



_ STORY BY JOHN MCDONALD _ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON CAPABIANCO

UNSTILL LIFE

FEW STORIES POINT UP THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ARTIST AND CAREERIST QUITE AS WELL AS PETER GODWIN'S. A LATE COMER TO ART STARDOM, HE'S LIVING PROOF THAT TRUE TALENT IS OFTEN THE LAST TO DECLARE ITSELF

PETER GODWIN is a most unlikely superstar. A big, burly man with a bald head and thin-rimmed spectacles, he has an air of habitual scepticism. One feels that Godwin would like to take a long look at anything before he pronounces judgement. This applies especially to his own career as a painter – a career that has been incubating for decades.

In an era when students hold solo exhibitions even before they graduate from art school, Godwin had his first proper one-man show when he was pushing 50. That was 2002. The venue was not one of the fashionable salons in Sydney's Paddington, but the small Defiance Gallery inner-western Enmore. It was an instant sensation, selling out in the blink of an eye. After five years and two more sell-out shows, Godwin is finally coming to terms with his success. "For the first time in my life," he says, "when I enter into the studio, I know I'm going to win."

Defiance director, Campbell Robertson-Swann, says he spent six years trying to convince Godwin to show with him. "I'd see these fantastic little paintings in a National Art School [Sydney] staff show. When I asked other artists what they thought, they'd always be enthusiastic. It was really obvious what a good painter he was."

It was obvious to everyone but the artist himself. For 23 years, Godwin taught printmaking, painting and drawing at Hornsby TAFE, in Sydney's north, then at the National Art School (NAS). He was an extremely well-respected teacher, but his art world profile was zero. This once resulted in his dismissal from the old East Sydney Tech – precursor of the NAS, which was recreated by Bob Carr about 10 years ago. It was part of a purge of regular teachers, the excuse being that Godwin did not have an adequate track record as an exhibiting artist.

I wrote a letter on his behalf, along with a lot of other people, but it made no difference. Out the door he went, and into a period of financial hardship, until he was restored by a new management.

In retrospect, Godwin seems like the character in the old Kung Fu series that suffers all sorts of indignities, rather than reveal his true powers. While being pushed inexorably out of a job, he was possessed of a degree of talent that put most artists to shame. He chose, however, to keep it locked up and take the fall. Even now he doesn't know why. "I suppose I didn't want to show until I felt my paintings were solid," he muses. "I could've had shows, but I just didn't want to. I wanted the work to be like a brick wall, so no one could touch it."

This might seem a perfectly neurotic stance, but Godwin comes across as more stubborn than insecure. He wasn't terrified of having an exhibition – he was determined not to show until he felt the work was of a sufficiently high standard. During those years, he had what he describes as "a very chummy relationship" with a small gallery in Balmain. He would provide his mate with four or five paintings every six months, and they would quickly sell. He was also producing lithographs, which found their way into Parliament House and various other collections.

"I wasn't ambitious for myself or my work," he admits. "I just painted what I pleased with no particular program. Every few months, I'd do some paintings down at the docks, or a series of landscapes. I painted a lot of portraits of the local punks. It used to change from year to year. One dealer almost gave me a show but I just didn't have the momentum. For a while, I didn't mind the term 'dilettante'. That's what I was."

