



WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, TED?

My first reaction when someone tells me I can't do something is 'watch me!'

TED MARKSTEIN was on the way to becoming one of Australia's most important painters, with one of his portraits a runner-up in the Archibald Portrait Prize and paintings hanging in high profile public places such as the High Court in Canberra. But then he simply stopped. Why?

THE BACKGROUND

Ted Markstein describes his real role in life as a subversive. *My first reaction when someone tells me I can't do something is 'watch me!' I prefer to confront issues, complain and agitate. If something is unfair or unjust and you shrug your shoulders and say Well, what can I do? then you're complicit. It's your obligation to protest and make a fuss—say it loud, say it often, say it everywhere!*

I like playing with the world; everything is basically a design problem—manipulating elements in time and space—designing clothes, playing the financial markets, portrait painting, writing or fixing computers. They are all design problems. Most people are asleep, not prepared to explore options. If you put your mind to it you can learn to do anything.



His parents left Vienna six months before the Nazi Occupation in 1938 and travelled overland in winter through Russia to Harbin (in what was then Manchuria), before landing in Brisbane on the last Japanese ship to arrive in Australia before Japan declared war.

The family moved to Sydney and Ted was born in the then slums of Paddington in 1942. He attended Sydney Boys' High School, (where his nickname was 'trouble') from the age of 13 when, obsessed with theoretical transmutation of elements, his ambition was to be a nuclear physicist. He left in 1959 and enrolled in science at Sydney University. This was an unhappy marriage which broke up after three months. After a brief stint as a professional gambler, having become heartily sick of the sight of green baize tables, he tried again for university, this time lasting just a few weeks.

At the age of 20, he was walking down Oxford Street in Bondi Junction, when an elderly Hungarian lady wearing a black apron grabbed me off the street and offered me a job in her menswear shop. I kept that job for a couple of years before moving on to Farmer's, a Sydney department store and then to McDowell's as an assistant menswear buyer. I designed blackwatch tartan flare outfits for the Bee Gees, when the twins were about 14 or 15.

In 1966, at the age of 24, he opened up his own shop, the 'In Shoppe for Men' in Hunter Street, Sydney. A year later he had 10 retail outlets and a number of factories. Inspired by London's Carnaby Street, they revolutionised men's fashion in Australia. In 1972 he sold up and set off for Europe. When the European winter set in he returned briefly to Sydney and thence to Mullumbimby to a hippy commune. After a brief period exploring the hippy life, he returned to Sydney to move in with Helene, the women's In Shoppe's chief designer, buyer and shop designer. They're still together after more than 36 years.

After it became abundantly clear that doing nothing was driving Helene insane while she was working so hard, Ted thought it prudent to embark on some kind of activity. Helene was an artist, so he thought he'd give drawing a whirl. *On the first day I did 70 self-portraits. Next day, 150. I must've done around 1,000 or more. In all I did around 13,000 life drawings before I did my first painting.*

