

Phillip Howe
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Illustrator, art director, designer, photographer, awards winner - Phillip Howe has worn all these hats at different stages of his life but his favourite headdress is the one he has always carried proudly as an artist, admiring Australia's amazing spiritual landscapes and wildlife; travelling, exploring, painting and capturing images directly from life. Currently working on a community sculpture project, Phillip took time out to talk us through his work. **Colleen Bate** fires the questions.



Q. It's been said that the experiences of your rich artistic upbringing and creative graphic design, illustration and photographic work has greatly contributed to your ability as an artist. Is it natural for you to draw on these strengths?

A. I was fortunate to grow up in artistic family environment (my mother an artist was also the local arts teacher at the primary school I attended) so of course I was encouraged to explore my creativity at a very early age and subsequently did a T12 Art course, and later completed my BA in Visual Communication at RMIT University. So I guess I learnt quite a bit about design, photography, illustration and printmaking during this time.

As an artist I have had to go full circle in my career when I stopped fighting against using my graphic design talents and began to embrace them in my art. The Outback Series, a collection of my contemporary works, is testament to this.

It wanted to capture the natural rich hues and contrasting Australian light in this series. Understanding photography and light was therefore a very important aspect of the creative process. In fact the series revolves around the variation of the light and intensity of colour, which is what personifies the outback.

The design element is evident in the use of negative space - it adds incredible depth. Then there's the black-silhouetted graphically depicted wildlife. Initially you see only the black shapes, but with closer observation start to interpret different formations and outlines of the ancient outback landscape and rocks; like the Devils Marbles forming the basis for the dingo's head and eyes and the way the emu's head actually shows the peak of some of the terrain. So there's more complexity than initially meets the eye.

Art in its pure form is an expression of one's self - it is very much an indulgent free act and there should be no room in the creative process to edit or steer your expressiveness or especially cater to others. This defines the major difference between art and commercialism.

Q. Technology has brought about a lot of change in the creative world. How has it impacted on your work?

A. To me new processes are always exciting - they can help you take some of your ideas into new areas. Yet at the end of the day it is important to be aware of the fact that technology is only another tool and not the creator. A great artist can produce great works whether they're using a stick of charcoal or a wacom tablet.

As an artist it is easier to ensure a high standard when you are producing a limited series of work. If you go into mass production the task quickly becomes far more difficult to keep a high standard and to maintain the integrity of the original work or idea. This is probably the big divide between limited edition art and commercial art - there's more self-fulfilment in limited edition art.

While I prefer creating one-offs, there is sometimes a need for my work to be replicated and in this case I choose to outsource it because technology and techniques are changing so rapidly. We all have our own speciality and in these cases it's better to make use of the specialist's printing skills and technology to output prints and digital work to achieve the best results. I am an artist - I don't pretend to be a printer.

Digital printing has certainly come a long way but there's a price to be paid for this. In the past the investment of purchasing expensive traditional print machinery meant an investment into training skills and crafts into printers. Digital printing equipment is a far more economical alternative and consequently is far more accessible, thus the investment of training and crafts and skills has giving way to economics. Operators (not printers) have become more blasé about colour reproduction and techniques, resulting in more sub-standard work being produced and widely accepted.

This can also be seen in design and photography. Computers have revolutionised the design industry with what was once requiring years of study and specialised training. Hardware equipment and graphic software programs are now readily and cost effectively available in every home and business. Everyone is now a potential designer. Digital photography is so accessible, part-time and hobbyist type photographers are now competing and taking on more professional commercial photographic jobs (do it cheaper) and in a most cases the standards have dramatically dropped.

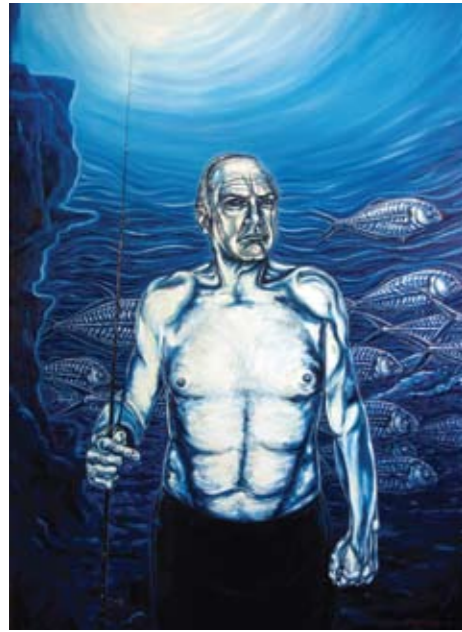
To summarise, I believe technology opens up a lot of opportunity, but on the other hand it can cause you to cut corners and disregard specialists that have the good eye and appreciation for their craft.

