The secret of the Hotel Chelsea was out. New Yorkers could walk down 23rd Street, in the block between Seventh and Eighth avenues, look up at the red-brick building and imagine the artists and writers and poets and Village bohemians inside: Andy Warhol shooting a scene from Chelsea Girls, Bob Dylan shaping rhymes for Blonde on Blonde, Allen Ginsberg on the roof. Arthur Miller shadowing Marilyn Monroe on the page. Harry Smith giving anthropological tips to Arthur C. Clarke. Janis Joplin slamming Southern Comfort, Dylan Thomas arguing with Caitlin, Brendan Behan stumbling through the hallways.

By late 1962, as Hair opened at New York's Public Theater and Haight-Ashbury residents staged a mock funeral on the other side of the country, colorful stories about the Chelsea were making the papers. If a benchmark of anti-establishment credibility was to exist below the radar, then times were changing in lower Manhattan. Even so, few of these stories had reached Eltham, a quiet hamlet in outer Melbourne. It was there that Richard Crichton was living with his wife, Florence, and their three small children. When Crichton applied for a Harkness Fellowship, the decision-makers faced a choice. Should they give it to this promising Victorian artist who had barely left home, or to Brett Whiteley, who had already enjoyed success?

Margaret Carrieger, a Melbourne collector, asked if it was possible for both to receive the scholarship — and the idea prevailed. Albert Tucker was already in New York when Crichton arrived in September with his wife and children. Tucker was staying at the Chelsea, and he urged his friends to join him.

For Crichton, New York was a revelation. The hotel, too. Down the hall lived George Kleinesinger, composer of Tallyho! the Tub; a man whose jangle of an apartment contained exotic birds, fish, an iguana, a skull, a monkey and a python. The Crichtons from Eltham often found themselves in the company lift with Arthur C. Clarke or Arthur Miller or some singer whose face they vaguely recognised.

A week in, there was a knock on the door. The odd-looking character spoke with a familiar accent. He was dressed in white, and had a puff of hair above his head. He introduced himself, inquired about the hotel and asked about Crichton’s work. “You making plenty of bread?” he asked, and Crichton, confused, replied that Florence had made some in Australia but here they just bought theirs at a shop. As they talked, people rushed past, carrying furniture. The penthouse upstairs was vacant, and the timing couldn’t have been better.

For Brett, New York was a living sculpture, an insect to appease his stick and study. He was going to spend four days whisking around in a cab, thinking deeply about everything from the bowery to big business, from the American Dream to Norman Mailer, Vietnam and hippie teenagers. And then he was going to create a single canvas that would capture the “immediate mouth-open power: exaltation, fear, wonder” of the city. “I hope the balance. The latest good will. The unreality of it all too.”

Brett, Wendy and Arkie made themselves at home in the Hotel Chelsea. The hotel was a de-liberate choice, even if it was chance that led them to the penthouse. (They were so confident they would end up there that they had sent their belongings from London directly to the Chelsea.) Unlike the Chelsea, the Whiteleys were aware of its reputation. They knew the names of guests, they knew who had been there before and they were looking forward to becoming a part of its story.

Room 1028 was split over two levels. The lower floor was where Brett and Wendy slept and Brett worked, while Arkie had her bed nestled under the stairs. The stairs led up to a small kitchen, which opened out on to a garden on the roof. They bought two ducks from Long Island and installed them in the garden. Now at least three. Arkie was enrolled in a Montessori kindergarten nearby.

Brett was afraid of America yet drawn to its extremes. He started working, trying to make sense of the city. In his notebook, he drew a picture of two bodies, on top of each other, one black and the other white, torsos entwined in a single shape. He drew these bodies in different settings: on a placard, beneath the words make love not war and as a new American flag.

One of his first pictures was a portrait of Bob Dylan. "Dylan is the outsider," he said. "He's the most on point in America.

Back in London, Brett’s latest pictures went on display at the Marlborough. Brett’s Christie pictures had attracted some disapproval, but the reaction this time was harsher. In the Sunday Times, Edward Lucie-Smith wrote, “Once a Wunderkind, he now seems to be having the Wunderkind’s growing pains.”

By the time these reviews had filtered through to Manhattan, Brett was hard at work on a new show. It was scheduled for the Marlborough-Gerson, a gallery on East 57th Street. Brett’s pictures were growing in size and breaking free from the two-dimensional space as he added objects like hair, fibreglass and wood.

Brett and Wendy spent long nights at the Electric Circus, listening to music and dancing — and also at Max’s Kansas City, where they met Andy Warhol and talked to residents from the Chelsea. Brett met James Rosenquist at a party in an East Village loft — the painter was a little drunk, and bailed away confused from their conversation — and spotted Roy LICenstein across the room. And he met Timothy Leary on the street — “a friendly, dressed up white cowboy boots white cowboy hat giving the Hindu love at pasting ‘Very bizarre.’

