The remarkable Barbara Blackman, at home. At 75, she is as active as someone half her age and refuses to look on her blindness as any kind of handicap.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORRIE GRAHAM.

A poetic life

Writer and poet Barbara Blackman brought up three children, nurtured her artist husband Charles' gift, made their home the hub of Australia's art circle and, she tells **DAVID LESER**, made her blindness a corridor to a different sort of existence.

Barbara Blackman greets me at her Canberra home wearing dark glasses and a Chinese cotton dress embroidered with purple butterflies. A clump of walking sticks guard the entrance. "Do come in," she says, as she proceeds to escort me across her Persian carpeted dance floor and into a room filled with music, fragrant smells and dappled light. "This is my English chest and my little teapot with hyacinths," she says, "and here," leading me upstairs, "this was my father's bed, and here is my gallery of photos ... "

The fascinating thing about this guided tour is that Barbara Blackman is totally blind, and has been for more than half a century. Having said that, it would be wrong to suggest that this disability somehow renders her sightless.

If truth be known, this 75-year-old former artist's model and muse, salon keeper, oral historian, writer, poet and all-round national treasure, can see better than most of us, except the world she sees is drawn from a combination of sound, touch, smell, visual memory, deep intuition and rich imagination. All these provide her with, as she says, the gift for "seeing from within".

"You sight-addicted people are a funny lot," she says half-mockingly. "You can't cook the dinner, wash up, have a shower, go to bed and make love unless you're watching. I think it's hilarious. I think when the lights go out and you all fumble and bump about ... it's hilarious. I mean when there was a power strike in New York recently, I had this wonderful idea of getting bus loads of blind people and issuing them, one per household, to run the houses until the lights came on."

So you're laughing at us? "Absolutely. I think the fact that you utterly distrust your hands ... sometimes I give talks and I say, 'Hold up your hands. Apologise to these beautiful, intelligent parts of your body that you don't trust and don't love and don't use.' Why are things only real if you see them ... ?"

And as if to prove the point, she walks to the kitchen to prepare coffee – taking the jar from the fridge, measuring three spoonsful into the plunger, boiling the water, lighting the gas, frothing the milk, retrieving freshly baked cake from the tin, taking the plates, cups and saucers from the pantry ... doing it all by touch and spatial awareness.

Can I help you? "No," she says matter-of-factly. "I have a pantry of the mind."

And just so there's no doubt about that, two hours later, she gathers up cucumber, avocado, spring onions, walnuts and basil from the fridge and begins to slice, spoon and crunch together a salad to accompany the fish soup lunch that she has somehow managed to conjure up that morning.

"People are so overwhelmed by what they see," she continues, "and they're the people who are dangerous for me to go out with, because they might push me under a bus or something. They're so preoccupied by the visual. 'Down step, up step, don't trip ... ' I'll get myself there, I tell them. Never broken a leg yet.

"How do I know how much milk to pour into a cup? I can feel the change in the weight of the jug. You people have got to look and see how much milk you're putting in. How do you know when shoes fit you? Do you look to see if they fit ...?

"If 30 people describe a painting ... Well, there are 30 paintings. You think you're seeing what other people are seeing. You are not. It's part of your visual addiction."

There are some people whose lives read like epic novels. They tantalise our imagination with stories of loss, despair, adversity, courage, love, wisdom, non-conformity, a sweep of history ... ▶

Barbara Blackman's is such a life, and not merely because, for 27 years, she was the wife and central muse of one of Australia's greatest painters, Charles Blackman, the man she fell in love with just as the last light was fading from her eyes.

That on its own could easily provide the stuff of fiction – the way she inspired arguably his greatest works, the Alice in Wonderland paintings, by having him listen with her to Lewis Carroll's masterpiece on a talking book machine; the way they were to defy convention in the late 1940s by living together before they married; the way she could "psychically reach out", intuit what he was painting and how he would, in turn, read to her, becoming her eyes; the way she managed to raise their three children without being able to see them; the way she and Charles partied long into the night with fellow painters, writers and musicians in what must surely have been one of the best salons in Australia during the post-war period; and then, of course, the way in which she eventually "resigned" from their marriage because she could no longer stand his alcohol-fuelled descent into oblivion.

