



SEEING RED

THE COLOURS OF THE DRY, DUSTY OUTBACK DREW LANDSCAPE PAINTER TIM WINTERS BACK TO HIS EASEL.

BY EMMA MULHOLLAND

THE CALL of a butcherbird ready to nest filters into the old bakery where Tim Winters paints. Standing by the window, Tim marvels at how lush and green his property has become with the recent rain. "It's something I'll just have to learn to deal with," he says, half-joking in his English accent. Although Tim grew up in London, he's not the sort to pine for the manicured lawns and delicate roses of an English garden. In fact, for many years the accomplished landscape painter avoided working with green. "The dry areas of Australia – that's what makes me want to paint," he says. "I love the heat, the dusty colours and the openness."

The ochre colours of the old bakery site in Stuart Town, near Dubbo, NSW, have inspired Tim's work since he moved to the property almost 30 years ago. He and his wife Lynn came across the place while holidaying and then and there, decided to leave their Sydney home and spend their lives making art. "I fell in love with the light and the colour here, it's very different from the coast," he says.

Now in their 50s, the couple spend their days immersed in work or sharing cups of coffee in the sun. Depending on deadlines, the quaint and well-kept property (complete with a tabby cat) is a place of tranquillity or one buzzing with the fusion of creative energy. Lynn works in what was once the bakery's shopfront, creating realistic pictures with oil paint and gold leaf. Where her husband's work is bold and spontaneous, hers is painstaking and intricate. But when deadlines are lurking, Lynn

admits that Tim is the more patient of the two. "He would hate me saying this," she says. "But he is extremely sensible. He is very calm and perseveres until he arrives at a conclusion."

As a teenager Tim was selected to study at London's Hornsey College of Art, but when his parents immigrated to Australia he abandoned his studies to come with them. He enrolled in an interior design course at the National Art School in Sydney and went on to work as a commercial designer. He enjoyed the challenges and limitations of designing restaurants and office spaces but it took time and energy, and his art suffered.

It took his 30s – and vast kilometres of Australian outback – for Tim to find the fuel that had driven him in his youth. While staying on a friend's property near Burketown, Qld, he flew over Queensland's Channel Country in an old helicopter. It was his first venture into remote Australia and the perspective he saw – the land from above – has been used in his paintings ever since.

"The violet dusk, the red earth – that re-invigorated the artist in me," Tim says. Soon after, he moved to Stuart Town and adopted the bold lines and vibrant dots that make his work so distinctive. Years spent poring over design plans have given him a good eye for form and elevation, and these careful details show up in his works. Strong, contrasting colours and simple, rhythmic shapes lend his paintings a spontaneous feel that looks something like contemporary indigenous art. "I've thought about that quite a



KATE BLACKWOOD

bit and there are parallels but it's not something conscious," Tim says. "It's the way that I individually see the landscape. The places are real to me when they are on canvas."

Inside the studio, Tim works around the remnants of discarded ceramic and cane-work projects and a couple of paintings in progress. Newspaper clippings of Aboriginal art and local pieces are tacked to the walls alongside his own sketches and an Indonesian print. Faded and covered in fly dirt, Tim likes the "ephemeral" feel they give the place.

There's also a stack of diaries filled with notes from his travels around Australia. Although Tim bases his paintings on specific sites he never takes photos, preferring to sketch the landforms and write detailed notes about the colours. He'll stew over the composition of a painting for years and then, with an image in mind, he'll draw up a series of thumbnail-sized sketches to plot it out. If the image doesn't feel right – and often it doesn't – Tim will put the diary away and come back to it in a year or so.

Even with careful planning, Tim admits that sometimes a painting just doesn't work. "That's a part of the risk factor. There's a sense of release when something really works but that's pretty rare," he says. "Often I don't know when I'm finished, I'm just so intent on going through the process. But then you get the feeling that something is really good and then, it's almost euphoric."

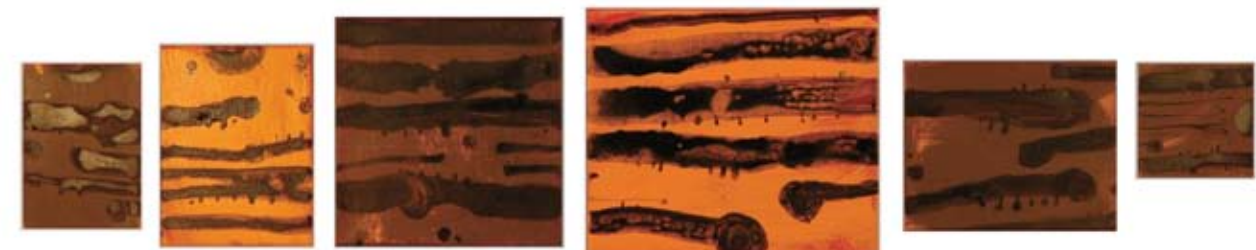
Three years ago, Tim hit on that feeling with his painting *Bare Bones*. Based on his trip outback – the journey that inspired him

to paint – *Bare Bones* won Tim the prestigious Country Energy Art Prize for Landscape Painting. Aimed at fostering regional art, the prize is Australia's most sought-after awards, attracting hundreds of entries from regional artists every year.

Judge Peter Kingston admits that on first viewing, he overlooked Tim's quiet, red-oxide work. But lying in bed that night, *Bare Bones* plagued his thoughts. "It says things that you can't really say in words. It's easy to be seduced by technique but Tim's is unconscious. There's nothing gimmicky, nothing slick about it and it's a relief to see a painting like that," Peter says.

The next day – the day he was due to announce the winner – Peter took another look at the painting and noticed elements he hadn't seen at first. It was enough to change his mind. Tim was announced the winner of the \$35,000 non-acquisitive prize, a decision even Tim admits came as a surprise. "It seemed a little bit rough," Tim says of the painting. "You don't really see them until they are finished. My paintings are usually quite well balanced but when I stepped back, I was surprised at this painting's robustness. But I thought it was good enough."

The work appears as a textured impression of the dry land and life-giving waters of the Channel Country. But for Tim the painting represents his first steps into the unknown. Being outback for the first time, he found a talent he'd put aside with youth. It took his 50s to discover that and a week to paint it. It's the bare bones of a life's work, in every sense.



A selection from Tim Winters' Channel Country, a range inspired by Tim's first outback journey. OPPOSITE: Summer Storm/ Pink Lakes Photos courtesy of Peter Sawa