

RIPE FOR PAINTING

Australian painter **Anne Middleton** has followed in her father's footsteps with a focused approach to her art – and now her latest series captures the lush textures of flora and fauna up close

WORDS: MARTHA ALEXANDER PHOTOS: ELSA MIDDLETON



The pockets of rainforest, natural freshwater springs and abundance of blossom detailed by Australian artist Anne Middleton as she describes her childhood “back garden” in the Danenong Ranges go some way to explaining why her paintings look as they do.

Characterised by exceptionally realistic flora and fauna, magnified on giant canvases and drenched in water or moodily lit, you half expect a sensual Marks & Spencer’s voiceover to accompany Anne’s paintings.

Anne’s latest series, *Gates of Paradise*, comprises all that she loves about the natural world. She has been working on the paintings since 2010 and they include the many birds, flowers and fruit that have been the focus of her work over the years. “It is a massive jigsaw of a painting, each adjoining component panel available for individual sale or in groups,” she says. “They focus on the hairy bee or the glory of cherries bursting with juice. Isolated and suspended on the linen canvas, these jewels of nature tenuously begin to form patterns.”

Her aim is for the series to develop into more intricate configurations – a visual jungle of some of Mother Nature’s finest achievements. It’s no mean feat, especially when you consider the level of detail that her latest paintings incorporate.

Anne now lives in an inner city suburb of Melbourne, but happily it’s a five-minute walk from the beach, so she doesn’t pine for the landscape of her childhood too much. “Albert Park is about as good as it gets as a city location and I love living here,” she says. “However, I still dream of returning to my childhood roots with some chooks and a vegetable garden. I miss the peace of country life.”

Although Anne cites her idyllic childhood as her career’s prime inspiration, it’s clear that she would have been an artist even if she hadn’t grown up in such a creative wonderland. Her artist father, Max, worked at home and proved a formative influence. “My child’s brain absorbed his highly refined painting techniques and his focus,” says Anne, whose fondness for starting painting at 5.30am was also influenced by his disciplined studio routine. “Dad never taught me formally, although he had many other students over the years. Informally however, he taught me everything I needed to know about the process of making an oil painting.”

Anne currently works in her father’s old studio; he offered it to her after he stopped painting. He will sit behind her as she works, listening to classical music on his headphones so she can work in silence. “The studio has fabulous natural light, and is large and peaceful,” she says. “It was the most generous of gestures as my father’s studio has always been his sacred space. I love painting there and sharing tranquil times with him at this point in our lives.”

Talk to Anne about her work and the respect that she has for both of her parents comes up repeatedly. Unusually, it was they who encouraged her to study for an art degree, while Anne admits to being “rather passive” about her career at the start. “Mum and Dad have both truly supported me in every sense as an artist,” she says. “They would, I am sure, have been



secretly dismayed if I had decided to become an accountant. As a teenager, I spent countless hours making things: fine silk embroidery, gingerbread houses complete with lattice windows and elaborate gardens, and detailed meandering patterns in pen. Becoming an artist almost happened by default for me. Fortunately my sensible parents recognised that my passion lay in the endless doodles that filled my teenage days.”

In 1985, Anne enrolled in an arts and crafts-based education degree at the University of Melbourne where she majored in painting and drawing and the emphasis was on traditional techniques.

She went on to study mural painting in Italy at the Il Laboratorio per Affresco di Vainella, and then again in 2004 as part of the Bogliasco Foundation’s fellowship programme, which developed her fascination with baroque oil glazing techniques.

With so much technical knowledge under her belt, Anne returned to Australia with a very different approach to her work. “It was ground-breaking,” she recalls. “I began using oil glazes in transparent layers of colour to build incredible luminosity and intensity.”