So, yes, there's enough here to tell a momentous story without mentioning what happened before and after Charles Blackman erupted into her life. Except that would be the easy way out, and for Barbara Blackman the easy way out has never seemed to be an option.

Charles and Barbara, with their children (from left) Auguste, Barnaby and Christabel, and (opposite) Charles in his Sydney studio in 1996, with one of his Alice in Wonderland series.

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"My mother read to me, which was a great bond between us. She was a wonderful, patient and loving reader. She loved reading to me."

Barbara Patterson started life, literally, as a survivor. Sixteen days after her birth – in Brisbane on December 22, 1928 – her twin sister, Coralie, died. For years it produced in Barbara a dark vision of herself. "It used to be an overriding thought for a long time," Barbara says now, "that she [Coralie] would have got it right and that I'd got it wrong; that she wouldn't have been blind and a burden on the people around her. She was my alternative. She was my might-have-been."

Then, at three-and-a-half, Barbara lost her father, W. H. (Harry) Patterson, a surveyor, painter and verse writer who had adopted the publishing name, Banjo II, in self-deprecating regard to his more famous distant cousin, Banjo Paterson.

Harry Patterson had previously lived with Aboriginal people in south-east Queensland, making maps for the Lands Department. It was to this country that he returned when he learned he was dying. "He had a stroke and knew life was very limited," Barbara says, "and so he walked out of the house, leaving the front door wide open, and he took my mother and me down to live out his days with Aborigines on Bribie Passage. That was my earliest memories – campfires, clapsticks, fishing, smoky bars ... "

The death of Barbara's father was emblematic of a generation of Australian women who had lost their menfolk in World War I. Barbara is old enough to remember the ragged hole this left.

"I think something terrible happened in the First World War," she says now, sipping her coffee. "So many were killed in that war. There were houses full of aged mothers, spinster women or widows. There was a great missing gap and it has taken a long time to build up that Australian manhood, if ever we have."

And so as a young girl, Barbara came to inhabit the world of women: six grandmothers in all, one of them real, the rest elected, adopted, foster, step ... and, of course, her own mother, Gertrude, with whom she lived in various communal houses and private hotels.

Even at three years of age, Barbara's eyesight was poor. "After my father died, I immediately went into hospital under observation. I could never read very much to myself. My mother read to me, which was a great bond between us. She was a wonderful, patient and loving reader. She loved reading to me and I loved being read to."

As Barbara's sight began to give way, she began falling under the spell of words. At four, she would make up stories by symbolically using stones as letters. By the time she was seven, she'd received her first radio and discovered the joys of listening to *The World's Best Books*, dramatised on the ABC. At 11, World War II had broken out and she'd started writing to penfriends in the army, navy and air force, lonely men who would write back to this inquisitive creature about their wartime experiences. It was the beginning of a lifelong addiction to other people's stories.

"My life course was set," she was to observe later, "to become one of the last great letter writers ... and later oral history interviewers."

(In later life, Barbara would conduct hundreds of interviews for the National Library Archives. She would also manage to maintain, over more than half a century, correspondence with Judith Wright, the deaf Australian poet.)

15/3/98
My dear Barbara,
I do think visiting is not a proposition
for us now – how could we possibly
communicate? I wouldn't hear you and
you couldn't see me and there is just
no communication system available ...
So I just wave to you in my mind,
knowing you can't see me and if
you did I couldn't hear you ...
With love and many memories – Judith.

