

JOHN ELLISON ON ART, CREATIVITY AND JOY

*We need a new counter-tide in the affairs of men.
Something like the optimism of the sixties, with less
reliance on mind-enhancing stimulants...*

At the beginning of 2003 before our troops went into Iraq, I nailed a sign to our front gate that said: "Mass murder sets a bad example to young people." Of an evening I would sip a glass of wine on the front veranda and watch the responses of the passers-by. Some of them read the sign and then without a glance in my direction walked away looking rather puzzled. Others would stare at me in a hostile manner, apparently thinking that I was the mass murderer in question. Some would nod in approval and reach across the fence to shake hands.

As a young man who grew up in the sixties I found myself out of step with the values of society at that time, and I still am. I think they stink. At that time (the sixties) throughout the world a legion of long-haired scruff-bags stood up and excitedly proclaimed that life was not just about owning things, but was about living more abundantly. It was not a new message of course—it had been preached in the churches for a thousand years or more—but to the parents of these long-haired scruff-bags it sounded dangerous and subversive and close to insane. A great euphoria swept the world for a while, together with exciting music—but we all know how it turned out. *We want the world and we want it now!* Jimmy Morrison sang before he drowned in the bathtub.

Looking back now, some fifty years later, we can see that the young people were right. Governments worldwide were representing Murder Incorporated; and they were

recklessly poisoning the air, water and soil of our living planet. Since then a lot of hope has gone out of the world. We now vote in governments that boldly promise to do nothing about it, and to do everything in their power to make things worse.

Society, I say, is on the wrong track. From the age of two or three children are being brainwashed by systematic advertising to join the official worldwide religion of Consumerism. By the time they are six or seven they are paid up members, urging their parents on. We need to set a new example. It is quite possible for people to live more simple lives. With our wonderfully high standard of living, people haven't got a moment to call their own. Henry Thoreau believed that a man or a woman is free in direct proportion to the number of things that they don't have to do. Someone once gave him a piece of marble to be used as a paperweight. Henry was pleased at first. But when he found that he had to dust it each day, he gave it away, as it was taking up too much of his time. *Simplify, simplify, simplify* Henry said. He was an anomaly in his time; who has now, of course, become an American classic.

We cannot depend on the politicians to make things better; people have got to make the change themselves. I have devised a new workshop that has underlying values totally opposed to those of the mainstream society. It will be on the theme of Art, Creativity and Joy, which of course



View from the North, acrylic on paper

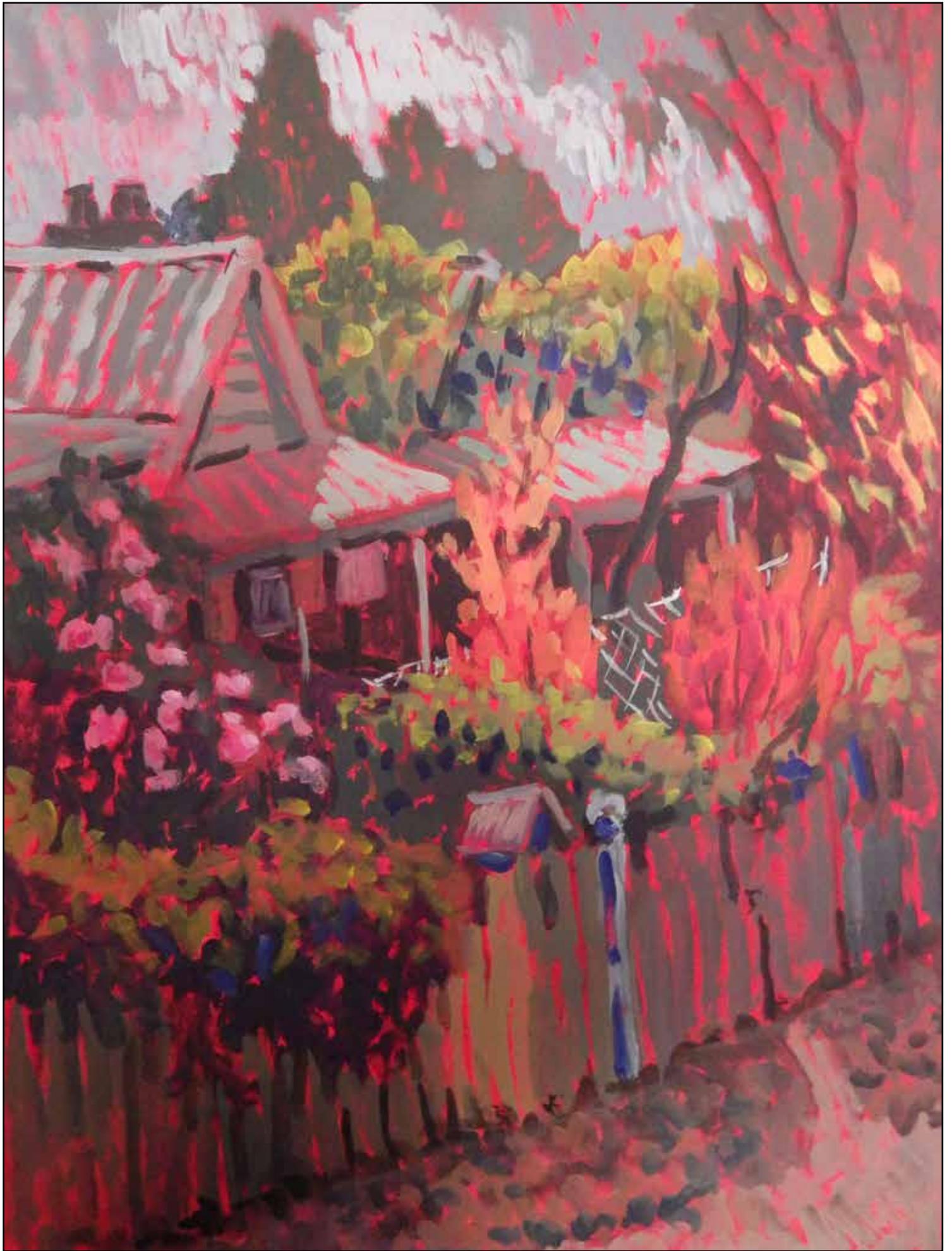
will sound like bottled snake-oil to many, but which I believe is terribly badly needed by our society at large.

