

Michael Hodgkins

Natural Progression

By Justyna Lupa



Michael Hodgkins's uncanny skill with paint and brush is the result of years of patience and almost a life-time of practice. As something of a perfectionist, for Michael, painting isn't so much about innovation as mastery of the palette and finding your own voice.



Austin Going Nowhere

As if predestined to be an artist, Michael Hodgkins grew up traipsing the outback with his father, the noted professional artist, George Hodgkins. "As a child I spent a lot of my holidays in abandoned outback settlements and mulga scrubs in searing heat with my dad, looking for suitable subjects for paintings," he reminisces. "I wasn't very good at sports as a child, but I sure learned how to spot a great scene for a painting!"

In time, Michael began bringing his own school watercolours and painting alongside his father. He even remembers buying his first set of Winsor & Newton oils in 1969 and buying up stocks of discounted paint with his father at a supplier's sale in the 1970s. He says, "I mention a tube of Cadmium Red in the accompanying demonstration – well, it's my first and only tube of Cadmium Red and that's where it came from! How's that for economy?" This sort of prudence is typical of one of Michael's major



painting practices – he uses a very limited colour palette and enjoys the challenge of mixing rather than buying colours that may only be used a few times. He believes that colour mastery is essential and has himself spent a lot of time and effort learning about pigments and mixing techniques.

“Every colour on your palette should be like an old friend,” he says. “You must know its strengths and weaknesses and how it interacts with others in every situation. You must play with them continuously and develop trust in their capabilities. It is much easier to be an absolute master of eight pigments than just having a rough idea of 20.”

When he does have to buy new pigments, Michael is fastidious about studying manufacturers’ colour charts, materials property sheets as well as independent evaluations in order to find the one that comes closest to what he wants. Furthermore, this endless search for the perfect palette is not only for oils, but also watercolours – which is another of his favourite mediums.

“I have harboured a desire to learn watercolours for years now,” he admits. “I started with a little pocket palette and dabbled.” In much the same way as he experimented with oils, Michael has spent a lot of time mixing, experimenting and observing how

watercolour paints interact and dry. In doing so he has been building on his skill with opaque gouache watercolour honed years earlier while painting clocks for a souvenir company. “I went through a subsistence-level period when I was painting just for money to survive,” he says. “At one stage, I was one of the few people in Australia who could paint the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House in detail entirely from memory. If you own a polished-wood souvenir clock featuring one of these motifs and a small ‘M’ signature, congratulations! Chances are you have one of my unpublicised gouache originals!”



Michael's early works were done in the same vein as his father's and it wasn't until he undertook professional training that he discovered all the many different styles out there, and began experimenting with them. Impressionism was one such look that particularly influenced him and to this day artists such as Renoir, Monet and Gauguin are among his favourites.

"The biggest challenge I face is trying to develop my own unique voice," says Michael. "I feel like a particular style seems to elude me as each new painting tends to dictate to me what approach should be taken for it. With some works it's a case of placing the first mark on a canvas and then spending the rest of the time trying to fix it."

He does take a much more perfectionist approach when working on commissions, however, and prepares for each one meticulously. "I don't experiment when someone is expecting something first class,

and similar to other works they may have seen before,” Michael states. “The process is always interactive.” This means extensive consultation with the client as well as involving them in the process and sending regular progress images. Among his commissions in 2001, Michael completed three stunning oil paintings for Oceaneering Pty Ltd that were presented to the company’s international board members.

Being a sentimentalist at heart, his own works often capture the grace of bygone days, such as an old house, an abandoned mine shaft or a setting sun in the outback. He often selects subjects because they either present a technical challenge or evoke emotion in him.

His subjects are often bathed in an expressive light that really gives the viewer a sense of the time it was

captured – be it morning, noon or the subtle shades of evening. Michael’s ability to do this has a lot to do with his working background in television, when he had to learn electronic colour mixing and setting black and white levels ready for broadcasting. “The disciplines that I learned involved judgements that were not made by the eye but with the help of waveform monitors and other electronic measuring tools,” he explains. “I still approach every painting with a tonal model in my head that corresponds to how I would adjust it so that it’s viewed with perfect clarity and correct greyscale levels – as it would appear on a television screen. “

When it comes to his work in the future, Michael admits that he has a lot of “lofty long-term goals”. He aspires

to create great paintings that really speak to the heart, as he believes that that is what art is all about. “It’s like a form of ESP that can transcend time and communicate directly to the subconscious of the viewer in a positive manner,” he exclaims. “My best passages of painting are those that I have no recollection whatsoever of creating. For me that is the ideal place to be! If I can look at something and honestly say, ‘I don’t know how I did that, but it’s good’, I know that it was coming from deep within and it will carry forward – loaded with much more than just the superficial structure of the pigments, medium and brushstrokes.”

To view more of Michael’s paintings visit his online gallery, www.mhodgkins.com