TOP Anne puts the finishing touches to another panel in her *Gates of Paradise* series
ABOVE *Dragonfly Frond*, oil on Belgian linen, 96x126cm
OPPOSITE PAGE *Plum*, oil on Belgian linen, 96x126cm

RIGHT Anne sits proudly in front of four panels from her *Gates of Paradise* series

"I look into the translucent skin of a cherry and see an apocalyptic sunset where clouds explode like fireworks across the sky"

Anne's paintings may be based on traditional mural techniques but her style and approach to composition is startlingly modern: her intimate close-ups demand to be examined and questioned. "I do prefer [to work on] a large scale," she says. "It allows me to explore the fine detail of a subject, while still allowing me to place down some juicy paint. My paintings are not intended as simple representations – my iconography transports the

viewer into a psychological and sensual drama played out on canvas."

It's clear how much Anne wants to draw people in by opening up the subject matter. Even the language she uses to describe her work is

impassioned, as if art gives her a heightened sense of the world around her. "When I paint, I am drawn into a vision," she says. "Look into the translucent skin of a plump cherry and see the colours swirl and become an apocalyptic sunset where clouds explode like fireworks across the sky. A luscious strawberry reveals strange orbs hovering in the atmosphere of its belly."

Away from her own work, Anne's litmus test for a great painter centres on one thing. "Brushstrokes reveal the true confidence of a master painter: intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. A true master can suggest the most precise detail with the least expenditure of effort. No fussy brushstrokes; just deft, confident choice of colour and movement. I admire that highly refined confidence in any artist in any medium." Anne particularly admires Van Eyck for "how loose and sensual his brushstrokes remain despite the confines of painting in miniature".

Colour is also a big deal for the artist, especially as she is 'zooming' in on objects and picking up on the subtleties that viewers perhaps wouldn't ordinarily associate with – or even notice on – an object. With inspirations ranging from the windows in Notre Dame de Paris to the "jewel-like" colours of Andrea del Sarto and the "exquisite, subdued hues" of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, colour is key to the success of her work: "The colour intensity that can be achieved through layering opaque paint and transparent glazes is remarkable and can create tremendous depth of field."

In 2003, the artist opened the Anne Middleton Gallery as a means of promoting her work, and that of other artists, to a wider audience. The gallery included two large indoor spaces and a sculpture garden, so it proved a major commitment for one person to maintain, especially when you factor in arranging a new exhibition each month and all of the work that went with it: from press releases and website updates, to hanging art and greeting customers. "I was quite simply overwhelmed," Anne recalls. "After a couple of years, I had refined my work processes which allowed me to paint in the gallery but I was constantly being interrupted by the phone and walk-in customers. I was unable to focus on what I love doing: my own creative work. It was a huge relief when I finally closed it five years ago." >

ARTIST'S BIO

Name

Anne Middleton

Born

Melbourne, 1967

Trained

Il Laboratorio per Affresco di Vainella, Italy; Melbourne College of Advanced Education, Australia

Next exhibition

May 2013, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London

More info

www.annemiddletongallery.com.au







CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
*Scabiosa Blossom; Red
Tulip; Baroque Cherries III.*
All artworks: oil on Belgian
linen, 96x126cm



Today, she operates the gallery online, making regular appearances at seasonal art fairs and exhibiting with other private galleries, including the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in the UK. Anne learnt how to use a computer for admin purposes and now uses one to help design her paintings. It also encouraged her to consider what her clients wanted in a more practical sense – not only a nice artwork but also one that will suit their home.

Above all, the biggest advantage of establishing the gallery was the confidence it gave her: “I dealt with a vast array of people, from tradesmen to arty folk, and being deep-down rather shy, this was good for me. Now

I truly appreciate the quiet, meditative solitude of my studio and never lament my self-imposed isolation.”

The online gallery has given Anne an opportunity to promote her father’s work. “Dad is now 89 and in frail health but he should be so proud of what he has achieved. I regard him as one of the great *plein air* painters.”

For such a successful artist, it’s refreshing to hear that she has frequently questioned what she does. “The real issues are always a lack of financial stability and the isolation that results from pursuing such a solitary career, not the art itself. I still get a great buzz out of crafting things with my hands and hopefully I always will.” 