

Tom Carment paints Australia on the move

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The life of the watercolourist painting *en plein air* would, one imagines, be calm, unruffled ... genteel, even. However, painting in the Australian bush can be a good deal more rugged – and dangerous – as Tom Carment painfully discovered.

Setting out a couple of years ago by bicycle on a South Australian sheep station to make some watercolours, he donned a helmet.

"I strapped it up and then I felt something sharp on the back of my neck," Carment says. "I rode off and did my watercolours but I started feeling sicker and sicker – sort of fluey. Then I had a terrible night, sweating. I went into hospital next day and they gave me two bags of antivenom."

He had, it turned out, been bitten by a redback spider, giving an all too literal twist to the concept of suffering for one's art.

Painting in a urban outdoor setting also brings other slightly less dramatic challenges, such as the inevitable stickybeaks.

"If I'm sitting on the edge of the footpath and doing a watercolour I think it is perfectly natural that people should want to look at it," Carment says. "I look them in the eye and I'm polite but I don't engage them in conversation.

"People are often very sweet, too. I was once painting in a little coastal town and this woman brought me a cup of tea and a biscuit and left it beside me and said, 'I'm in No. 79 over there, just leave it on the veranda when you are finished. I'll leave you alone.' "

Carment's distinctive watercolours are held in dozens of collections, including the Art Gallery of NSW and the NSW State Library. This year he won the NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize.

Born in Sydney in 1954, he still lives in inner-city Darlinghurst with his partner, Jan. On leaving school he was offered a Commonwealth scholarship, which he knocked back, such was his commitment to a life in art and writing.

"I knew what I wanted to do and I didn't want to do something that I didn't really want to do just because I had the scholarship," he says. "I've always been a bit stubborn."

Instead, he attended the Julian Ashton Art School for a year, had his first solo show at 21, and for the next 30 years supplemented his income from his art by working as a house painter.

Now aged 60, he has pretty much always worked from life outside, happily embracing the discomfort ("I just sit on my haunches") and technical challenges involved in applying ink and paint to paper while exposed to the elements.

So when photographer Michael Wee suggested a couple of years ago that the two old friends do a book together based around a series of bushwalks, he needed little persuading.

The result is a beautiful, quirky volume, *Seven Walks: Cape Leeuwin to Bundeena*. Each walk is described in an essay by Carment, lavishly illustrated with his pictures and Wee's perceptive photographs.

Perhaps unusually, for an artist known mainly for his delicate watercolours and sketches, Carment has always regarded himself as both writer and painter, happy to switch between the two.

"As a young man my main contacts were writers more than artists," he says. "I was lucky enough to meet [the poet]

Robert Gray and he was quite an influence on my reading and what I looked at in art."

In the early 1980s he had "a few bits" published by *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which proved a spur to his writing ambitions. "The fact someone wanted to publish what I had written gave me confidence in my writing," he says. "I've always kept a journal and written long letters to friends."

Carment's writing in the book is beautifully unadorned, weaving together history, tales from the trail and observations in a style that is deceptive in its simplicity.

Here he describes suddenly coming across a snake in the Royal National Park:

"I pulled up just short of its coiled form, which reminded me of a wound-up garden hose," he writes. "I stood suspended, as in a game of statues when the music stops.

"This snake lifted its head in my direction, as if drowsy from sleep, and then unwound its long body and flowed easily away between the thin trunks, until I could no longer see it among the dappled shadows."

Helen Garner describes Carment's style as both "austere" and "articulate".

"I didn't want to write a story where you say, 'I went down the rocky path and turned left at the bent tree'," he says. "I was trying to segue in and out of little bits of history and anecdotes about the people I walked with and conversations we had.

"I don't like too much flowery language. I like to say things simply – not too many adverbs."

Carment says there is a connection between his pared-back writing style and his unfussy work with pencil, ink and pigment.

"In a sense, I think my drawing and painting affect the way I write," he says. "I'm a bit of an obsessive about syntax and the way the sentence sounds. The rhythm of it."

But while his writing is worked and reworked to create the final form, the paintings in the book are necessarily the product of the moment, often done swiftly.

"The sketches and watercolours in this book were things that were done fairly quickly without thinking too much 'Is this good or bad?'

"I'd just sit down and see something I liked and try and get it down quickly – sometimes through circumstances because it was lunchtime or I had to walk on and I was keeping people waiting. And then, of course, the light changes very quickly when you are outside.

"The weather is reflected in the way you paint and draw, too. If it's windy, your line is different, it's choppier than on a very calm sunny day when you maybe work a bit slower. If the weather is foul or a storm is on the way you kind of rush on."

In the book there are two double-page photographs that give a charming hint of the contrasting characters of the collaborators. Each image shows the "kit" used by one of the men. Wee's gear, with its head torch, self-inflating sleep mat and modern backpack, is quite conventionally high-tech.

By contrast, Carment's gear, which is laid out on an old drop sheet from his house-painting days, is battered and well-worn to the point of dilapidation. His 30-year-old backpack came from an op shop. There are two old tuna cans that he uses for his water, a blackened billycan and a disreputable old woollen beanie.

We had arranged to meet in Bundeena for this interview and after lunch took off for a walk in the angophora forest adjacent to the village for a walk.

At one point Carment unpacked his bag to make a sketch. Out came the same two tuna tins and the plates, stored in the same much-folded plastic Sportsgirl bag pictured in the book.

"I'm going to ask Sportsgirl to sponsor me," he jokes as he settles down to draw the fantastic-limbed trees.

A lifetime of painting has revealed to him all that he needs and, more importantly, all the things that he doesn't. Refining his equipment still further for the overnight walks was a refreshing process.

"In a way it's liberating. You're not thinking, 'Should I do this painting in gouache or oil?' You've got one choice, so most of the pictures in the book are done with a pigment ink pen followed by watercolour."

Restricting the size of his work to just an A6 or A5 pad has also resulted in a collection of images that are quite intimate, contrasting perfectly with Wee's photographs.

"Sometimes I have thought maybe I should be doing more major works or larger things that you work on for weeks," Carment says. "Then I think maybe all my little paintings are like bricks that make up a wall or very small tiles that make up a bathroom. I'm not trying to paint one big impressive masterpiece; it's just an accumulation of small pictures."

Seven Walks: Cape Leeuwin to Bundeena is published by Roc/Hin, \$69.95.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/tom-carment-paints-australia-on-the-move-20141212-125ddq.html>