

Her father came from County Mayo; her mother from Galway. It sounds like the lyrics of a beautiful ballad. Add a husband from Hungary, life in the then Kingdom of Libya, a sabbatical in the then frightfully French Tunisia and you have the enigma that is amazing painter Florence Grubanovich.

Starting out life during the Second World War with those lyrical parents in Dublin, young Florence Kennedy was schooled by the Dominicans and then at the Loreto 'motherhouse', the headquarters of the religious institute.



Although she was an outstanding student at art, her father firmly believed in job security, and helped her find a clerical job at the Irish National Sweepstakes, an organisation founded after the war to help fund hospitals. Job security it was, but also slightly boring, so young Florence took off for London. She settled in Kensington. Sad to say, it was not the duchess end, but the western bit, somewhat closer to Earl's Court than Kensington Palace.

Again, Florence settled into a clerical job but then she saw an advertisement recruiting people to join an American oil company in the Middle East. Even

though the Beatles were transforming the scene in London she opted for Libya. The Americans needed the antithesis of a mini-skirted dolly bird for the super-sensitive role of liaising with the Libyan people, and after vetting the recruitment photographs the PR Department handed the job to the obviously very well-behaved Florence.

Libya was still a Kingdom under the rule of Idris bin Muhammad al-Mahdi as-Senussi and in the mid 1960s the fourth largest oil producer in the world. The night clubs and lovely cafés established under the former Italian regime were still flourishing and life as an expat was great fun. However it all changed after Muammar Gaddafi led a victorious coup d'état in 1969. Florence found that the local people were no longer as friendly and after another year doing her liaison work she decided to leave and holiday with a friend in Tunisia.

Although it had gained independence from the French in 1956 Tunisia was still frequented by Parisians. Her friend from Ireland had married a Tunisian — with the help of Florence in the best Irish matchmaking tradition. She had a marvellous year there, polishing up her French and soaking up the local culture.

Back to reality and Ireland, Miss Kennedy became the Personal Assistant to the Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Ireland, based at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Founded by revered poet William Butler Yeats and Irish dramatist Lady Gregory, the theatre favoured Irish plays. Maybe that's why Florence and her colleagues endured a bomb scare, the sort of scare one took very seriously those days in Ireland. The play for which they were staging a full dress rehearsal was actually Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. So out into the street went everyone, in period Scottish costume, to the delight of passers-by. The bomb did not go off, so according to Florence they all went to the pub. The travel bug had bitten our Florence and she decided to visit a cousin in Australia and then see Papua-New Guinea. She made it to Oz in 1972 and started working for a land developer in Sydney. The sales manager was an extremely good-looking and utterly charming Hungarian called Geza Grubanovich, so she crossed PNG off her bucket list.



Home became Northbridge where Geza set up his own real estate agency. Florence had her favourite job of all time, working for the Assistant General Manager of Grace Brothers at Chatswood. Old Mr Grace (group Chairman Bertram Augustus 'Mick' Grace) was still alive, running the place like a family and Florence had a marvellous time looking after all of them.

Noosa then came on their horizon and the couple established a macadamia orchard at Cootharaba. Soon it took over their lives and they moved up here to build a dwelling on the farm.

Macadamia trees are kind to their keepers, giving them two or three months a year when they just grow and no-one has to do much for them. Left to her own

devices for the first time in her life, Florence started painting.

And from this unassuming, well-behaved lady of sound Irish stock emerged the most amazing, vibrant and totally original paintings. None of the art boffins have been able to categorise them, nor has Florence. It's as if Gustav Klimt's paintbox fell into the hands of Jacques Rousseau when he was trying to copy Gauguin while listening to a symphony composed by Van Gogh. There, I told you it was impossible to describe them.

Florence admits she is drawn to what she perceives to be exotic. Her paintings are naive, the figures androgynous, and while Chagall did like the occasional cow floating sky-high in his masterpieces, Florence has an affinity for ducks. Her one and only major exhibition in Noosa



Heads a few years ago was a complete sell-out, and a huge hit with younger buyers.

The wardrobes in her beloved house at Noosa Waters are crammed with canvases. She and her husband moved there soon after it was developed and Geza built several houses in the area. Cancer took him in 2002 and now Florence divides her time between the Bridge Club and trips home to Ireland, with Middle Eastern detours en route.

On a recent trip she met her Dutch sister-in-law's nephew, aged about 18. Gazing at photos of Florence's paintings he could not believe they came from "a little old lady like that". We do not agree with the 'little' or 'old', but must admit they are utterly amazing and glorious paintings. And their brilliant creator is sitting just over there, playing bridge.

by Susie Osmaston