


Local Artist Uncovered

Story and Images Michelle Meehan



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Marc Brabender



It's been 14 years between exhibitions for Cessnock's Marc Brabander. As a part-time artist, full-time business owner and father-of-two, juggling a hectic workload and a young family often meant there was never enough time left over to properly indulge his creative side.

But after battling a cancer diagnosis and struggling with the anxiety that followed, Marc found that making time for art was a necessary step to take on his road to recovery.

Born in Holland in 1971, Marc loved to draw from a young age and in high school trained to become a graphic designer.

After graduating and fulfilling his compulsory year of military training, he worked in a reproduction house while he saved his money to travel to Australia – a country he had been dreaming of since almost emigrating there with his family when he was a young boy.

"When I was 10 my family almost immigrated to Australia, my Mum and Dad and my five other brothers and sisters," Marc said.

"My Dad was going to look after a nursing homes with Dutch residents. As older people grow older particularly from a different country, they start to fall back in their language of where they grew up. Unfortunately his training wasn't recognised by the Australian Board of Education so it all kind of fell through.

"But the excitement that I had over going to another country and having dreamt about it kind of stayed with me.

"We had (an Australian) Rotary Exchange student stay with us when I was 16, that was such a good experience, he lived with us for three months.

"So I thought what you can do I can do too, I asked him and his family if I could stay with them while I got started so I had a base to stay.

"I worked at a winery, it was a working holiday. I started in Adelaide but I ended up in Sydney and I travelled around in between."

Marc arrived here when he was 21 and, as the story so often goes, he fell in love with the country – and an Australian girl – and decided to stay.

The couple married and in 2001 they relocated from Sydney to the Hunter Valley. Marc had already begun painting by this time, using it as a way to unwind from the stress of his job as a graphic designer.

When they moved to Cessnock Marc started Bink Creative Design Studio and Cessnock Print Place, using his downtime while establishing the business' clientele to indulge in his passion for painting flowers.

By 2003 he had put together enough artworks to hold his first exhibition at a gallery space in Wollombi.

"Initially there was a lot of free time so I started painting and within that first year or so I had an exhibition," he said.

"I was young and I noticed I hit on something. A cousin of mine who's a florist saw what I was doing and he suggested I paint this, which was a tulip, and out of that something beautiful came.

"In the space of three months I painted 30 paintings, all in oils, and they were realistic but at the same time they had a lot of feeling to them.

"That exhibition was held in Wollombi, called Spring Awakening, and it was all flowers.

"That went really well, I pretty much sold out with lots of commissions. Then my wife fell pregnant so reality kind of hit. My wife was the main breadwinner at the time so we kind of swapped sides so she could look after the baby and I could look after the business.

"I quickly grew the business with that intent but I found less and less time for my art."

Ten years – and two boys later – the next major change in Marc's life came when he was diagnosed with cancer. While thankfully for Marc an early discovery meant he only needed surgery in October 2012 to overcome the disease, the after affects of the diagnosis were, unfortunately, far longer lasting.



"I like art but often when you go into a gallery it's 'I like it' or 'I don't like it', there's not much else to it unless you dig deeper and try and understand the artist.

When I got cancer ... that kind of really hit me in the head," he said.

"Although it was an operation and I was done, not to the extent that most people experience it because I was really early, but the mental side of that really struck me.

"The realisation that we're on a planet and you can die at any moment - I wasn't ready to give up my family and leave the children with my wife alone and for her to fend on the business.

"I really struggled with anxiety because of the fear in my head and unresolved feelings."

The turning point for Marc came, not surprisingly, in the form of a paintbrush and pencil.

"It came to a point where I realised I needed to be creative, subconsciously, and my wife in her wisdom gave me a book," he said.

"It was a course on how to draw, which I thought was hilarious because I do know how to draw being a graphic designer and an artist. I kind of flicked through it and the one thing that stood out to me was 'one-a-day'. The course was six weeks, you do one drawing a day and at the end of that you've got something.

"That really struck me as something I could achieve. The other side was I'm a little bit of a perfectionist, I want to finish stuff and I want it to look good and in a way I'd been hampering myself all those years with that thinking, of needing to complete a painting or needing for it to be good, but what is good?

"So when I started that one drawing a day, all I needed to do for myself was just to draw something. I didn't care how it looked, I didn't care how long it took, it could take 10 seconds. >



"So it took off all the pressure that I had and in very quick time I realised what it meant to be creative, which is just going with it and letting something else unfold without the interference of the mind. >

"It was very freeing. I tried everything, whatever I felt like doing I did, I didn't hold back. So I tried pencils, I tried paints, I tried pen, textas, I even drew in sand but that one is long gone."

Marc started his one-a-day challenge in August 2015, deciding that, rather than just the three months suggested by the book, he would continue the practice for an entire year.

While he set out on the journey as a means of simply reconnecting with his art, Marc found the process gave him so much more, both emotionally and artistically.

"I'm a big thinker, I think a lot and I think that part of me hampered my mental recovery if you like, not that I was really deep down, but I was in the mud," he said.

"It took a good four or five months of drawing to start

to realise it's alleviating the pressure in my head without me even realising it was happening. But all of a sudden I thought okay, the noise is gone.

"Through that process also I started to notice there was a conversation going on between what ended up on paper or the canvas and whatever was out there, whether it was my subconscious talking or the universe or God or whatever, there was always something in there for me.

"The curator of the art gallery mentioned that there's a bit of mindfulness going on with that, it's almost like a meditation. That conversation I was really intrigued by, and about four or five months of doing that one drawing a day I kind of realised this could actually be an exhibition, but I just kept drawing and in the meantime this exhibition kind of formulated itself in my head."

Marc's long dreamed of exhibition, entitled Local Artist Uncovered – Marc Brabender, went on show at Cessnock Regional Art Gallery on May 17, continuing through until July 2. It included almost 80 of the 'one-a-day' creations in various states of completion, showcasing everything from an almost 2m-long acrylic on canvas landscape to the smallest 10 second sketch, each accompanied by a short explanation of what Marc was thinking, feeling or reacting to at the time.

"This is my second exhibition, it's been a long time coming," he said.

"I enjoy seeing it up there and seeing people's reactions. When I was at Wollombi (with my first exhibition) I was there on the weekends and I was painting while the exhibition was on and people would come by and watch me paint. I think people love that and they relate to that, they like seeing something created.

"And I think in some respects I've done that with this exhibition as well with the stories underneath it, which



kind of sets a scene for them to relate to the picture on the wall.

"I like art but often when you go into a gallery it's 'I like it' or 'I don't like it', there's not much else to it unless you dig deeper and try and understand the artist.

"What I've done is really put myself out there, in a way I've bared my soul, but I think people relate to that, they can see certain things in that story or in that drawing that they have themselves so there's a connection there straight away, which sometimes with other artists is hard to comprehend.

"To me, witnessing that is something that really touches me as an artist, just to see how visitors to the exhibition interact and how they find inspiration in what I've done; I think that's pretty cool." 