



the art of patience

WORDS: FRANCES FRANGENHEIM PORTRAIT PHOTOS: JEFF SINCLAIR

If you think back to your teenage years when you were at your happiest banging on drums or dancing in fluffy leg warmers in front of the mirror, and you think you missed your calling – you might just be right.

Sunshine Coast abstract artist Michael Whitehead should have seen it coming when he started dabbling in art in high school.

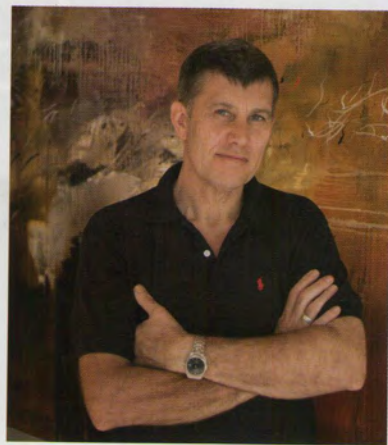
He recalls he had a penchant at the time for creating rock n' roll poster art, but in the early 1970s art subjects weren't offered past Year 10 and he instead pursued art in other ways.

He studied and worked in graphic design, which led to art lecturing, then to purchasing a screen printing business and illustration work, until a disastrous two-year stint managing a motel on the Sunshine Coast prompted his wife, Lorraine, to ask him, "Why don't you pick up your art again and try to make a living from it?"

No doubt Lorraine might credit these words as some of the most worthwhile she's ever spoken because nowadays, just 12 years after that fateful question, Michael paints every day. He needs to, to meet the demand for his large contemporary abstract oil and acrylic pieces selling through reputable galleries Australia-wide and in New York. →

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dreamer
122 x 91.5 cm
Michael Whitehead (above)

“

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new morning diptych
200 x 120 cm (right)

Shadows and disguises
170 x 125 cm (below)



His work is also featured in private and corporate collections around the world and the Federal Government has also recently invested in two of Michael’s larger pieces for the foyer of the Trades and Patents Office in Canberra.

Of the moment he launched into making art his business, Michael says, “I wasn’t doing anything else at the time.

“We’d arrived in Noosa two years earlier and bought a small business managing a motel. But I wasn’t cut out for that – it was like something out of Fawlty Towers – so when Lorraine suggested I get back into my art and try to run it like my own business, I thought ‘I’ll make a commitment to this and see how it goes’.”

Testament to Michael’s innate artistic talent, over the course of the first five years, his art started selling quickly through galleries in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. So, how does one find the nous and confidence when they’re starting out in a new creative career to drive themselves as a business? Michael shrugs off any real doubts at the initial

stages, acknowledging he was committed to the idea and fortunately for him, it all snowballed from there.

"I never felt uncomfortable with my decision to pursue art full-time. Of course, I experienced the normal frustrations and certainly at times thought, 'Am I going in the right direction or not?' but then all of a sudden I'd get a contract from a gallery or referred by one gallery to another and things would speed up.

"When I was starting out, the first painting sold in a contemporary design furniture store and this gave me the confidence to approach a couple of local galleries. After the first two paintings sold in the galleries, I approached a gallery in Melbourne and developed a good relationship with the owners. From there I could prove to other galleries I was reputable and had a history of sales."

Locally, Michael is stocked in Jive Gallery in Noosa's Hastings Street where he held a solo exhibition in October last year – a sell-out show.

Jive gallery owner Jan Sinclair speaks highly of Michael, as an artist and as a spirited soul.

"What's exciting about Michael's work is that he's always seeking to better himself and while he has signature works his style varies so each piece is very different from the next," Jan observes. "He's also just a very nice person and a true dedicated art soul – he doesn't paint for a living; he paints to paint, and that comes through in the integrity of his work."

Of the many regular clients Jan sells to, some local and international clients will only buy Michael Whitehead works. Jan can understand the loyal affection buyers feel for his works. "I have two of his pieces in my house and I'll never sell them," Jan says.

Michael's contemporary works are large, layered abstracts that employ mediums which, Michael admits, really shouldn't go together.

"I have a go at putting together different mediums ... even things that really shouldn't go together because you get happy accidents. I've been combining oil based medium and acrylic. Because they don't like each other, you don't try to mix them together but where they overlap you get these beautiful broken edges and soft tones, and really warm amber palettes, like a cloudy view through things."

The results bring different interpretations for the viewer, suggesting moody palates that capture or reflect light and provide a fleeting glimpse of a secret world beneath.

Michael's painting style is to work in bursts from his large studio beneath his two-storey family home on acreage in the leafy hamlet of Doonan, a 10-minute drive inland from Noosa.



Michael Whitehead

Michael says he's a country boy at heart, most likely influenced by being born in the country town of Echuca on the Murray River in Northern Victoria. The only problem with his home studio is the ceilings aren't quite high enough to accommodate the scale of his canvases, which can get up to 3 metres in width by 1.5 metres in height.

"I like to stand my canvases up and turn them around to work at them from different angles, so I have to take them outside at times if they're really big," he says.

Michael never holds on to any of his pieces for his own walls, only hanging them long enough to make sure they're complete.

"I'll hang them over days or weeks in my lounge room so I can casually take notice of them and I'll work on them more until I'm satisfied they're finished," he says.

With this unerring patience in his character, it's no wonder Michael waited until the right time to make art his life. **S**

Locally, Michael Whitehead's art is featured at Jive Art + Design, Gallery 1/37 Hastings Street, Noosa Heads, 5455 3308. www.jivedesign.com.au