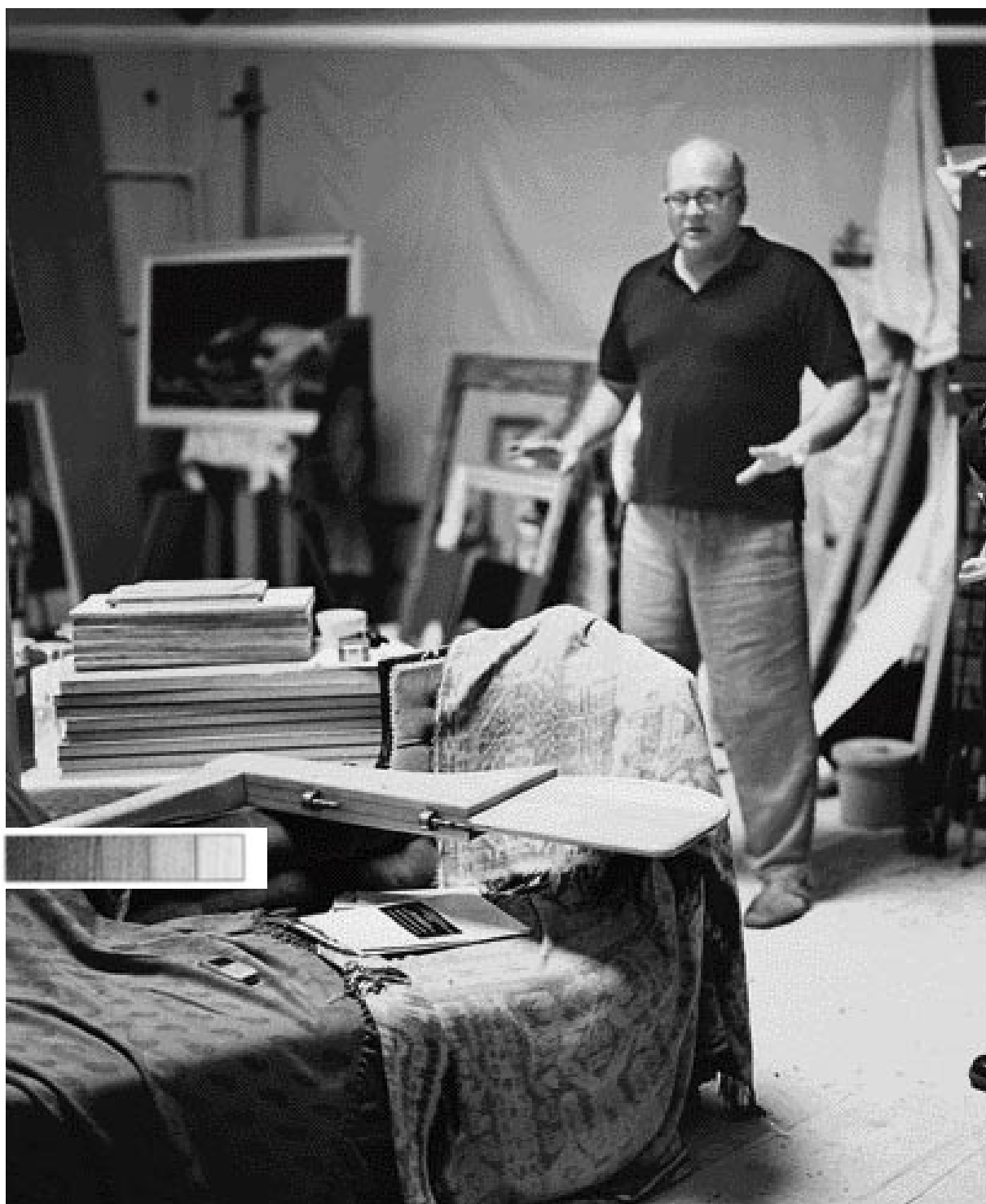
At the same time, Godwin derived an increasing satisfaction from teaching. In this he repeated a familiar pattern: at art schools, the best, most dedicated teachers find that their own exhibiting careers tend to dry up. There is no shortage of talented artists teaching at the colleges, but many approach the work in a perfunctory manner, seeing it as merely a way of earning extra income. Worse are those who push their own agenda to the exclusion of all other considerations, turning their students into clones of themselves. There are always a few egomaniacs who see students as potential groupies rather than embryonic artists.

Godwin has an ingrained distrust of what he calls "employing by reputation". Having been a nobody for more than twenty years, he has watched the way art schools covet high-profile appointments, even when teaching skills and experience are missing. Now that he is a 'name', he is scaling back his own commitments. If he is continuing his involvement with the NAS, it is because he enjoys the interaction with students, not because he needs the money. He is confident that students "have great bullshit antennæ ... They know if you're wanking on, or if what you're telling them you don't actually do yourself. When you lose that mutual respect, that's when the rot sets in. That's when you stop communicating."

Godwin has formed his views on art education from his own experiences as a student. "I went to art school at Hornsby when I was 17 and left after about three months. I just wasn't ready. So I went overseas and knocked around for a few years, looking at paintings in museums ... When I came back to Australia and enrolled again at the age of 22, I just flew through the course. I was like a sponge. It was the greatest experience. And that to me is what art school should be."

He feels that students should enjoy themselves and not have unrealistic expectations. "If you remember three or four things that have affected you over the course of three years, you're doing really well," he says. "And you have that moment locked away – the moment when oil paint and brush really clicked for the first time ... It happened for me at Hornsby and I did pretty well. I got the biggest shock of my artistic career when I won the Gruner Prize, which was the major student prize for the state. I thought: this is pretty good!"

Godwin remembers the landscape painter, Clem Millward, as an influential teacher. "He once said to me that I'd painted a monochromatic painting, and this got me really feisty ... I said 'Clem, that painting of yours in the Wynne – a nocturne – that's a monochromatic painting!' Well, his eyebrows shot



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up, and he told me to step outside – where he proceeded to explain to me about all the different blacks you could have in a painting."

THAT LESSON ABOUT different shades of black has stayed with Godwin, but he has refined his ideas through a close study of the way artists such as Matisse and Braque use blacks. He points to the large still life painting half-finished on the easel, noting that a dark area on the left is a blue-black, but that it needs more work if the blue is to "resonate". An area of green forms the underpainting for an application of red.