6/4/98
My dear Judith,
So you think that being deaf as all posts,
blind as all bats, we should never meet
again. Dear friend, a kiss is still a kiss,
a hug is still a hug ... We have had
good times, Judith, and it will be all
good to the last drop, no matter what
bits fall away,
I send you my love, Barbara

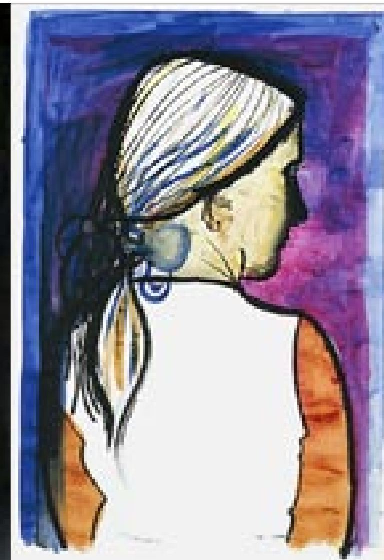
By the time Barbara was 15, she had started experimenting with her own prose styles and begun writing poetry. One surrealist effort saw her published in the *ABC Weekly*. It caused a commotion.

"If a 15-year-old schoolgirl wrote this, I'll eat my hat," exclaimed an incredulous letters page correspondent. Barbara responded by writing another poem about people eating their own hats.

When she left school two years later, in 1945, Barbara had just enough vision to look like she could see. She enrolled in university and began studying philosophy and psychology, subjects which required less reading than English or history. Still, she needed her friends to read to her, which they gladly did.

Barbara became part of a burgeoning cultural and intellectual life which was to challenge the straitjacket of 1940s Brisbane. She edited the literary youth magazine, *Barjai;* flirted with communism; went to public lectures on Carl Jung; attended poetry readings at the Ballad Bookshop; frequented the notorious Pink Elephant Cafe; and befriended a veritable who's who of Australia's emerging talents – poets Barrett Reid, Charles Osborne and Judith Wright; philosopher Jack McKinney; artists John Yule, Sidney Nolan, Laurence Hope and a "small scruffy muscly painter from Sydney" by the name of Charles Blackman.

Charles Blackman and Barbara Patterson fell in love in Brisbane in 1949, and by the following year had moved to Melbourne and taken up residence in a converted coach house. Charles was on the threshold of ▶



"It seemed to me then that I was being given a life sentence for a crime I had not committed. Later, it was commuted to solitary confinement with parole and 100 lashes a day … "

Two Charles Blackman portraits of his wife Barbara, done in 1995 (far left) and 1969 (left).

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becoming one of Australia's finest and most prolific modern painters, renowned for his haunting images, his sense of adventure and his exquisite use of colour. Barbara was still reeling from the devastating news she'd just been handed.

Brisbane, March 1950. Ophthalmologist's consulting room. "Optic atrophy … rapid decline … Certification of industrial blindness. Sign here for pension."

"It seemed to me then," she would later write in her autobiography, *Glass After Glass*, "that I was being given a life sentence for a crime I had not committed. Later, it was commuted to solitary confinement with parole and 100 lashes a day – the lashes of landscapes dissolved in vacant air, smiles and gazes buried in blanks, faces of lovers and children drowned in fathomless clear water, spillings, bumpings, gropings, uncertainties, bewilderment … "

Charles had been drawn to Melbourne because of artists such as Arthur Boyd, John Perceval, Joy Hester and John Yule, and the new wave of modernism being ushered in under the patronage of Sunday and John Reed. At Heide, their rural retreat near Heidelberg, Australia's answer to the Bloomsbury set burst into life, although the Blackmans never felt quite at home there.

"Someone once made a toast to the good ship Heide and all who sailed in her," Barbara says now. "And I couldn't resist it. I said, 'And a toast to all those who were made to walk the plank.' So you know there were two sides to it.

"I'm not disgruntled. They [Sunday and John Reed] were great people, but to me they didn't have anything to offer compared to Jack McKinney and Judith Wright, who were my sky heroes."

Still, it was an intoxicating and revolutionary time, when Melbourne was becoming defined as a city; a time when artists would show their respect for one another by swapping shirts – "shirts off" became the salute of the day; a time when everyone knew the addresses of the three major abortionists in town; a time when Mirka Mora's studio was turning into the famed meeting place for group and solo shows, exhibitions, suppers, readings, theatrical events, conversations, music and riotous sleepovers.

During one of these, Barbara actually awoke in the arms of a young architect with whom she had apparently fallen asleep discussing the difference between bisexuals and hermaphrodites. "You slept with my wife," Charles accused the man when he stumbled upon them. "Well, yes, no, sort of, nothing like … " came the man's faltering response.

