

John Peart: Artist was at one with every landscape he painted

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The method that consists in no method is the perfect method." That opaque Taoist quote from China in the 7th century was chosen to describe John Peart's artistic philosophy by his fellow artist, the late Roy Jackson.

The two artists lived in a dedicated artistic community at Wedderburn, just beyond Sydney's relentless suburban creep, with Elisabeth Cummins, Joan Brassil and Fred Braat. A common factor in their work was a non-figurative response to the nature around them but Peart's constant questing for new ways of seeing was a source of admiration among fellow artists. He said: "The riddle is how to plan to surprise yourself."



Bringing out the background: John Peart with his work Tiru Squares in 2011. LANNON HARLEY

The young Peart only ever planned to be an artist. He was born in Brisbane on December 10, 1945, and was selected at his suburban primary school to attend art classes at the Old Museum. Ann Thompson and Leonard Brown were fellow students. After a brief time attending a commercial art class, discovering what he did not want to do, Peart left for Sydney in 1962, almost immediately finding a job with the Barry Stern Galleries and a friend in Frank Watters, who also worked there.

Two years later, Watters and Geoffrey Legge opened their own gallery, and within a year, Peart made his first public appearance as a painter in a group show, aged 19. In 1967, he had the chutzpah to create a large artwork at a prom concert in Sydney in an "interaction" with composer Nigel Butterley and an orchestra, described by music critic Roger Covell as "working astonishingly well".

By the end of 1968, he'd appeared in the legendary *The Field* exhibition curated by John Stringer at the new National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne and won four of that year's major art prizes. Unfortunately for Watters Gallery, the success they'd had in selling Peart's early, coloured calligraphic works was immediately challenged by his new found interest in minimalism - all-white canvases on oddly-shaped stretchers.

"Collectors were furious," recalled Watters at Peart's funeral. "But that didn't bother him. It was the beginning of a pattern. He never fell into the trap of painting for the market or just to please people." Thirty-five shows later, Peart was exhibiting at Watters what Frank called "his finest ever show" just weeks before his untimely death as a result of a bushfire at Wedderburn.

Precocity was also apparent in his personal relationships. Sharing a "crazy, arty household" with Peart in 1964 was a young Brisbane potter, Diane Moon. By March the next year they'd married and had their first child, the beginning of a 12-year partnership, much of which was spent in the English countryside funded by those 1968 prize-winnings. Fellow artists like Michael Johnson, Howard Hodgkin and Alan Gouk lived nearby. While Moon moved on from pottery to her speciality as a curator at the Queensland Art Gallery - textiles - Peart dipped in and out of the American colour field scene. But by 1974, "I'd realised that painting was not developing along a linear path dictated entirely from New York - then I got busy rediscovering Australia."

By then, he had discovered an ambition to be "the complete artist", admitting to jealousy for those he felt had achieved it - Anselm Kiefer, Colin McCahon and Tony Tuckson being the most accessible; Rembrandt and Picasso out of reach. "The possibility of an artist spearheading a new style which will later become historically dominant is unlikely," he said. He also noted an admiration for Cezanne's continuing to paint rather than attend his mother's funeral - a matched obsessiveness that may have contributed to Peart having, as art critic John McDonald put it in a recent *Herald* article, "a string of broken relationships that testified to the overwhelming nature of [his] preoccupations".

Moon, however, believes she and John grew apart as they matured, and said his partners and children were "a huge expanding family which is all together now". She has two works, "which I love because I can trace his hand in those works - follow just where it went as he drew those lines".

Although constantly trying different working techniques, Peart developed a unique way of relating form to ground through subtraction, much like a sculptor. Legge said: "He starts by covering the canvas with glowing colours so that it becomes a field of luminous beauty. Over this vibrant surface he superimposes what will become the [back]ground. Parts of the original painting, left untouched, become the forms and figures - the ground playing a dynamic role in their creation. Peart's study of Eastern thought has informed his way of working."

Peart first discovered the East and the calligraphic method after visiting Ian Fairweather on Bribie Island. In 1984, he went to India with his family to get closer to Buddhist and Hindu cultures, and sculptor Paul Selwood identified that, as with Fairweather's, "Peart's life is a spiritual quest; painting is a process of 'becoming' through aesthetic perception".

As with many quotes in this obituary, that comes from the Campbelltown Arts Centre travelling exhibition catalogue *John Peart Paintings 1964-2004*. The book, produced by his local gallery, is full of tributes from fellow artists as well as an insightful interview with Peart by his third partner, Sumana Viravong. In it he explains, "I see pictorial space as an inner landscape for the mind's eye to roam; so it's not surprising if my paintings evoke the feeling of landscape. [I] know it is a mental projection but it is inherently delightful. While painting, I am issuing an open invitation for these illusions - or allusions - to enter. My conscious mind can be occupied with the making, and the unconscious can come up with its own surprises."

Of course, titles cause their own problems. Many will recognise Indian heat and humidity, the moon on cooling waters and the bull who carries Shiva in Indian mythology in the six-metre canvas *Nandi Moon* (1997), which is a classic Peart grid of white boxes on a dingy ground with startling vertical slashes of colour. For artist Leo Robba it also invoked the hairs-on-the-back-of-his-neck sensation previously experienced in front of *Blue Poles*. And it must have been a landscape because it won the 1997 Wynne prize - one of many times Peart was selected for the Wynne, Sulman (won in 2000) and even Archibald prizes. "But there is not a clearly identifiable tree or building to be seen," observes artist Joe Frost. "Peart is calling on the various impulses that animate the landscape as he finds them within himself."

In his last two exhibitions, Peart had shown the fruits of a visit to the Kimberley courtesy of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. Bare, Bungle Bungle-style hills are superimposed on canvases, some old ones given a new life, as, in the past, he'd cut up old canvases to collage their fragments of art on a new ground.

Moon was delighted that, despite his passions - aesthetic and ecological - for his Wedderburn bush, Peart was discovering new places, and possibly embracing remote Aboriginal painters as his fellow artists for the first time. "I wish I'd been able to discuss this with him," she said.

But, going into that Wedderburn bush to make sure that spotting fires weren't a threat to the new studio he'd been building, Peart, hose in hand, was overcome by smoke and suffered a heart-attack. He is survived by his four partners - Diane Moon, S'raya Rahmat, Viravong and Meera Anderson, his children with Moon, Gara and Simon, and with Rahmat, Mirabai, Jyoti and Janaki - all of whom, in Mirabai's words, "were brought up believing it was a given we'd live a creative life and experiment".

Jeremy Eccles