Q. You have said that one of your big passions is people. How do you believe this comes across in your work?

A. I have always had a gift for understanding people and seeing the 'secrets' in their faces. It was as a casual barman (in the historical watering hole of the Old England Hotel established in 1848; the same bar frequented by the famous Heidelberg School of Artists) through observation that this interest in people grew - the characters, the

Top left: Tree of Life Spring - oil on canvas
Left: The Couple - charcoal and dry pastel on paper
Top Right: Dingo Pack - acrylic on canvas
Right (centre): Uluru Sunset Yellow - acrylic on canvas
Right: Emu Kings Canyon - acrylic on canvas





Top left: **Rex** – oil on canvas (Archibald entry 2005)

Left (centre): **wildeside** - oil on canvas (Archibald entry 2006)

Bottom left: **The Mastery**
The Lillee of Spin - oil on canvas
From the Shane Warne Stamp Collection 'The Artistry' – one of four specially commissioned oil paintings for the West Indies Government of Grenada

stories, the expressive faces of the regulars that frequented the public bars of Australia. On the quiet nights I would often sketch some of these local characters on the back of coasters. The older you get, the more of your personality is reflected in your face. You can see a person's entire life journey in his face.

A lot of the nudes I paint almost take on a portrait style, allowing the observer to read signs from the stance, the eyes, the culture they may be from. I think that comes out in the colours that I choose.

Humans have such an intricate tapestry of emotions. When you can actually see it all and can break it down a little bit, you can actually start picking up the associated colours.

Sometimes there is passion that needs to be portrayed in my models – it may not be in the body form but in the background, or an energy that needs to be expressed. That's the difference between creating something on a computer and having something lifelike to create. There's an engagement, a relationship and subsequently a roller coaster of emotions in the creative process.

Q. You've painted a number of prominent people over the years. Share some of these experiences with us.

A. I met **Shane Warne** through a collector that had bought one of my paintings and this resulted in being commissioned by The West Indies Government of Grenada to produce four oil paintings for a commemorative stamp series called The Shane Warne Stamp Collection 'The Artistry'.

I liked Shane immediately – what you see is what you get with him. He is the proverbial Aussie bloke who made cricket enjoyable to watch. He is very charismatic and has that X factor ... a very rare thing to find. I saw that he has plenty of colour, passion, vitality and strength and have tried to convey this in my paintings.

The paint in the series is loose and not controlled. I have used a lot of red in his face and the intensity of his green eyes is pronounced - he has quite strong eyes and an unforgettable stare. I've depicted the incredible energy and presence he has the presents of a fast bowler. No one else can boast this kind of energy. To have that threatening stance and to intimidate batsman as a leg spin bowler is just ridiculous! You've got to admire that. He is very passionate about his foundation and decided to donate the original oil paintings to the foundation. He had just announced his retirement from test cricket and this was going to be his last test in Melbourne and so we had the auction and a breakfast on Boxing Day ... the same day he was playing his last game.

I sat next to him as a guest at his table. Here's a guy giving up his time to the foundation on the day of his most important match because it's going to give maximum impact, and the media hardly reports it.

Rex Hunt is another true blue character. I first met him while I was being interviewed on 3AW radio by Sam Newman on Grand Final Day in 1997. The discussion revolved around the AFL St Kilda Football club team jumper that I had designed, which the team had first worn the year before winning their first night premierships.



Newman became a little intimidating during the interview and Rex steered the conversation in a different direction.

Years later I chose Rex (beardless at the time) to sit for a portrait to be entered into the Archibald Prize.

The title 'Rex' originates from the Latin word meaning King and depicts him as a stern-looking King Neptune ruling the Great Southern Ocean. The proud front on open stance with bare chest represents Rex's strong personality and big presence, almost stating that 'what you see is what you get' with this man.

The main concept of this painting was to emphasize Rex's extremely strong ties with the fish's world and his deep concern for their environment.

The metallic richly painted school of fish (silver trevally) swim behind Rex's imposing figure as he protects them from any outside intruders. There is a subtle glowing halo around his head and body that is lit from the heavens above as it filters through the deep blue waters. Rex clenches a fishing rod in hand as a symbol of the trident and which poses no threat to the fish with the absence of line as it fades off into the light.

A lot of people don't know that Rex set up the fish foundation and re-educated people about enjoying the fishing but making sure it is sustainable for a long time. I saw him as a protector of the oceans.

The original canvas (an impressive 2.75m x 2m) is too big to fit into Rex's home but he does have a replica, a digital print that I organised.

I have become a great friend of **Wilbur Wilde**'s after a few road trips and journeys when I painted him for The Archibald Prize.

This aptly titled Archibald portrait 'wildeside' came about from a discussion I had with Wilbur's long time friend and OL' 55 rock'n'roll band partner Frankie J Holden who no doubt has seen Wilbur's wilder side.

'wildeside' takes us through an expressionistic journey of over 50 years of Wilbur Wilde's incredible life. To reflect the enormity of this great character who in life stands around 1.98 metres meant the size of the canvas had to be big – 2m x 2.75m to be exact.

The painting was purchased as a gift by a large group of his rock'n'roll friends and presented to Wilbur on his 50th birthday party. It now hangs proudly in his study.

I painted the portrait while he was playing his tenor sax. It conveys the way his face starts to redden and begins to morph. Areas in the face form pockets and become much more defined as air is drawn in and then exhaled through this beautifully preserved tenor sax, resulting in an incredibly rich and unique sound.

