

painter

without a *brush*



WORDS **DEBORAH MCINTOSH** PHOTOGRAPHS **TONY SHEFFIELD**

WHEN RICHARD ALLEN FIRST POINTS to a large canvas lying on a table in his Berrima studio and says he often paints children, I initially can't make out a thing, and have an awful feeling I have been trapped like the obliging townsfolk in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Then suddenly the markings in the pale paint take form, and there, clear as day are

beautifully shaped chubby little children climbing about, yet I'm still utterly mystified. Their shapes appear to have been pressed onto the canvas rather than painted on, but even then I can't understand how they've been done.

Richard says if he tells me he'll have to kill me, but kindly proceeds to reveal his secrets (and allows me to later leave). "I don't use paintbrushes. I just carve into the paint. The only time I use paintbrushes is to sign my name," he says.

"I sculpt in the gesso (the white-based paint used to prime

THIS FRIEND OF A FRIEND WORKED FOR A MAJOR CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY IN LONDON AND SAID, 'GIVE UP YOUR DAY JOB'.





PREVIOUS PAGES: RICHARD AT WORK AND SOME OF HIS ANIMALS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): NIGHT'S COCKATOO, STUDY FOR INK RHINO, THE PROTAGONIST; AND AN AERIAL LANDSCAPE, NETTING SPRING.

a canvas). I use it quite thickly. So I'm sketching in white, and when it dries, the colour goes on. It's a little bit like doing an etching, but in paint. It's got to work quite quickly. And it's not until you put the colour on that you can really see it."

Richard has painted since he was a child, but never considered becoming an artist when he left school. "My family was always encouraging about me painting but it was never contemplated as a job. I spent 10 years trying a whole lot of other jobs. I started studying law, lasted a year, and then did merchant banking, television, advertising, stockbroking..." (he pauses, but amazingly the list continues) "...architecture, interior design and marketing. None of them made my heart sing."

As Richard skipped from one to the next, he continued to paint. Then, in his mid 20s he accidentally bought a little triangular garage in Darlinghurst – "I put my hand up at auction and got stuck with the thing" – which was where he was inspired to start his career as an artist.

"It had three walls, one power point, a loo, and I rented a shower in the garden next door. And because it was such a dive I covered the walls with paintings.

"I used to have a dinner party once a week...and one night this friend of a friend turned out to be a dealer in London. She worked for a major contemporary art gallery in London and she looked at the paintings and said, 'Give up your day job'. And I did, on the Monday, and just started painting." He was 27.

The woman didn't offer to sell his work, but her faith in him

made all the difference. "It was just somebody saying, 'Just do it'.

"I remember going to a dinner party at my parents' about two months later and seeing an old school friend who said, 'So what are you doing?' and I said 'I'm painting', just at the moment when the whole table went silent. I remember Dad saying, 'You're what?'

"I said, 'Have I asked you for money?' He said 'No.' I said, 'Well, don't worry, I'm fine.'"

Richard has managed to make a living as an artist ever since; his mostly large pieces now fetch between \$10,000 and \$40,000. In the early years, friends and acquaintances supported him. "When I couldn't afford to pay the gas bill, friends bought things.

"My stepmother was very good at forcing me to show people my work. If people said they wanted to see my work, she'd say, 'Go and show them. Instead of being the blushing artist, tucked away in the studio, put it out there'. So I'd just turn up and show people, and the worst they could do was say no. But people bought stuff."

Early on, he got a show at Paddington's Coventry Gallery, and later showed with Michael Carr. He is now represented by Richard Martin Gallery in Woollahra, and occasionally exhibits locally at Berrima's Bell Gallery.

Richard Martin bought one of Richard's pieces, *The Fighting Cock*, years ago. "As a collector of modern Australian art, I loved his work," says Martin. He showed it at the opening of his gallery three and a half years ago.



THE SHED
IS LINED
WITH FENCE
PALINGS
AND HAS AN
OLD SPIRAL
STAIRCASE



THESE PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: THE STUDIO'S LIGHT FITTINGS WERE ONCE USED FOR SPINNING WOOL TO MAKE FELT HATS; THE PIGGY-BACKERS; RICHARD ALLEN; THE STUDIO HOLDS A FEW SURPRISES, LIKE A WATER BUFFALO HEAD AND THE VESPA RICHARD BOUGHT FOR HIS 40TH WHICH IS THE SAME AGE AS HIM.

“When I opened my gallery, I thought the best thing was to represent artists whose work I love, and Richard’s work is remarkable. His work is so fluid because he doesn’t use brushes. He also does some very vivid, coloured abstract landscapes, which are quite different and more structured.

“In a lot of his work, he’s got this paint that drips and if he doesn’t get it right he basically has to throw away the canvas. But it means there’s a lovely spontaneity to his work, which someone like Brett Whiteley had. I love that sense of the moment.”

Richard’s work has been also exhibited in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Paris and New York and is regularly shown in London’s Kings Road Gallery. “The place I’ve been slack in is Australia... but I guess with little children, it was great having markets elsewhere so if the market was quiet in one place, there was always somewhere else.”

Richard and his wife have two sons, aged 14 and 11. The couple both grew up in Sydney but attended schools in the Highlands and came back after they married, building their home in the bush behind Berrima 15 years ago.

They built the barn-sized studio because Richard needed a large space; he often works on six to 10 large canvasses at a time. The steel frame shed is lined with fence palings and has an old spiral staircase, found in Moss Vale, and light fittings made from big perforated metal moulds, once used for spinning wool to create felt hats.

