



# A PLACE LIKE NO OTHER

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DEB LYTTLE CONTINUES HER SERIES OF STORIES ABOUT GARDENS SHE ENCOUNTERS ON HER TRAVELS. THIS TIME, SHE DROPS IN TO THE FABLE-LIKE HOME LANDSCAPE OF AUSTRALIAN ARTIST KEN JOHNSON.



**THERE ARE THOSE** who hold a sense of awe; a depth of respect for 'place'— whether it is crafted by God or by the hand of man.

Ken Johnson, renowned Australian artist and adventurer, has wandered the world for much of his life, breathing reality into his paintings of both the exotic and the Antipodean. And when it came to designing a home and garden for his family near Byron Bay, New South Wales, he garnered together such a poetry of 'a haveli' that there could be no other within his home country.

Over the years, Ken has not only carried home to his wife Gail and their daughter, Radha, the stories, the colour, the foreignness but also the pillars, tiles and doorways of global travel and woven them into a mythical setting, landscaped with tropical plantings and icons.

With his long hair and blue eyes, it is possible to imagine that his Viking family roots may be responsible for this roving. He adds, "It's my sense of freedom from the rigors of painting. Painting puts me in a state of hyper activity. As much as I love it, it's all-consuming; 24 hours a day."

Last year, a 40-year retrospective of Ken's work was displayed at NSW's Tweed River Regional Gallery, New South Wales, while other exhibitions were held at four major cities. Often his art choreographs a vastness of space (and an absence of people) – axonometric as if seen from an angel's perspective. His art is highly detailed; every pebble, every crevice, every molecule of time is captured.

That appreciation for detail, as well as vastness, is again evident in the Johnson property. Ken stretched the original short driveway into a meandering roadway that begins at stone pillars, curves past a collection of his totems, rustles through the golds and browns of fallen leaves, touches upon a humble stone and timber sculpture studio and segues between liquid amber trees where prayer flags traverse and dance. Finally, when a temple (the haveli) comes into view, it is with enchantment and mystery, as if the visitor has stumbled across the border into a fable. ➤

Railway sleepers, water, arches, intricately-carved columns and ceiling panels to dapple light, together with lush tropical plantings are just some of the elements employed by artist Ken Johnson (above) in his extraordinary hand-built house.



It is then the eye turns outwards; the land drops away gently into a wide valley of grass where Suffolk sheep graze and, yes, alpacas lift their heads in interest.

As he describes the haveli and its garden, Ken is a shifting balance of animation with serious thoughtfulness. He gestures with largesse – arms outstretched - at times, hugging his shoulders. His fingers reveal painterly evidence of his most recent artwork. His jeans are an abstract in themselves. Spattered with colour; they were his good jeans until last week when he decided to tweak a painting on a day off.

With the aid of only a few chosen helpers, Ken physically re-built the original house, creating rock walls and planting the gardens over eight years. "It took its toll on me."

With honesty, he admits it is the result of a perfectionist. "I like to do it myself. It annoys me if someone else does it – they don't have the tactility for the stuff. When things are left undone, I feel I should correct them. If I'm producing something like an architectural design and if it's out of proportion, it would bother me."

Ken draws a comparison of his daily life to his travels in India; "It is the antithesis of what I have here – India is chaos. Libran balance – that's me. I'm a Libran. I wish I wasn't sometimes. That's the perfection – to neaten things up, to mend fences."

And to trim hedges. He points to the hedge bordering the front garden. Admitting to a fascination with hedges, Ken likens himself to the movie character Edward Scissorhands.

Next to the hedge, he has planted an eclectic garden with plants chosen on the basis of being both exotic and low maintenance: "I grow things that want to grow anyway." The list includes agaves, succulents, sago palms, cordylines, desert species, birds' nest ferns, prickly pear, gardenias and cycads, kentia, the local bangalow palm and foam trees which, when wet, spill out foam.

A grouping of mature majestic palms shapes a contour that announces the entrance to the front steps, "It's about finding the rhythm – the collinear continuum." ➤

TOP: The haveli where Johnson entertains; ABOVE: The recycled windows and crenels offset by a veritable jungle of plants create intrigue; OPPOSITE PAGE: Only the concrete kangaroo ties the barn, a masterpiece of classic design, to a date and place.



Ken made use of the rocks he found on the property, building stone walls to divide off the field. The rocks had been thrown 75km from Mt. Warning when it blew 23 million years ago. And with a friend, Ken dragged stones from the creek to build a 'stupa' for the chooks. Over time, its conical roof has been embellished by nature with a lushness of moss.

The haveli and Ken's painting studio envelope a courtyard and pool fit to entertain a maharajah. The pool's colour has a depth of blue developed from granite quartz which was matched to a Japanese glass bottle. At the end of the pool, one of several zany elements on the property: a realistic crocodile's head rears out from a square porthole.

In the courtyard, golden bamboo creates a protective height in one corner while another is crowned by a proud 50-year Madagas-

car palm which was stored for a year while the site was completed.

The bamboo reminds Ken of his next project; the free medical centre he designed and is building in Rimbick, five hours north of Darjeeling India. Called the Kingdom of Jambange, it is being built from a matrix of cement, steel and bamboo. While attending a wedding there last year, he and three friends came together with the goal of building a clinic and veggie gardens and agreeing to abandon their egos through the process. He is looking to raise money and encourage volunteers to give their time and also for doctors to help out. As well, he is offering art tours to India later this year to raise proceeds for the project.

When asked to explain how he manages all that, he replies, "I'm just a very busy person."

Websites: [www.kenjohnsonart.com](http://www.kenjohnsonart.com) and [www.jambange.com](http://www.jambange.com) □