These techniques are the staples of the painter's craft, and Godwin is a very old-fashioned craftsman. The paintings that have made his new-found reputation are all still lifes and interiors, reminiscent of the heyday of modernism, when Braque, Picasso and Matisse painted countless variations on these subjects. Godwin discusses his work in the hermetic language of painters, saying that his main preoccupation is to establish the vertical and horizontal axes for a composition.

At first, he says, he is satisfied "so long as the viewer gets a feeling of space". On reflection, he admits he is also searching for a metaphysical dimension. "It's something I find in Braque, but not Picasso. I want to incorporate a feeling of time into the work. I hope that the viewer can feel the time I've put into the picture. When we experience time we experience movement, and that adds another dimension to the work."

Godwin builds up these unstill still lifes with layer upon layer of egg tempera. It is an old technique used in a non-traditional manner. Over the past few years he has become completely addicted to the medium, although it brings its own problems. It is, for instance, irresistible for

VISUAL ARTS



Above: *Bird and Shell*, 2005. Egg tempera on linen on board 50 x 85cm. Right: *Dark Interior with Dove*, 2005. Egg tempera on linen on board 76 x 100cm. Far Right: *Blue Interior, White Light (with Noel's Chair)*, 2005. Egg tempera on hemp on board. 180 x 240cm.



cockroaches and rodents, so he has to be cautious with storage. He has also had to experiment with glazes to find a medium that stabilises the surface without discoloration. His attraction to egg tempera is largely a matter of touch. He says it handles like an oil-based medium, even though it is water-based. He feels that it enables him to paint in a way that is very close to drawing, or more precisely, to drawing on a lithographer's stone with a crayon.

Each painting is filled with the bric-à-brac of the studio itself – easels, chairs, tins of brushes, books and papers, objects on plates. A large canvas may be roughly stitched together from two separate pieces, with the join visible beneath the painted surface. That surface itself is scarred with pencil marks and scratches, testifying to the artist's constant, obsessive revisions. “Three or four years ago, I wouldn't have done it,” he says. “Maybe it's a confidence thing. I tell myself I'm only dealing with the vertical and the horizontal, so there's no need to be precious.”

He refers to the British painter Frank Auerbach, who will erase and rework a drawing until he has worn a hole in the paper. Auerbach's solution is to stick another sheet on the back and simply carry one. Not only does Godwin appreciate this kind of pragmatism, he also identifies with that urge to revise a picture over and over – beyond the point where most artists would be satisfied – until it feels right.

So when is a painting finished? “When there is majesty and rhythm,” he says, quoting Allen Ginsberg. Or “when there is a feeling of harmonious tension”, in the words of another sage whose identity has been forgotten.

Godwin's dark, moody views of the studio give the impression that they were painted in a Bohemian garret. The truth is entirely different: his studio is a spacious pavilion on Wagstaff Point, on the Central Coast north of Sydney. It is on an outcrop surrounded by bush; natural light streams in, and flocks of parrots gather on the balcony.

This idyllic studio is the result of some enterprising patronage by a businessman friend who lets Godwin use the building in return for one painting a year. It is an arrangement that suits both parties, but as Godwin's reputation grows and the value of his work increases, what began as an act of generosity may be transformed into a shrewd investment.

It is a mystery as to how long it will take for Godwin's popularity with private collectors to generate interest from the public galleries. It took years for local museums to acquire significant works by the Queensland landscapist, William Robinson, even after the Metropolitan Museum in New York had purchased a suite of paintings. The curators seem equally hesitant about artists such as Godwin or Cressida Campbell, who paint relatively traditional still life subjects. Without some gimmick or sensational content, it seems hard to stimulate these jaded palettes.

Godwin says that he is not a traditionalist and he hates being labelled, but he is staggered at the things students are not taught at many art schools – most notably the basic skills they need to paint and understand pictures. He himself has always paid close, if idiosyncratic, attention to the art of the past. He is besotted with Chardin, says he spent years working his way through Ian Fairweather, and has painted small copies of a Pissarro landscape and Fragonard's tiny masterpiece, *The Stolen Kiss*.

He agrees with the old adage that all painting is abstract, but is fascinated by the question of how ambiguous or how representational his own paintings may become. The important thing is to give oneself the freedom to explore that limitless territory between abstraction and figuration.

"You're never 100 per cent in control," he says. "The painting is telling you where to go next, and that conversation goes on all the time. Nowadays I know that I can win my battles at the easel, but I still don't know what a painting is going to look like until it's finished." ■

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The artist's studio... Definitely not a bohemian garret, Godwin paints in a spacious pavilion on Wagstaff Point, on the Central Coast north of Sydney.

