



Thornton Walker's mood painting



By the age of 35 Thornton Walker was widely acclaimed as one of Australia's most promising emerging artists. Today, his enigmatic tonal landscape paintings and still life compositions are highly prized and keenly collected. Story by **Sasha Grishin**. Portrait by **Kirstin Gollings**.



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Thornton Walker, *The slightest stir of the wind (I)*, 2005-2007.
Watercolour, paper size: 102 x 66cm, frame size: 115.2 x 79.2cm.
COURTESY: CHRISTINE ABRAHAMS GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

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Biography

Thornton Walker is one of Australia's most successful and highly collected figurative tonal painters. He was 12 years old when in 1965 his family moved from Auckland in New Zealand to Melbourne. He trained primarily as a printmaker and from 1974 to 1976 studied at the Prahran College of Advanced Education where he graduated with a Diploma of Art in Printmaking. The idea of a matrix and the layering of surfaces to build up a complex palimpsest has remained a constant preoccupation in his art. In 1977 he continued with his studies of printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts, but by the end of the year he had abandoned his studies to spend the next eight years living and working in Europe and the United States. Of these years he says: “In the late 70s and early 80s, I travelled a lot through Europe, particularly in France and Greece where I spent a couple of years – mainly working as a fruit picker and labourer and over this time produced hundreds of watercolours. During these trips I regularly returned to Melbourne.”

Although he first started to exhibit in 1976, when he was included in a Print Council of Australia touring exhibition to France, his first solo exhibition was not until 1980. Subsequently he has held 36 solo exhibitions throughout Australia. In Thornton Walker's early work there was a certain romantic freedom as he attempted to abandon himself to the process. He was a finalist in the inaugural Moët and Chandon touring exhibition in 1987 and noted “In my work I try to let go of the known. To let go of that which has been articulated. I approach each work as though it is my first; containing within it unique problems and therefore asking for unique solutions ... An anarchy exists at this moment in which external moral dictates such as continuity and originality, right and wrong become irrelevant. This chaos in working with an infinity of possibilities gives rise to an individual order.” The painting which he produced for the Moët and Chandon competition was a striking acrylic and wood collage applied to canvas. The figure of the child was highly figurative, like a stencilled outline, while the surrounding abstracting elements disrupted any definitive reading of the work.

The following year, in 1988, Thornton Walker was included in the prestigious *A new generation* 1983-1988. *The Philip Morris Arts Grant Purchases* exhibition at the Australian National Gallery (NGA) in Canberra. It was a body of art which had been largely assembled by James Mollison and although partially shown in 1986, now the selection was being presented with the authority of the NGA as a distilled statement as to what was considered by the gallery as the emerging new talent in Australian art. By the age of 35 Thornton Walker was widely acclaimed as one of Australia's most promising emerging artists.

While always a great traveller, Thornton Walker now settled in Daylesford in rural Victoria and increasingly turned to tonal landscape paintings and still life compositions. For him a central artistic strategy was a steady, subdued consistency with a reserve and quietness. Like Giorgio Morandi, who with his constant selection of jars and bottles attained a diary-like intimacy and profundity, Thornton Walker opted for a restricted range of subjects and a familiar and well loved reality. As he has recently observed “Morandi has always been important to me particularly his lifelong commitment to transforming a simple still life arrangement and imbuing his work all along the way with an incredible energy and life. Other painters who have had a big influence on me have been Cy Twombly, Antoni Tàpies and Antonio Lopez Garcia.”

In 1994 Thornton Walker was awarded a six month residency at the Australia Council Studio in Barcelona in Spain and while it is unwise to draw up direct causationist links with an artist of Walker's complexity, but the Spanish residency seems to have nurtured his interest in surfaces and the affects of light on these surfaces. It also deepened his interest in the work of Picasso.



Generally Thornton Walker's paintings are visually attractive, yet have a certain toughness and are imbued with a sense of the enigma. In their formal structure, they are informed by the art of the post-war Abstract Expressionists and by some of the more recent non-figurative painters. Whereas an artist like Robert Rymen would leave his canvases as fields of white and would experiment with surface textures and tonal gradations, Thornton Walker inevitably includes a still-life motif. This creates an effective visual tension between a china bowl, lemon or aubergine motif, which is recorded with the precision of a Dutch still life, observing the highlights, shadows and surface textures, and the background of roughly textured colour.

Thornton Walker's art is ultimately the art of mood painting of a high order. In their contemplative and meditative nature, they allude to the sense of otherness, with an implied enigma. He introduces strange scribbling of text or arbitrary dribbles of paint which destroy in the painting the properties of a highly finished and polished work. There is frequently the quality of an unfinished dream into which the beholder is invited to enter and dissolve.

