

A Far Horizon

BY REBECCA BISSET



I know that all art is personal, but I do find these landscapes by Australian artist PETER WATTS very peaceful. Peter lives in Melbourne and has exhibited his work at REDSEA Gallery in Dempsey since June 2020. The way different artists work is also very personal, so I asked him about his background, his creative process and his inspiration.

How has your background in design and your experience as a creative director shaped you as an artist today?

Painting, like design, is visual communication – an idea or story expressed in imagery. I was always interested in creating images, whether it was via design, painting, photography, print making or drawing. I drew a lot as a child and always loved painting, but as I grew up I saw a more reliable financial future in graphic design. I had really good teachers around me who also pushed design as a means for employment. Becoming a creative designer and owning a design business with my wife Helen for over 30 years did build a financial foundation for me. Now I do what I really loved as a child: paint.

Tell us more about your artwork process from start to finish; what's the most challenging part of painting?

I never have a specific starting point. For me, a basic composition plan and spontaneity are the key things. The process starts with the clouds composition. Are they dark or light? Are they grey, blue or warm tones? Once I've laid them down, I sit and study how the light from within these clouds will affect a landscape. I just let it happen. Blocking in with rough colour helps me see the land appearing before me.

I always home in on weather events that are fleeting and hard to capture in the real world. I have the freedom with paint to be the author of unpredictable, dramatic and sometimes breathtaking weather events. Paint can be moved, layered or brushed to build up contrasting tones that tell a story of light and shade, landscape artistry and mystique. The real challenge is to visually convince and excite the viewer of this fleeting moment.

How long does it take to complete your paintings, and do you work on multiple pieces at a time?

A typical painting takes less time than you think; however, it's taken me 10 years to learn how to achieve a result in a short time. Fast-drying acrylic paint helps with the speed and spontaneity.

Which painting from your portfolio do you best feel represents you as a person?

I haven't painted it yet. I'm still experimenting and searching. Having said that, I do have two works in my home that I will probably never sell. "Drenched" is one of them. Dark is my thing. (Don't worry, my mind is bright!) I can create contrast and movement with dark and light a lot more than with clear, bright colours.

How has your painting style and the way you express yourself artistically changed since you started painting? Have you always painted landscapes?

I've always painted landscapes and probably always will. I started out with a more abstract approach. Over the years, I have slowly ventured into reality, but I still like to leave parts of the work dark and mysterious. Sometimes it's about what you don't see that creates intrigue.

How do you envision your portfolio of works in the next year and five years on?

That's hard to answer. As an artist, I don't have a plan; I experiment and see what happens as I go. Sometimes I surprise myself.

What inspires you in your day-to-day life?

Failure. The road to success has failure bumps. You must learn from these. Never give up, and stick to what your heart tells you. Of course, feedback, high praise and continually selling work are a great inspiration, but they should never lead to complacency.

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Which artists have played a role in influencing your style?

As a student, I was always intrigued by the Heidelberg School artists: Streeton, Withers, Roberts, McCubbin and so on. John Glover was an earlier interest with his English-looking eucalyptus; later, I discovered Constable, Turner and the like. I have been lucky enough to frequent many of the great galleries of the world to view many of these amazing works in person.

Can you share with us what makes you happy?

Happiness is built from having a healthy, loving and supportive family. If you're lucky enough to have this, then happiness spreads throughout all that you do. (I'm also pretty happy when a painting sells!)

What has been your most exciting lockdown discovery?

Me.

What's the best piece of advice you've been given, not just in art but in life?

I've had some good advice throughout my life:

- You will only do something well if you enjoy it.
- If you don't ask you won't get. (But ask politely.)
- If you don't win, try harder next time.
- If you create something you don't particularly like, it's likely no one else will like it either.

The best advice? Be honest and ethical in all you do and you'll live life with a clear conscience.

What advice would you give to somebody who wants to make a living from art?

Make sure you have a day job! I wouldn't recommend intentionally going out to make a living from art. Art is an expression of one's self. Paint, draw or scratch what you like for yourself. Don't do it for any other reason. I think making it a hobby first is better. If what you create appeals to others, then sell it if you wish. If you can sell enough to make a living, then make it your day job!



Do you ever seek opinions about your work before it's finished?

I used to ask. I will be working on a piece and my wife Helen will walk in and bluntly tell me, "Oh no, that part on the bottom right is definitely not working." Same day, my son Christopher will walk in and tell me the opposite, "Oh yeah, I love what's happening bottom right!" So, I don't ask anymore. When I'm happy, it's finished.

What is your career highlight and future goal as an artist?

Career highlight: being a Glover Prize finalist for 2021. Future goal: to become a notable Australian landscape artist would be nice! *æ*

To see Peter's art at REDSEA Gallery, visit block 9 Dempsey Road, #01-10 Dempsey Hill. 6732 6711 | redseagallery.com