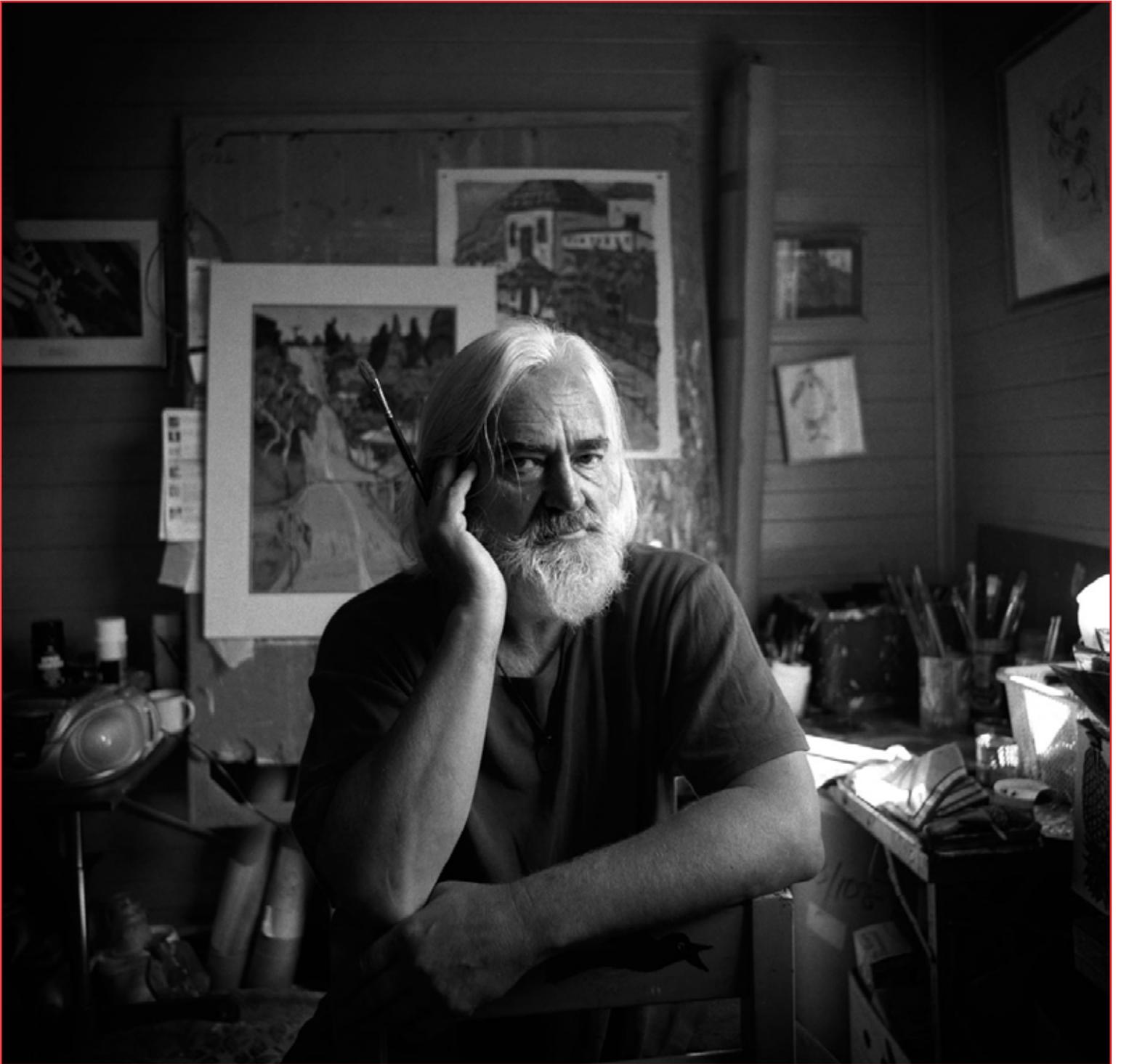
My models in this enterprise are people like Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, Leonardo Da Vinci, Picasso, Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keefe. Every one of them a stubborn individualist who believed, in the words of Oscar Wilde: *You have a wonderful personality. Develop it. Be yourself. Don't imagine that your perfection lies in accumulating or possessing external things. Your perfection is inside you. If only you could realise that, you would not want to be rich. Ordinary riches can be stolen from a man. Real riches cannot.*