Arthur Miller called the Chelsea a “house of infinite toleration.” It was a working picture of people and music and words and eccentric characters who became everyday faces in the elevator and lobby. And when Valeska Solanas pressed into Wendy’s hand a copy of the SCUM Manifesto, George Kleinesinger wandered up to the garden to give his psychoanalysis. Buying bargains across the street, Brett and Wendy made conversation with a well-dressed singer from Canada called Leonard Cohen. When Wendy saw Janis Joplin in the hotel, she felt sorry for her. Joplin was dynamic on stage but it looked like she had a death wish for their idol, egging her on to more extremes. In the Chelsea, Joplin was just another bohemian who liked a drink, and got to know the Whiteleys, and looked after Arkie for a few hours one night while Brett and Wendy went out.

In New York, he had an opportunity to demonstrate the evolution of his art. His exhibition consisted of 23 pictures, most of which had some element of mixed media in their construction. On the front of the catalogue was Vincent Van Gogh, the artist depicted above a table with a candle, a pipe, a letter to a friend and a bottle attached. There were three portraits of Dylan. There was Martin Luther King, who had been killed the previous month, plus New York imagery like hot dogs, taxis and city landmarks.

After the pictures were unveiled at the Marlborough-Gerson, five rooms up on East 57th Street, it was time for the party at the Chelsea. The crowd made its way across town and into the apartment and the garden on the roof.

When Brett disappeared. Wendy at first thought nothing of his absence. Openings always made him uncomfortable. But as the party went on, she became suspicious. She knocked on the door of an apartment downstairs, where an architect called Constance Abernathy answered the door. Wendy pushed past and found him crouching on the outside balcony, naked, high up on the 23rd Street and shouting in the spring air. He came inside and sat on a piano stool, mumbling: “You can keep him.” Wendy said to Abernathy, and returned to the party upstairs.

This was not Brett’s first affair. In London, while they were living in Melbury Road and Arkie was a baby, Brett had a one-night stand with a wealthy art collector and told Wendy proudly about the conquest. Wendy was distraught, even suicidal, but Brett insisted their marriage was solid. It was just an affair, just sex. Brett told Wendy she had an advantage anyway, giving her beauty.

At his studio Brett was becoming obsessed about a new picture in progress. It was simple...
statement on a single theme, the piece he had been planning before arriving and the work that would sum up his experiences of America.

What exactly was happening in America? Musicians like Jimi Hendrix were noticing the tension, particularly in New York, where the city seemed more violent than ever. Late on June 3, Valerie Solanas approached a police officer on Times Square and told him she had shot Andy Warhol. Two days later, Robert Kennedy was shot in Los Angeles. "It is not time to take a long look at ourselves," Arthur Miller wrote that week, "at the way we live and the way we think, and to face the fact that the violence in our streets is the violence in our hearts, that with all our accomplishments, our spires and mines and clean, glittering packages, our charities and gods, we are what we were — a people of violence" Miller added Robert Kennedy's name beside other victims of violence. "The American Dream is ours to evoke."

The Whitneys were making notable friends at the Chelsea. Wendy got on well with Caroline Schneemann, a regular sight at the hotel who used her body for art. They met Hendrix at a New York studio, and were surprised by how quiet and shy he was. And they spent an afternoon with Charles Mingus, whose sunken demeanour made them feel sympathy for a musician whose best days were behind him. Francis Bacon came to town; his show at the Marlborough-Gerson attracted a large crowd, but he spent most of the night drinking whisky at the back of the gallery with Brett.

New York was expensive, and the Harkness money barely covered expenses. Wendy decided to work, a move frowned on by Brett. With her friend Liz Sheridan, she opened the Put On, a fur shop on West 20th Street stocked with coats, hats, vests, rugs and other items.

One of Brett's portraits of Dylan was hanging in the window, and a passer-by recognised its distinctive markings. Tony Woods was an Australian artist also in New York on a Hark- Continued on Page 8
At the beginning of 1960 the Hotel Chelsea, for so long a community where normal rules didn’t apply, was losing some of its charm. The dreams that had sustained the hotel were falling, along with the perception within that artists had the power to change the world.

In his notebook, Brett jotted stories about the death of Marcel Duchamp, civil unrest in the United States, and Lyndon Johnson saying there had been no change in Vietnam. He wrote to Jasper Johns, calling him “weak.” On the same page, he scribbled “SH” over and over, bringing the numbers closer and closer until they met as a single shape to form a yin-yang symbol.

Brett was acting erratically. Bottles were piling up at the studio, and he was working around the clock. He reached for Rimbach but he had been quoting the poet for years, and he knew the key points of his life, including Rimbach’s determination to look to the unknown through a dermatoscope.

