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ISSUE 17

www.artistprofile.com.au



John Peart: still exploring

Story Joe Frost

JOHAN PEART SITS back on the couch under the high ceiling of his house in the bush at Wedderburn, an hour south-west of Sydney. The living room is hung with paintings that have just returned from exhibitions and others that are about to leave. He is happy to converse about art on this bright winter's day, but dressed in paint-flecked cargo pants and a bushman's beanie, it's clear that work is his natural state.

"Art seems like such a harmless thing, it could never be a threat to anyone," he begins, phrasing his thoughts carefully; he is unafraid of long periods of silence. "But then people identify so radically with their own practice or their own ideas... it can seem almost life or death. I think it's quite liberating to not categorise ideas as someone else's ideas, or an old idea or my idea, but just the extent to which the idea can fascinate, lead to some experiment."

Experimentation in painting has been the constant preoccupation of Peart's life as an artist. His ability to create a pictorial form, re-invent it once, then change its significance through two or three further transformations, has made him one of Australia's most admired abstract painters. Close attention to his development reveals that there are consistent elements running through his work: loose brush-drawing, flows of pure colour and decisive, freestanding shapes have been enduring elements, present from the outset. But they have been re-invented so fully over the course of his 46-year exhibiting career, and melded into such unexpected combinations, that there is now no single image that can serve adequately as an emblem of his creativity.



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In 2004, a survey exhibition of Peart's work began a two-year circuit that ran to most states of Australia – 29 works representing a then 40-year career. The common thread was not their outward appearance, but their strength as art. In every phase of his career he has created works of beauty and originality, expressing a deep, lyrical sense of life. He draws equally upon the textures of nature and an imaginary realm of synthetic forms – there are few painters, Australian or otherwise, who have worked from such a broad base of painted forms. Reflecting on the survey exhibition – his reward for making 60 and still working – Peart laughs: "It's a bit like you imagine a death experience where your life flashes before you. It's strangely paradoxical because in some ways the paintings are so close and in other ways they're like seeing something that someone else may have done, some fictitious character who happened to have my name."

Selected by Peart, the survey exhibition gave an insight into his view of quality in painting, although this is a matter he is reluctant to over-simplify. How does an artist so committed to experimentation judge his own works? "I suppose that you could say I chose what I thought were the best ones, that'd be a fairly straightforward way of putting it. But, the way I like to think of it, the way in which I exercise judgment is to do with pictorial energy. It either has intensity or it doesn't, and that's how I like to think of it. Rather than good or bad, it's simply the level of intensity, and of course it's a subjective thing – I don't deny that it's subjective."

Intensity and pictorial energy are words that come up often in

conversation with Peart. He uses them to describe his most memorable encounters with art, like the accidental discovery of a small exhibition of Cezanne watercolours in New York in the early '70s, a show of Jackson Pollock's Black and White paintings at the Marlborough Gallery, New York, and the You Yangs landscapes of Fred Williams. There is a paradox in Peart's character that has been fruitful for his work: he sets high standards for himself and leans towards the view that the best paintings possess a universal quality, transcending time and place. But this conviction is trumped by his devotion to visual sensation. Words like 'hunger' and 'appetite' are peppered through his comments about painting, and it seems his need to lose himself in painting is stronger than the desire to theorise. Pictorial energy is his highest value, and absorption in experimentation is the route by which he reaches it.

Peart recalls that while growing up in Brisbane, one of his first artistic endeavours was doing drip paintings in the backyard after seeing an article about Jackson Pollock in a magazine. The son of an estimating engineer and a schoolteacher, he left home at 16 with only two years of high school and 18 dreary months of a commercial illustration course under his belt, determined to become a painter. Arriving in Sydney in 1962, he was inspired by the linear approaches of Paul Klee, Ian Fairweather and John Olsen, and was still only a teenager when he discovered the philosophical ideas of Krishnamurti, who had influenced abstract painters from Mondrian to Pollock. "I think there was a kind of breakthrough for me where the reading I'd done of Krishnamurti combined with an impulse to paint, got me off to the idea of



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experimenting where you don't have a fixed idea. I remember thinking to myself: okay, I want to paint but I don't want to have a fixed idea of the end result, so I would begin with just some paint on the brush and the brush on the surface... you just watch it move and the first serious paintings that I did grew out of that."

The story of these early years, and the quality of Peart's first paintings, suffice to suggest that he was a prodigy. Bypassing art school, he began exhibiting at Watters Gallery in 1965 and stepped directly into a circle of artists 10 years older than him, including David Aspden, Dick Watkins and Michael Johnson. "It was a very heady time. It was exciting. Of course," he laughs, "the art scene was on a smaller scale so you could be a bigger fish in a smaller pond."

Fashions in art were changing rapidly and by 1967 he was questioning the basic premises of his work. "I went through a stage of trying to jettison everything that I could from my art. I ended up with a very minimal form of painting, practically white paintings," he remembers. "It was still the stage where painting could be an avant-garde activity. That came with a certain adventurousness and a sense that one could contribute to the culture in a new way. There was a sense of being involved in a world culture, not just Australian culture."