Throughout his career, Richard has returned to three main

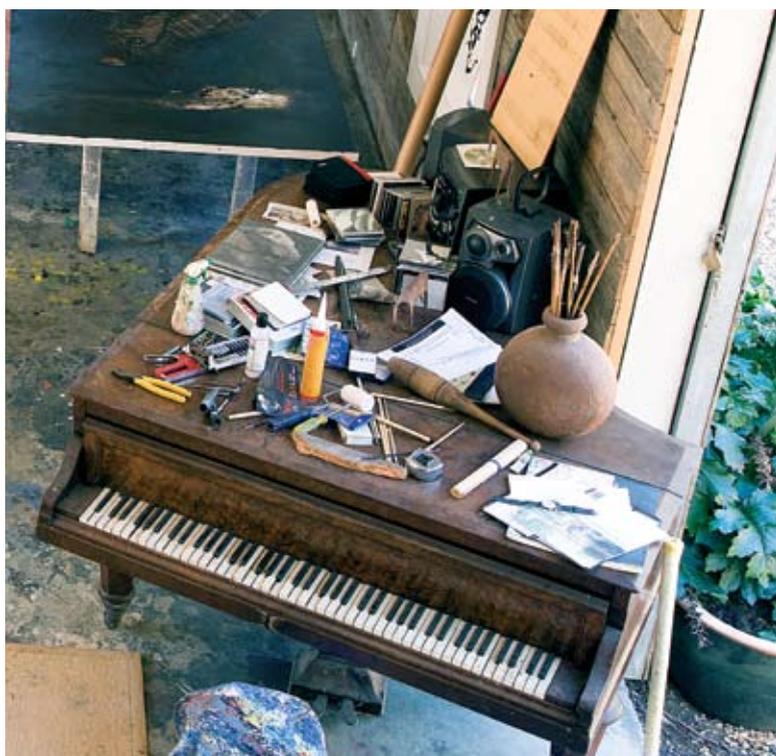
themes – aerial landscapes, children and animals, and he tends to use different techniques for each. His landscapes are usually painted directly onto the canvas using various tools. “I’ve used the same tools ever since I started. The same little spatula, the same scrapers, even the same cooking pan. I mix everything in a cooking pan because I use quite a large volume of it.”

The landscapes are abstract, yet quite accessible once he explains their origins. “I used to do a lot of flying with my grandfather (in my late teens and early 20s). He was at one stage the oldest licensed pilot in Australia, which was terrifying I can tell you.

“My perspective of the landscape has always been looking directly down,” Richard continues, pointing to one of his artworks. “This is looking down at a lovely little airstrip down on the Monaro. You get the yellow of the grass, all the ploughed fields – these are plough marks – but it’s a very abstracted thing.”

He often does aerial views of orchards, using thick “regimented blobs” of paint. “It’s the repetition of pattern I like, and looking at the marks man makes on the landscape. When you look out a (plane) window and think what am I looking at? I can see patterns and colours and shapes, but in reality what is it? I quite like that.”

One orchard painting in the studio has lines swooping across it. “It’s like the movement of birds,” he explains. “If you look at a landscape, it’s never static. Very rarely will you look



at a landscape and have nothing move...and that makes the landscape come alive.”

His paintings of small children grew from watching his sons when they were young. “It was initially like a diary; my way of recording our children when they were younger. I miss that now that they’re older. So I keep (doing it) so I don’t forget.

“I don’t work from photographs, I just start with a shape. They’re all there stored away (in my mind), the way children stand or attack each other or muck around.

“I’ve always done (children) as way of drawing. I’m interested in their body language. In how they relate to each other, how they move. I’m not interested in their facial features. My children are now too old to do it. They’re conscious of how they stand, whereas little kids aren’t. I’ve always loved that lack of awareness.”

Richard sometimes paints his animals and birds in the same method as the children, but he also does pieces where he pours paint from a bottle and creates the entire work in one shot. “It has to happen instantly. And because you’re doing it onto a raw canvas – this (hippo) is on linen – you can’t fiddle with it. It’s just like: will this work?”

He likes hippos, storks, monkeys and particularly elephants. He has a huge elephant in his home, which was probably the first he did pouring from a bottle about four years ago. For this one he poured clear varnish onto a white canvas, then painted over it in a neutral colour. “It’s literally the reflection you’re seeing as you’re doing it, and it’s not until you put paint on that you see the image.”

He loves the elephant’s “wicked and innocent” look. “There’s just something human about elephants in a way. There’s a grandiosity about them I love, a gentleness and power. I don’t know – it’s all the good things in one big package.”

In his home, he has also kept a painting of a marmoset (an organ grinder monkey) and a seal from a zoo. There’s actually a connection between his animals and landscapes, he explains. With his landscapes, he’s not captivated by nature on its own, but by marks people make on the land. With animals, he is fascinated by how people use animals, in zoos or as circus animals. “I’m not sure if I’m making a judgment about it, it’s more something I’ve always been conscious of, I guess.”

His works are also linked by a love of curves. He’s drawn to chairs with curves and instruments like the cello. And he loves patterns, “especially that wonderful, almost sexy sweep of plough marks in the ground, looking from above. I just love it”.

He’s still surprised that other people like what he does, and that many have bought multiple pieces. “I do it because it’s who I am. It’s like breathing.”

And he loves that his paintings have had an effect on people.

“With the aerial stuff, quite often a friend will have gone somewhere in a plane, and they’ll say, ‘I was looking out the window and I saw a ‘you’ on the ground. It took me five minutes to work out what it was.’ I love that it’s made friends of mine or whoever look at something they didn’t look at before and notice it in a different perspective.” **HL**

FROM TOP: THE PHILOSOPHER’S WALK, ONE OF RICHARD’S SCULPTURES; THE SEPIA BOYS IN POTS; RICHARD STILL USES MANY OF THE SAME TOOLS HE HAD WHEN HE STARTED HIS CAREER AS AN ARTIST.