys' arrival in Australia in 1914 was directly linked to the established Kytherian café trail throughout New South Wales and Queensland which saw many young men come from Kythera looking to make their fortune.
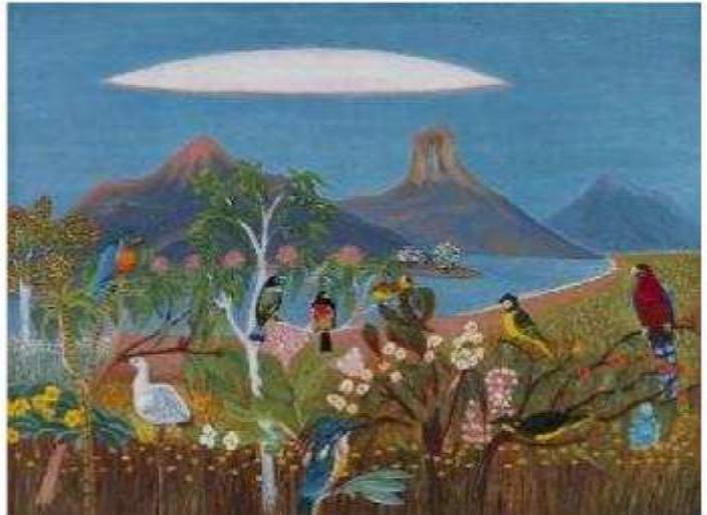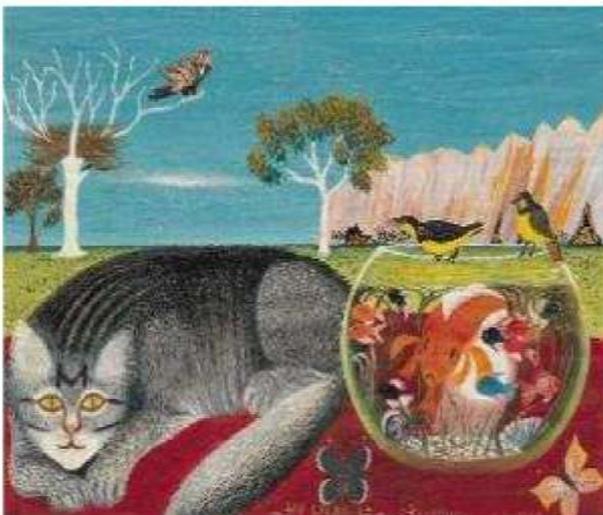
COLOURFUL: James Fardoulys' 'My cat Doula'. AUSTRALIA'S EDEN: James Fardoulys's Birds in Disney's paradise.

Fardoulys initially found work in the Olympia Café in Warwick. After a short stay, Fardoulys moved on to a café operated by one of his uncles in Stanthorpe before going to Tamworth to join his older brother, Stathis (whom he had never previously met). James then moved to Boggabri and later to the Olympia Café at Goodiwindi where all three Fardoulys brothers, James, Stathis and Peter, worked in around 1917-18.

James Fardoulys ended up running his own café in Goodiwindi by 1927. In his later years, James left the café business or, as Denis Conomios writes, he "stepped outside the common mould of his fellow islanders" and took up vaudeville and taxi driving. At the age of around 60 years, James Fardoulys took up painting.

Melina Mallos, the Curriculum and Education Programs Officer at the Queensland Art Gallery, notes that in addition to working in cafes James Fardoulys spent time on farms and sheep stations and all of his life experiences resonate in his later paintings. Also known as Jimmy, Fardoulys started to mix with artists, including one of Australia's greatest living artists, Charles Blackman, and exhibited his works from time to time.

As Melina Mallos relates, Fardoulys never forgot his Kytherian roots although, sadly, he never returned to the island. The artist "with the eye of a Greek" always remembered Kythera as a "place where the sea is the bluest, the grass the greenest and the air the clearest on earth".

The works on display betray a certain amount of childish exuberance which in some cases flows over into Fardoulys' painting style. But it would be wrong to dismiss his paintings as being immature. As Charles Blackman wrote in the introduction to Geoffrey Lehmann's *Australian Primitive Painters* (University of Queensland Press, 1977), he met naïve painters such as James Fardoulys who did not have – or need to have – a sophistication of an awareness of the history of art. Rather they were invariably men who had worked as labourers for most of their life and once in retirement they started to paint "out of some inner compulsion - and for their own enjoyment – the memories of their childhood, with a freshness of seeing clear as a bell".

In a review of the exhibition in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* newspaper, Fardouly's son, Peter (now 80) comments that his father's way of painting was "child-like, simple and direct ... (and) was unmediated by the world."

Indeed, when interviewed for a piece in the *Australian Womens Weekly* in 1968, Fardoulys explained his philosophy of painting as follows:

> "I work for depth and clarity as far as the eye can see. You must be able to see all the detail, even from a distance. There is no haze in my paintings."

The works on display are vibrant, and colourful and occasionally whimsical, infusing the canvas with a mixture of Mediterranean colour and Australian wit. The paintings are simply delightful.

His works cover a myriad of subjects, including horses, other animals, outback scenes, James' adorable cat, Doula, Greek-inspired icons and other religious depictions, including a painting of the Monastery at Myrtidia. As the artist and contributor to the catalogue, Leonard Brown, writes, for James Fardoulys the act of painting was "nothing less than an act of *zoegraphos* – literally, life-writing". According to Brown, Fardoulys' paintings were "like mini-bombs going off, jumping from the wall, making the Brisbane version of the new modernism appear very self-conscious".
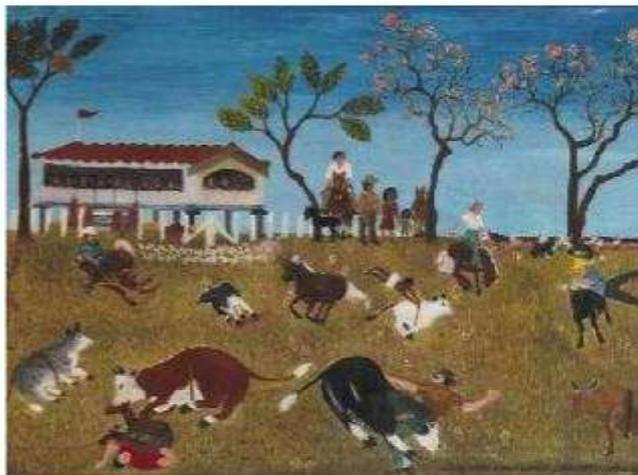
COUNTRY COLOUR:
James Fardoulys' A Day of Play on the Barcoo.

TELLING STORIES:
James Fardoulys' The start of Burke and Wills 1860-1972.

If you get a chance, go to Brisbane for a weekend and take in this fascinating exhibition. The permanent collection of the Queensland Art Gallery is also worth viewing with some very impressive Australian and other works on display.

Airfares to Brisbane fluctuate but there are good deals usually available through Virgin, Jetstar and Qantas, starting as low as $79 one way. One night's accommodation at the Riverside Apartments in South Brisbane, just across the road from the gallery, costs $102.00 per room. For a nice meal to cap off a *Tsirigotiko* weekend visit the Kapsali restaurant at South Bank, that is beautifully situated overlooking a man-made beach, in the heart of Brisbane. The fabulous Greek food and atmosphere really does capture the feeling of being in Kythera!

George Vardas