Now aged in his mid 50s, Thornton Walker is continually attempting to reinvent his method of work. About five years ago he started his series of studies inspired by Picasso's *La Flûte de Pan*, a large canvas in the Picasso Museum in Paris. Picasso had painted it while holidaying at the Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera in the summer of 1923, after he had moved away from cubism and was experimenting with a form of Hellenism with very bulky statuesque forms. In this painting he shows two life-size male figures, wearing bathing trunks, who have terracotta coloured bodies and who have been placed against the brilliance of the Mediterranean Sea seen at midday in the height of summer. The composition is serene and emotionless, the figures are as if united by a spiritual bond established through music and they are placed against abstracted geometric compositional blocks with their chunky hands and feet frozen in space.

Thornton Walker shows no desire to paint studies after the Picasso

Generally Thornton Walker's paintings are visually attractive, yet have a certain toughness and are imbued with a sense of the enigma.

This page: Thornton Walker, *Composition with Horizontal Lines*, 2006. Acrylic & collage, 100 x 100cm.

Opposite page: Thornton Walker, *The Enduring Body I*, 2006. Acrylic & pigment, 150 x 100cm.

COURTESY: CHRISTINE ABRAHAMS GALLERY, MELBOURNE.





This page: Thornton Walker, *Swept away (II)*, 2007. Acrylic & pigment, 150 x 180cm.
Opposite page: Thornton Walker, *Untitled VII*, 2006. Acrylic & collage, 140 x 120cm.
COURTESY: CHRISTINE ABRAHAMS GALLERY, MELBOURNE.



picture, instead his large canvases can be thought of as a series of meditations on elements in the Picasso painting. All recognisable figurative content has been removed and we are presented with paintings which are simultaneously tough and confronting, yet at the same time lyrical and highly evocative.

The specific aspect of the Picasso canvas examined in his paintings is not that of the two figures, but rather it is the space between them – the glimpse of the sky and the sea surrounded by the architectural blocks framing the view. In an aphorism ascribed to Picasso, he once described eternity as “the combination of the sea with sunshine”. Many of Thornton Walker’s paintings from the past five years are conceived in the form of meditations on eternity, as in part revealed by Picasso.

These are some of the best paintings by Thornton Walker to date. The preciousness of this work, as in much of this artist’s oeuvre, lies in attaining a state where the paintings assume their own existence, one which denies the mimetic literalness of representation or the controlled arena of the artist with his bag of tricks. The painting seems to have its own independent life, like a meditation on something, rather than a physical description of an object’s existence in space.

He noted about his most recent exhibition at the Christine Abrahams Gallery in 2007: “They are paired back, trowelled works, containing one and sometimes two bowls, titled from **Matsuo Basho**’s *Travel-Worn Satchel* and inspired by his reflections on impermanence. It is a body of work that began in the early 80s with a painting exhibited in the Phillip Morris collection at the NGA titled [What is] *The Enduring Body Of Reality*, part of a title I have used many times since then; a koan reflecting on emptiness, a joke about trying to portray ‘reality’.”



Earlier this year Thornton Walker undertook a Printmaking Fellowship at the Australian Printmaking Workshop in Melbourne where he produced some quite stunning etchings.

The Best Works and Where to Find Them

Thornton Walker is widely represented in Australian public collections including the NGA, Art Gallery of New South Wales and Art Gallery of Western Australia. His work is available from Christine Abrahams Gallery in Melbourne, Tim Olsen Gallery in Sydney, Beaver Galleries in Canberra and at the Heiser Gallery in Brisbane.

Prices at Auction

Thornton Walker's work has not had a major presence on Australia's art auction scene with most collectors apparently choosing to hang on to their paintings. Of the few paintings sold the highest prices achieved included \$16,800 in 2005, \$7,050 in 2006 and \$7,637 in 2002, but none of these was a major work. The very few works on paper seen at auction have sold for less and have ranged between \$396 and \$1,292.

How to start Collecting

Thornton Walker has always been quite a prolific artist who has exhibited frequently since his first solo exhibition in 1980. Generally his prints sell at about \$1,000 for his etchings and over \$3,000 for his manipulated monotypes and are widely available through his dealers. His watercolours and ink drawings range in price between \$1,800 and \$8,000. The larger paintings are highly prized with collectors and generally sell for between \$12,000 and \$30,000. He is also an artist who has generally improved with age and unlike some painters whose early work is more highly prized, Thornton Walker achieves some of the highest prices for his most recent paintings. ■

New work by Thornton Walker will be exhibited at Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne until 20 October, 2007.

This page: Thornton Walker, *Swept away (II)*, 2007. Acrylic & pigment, 107 x 183cm.

Opposite page: Thornton Walker, *The Records (Breath)*, 2006. Acrylic & collage, 180 x 150cm.

COURTESY: CHRISTINE ABRAHAMS GALLERY, MELBOURNE.