Every child is a creative individual. They sing and dance and throw drawings and paintings over their shoulders like Hokusai's depiction of the Mad Poet. The universe has imbued them with limitless curiosity and imagination and joy. And then something happens. They go to school, have the stuffing knocked out of them; and emerge as dull-eyed adults vowing never to read Shakespeare again.

But all is not lost. There are methods whereby we can regain some of that childhood élan, that childhood genius. Like Leonardo we can regain some of that vision of youth. Like Picasso we can recapture a sense of adventurous play. Like Hokusai we can lose *our mind and*





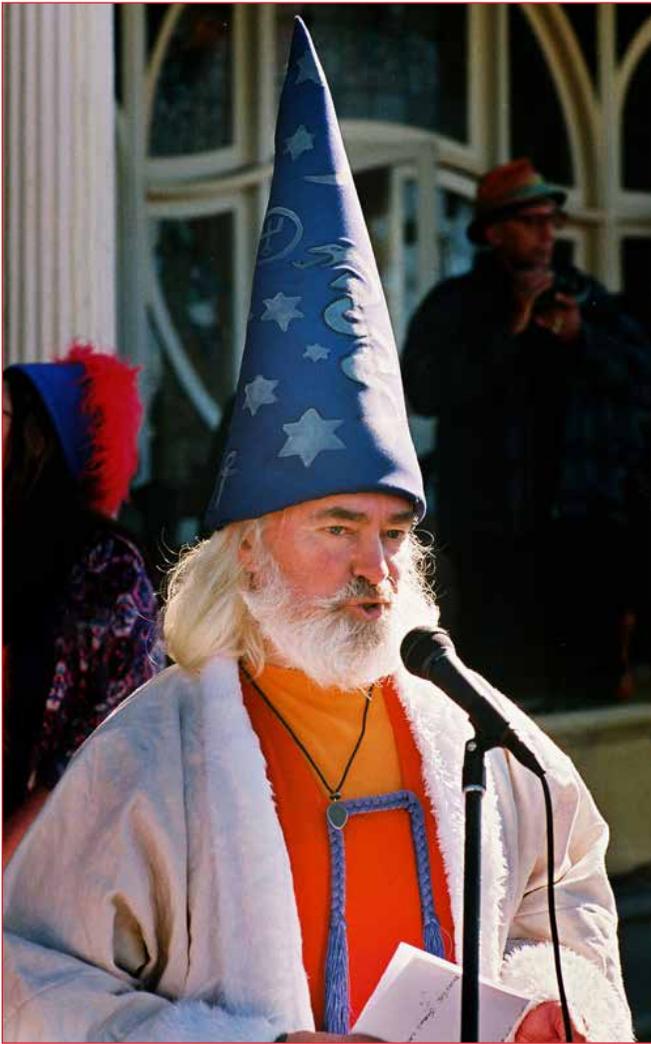


come to our senses. We all have so much to give; and as Ralph Waldo Emerson says: *With the exercise of self trust, new powers appear.*