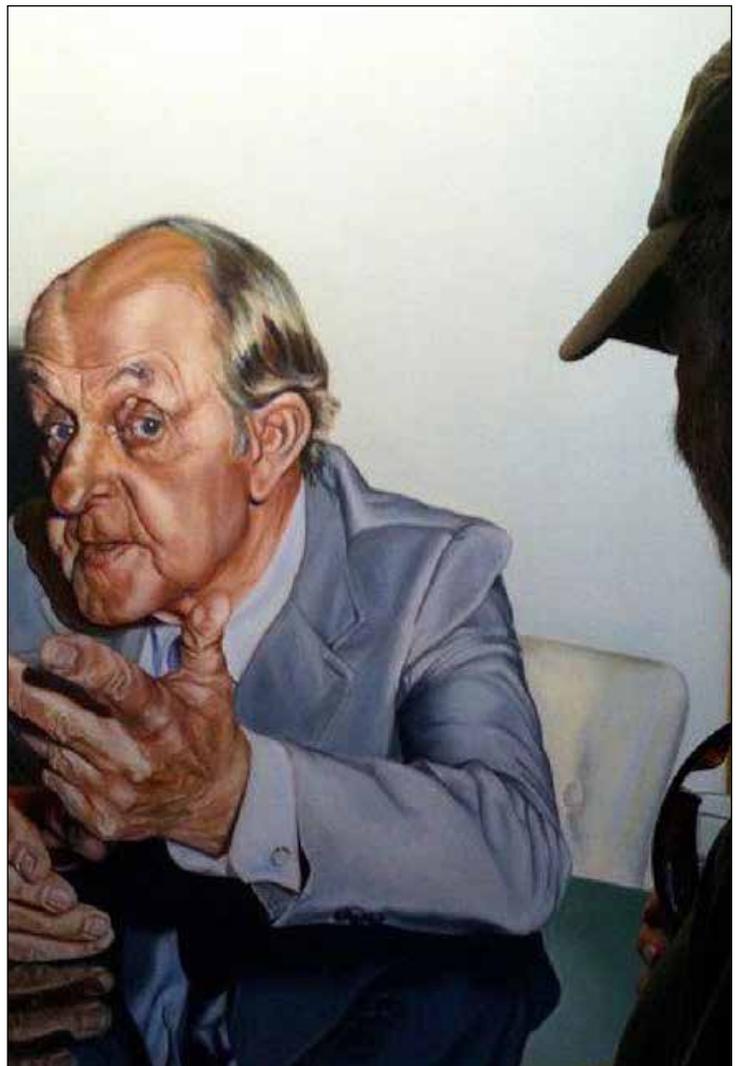
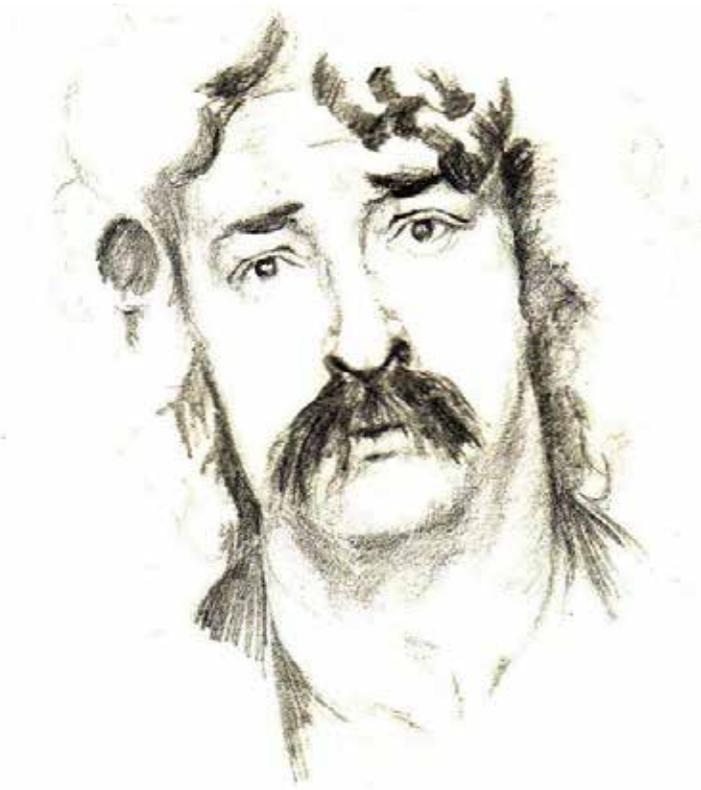
Australian artist Garry Shead presented Ted with a book by Salvador Dali entitled '50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship'—and that unlocked the path for him. He entered the Archibald portrait competition for the first time with a portrait of Lennox Hewitt—that was the runner up. His second entry in the Archibald was Sir Garfield Barwick as St Sebastian, self-decreed martyr to the cause of the letter of the law, which now hangs in solitary splendour in the High Court in Canberra.