The painting works best at night – it is set against the contrast of the dark smokey jazz bars ambience of turquoise, purples and blacks as the envelope of sound dances through the midnight hours.

I felt I had to paint Wilbur's distinct profile – it almost emulates the unique shape of his sax and I wanted to capture the side of Wilbur that makes him really tick.

Wilbur's stance in the portrait reveals that he is a profile sort of person and not at all confrontational. It also demonstrates more of his serious side – the genuine, passionate musician that loves his tenor sax.

He is a seriously practising and accomplished musician; being selected to study music at the Sydney Conservatorium and more recently in July 2007 was inducted into the ARIA hall of fame being an original member of the band - Jo Jo Zep and the Falcons.

Wilbur has also performed alongside some of the greatest bands and musicians including: Skyhooks, Elvis Costello, Garth Brooks, Joe Camilleri, OL' 55, Tom Jones, Split Enz,



Roy Orbison, Cold Chisel, Dire Straits, James Morrison, Renee Geyer, The Angels, Glenn Shorrock, Dragon, Billy Thorpe, James Reyne and Paul Kelly.

The defining dynamic lines in Wilbur's face take on an incredibly rich road map appearance, expressing his musical experience and amazing journey of life. Like a catalyst for the regular road trips of the outback we do together, which started out as a spontaneous journey and has now evolved into what has become known as 'the journey' – a current body of expressionist portrait painting works painted from live performances around the country. This features Australia's iconic rock'n'roll musicians such as James Reyne, Brian Cadd, Russell Morris, Joe Camilleri, Renee Gayer, Diesel, Ross Wilson, Daryl Braithwaite, John Paul Young, Glen Shorrock, Daryl Braithwaite, Mark Seymour, Jon English and Doug Parkinson - to be exhibited nationally.

I am honoured to be working with Wilbur on this project. To me Australian culture is first and foremost about music. There's nothing better than painting in natural light and seeing the true person. Initially I draw quick and spontaneous charcoal sketches of the performance to get sense of the energy, their stances and little idiosyncrasies, and ultimately I get the performer to sit for me to capture the detail.

The challenge is not to get caught up with what people perceive to see, I have to paint the person's journey as it is revealed to me. Sometimes when you look at a person up close you can see a whole other face. It may not always be flattening.

Q. Your love of Australian summers is obvious in the painting 'Beach Cricket'. How did this come to be?

A. At the size of 4m x 1.2m, I am thinking of changing its title to 'the painting that was too long'! It was initially selected and commissioned to be for permanent display at the home of cricket by the MCC Department, but the proposed area they had access and allocated was unfortunately too small for the final 4m expanse.

Cricket Australia learnt about the work and came out for a viewing at my studio with an intention of purchasing the work for their East Melbourne Jolimont Head Office (opposite MCG). Unfortunately there wasn't adequate display wall space in the terrace style building. However, Cricket Australia (CA) commissioned us to produce a limited edition of 550 fine art print series to be given to national and international cricket dignitaries during the Ashes Series 2006-7. The original work was also exhibited at the MCG and the SCG (Sydney Cricket Ground) during The Ashes Series 2006-7 on behalf of Cricket Australia.

The original work now resides in Bendigo where it was bought by a private collector.

Beach Cricket captures Australia's unique natural and expansive beaches, and the fact that the country is synonymous with beach and cricket.

I have highlighted the joy of being in the outdoors and the colours of the Australian panoramic landscape. It's a celebration of families, friends and just being out in the Australian summer.



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It's hard to say how long this painting took me – probably my whole life. I don't equate painting to time. It's all my design experience, photography experience, art experience, my mom, my childhood, my grandfather when he brought paper home for me from the paper mill where he worked ... all those sorts of things. It's a build up of my life's experience.

Above: **Beach Cricket** – oil on canvas

Bottom (left): **Gate Way Sculpture** – As a local artist Phillip was recently approached to create a sculpture for the Banyule community.

He explains: "The sculpture made from metal is a concept that has been embraced by the local traders who have already raised some significant funding towards the project. To date we have had numerous meetings and presentations with the Banyule Council and councillors and Road Traffic Authority (RTA) with the sculpture ticking all the correct requirements and we have to date received strong verbal support by all parties concerned. It is now a case of getting both the local and state government and an opportunity for a big business like BHP to financially support the project and turn this sculpture into a landmark/gate-way." "Banyule is an Aboriginal name meaning 'hill', inspiring the sculptures smooth rolling solid form. The metal rust coloured sculptural shape also represents the Yarra (ever flowing) and Plenty Rivers, the winding water and walking trails that form our surrounds and boundaries of Banyule. The main sculptural shape also represents the indigenous people's Dream Time Rainbow Serpent creator of nature the land, water and the plants. The Rainbow Serpent is also a protector and guide. There are two main indigenous ancestral clans of the Banyule area, the Wurundjeri-willam and Woi Wurrung clans both represented by indigenous art would be sculpture embossed into metal at the tail and head region."

