

Thanks to the spirited and generous philanthropy of Mr Sam Walsh, CEO of Rio Tinto Australia, and an offer of accompaniment from my friend and fellow artist, Ken Knight, we were privileged beyond expectation to spend two weeks in West Australia's Pilbara region in July this year.

My purpose, aside from gathering material for my own work, was to assist Ken in preparing for his Perth Exhibition in November. I would help in transporting painting material from the motif, driving relief, photo and video documentation, and also company in the most distant region in Australia from our east coast studios.

In the following two weeks, in glorious weather, we travelled and worked in the Burrup-Karratha area, Millstream National Park, Pannawonica, then Tom Price and the Karijini National Park. Each day we were confronted with a strange, at times stark beauty. It was new to both of us.

The overwhelming antiquity of this enormous landscape presents itself with most elegant folding and modelling of form. Every rearing hill and mountain proudly reveals the layered strata of the earliest ages, where it is clothed in a mantle of tawny blonde Spinifex. The colour of this country is underscored with a rock strewn earth of deep burnt rust through all hues of terra cotta to a bleached orange. The numerous ranges march then twist in wave like processions into a lavender to blue-grey distance.

It was the sort of country that makes a painter ask "Where do I begin?" What was interesting, as the trip stepped into gear, was that Ken was soon asking "What shall I bring to this?"

Ken works quickly and confidently as an impressionist must, if he is to capture the light of that given moment. All his work for at least the last thirty years has been painted on location and Ken is extremely adept and authoritative in setting up his easel and getting speedily to work, oblivious to any discomforts nature will impose, including wind, heat, cold, insects and spiky Spinifex.

Although Ken and I had worked together on numerous painting trips some years ago, I was only vaguely aware of his procedure, being absorbed in my own task at the time. So it was with some objective interest, then revelation witnessing the intensity of the application to his art.

My first revelation was the beauty and authority of his brush drawing as he establishes the composition of his motif on the white board. A blend of intuitive eastern calligraphy with an abstract expressionist spontaneity, one is almost saddened to see it disappear under the ensuing applications of paint. Large areas of his image are quickly established in thicker paint with careful consideration to the placement of darks and how they relate to the mid-tones and highlights.

His working procedure at this point is one of total engagement with what is in front of him, a pushing and pulling of the image that is almost frenetic in the quest to extract the essence from the motif.

Detail of any sort is reserved for the conclusion of the painting, and then only if it is needed. In fact, Kens approach is entirely suited to his purpose; abstraction in dialogue with figuration, painting first from the shoulder, then elbow and finally the wrist with the last deft touches.

Ken works with the basic language all artists understand; a variation on the infinite, hidden mechanics of pictorial investigation supported by a timeless geometry, the horizontal, the vertical and the diagonal that hinge his compositions instinctively.

Of course this is just one component in the making of these works; it is the colour you notice first, which is observant whilst somehow being creative and inventive.

By bringing some resonant detail to one or two areas, leaving other sections broadly suggested, it provides the viewer with the imaginative, yet pleasurable task of “completing the picture “.It is this direct engagement with the work that is often missing from a painting that is photographic in its overall detail. He will often paint several versions of the one subject on boards of different dimensions. I soon learnt that he likes to exhaust every pictorial possibility from a given motif; whether on vertical or horizontal format, focus shift with compositional changes or simply what the changing light presents to the subject as the day progresses.

His work seemed to expand on this trip, with new approaches to meet new experiences. In the Gorges he seizes on colour combinations beyond what he has previously witnessed. He responds with immediate exuberance and very soon creative authority over the near electric complementary colour. Confronted with vast distances from the high viewpoints, he often chooses a multi-panel approach where the image is presented on vertical strips, rather than the expected long horizontal panel.

Packing the dried paintings for shipping back to Sydney, I became aware of the breadth of approach in this body of work, from the direct and strong bravura that depicts the monumental bluffs and blazing heat in “ The Fortescue River”, to the searching and sensitive study of dying light in “Blushing of dusk-Quartz ridge near Karratha”

Back in Perth for two or three days before we returned East, I imagined Ken would be exhausted and we would be tourists, taking things easy, for the weather had held in the North and he had worked non-stop for two weeks. But no, out comes the easel, The Pilbara forgotten, as his interest, then serious attention is turned towards a mood of urban parkland idyll, with its multitude of greens, on the banks of the Swan River.

At this point the artist confesses that at times on a prolonged painting trip he hopes for rain as a means of rest...”because if the light is there, I can’t help myself”.

Robert Simpson