I then wanted to paint the full High Court Bench—including

Opposite page top: Ted Markstein with his portrait of Sir Garfield Barwick photo ©Peter Adams

Opposite page below: Jan Cornea

This page top: Self portrait
below: Lennox Hewitt



Lionel Murphy wearing the rattiest wig I had ever seen—as the Last Supper; pure Hogarth! Barwick agreed but the others wouldn't be in it. I wanted to strip away the public persona and reveal the underlying character of people in the public eye.

In 1982 he entered a 4.5 m x 1.25 m multiple portrait of Patrick White entitled *The Great White Hope in the Land of the Blind*, which the University of New South Wales subsequently managed to damage and then lose—described by Ted as *an astonishing feat of curation!*

Today Ted is the somewhat eccentric Apple Guru based in Katoomba. He spends far too much time on Facebook, according to his family, but as he says: *It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it.*

Updated 2014 by Ted Markstein from an interview ©Alan Lloyd in 'The Street Wise'.

OZ ARTS ASKS THE OBVIOUS QUESTIONS

Q: Artists like to say that if you are passionate about painting, then you simply can't NOT paint. You did. Does that mean you aren't passionate, or you just don't like painting?

A: Artists will say anything. When I painted, I was obsessed and absorbed by the problems I set myself by the choice of paintings. I never considered that I was enslaved by a passion for painting. To say you simply can't NOT paint is juvenile. I experienced great joy and great frustration in the act of painting. I was mainly obsessed by the problem of making paintings that had that wonderful unfinished quality of good drawing. Like when you view a corpse and you expect it to come to life any minute. I loved painting and paintings. I still do even though now I no longer paint.

Q: What are you passionate about?

A: Justice, loyalty, artistry, language and thought.

Q: Nowadays any artist striving to succeed must not only paint but also be media savvy. Just being good isn't enough and sometimes being a showman IS enough. Do you think it would be more useful for young people to learn how to promote themselves rather than how to paint, write, dance..?

A: Useful? Sorry, not of interest. There's a special level of Hell reserved for Marketing and PR people. Buying and selling art is



a Commodity Market. Success and the prices paid have zero to do with the intrinsic value of the (art) object/performance. Perfect cases in point are Damien Hirst industries, the great Andy Warhol scam and, closer to home, the appalling 'look Ma, I smeared the walls with shit' paintings of Adam Cullen.

Read the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (who knew a thing or three), especially:

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.

Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.

They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty.

We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it.

The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

Q: What do you think of the present gallery system in Australia, public and private? Some say it's all going downhill but others say it's just in a state of change? Change to what?

A: I think MONA and some of the big public shows are great. The Bacon show was one of the best presented and curated shows I've ever seen. The Archibald, Wynne and Sulman are consistently disappointing, boring and eccentric in the worst sense of the word.

Q: Who do you most admire?

A: Lao Tzu, Pythagoras, Michelangelo, Mozart, Oscar Wilde, Shakespeare, Arundhati Roy, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Julia Burnside. Interesting question.

Q: Many of us in the Mountains wonder how a creative genius can stand messing about with computers day in day out. What's the attraction in this business?

A: Business is NOT attractive. Problem solving is. I was brought up to believe that one's duty in life was to be of service and that's what I do.

Q: When are you going to write that blockbuster novel Ted?

A: That'd be telling!

Opposite page: Hal Wootten
Below: *The Three Wise Men in the Garden of Gethsemane* 1984



HILL END SONNETS

MAN READING A NEWSPAPER

[after the painting of the same name by Russell Drysdale, 1941]

He seems pretty casual about the whole apocalypse
sitting there in his singlet reading the funnies
while all around him the world is a smoking
ruin. His house in particular, nothing left
but some bits of old iron and a windmill.
He's hung his coat on the branch of a burnt
tree and the black stump he's sitting on
could be the archetypal black stump
of anywhere. The conflagration has laid
waste to all between here and the horizon.
But look, what's that at his feet? Is that not
a jerry can of two-stroke? Ah, I see, it's not his house,
he doesn't care, he's the one who's torched the lot,
kicking back with the paper, job well done.

Mark O'Flynn

Ted Markstein's lost portrait of Patrick White, *The Great White Hope in the Land of the Blind* 1982-3