Long absences were followed by Wendy finding paintings in her possession. The worst was when she came to tell him that his uncle Syd had died. Brett had been at the studio for a few days, and Wendy broke in and saw him lying in his own vomit. The picture he’d been working on showed the despair in the room, as though the spray of paint on to the surface had made him throw up on the floor.

In order to satisfy the new dreams, Wendy wrote to Beryl. “Trying to cobble how to be more at peace with myself and Brett’s dulness, and his jumps into the day, is a way of despair and nihilism, my temper feels smoothed and I feel more able to handle the desperate moments with calm and a bit more detachment. None of this theory has yet been tested but at least I’ve been feeling well. We’ve been pretty much emotionally separate at times, but somehow it always works up in some sort of rhythm, region.

Brett invited Richard Crichton to see his new picture. He was calling it The American Dream. Crichton was honest: he didn’t think it was very good.

Wendy’s time was divided between the shop, housework, and looking after Arlie. At four, Arlie was “more beautiful, inquisitive, bright and knowing every second.” At the Put On, the end of winter meant the windows were drawn down. There was talk at home about moving to Fiji for a change of pace, and the Whiteleys fantasised about a Mayan jungle place. But from the concerns of New York, where Norman Maier had just entered the mayoral campaign, Brett made a poster — IF WE MAIL IT IT’VE MADE IT! — and dropped it off at the campaign office. The poster disappeared. Mailer dropped out after failing to secure enough votes and Brett returned to the project that had been dominating his waking dreams for months.

The further Brett went, the more difficult it became. Day after day the ache and panic rose within him. He drank and smoked more, hoping to feel the heat of hell and to “report it up.”

Wendy knew what this picture was doing to her husband. But she was convinced that it would make a difference, even if not everyone was going to like it. She wrote to Beryl and said that the work was “beautifully beautiful” and impossible to ignore: “If this painting doesn’t blow their minds then this country is really dead.”

Brett had revolution in mind. He wanted to wake up people to the decisions being made in their name and fire them with a new kind of political consciousness. He felt the country was dangerously divided, sliding into catastrophe. It needed a jolt, and this picture, the product of almost a year’s derangement, would be the trigger.

The American Dream was huge, spread over 18 panels, each no more than two metres high. It moved from a tranquil dawn to heart-attack apocalypse, then settled into paradise and hope. It was a warning of the future and a kaleidoscope of Brett’s America.

The picture was arranged in a circle in his studio, enveloping the visitor in a whirl of violence and energy and movement. There were images of van Gogh, Dylan, Bacon, Mailer, quotes from Wilde, Baudelaire, John Cage, and personal milestones thrown into the mix: “1960: LED first time,” Hitler makes an appearance, as does Vietnam, while scenes of warfare and nuclear destruction are bunched together in the busy central section, with references to revolution, love, power and pain.

To lean in close is to notice the details: an American flag on Ayres Rock, a wedding ring, two Ching symbols, shark teeth cut into a panel; tiny passages of text. Brett added details from his own world, like a photograph of Arlie beneath words from Yeats, a street sign from the corner of Seventh Avenue and 3rd Street, and an illustration of a house with a tower in Fiji, his idol for the future. Then there were the extraordinary elements that made a visit to his studio even more confronting: the flashing red light and sirens, an echo of the police vehicles outside.

Brett invited Frank Lloyd to come down from the Marborough. The viewing went poorly. Lloyd said The American Dream was too big, political and aggressive. Leo Castelli visited and had a similar reaction.

Brett couldn’t believe it. He had poured everything into this picture in the belief that it would change America, and now the country’s gatekeepers were standing in the way. It was his first serious setback as an artist. Fiji seemed like a good idea. Brett threw his belongings into a leather suitcase and took a taxi to the airport. He left Wendy and Arkie behind to sort out the details — the hotel, the studio, the shop — and flew off towards the promise of paradise.

“Maybe Gyo’s right about NY causing a love when you’re away from it,” Brett was writing to his mother from the plane that was taking him from New York and the madness of a metropolis that had beaten him. The note was on Quinns letterhead and his handwriting was screwed across the page: “Maybe I’ve become more American than I can account for at the moment. Hope not. I think I hate it or at least find it intolerable.”

Wendy and Arkie were flying to London to organise Brett’s affairs before joining him in Fiji.

What was it about America that disturbed him? Brett was still trying to work it out as the plane crossed the continent. Was it him? “I must put the force to beauty now before it de- ceives me,” he wrote. “Did I get it from you? Do you think we’re Devils? Terrible thought isn’t it, but exciting. Shhhhh.”

He was glad to be leaving. The plane was stopping in San Francisco, where Brett would post his letter, and then it was on to Fiji and a new life. He was thinking of family, humming to the harmonies of the engines as he drifted off to sleep.

This is an edited extract from Ashleigh Wilson’s book Brett Whiteley: Art, Life and the Other Thing, published next week by Text.

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