The lure of the northern hemisphere was strong and in 1969 Peart left Australia for six years. Eventually settling 100km west of London in Wiltshire, he made regular visits to New York and painted in Paris. But his own work remained for Australian eyes only; rolled up and sent back to Watters Gallery for annual shows that drew consistently good reviews. He admits that he was keen to establish his reputation in London and New York, but explains: "While I was living overseas the attitude to painting was changing and most of the excitement about new work seemed to be directed to installation, video, conceptual art. So the kind



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of work I was doing went fairly suddenly from being avant-garde to being passé." Having travelled around the world to participate at the forefront of art, it would have been understandable if Peart felt deflated, yet he took a philosophical view. "There was a kind of ambiguity about it because in a way you could feel a bit like an outsider rather than an insider... I suppose it was part of the mythology of art that I subscribed to – the artist probably should be more of an outsider."

He adds: "Art was starting to disappear up its own orifice in a way. I remember thinking that the future of painting is going to be a fairly idiosyncratic thing, to do with personal exploring rather than conforming to the momentum of modernism. It could have been liberating in many ways – it just throws everything back on your personal judgment and personal choices."

“ I remember thinking: okay, I want to paint but I don't want to have a fixed idea of the end result. ”

These were circumstances in which Peart's curiosity and independent streak could flourish. He returned to Australia in 1972, stopping in India along the way. India would prove to be just as significant for the long-term development of his work as his stint in the art centres of Europe and America, emboldening him to pursue a sense of grandeur and beauty in

painting. The work of the '70s was characterised by liquid flows of soft colour punctuated by sudden, decisive actions, such as the skeins of thrown paint in *Grand Pink* (1973) or the geometric interventions of *Paradise Point* (1976). Towards the end of the '70s Peart rediscovered the joy of direct brush-drawing – the mainstay of his repertoire – and by the '80s he was covering vast, textured canvases with linear structures that looked like ivy growing on stone. At a time when many Australian artists were latching on to postmodern theory, Peart made *Neelima 2* (1985), a massive, sober painting that might have been better suited to an ashram or a mosque than a contemporary art gallery.

Paintings of the '90s such as *Nocturne* (1996) and *Nandi Moon* (1997) veered closer than ever towards landscape, and in 1997,



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29 years after participating in 'The Field' exhibition of hard-edge abstraction, *Nandi Moon* was awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape, a career shift that would be unthinkable for most artists. "I was welcoming the landscape in – it was coming of its own accord, creeping in the back door," says Peart, who clearly relishes such surprises. "There's some ambiguity where you're just looking at the bush and you see a shape through the trees and think 'What's that? Is it a rock, is it water, is it the sky?'" He laughs heartily. "There's a state of suspension where the opposites aren't competing, or where the opposites are equally valid, and... it's a way of being lost. I mean, intellectually I suppose it is being lost – but then it's fun to get lost.

"It's such an odd thing to do, to try to surprise oneself," he continues. "It's an elusive thing. In some ways it's the only interesting thing, to be surprised. But to create the circumstances where that can occur – it's where a lot of the ideas for painting come from. It's a matter of setting up... what would happen if I brought these elements together? I've never done that in quite that way before, so let's try that."

In the last decade Peart has continued to weave the strands of his pictorial language into new variations. The elements come as second nature to the 66-year-old, which only increases the possible permutations. One recent development that Peart is excited to continue is the series of Palette Paintings, works that begin with the colour splodges and scrapings of his studio palettes. Formed from a combination of randomness and conscious design, they extend his interest in the visualisation of thought processes. "Nowadays," he says, "I feel as though my work has its origins in mainstream modernism but somehow it's become a weird hybrid form. It's hard to imagine what kind of art world would value the paintings. I mean I never aimed to be esoteric but it seems that if I imagine the kind of people who appreciate my work they're probably some kind of specialised

esoteric fanatics." He laughs: "Aesthetic eccentrics!"

It would take a vast exhibition to show how all the pieces of Peart's puzzle fit together. It's true of any living artist that we don't know the full meaning of their oeuvre, but in his case it is especially so. His capacity for invention is known and admired, but while this might be an achievement in itself, it will surely be the remarkable run of individual masterpieces he has created, and those still to come, that will secure his place in the history of painting. ■

John Peart is represented by Watters Gallery, Sydney
www.wattersgallery.com
www.johnpeart.com

- 01 *Nandi Moon*, 1997, oil and acrylic on canvas, 170 x 592.5cm
- 02 *Shadow Rhythms*, 2010, collage, 25.5 x 26cm
- 03 *Tiru Moment 3*, 2011, oil on canvas, 175 x 175cm
- 04 *Night Sky 8*, 2010, collage, 15 x 13.5cm
- 05 *Moment 1*, 2011, oil on canvas, 205 x 175cm
- 06 *Moment 5*, 2011, oil on canvas, 205 x 175cm
- 07 *Cloud*, 2010, collage, 24.5 x 17.5cm
- 08 *Backforth 11*, 2010, collage, 20 x 19.5cm
- 09 *Night sky 7*, 2010, collage, 14.5 x 12cm
- 10 *Backforth 8*, 2010, collage, 24.5 x 31cm

Images courtesy the artist and Watters Gallery, Sydney

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