

# Under the spell of a magic forest

The Daintree rainforest inspired London-born Jeannie Baker to produce a book, an animated film and paintings, currently on exhibition in Sydney. BERWYN LEWIS talked to her

WHEN Jeannie Baker first went alone to the Daintree rainforest, northern Queensland, everyone warned her about the wild pigs, the snakes, the spiders, ticks, dangerous people and getting lost.

"You'd better take a gun" they told her.

Armed with a knife ("to cut bread"), a compass, maps, a light tent, some provisions, a sketch book and dozens of plastic bags to collect specimens for her collages Ms Baker went ahead and immediately fell under the spell of the trees and rainforest life.

Her book, paintings and an animated film, all entitled *Where The Forest Meets The Sea*, are the outcome. They are on exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Paddington, NSW.

Sleeping in the forest, wrapped in her ground sheet, haunted by the birds, enthralled by the forest sounds and the animals, she says the worst thing that happened to her was the night a mouse ran across her face.

Looking back on her experience the willowy, pixie-eyed Ms Baker gives the impression that she has not quite shed the magic and power of the secret rainforest places she knows. Even the Aborigines who once lived there now "fear" these places and Ms Baker adds "most white people feel afraid" of them.

Born in Croydon, a London suburb, Ms Baker has lived and exhibited her work in New York, Sydney and London, a long way from tropical rainforests.

"When I first read about the Daintree I knew I wouldn't be happy until I went there and saw the incredible diversity of plant life species. I wanted to see what it would do for me. I had to live in it. That's how I work. It stretches me. Even today no one completely knows what is there, yet it's so extraordinary especially the way it comes right down to the beach like a wall.

"There were tribes of Aborigines who used to live there until the 1930s. They were small and had frizzy hair. I found some descendants living in the Wujul-Wujul reserve, near Daintree.

"They showed me where to

find forest berries, yams and scrub hen nests," says Ms Baker.

"I had intended to walk in the forest with a tent but it was too heavy. After a week or so I felt so safe I went off with just a plastic sheet to wrap myself in at night. It was extraordinary coping with sleeping out in the forest with all the unfamiliar sounds and things. I had a torch but the batteries didn't last long. I'm a bit of a baby when it comes to leeches. In the highland rainforest they come back as quickly as you get them off. I thought, get this into perspective. They won't kill you. Every night I checked myself for ticks."

But it was a family of white Australians who opened Ms Baker's eyes to the rainforest.

"Harry Dick, a tin miner with a lease on the forest beside the water, with his wife and children knew the forest really well. The forest is the only world their three little boys know. They live off the forest, growing fruit trees, eating wild pig and fish and bartering in Bloomfield.

## Collect

"The children show biologists and scientists through the rainforest. They had three strangler fig tree cubby houses which we could climb up to," says Ms Baker.

The children helped Ms Baker collect specimens for her collage work.

Her paintings are meticulous constructions of materials, some so tiny and fine they take careful scrutiny, almost to the point of searching for a hidden clue among the tumult of the rainforest canopies and vines.

On these collages Ms Baker uses a subtle photographic double exposure which suggests the past with prehistoric creatures and ghosts of Aborigines, and warns of the future, with high rise buildings and tourist complexes superimposed on the remains of the rainforest beaches.

"Wherever I can I use real vegetation and natural materials. The bark is real bark. I have to preserve the materials. It's a complicated process. When vegetation dies the colours go brown so I use chemicals to strip out the colour and then use glycerine. After that I spray on the

colours with an air brush and if I do it well it should look no different to the original," explains Ms Baker.

"When we were making the film we did some tests. At the end of the day a cameraman said to me, 'It's not going to work. The vegetation is dying'. He pointed to some dead bits. I said I painted those bits on there. It's very hard for people to know what's real and what's made with my work."

Ms Baker laughs at the notion of her as a Rambo-ette or Ms Crocodile Dundee.

"Those images are so stupid. If you slash through you get nowhere."

"I had really good maps. When I was exploring I kept close to the rivers. I got lost twice but I used my compass. When you get back to the river you can see the direction of the current. I was never really frightened. The things people told me were quite unfounded. It's a lack of understanding.

*Where The Forest Meets The Sea* exhibition will tour for 10 months - The National Gallery, Victoria from April 30, the Dronkeen Museum of Children's Literature, Victoria; Penrith Regional Gallery, NSW; Ipswich City Gallery, Brisbane and Noosa Regional Gallery, Queensland.



Ms Baker . . . 'Wherever I can I use real vegetation and natural materials'