"Did you f*** her? Yes or no?" Charles insisted. "Absolutely no," the man replied. "Then you have insulted [her]," he said. "She is too attractive a woman to be treated like that. I'll have you put on trial." Thus began one of the mock trials for which this crowd became famous.

Half a century later it begs the question: was she a wild woman? "No, I just lived my life," she responds, smiling at the memory. "I dressed very properly. I'd studied psychology. I'd worked for a while in a kindergarten. I posed at art schools. I just could not tread the unquestioned path. But we didn't go streaking up the street nude.

"I sometimes thought if I'd had sight I might have been wild [laughing]. Gone down to the docks and hung around … I don't know. I was wild in my ideas and in my words and in my vision of things."

Through the 1950s, Barbara became one of the most celebrated artists' models in the city. She posed for, among others, Fred Williams, John Brack, Clifton Pugh, Dattilo Rubbo and Thea Procter. But it was her role as muse to emerging genius Charles Blackman that captured most attention.

"Without question it was Barbara … who had the most profound and lasting influence on his art," commented art historian and curator Felicity St John Moore. "She was able to name the emotion that he would intuitively feel. Charles once wrote [in a letter] of his need for her, 'I shall achieve, but only I feel through Barbara'."

The clearest testimony to this, believes Felicity, was Barbara's presence in the Alice paintings, where "listening to the story again and again, Charles was struck by the parallels between the fabulous Alice and the real Barbara".

This long-standing assumption was challenged recently by art historian Janine Burke, who speculated, in her book on Heide, that in those paintings Charles was paying homage to his patron, Sunday Reed, not to Barbara.

Barbara scoffs at the notion. "It's idiotic … She wasn't there."

Felicity St John Moore says that, "If Barbara was Charles' muse, he was her eyes. During the formative years of his art [1950-56], he developed the habit of reading to her at great length, mainly modern French literature, but any book of note that helped him explore the language of his emotions."

"Charles was a wonderful describer," ▶

Barbara concurs. "To walk up the road with him was wonderful. He described people in the restaurant. He'd turn them into cartoons or poems. He'd see right into them. I brought that out in him."

Which she still does, according to some of her legion of devoted friends. Award-winning writer and artist Kim Mahood marvels at her capacity to elicit word descriptions from people. "There's a real pleasure in going that extra distance, in telling her how things look," she tells The Weekly. "And because she's been around painters all her life, she has an amazing eye ... so I describe my work to her and she imagines it back to me."

Another friend, artist and neurologist Ross Mellick, has enjoyed over the years the curious but delightful pastime of taking Barbara to Art Gallery of NSW exhibitions. Guiding her through the painting-filled rooms, he describes to her what he is looking at by drawing an approximation on the palm of her hands. "It's wonderful to describe a picture to Barbara and wonderful to get a response back from a blind woman," he says.

Charles Blackman was at the height of his artistic powers when he and Barbara had their first child, Auguste, in Melbourne in 1957. Two years later a daughter, Christabel, was born, and then, in London in 1963, their third child, Barnaby, arrived.

Betty Churcher, former director of the National Gallery of Australia and a lifelong friend of Barbara's, remembers her struggling mightily with her sight around the time Auguste arrived. "She could just see enough out of the corners of her eyes to put the nappy pins in," she says. "And she used to sew bells on his shoulders so she could hear where he was. Auguste eventually learned to hold the bells so she couldn't find him."

There was nothing in the literature about blind women having children, and it took friends like artist Joy Hester to bolster Barbara's courage. "You'll be right," she told her. "The babies will help you. They know what you should be doing."

She was right. "My children learned things at a very early age," Barbara says. "They maybe got things on inside out or back to front, but people would say, 'Aren't they clever children?' No, they were just allowed to do it.

"I used to, when I moved to a new house, tell my neighbours I was blind and that I had little children and there might come an occasion when I'd need help urgently, and that was all right.