We need a new counter-tide in the affairs of men. Something like the optimism of the sixties, with less reliance on mind-enhancing stimulants, and more reliance on the innate powers that the universe has uniquely bestowed on each one of us. As my good friend Fredrick Nietzsche said to me recently: *There are a thousand paths that have never yet been trodden, a thousand forms of health and hidden islands of life. Man and man's earth is still unexhausted and undiscovered.*

When I was in Crete, I went to the Palace of Knossos

and looked at the murals depicting the beautiful athletes, male and female, doing flying cartwheels over the backs of the bulls. And then in Iraklio, the capitol of Crete, in an archaeological museum, I saw a reproduction of a tiny stone stamp, the type used by royalty to seal their letters, the reproduction blown up to maybe fifty times its original size, showing a young athlete, full of grace and beauty, standing in front of elaborate buildings —this whole thing carved onto a stone no bigger than an acorn, and looking as though it had been drawn and designed by Picasso, Matisse or David Hockney. I shook my head in disbelief. Somehow, something like three thousand years ago, some unknown artist had managed to carve



this work of remarkable modernity onto a surface almost too small to see.

That evening, standing on the footpath overlooking the beach at Iraklio, the black waves thundering in, I raised my arms into the air thinking of the artists of that early mysterious Minoan civilization, and of the great Cretan writer Kazantzakis, creator of the modern Odyssey and I felt a transmission of all the joy-filled artists coming down through the ages, down through Rabelais, Balzac, Vermeer, Rumi, Renoir, Walt Whitman, Henry Miller, Allen Ginsberg and connecting up with myself standing there with my arms raised in a gesture of preposterous delight.

And if anyone thinks it is vainglorious of me to feel connected to such superhuman company, I can only repeat Walt Whitman's words: *And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

For more information about John Ellison's forthcoming workshops, go to www.harrisonandellison.com

ABOUT JOHN ELLISON

The art of John Ellison is evocative of the post-impressionist period in Europe through its use of form and colour. He follows the style of the masters without aping their technique, adding a distinct Australian identity in detail and robust use of light and tone. At the time of our

interview he had just sold six paintings to a private buyer. It was a measure of his success as an artist, not his ego. He was delighted. The buyer was astute. The works—all from a series inspired by his recent European travels—will live on beyond the lifetime of the artist or the buyer. For six weeks Ellison had travelled in the footsteps of the great European painters.

I needed to get a sense of place in my work—my style has many European references—it is still evolving. The post-impressionist painters had to deal with their own holistic experiences in the environment in which they worked. They had to respond to their personal emotions and dreams. That's what I try to do in my own paintings. A gentle man with a ready smile, Ellison is a familiar figure in Katoomba as he rapidly sketches another moment in the life of the Street.

I consider drawing to be the backbone of my art. He confesses to having little knowledge of architecture, yet his eye for detail is unrelenting. People pass over the world with great haste, they don't observe. It's the job of the artist to capture the unexpected—I'm observing for them. I suppose I'm a romantic! I look at a building and wonder at the imagination of the human being who designed it for its purpose.

In the small town of Arles in the south of France he stood on the ground and walked the streets immortalised by Vincent Van Gogh. *It was nowhere near as colourful as Van Gogh painted it, he invented his own colour world. Colour seems to me to be the big mystery. I thought Matisse had taken it as far as it could go. I now think it can be taken further ... colour is only meaningful if it is connected with our own consciousness.*

John Ellison was born in Manly. He has lived and taught in the Blue Mountains for almost 30 years. *I particularly like to teach ... I like to explain to people what's going on in my own head. I mainly aim to teach people to express themselves in their own way ... to bring them into psychological contact with the subject. It's alright to make a line go in any direction you want it to. I intend to travel again. I've probably seen more of Europe than Australia, so I'll probably start here. I'm not so much worried about the stylistic mode my future work will take, I'm more concerned about the consciousness that goes into it. It's a private thing. It's the sort of stuff that Brett Whitely was wrestling with—his ever-increasing need to explore—to connect psychologically. He used substances to increase his consciousness. That's what destroyed him.*

Meanwhile, John Ellison will be out on the Street, quietly sketching the moments in time that we miss in our haste to post a letter.

Written by Alan Lloyd and published in 'The Streetwise—A Portrait of the People of the Blue Mountains' by Peter Adams and Alan Lloyd. Photos of John Ellison in his studio and as Winter Magic's Wizard © Peter Adams