

## Tom Carment | New paintings – old habits

By Joe Frost | November 7, 2017

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During a typical week Tom Carment might journey around the city of Sydney to make watercolours, visit a friend to paint their portrait, or draw in the streets with a pencil and sketchbook. He works directly from life and doesn't like to modify his pictures away from the subject, so there is no ambition larger than a day can contain, no overarching conception to distance him from the subject of the day. During a typical week Tom Carment might journey around the city of Sydney to make watercolours, visit a friend to paint their portrait, or draw in the streets with a pencil and sketchbook. He works directly from life and doesn't like to modify his pictures away from the subject, so there is no ambition larger than a day can contain, no overarching conception to distance him from the subject of the day.



Tom Carment



Although he has less need of a studio than most artists there is one small room of his house in the inner suburb of Darlinghurst where he stores finished work and prepares his materials. It's there that he forages through a big chest of plan drawers to show me what he's been doing lately. Blank and painted boards are propped against the walls, and drawings are stacked on top of the furniture. All of the work is modest in size. "I just see so many things in the world I want to paint," he says as he retrieves one picture after another, the carefully handled display eventually filling the adjoining rooms. "By working on a small scale I can get to do more of them and I like the spontaneity of it."

On the day of my visit he has just returned from a week of landscape painting on a friend's sheep station west of Whyalla, in South Australia, but most of the year his work fits around the rhythms of his family life. After our conversation he'll be off to collect his daughter from school, and while it would be wrong to portray Carment as an amateur he comes across as the antithesis of the expert. He's not given to grand philosophising, and when working he does not appear to aim for the superior insights of a specialist. He seems to want to see things simply, and the pictures convey the kinds of curiosity and delight that any person might feel towards the sights of their world. "I try to always carry my watercolour bag with me, wherever I go," he tells me. "Sometimes I'm outside working in a spot I really like and I feel it's really good, and then next morning I look at it and say to myself, 'no, it's rubbishish...'" The main thing is to keep doing the work rather than think about whether it's good or not. There's a windmill at Middleback Station (Whyalla) and I've been painting that same windmill every time I go there for the last seventeen years. It's a good way to get myself straight into painting after the disruption of the journey, yet by going again to that motif I sometimes wonder if I'm being a bit lazy, 'cause I've painted that before. But in another sense it's very interesting because when I bring the pictures back home they always seem different from those of the previous visit".

Naturalism and impressionism have so accustomed us to the premises of the plein air artist, it's easy to forget that the painter who works exclusively from life is a rare and comparatively recent art historical phenomenon. In most periods, the idea that looking at the stuff of everyday life could yield insight or give rise to beauty would have seemed absurd. Carment's work, with its perceptual wobbles and quirks of composition, makes the world strange again. The skies of his landscapes are a dance of

blue and white. The medley of dragged lines and acute strokes in his portrait drawings are the searchings of a genuine observer. If the solutions in his work are fresh it's because he is working out how to do it again, each and every time he begins.

Carment is a published writer as well as a painter, and when writing in his journal he achieves with words something similar to the personal viewpoint of his paintings. There are no dramatic plotlines in his stories, but each glimpse of life is described with care, with a determination to stay on the seam of his own experience and avoid cliché.

When asked whether the twin branches of his creative work stem from the same source, he answers in the affirmative. "I think it (painting and writing) is all one to me. For example, last year I was doing some pencil drawings, portraits of my optometrist's favourite customers for a commission, and after each session I'd go home and recount in my journal the conversations we'd had, and interesting things that might be worth remembering about that person. I should also say that I don't write on my paintings and I don't draw in my writing books—just out of interest".

Carment's career as an artist now spans 35 years. As a boy growing up in Sydney in the '50s and '60s, he made watercolour copies of Australian landscapes from the Women's Weekly, encouraged by his mother. "I knew from about the age of 15 or 16 what I wanted to do, which was to paint and to write".

Although he gained confidence by a stint at the Julian Ashton Art School in 1973, he is essentially a self-taught painter. Living in Glebe during the late '70s he spent many nights in the Sydney University Library acquainting himself with the history of art, one book after another. "Maybe it was youthful arrogance" he reflects, "but I just felt like getting out into the world and painting".

The first time he entered the Wynne Prize, in 1976, his painting was not only hung but purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, making him the second youngest artist after Charles Conder to be acquired for the collection. But for his bread and butter he continued to work at manual jobs, painting when he could afford to.

During the '80s he travelled to Africa and then France, living overseas for four years and producing a book of writings, paintings and drawings 'Days and Nights in Africa'. It was on returning to Australia in 1988 that he settled upon his current approach of making small, direct impressions from life. "I think the size restrictions have come to me over the years through where I've been living," he explains. "When I started out I actually lived in a big old warehouse down at Balmain—it was 3000 square feet and I kind of painted from my shoulder then, you know".

With more than three decades worth of pictures to look back upon, a curious effect of Carment's work has emerged: a picture painted years ago, in 1979 for example, is no less fresh or current than one done yesterday. It would be hard to think of a more casual but thorough rebuke to the expectation of progress in art than this ongoing series of impressions retrieved from what is now the past. The paintings express presence in the here and now, unspoiled by the weight of the past or the worries of the future. And as if to remind us that art is not a matter of being up-to-date, Carment takes on subjects that have already begun to look faded, a dry paddock or an unloved brick wall, interpreting them with a vividness that will restore them to a place in the viewer's mind.

He acknowledges that nostalgia pulls him towards certain beloved subjects: "There's that feeling you get when you smell wet bitumen and it brings back memories, and I think that's a good sort of nostalgia." It seems a strange observation to make of paintings that are so full of sunlight, but Carment's work is steeped with the awareness that our lives in this world are finite. Everything about the way he paints, from the framing of his subjects to the loose weave of his brushstrokes, prolongs our attentiveness and gives permanence to perceptions that are, by nature, fleeting.

It's not surprising that he nominates the paintings of Van Gogh's Arles period and 'the humanism of Rembrandt' (as he puts it) amongst the artistic achievements he most admires, but he goes on to reveal: "A really big influence, not perhaps in the sense of the way I paint but for subject matter, is Caspar David Friedrich. He's perhaps my favourite artist." Which confirms that in his way, Carment is a Romantic, awed by life and inspired by one unanswerable question: why are we here?

## EXHIBITION

**Tom Carment | New paintings – old habits**

**7 November – 2 December 2017**

**King Street Gallery on William**

Courtesy the artist and King Street Gallery on William