"Once, when Christabel was a month or two old, she was on penicillin every four hours and Charles had gone away on a painting trip with Cliff Pugh. I just used to go down to the front gate and say to a passer-by, 'Excuse me, I'm blind and my child needs four of these drops'. I wasn't embarrassed. My child needed drops and here was a human being. He could see what a drop was."

Because of Barbara's disability, she and Charles never belonged exclusively to the arts world. Instead they gathered around themselves not just artists, but people like entrepreneur Georges Mora and his wife, Mirka, poets Jack McKinney and Judith Wright, as well as musicians like Peter Sculthorpe and Ross Edwards. Their parties became celebrated events.

Adrian Keenan, a music friend of Barbara's, claims he has never been the same since he entered the Blackman world nearly 30 years ago. "It was the epicentre of cultural life in Australia," he says. Not to mention good fun.

Adrian remembers a dinner party one night at their home in Paddington, Sydney, not long after Charles had returned from one of his painting trips. Barbara had prepared a sumptuous meal for about 24, the alcohol was flowing, the Alice paintings were staring down at everyone from the walls, and it happened to be the eve of Christabel's English Higher School Certificate exam. The party turned into an all-night bender.

"I think that was the night we had the competition between Beethoven and Elton John," Adrian says. "We had two sound systems going flat out."

"Yes," adds Barbara, chortling. "It was hard to hear the neighbours banging on the door [at 2am]. It was even hard to hear Christabel screaming. It was too much for the cat. In the morning she had kittens."

And so, across nearly three decades – from Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, to London, Paris and back to Australia again – the Blackman marriage assumed an almost mythical status.

"He used to sing in a great deep voice Bessie Smith songs," she says. "I'd never met anything like Charles. And he'd never met anything like me. So it was utter dynamics of being carried away by each other. Probably one of the last interviews he ever gave on radio was to this chirpy interviewer who said to him, 'What was it like being married to a blind wife?' He said, 'She never looked at my paintings and interfered with my thoughts.' *Continued on page 206.*

Left: Nigel Thomson's atmospheric portrait of Barbara Blackman, which won the 1997 Archibald Prize.

"He used to sing in a great deep voice Bessie Smith songs. I'd never met anything like Charles. And he'd never met anything like me. So it was utter dynamics of being carried away by each other."

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BARBARA BLACKMAN *Continued*

And the interviewer said something like, 'But you had to read to her?' And he said, 'I read her great books and, Madam, it made me an educated person'."

But it all came to an end in 1978, not because of Charles' rumoured infidelities, but because of his alcoholism. (Today, he suffers from alcoholic dementia.)

"I've a friend," says Barbara, "who said, 'Small infidelities save more marriages than they destroy'. I think it's a very wise remark. No, it was the alcohol. It's done great damage in my family. And as I'm not an addictive person, I suppose I'm on the other side of the river. If you're blind, you can't get too drunk because you lose your footing. You lose your precious self-control and independence."

Barbara announced the end of their marriage one morning in 1978, by typing a letter of resignation to him and placing it – along with a flower – on his breakfast tray. She declared that the resignation would take effect a fortnight later, on their 27th wedding anniversary.

Music is Barbara Blackman's life flow, the heart of everything. Every morning, for half an hour, she sways and turns across her dance floor to the sounds of Dave Brubeck, Harry Belafonte, Sufi rock or, as was the case on the day I visited her, the Beatles. "It's to cleanse the mind and work the body," she says. "I just love it."

Barbara Blackman reminds us of what the spirit is capable of when the world appears to vanish before our eyes. After their separation, Charles went on to marry one of his daughter's friends, a woman 30 years younger. It was the first of two successive marriages. Barbara chose instead to fall back into Aboriginal life, back to the place of her earliest memories with her father. *Where's that whitewoman called Blackman? She don't see ... she smells.* It was here, in a place where she was to become mythologised, that she had a soul meeting with a three-year-old girl, Rebecca, whom she would later adopt as her daughter.

Over the succeeding years, Barbara's life trajectory continued to take her in a multitude of directions, but seemingly always under one guiding star. Earlier in her life, she had played the muse and the model as well as the vigorous campaigner on behalf of Australian contemporary art, music and writing. A beautiful writer, she had celebrated the world of ideas and what it meant to be a good citizen. She had helped form the National Federation of Blind Citizens and later Radio for the Print Handicapped in Perth.

In the last third of her life, she has become increasingly drawn to the spiritual. To the rigorous study of – as opposed to New Age infatuation with – astrology; to an investigation of where modern science and the ancient wisdoms might intersect; to the Temenos Foundation, which seeks to bring these ancient wisdoms into greater focus in contemporary life; to the power of service to those she loves.

It was at Karnak, Diane Cilento's School of Sufi Studies in Queensland, where Barbara met Frenchman Marcel Veldhoven, the "scholar gypsy" with whom she would spend nearly 20 years.

Together they created a "university" in the bush in Kangaroo Valley, on the south coast of NSW – a retreat called Indooroopilly, where friends came for contemplation, good company, music and the study of poets and philosophers. "All fixed beliefs," she said, "were left, like the metaphorical shoes, at the door."

But that, too, came to an end around Christmas 2001, when bushfires swept the Southern Highlands and Barbara was forced to evacuate the house, along with her computers, her talking book machines, archives and paintings. By this time, her relationship with Marcel had long since fulfilled itself. He was drifting further to Tibetan Buddhism; she to her many friends and interests in Canberra, and "the tasks of old age".

When I'd first spoken to Barbara by phone, she'd claimed her world was "going down", and that she was "not unhappy to go down with it". I asked her to elaborate on this theme, and so she talked of how she felt language and moralities had changed beyond recognition; how words like modesty and frugality and decency had gone out of fashion; how the idea of housework had come to be regarded as drudgery rather than service.

"The home is the centre of family, hospitality, woman's solitude and solace," she reminded me. "I'd replace 'drudgery', with 'caress'. The house breathing its waves of safe harbour when all are asleep in the night, the clock ticking its heartbeat welcome, the order and cleanliness of humble utensils, a hat on a hook, a book left open ... "

And while we're at it, what happened to the writing of letters? "I suppose the worst things about old age are the sins of omission," she observes. "What have I not done that had I done would have made life better for someone? One of the great sins of omission is not writing to people and telling them how much they've helped you. I say to people – and I don't always do it myself – 'Spend half a day a month saying thank you to people who've made your life better'. That's gratitude. And when you pay your bills, pay them promptly. I used to post my payments with a few leaves of lavender in it ... now we don't pay bills like that."

And so, yes, a world is crumbling, but Barbara Blackman retains a truly adventurous spark and an appreciation for everything life can offer. Every first Sunday of the month, she opens her home to friends, just as she did when she was married to Charles, or when she lived at Indooroopilly with her second husband, Marcel. "You can't finish a poem until you've lived it to the end," she says.

A few months ago, she went on a cruise with a friend along the east coast of Australia, visiting two beaches a day for a week. In that mysterious, almost psychic world of hers, she addressed herself to – as she puts it – the "eternal ocean", "the ephemeral sand" and the "ancestral rocks". She came back re-invigorated.

"Every day I wake up with a sense of surprise, gratitude, curiosity," she says, "and it never lets me down. And whenever I go to bed I am grateful – grateful for the bed. I suppose blindness was a shortcut to humility and so I've just let myself be guided."

And now that she has reached old age, she feels curious about what lies ahead. "If I could look in the mirror, I would probably lament a lot more," she says. ("It looks like the prow of a boat," her friend Kim Mahood says of her face.) "I'm the height now I was when I was 12. Petticoats have gone out of fashion. But what is interesting about old age – what my mother called the Promised Land – is that you don't have the weight of tomorrow on your back. You are free to look at beginnings and where they lead."

Do you welcome the Great Sleep? "Yes," she says. "I've enjoyed everything about my life and I'm sure that dying will be one of the most interesting. It's my curiosity which carries me on, and surely death is something to be curious about."

What do you think happens when you die? "I like that phrase from Tennyson," she replies. *"When that which drew from out the boundless deep turns again home. Twilight and evening bell and after that the dark! And may there be no sadness of farewell when I embark."* W