

Featured Member

Ralph May found a special niche in his working life. Driven by an insistent call to be visually creative, he eventually combined two areas not normally associated with each other.



When and how did you get started working in your art practice?

I clearly remember my first big art experience as I had no art classes through school. I was at Uni and as part of my Science Degree course I had to do Pure Maths and hated every minute of it. A friend invited me to tag along to the Johnson Gallery in Brisbane to see an exhibition of Sydney Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings. It was a terrific experience, not just the exhibition, but the gallery with its rain forest garden divided into separate rooms with sculptures. It was like stepping into a different world. Art, architecture, sculpture and landscape together was way beyond the sum of its parts.

After completing a Science degree in Biochemistry and working in the field for a few years, I grew restless. I worked in marketing for companies servicing the Biotechnology industry for a while but in my thirties decided to do a Graphic Design course and eventually established a consultancy providing design and communication advice to companies in the Biotech field. But then my work moved to diverse organisations. For example, with the introduction of on-line learning to tertiary institutions, I was commissioned developed graphically interesting learning assets for students unable to attend lectures. My mantra was to make the boring look interesting and the complex look simple.

I developed learning modules in technology fields like geo technical engineering, nursing and optical. It was fun interpreting information into a visual form to make it understandable and memorable for students. I found that few people had my skill set that combines the technical with the artistic.

When I retired, I joined the Camberwell Camera Club, took painting classes and joined The Men's Shed to progress my interests in photography, painting and fine timber work.

What inspires your work?

Landscapes and seascapes. It's unsurprising given I spent my early years living on the Gold Coast beachfront. I've always been drawn to where the ocean and land meet. Equally, the stunning centre of Australia and its wide empty spaces fill me with awe. I work in acrylic on canvas. Presently I'm interested in developing my skills into semi abstract landscape painting.

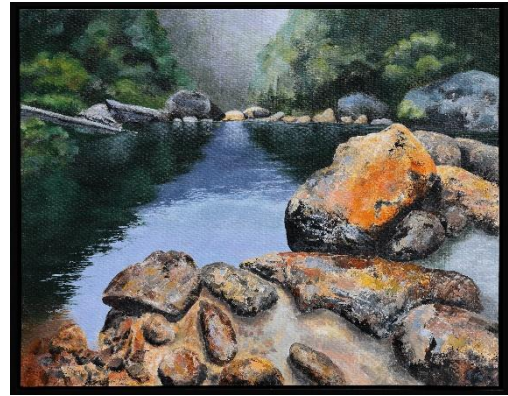


Squall Coming

What is your favourite tool and why?

I'm lazy so it's a palette knife as it's so much easier to clean than a brush. While detail is difficult to produce with a knife, it is great at creating texture and makes my style more impressionistic.

'Wild River' was mostly done with a palette knife.



Wild River

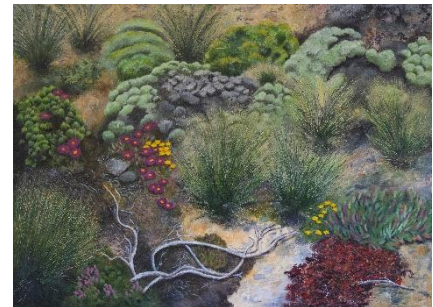
If you could collaborate with another artist, past or present, who would it be?

Fred Williams (*Iron Ore Landscape* on right). He taught Australians how to appreciate the aesthetics of our harsh, dry continent rather than apologising for it.



What work will you never sell and why?

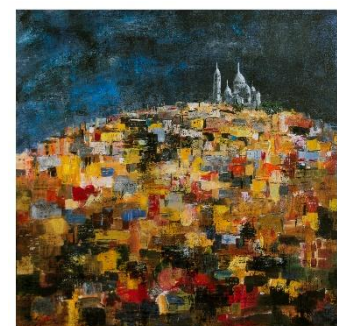
While travelling on Kangaroo Island, my wife briefed me about a painting she wanted of the flora growing on the wind beaten, salt sprayed cliffs of the islands southwest corner. I compiled about 40 reference photos of tussocks, native grasses, succulents, bleached branches and exposed sandstone. On completion, my wife decided it was far too good to be hidden away in her study. It now hangs permanently in a passage to be seen by others.



Kangaroo Island Flora

Do you have a piece with an interesting story behind its creation?

Some years ago, I was in Paris and took a photo looking up towards Montmartre. The scene was monotonal: slate grey roofs and pale stone facades. It showed no evidence of an artists' colony full of life, colour, creativity, artistry energy and bohemian charm. So, I painted my interpretation of it using abstract shapes and lots of colour. And of course, the strong hand of Sacre Coeur is there maintaining discipline,



Montmartre

What is your favourite artwork by another artist? It doesn't have to be in your field of work.

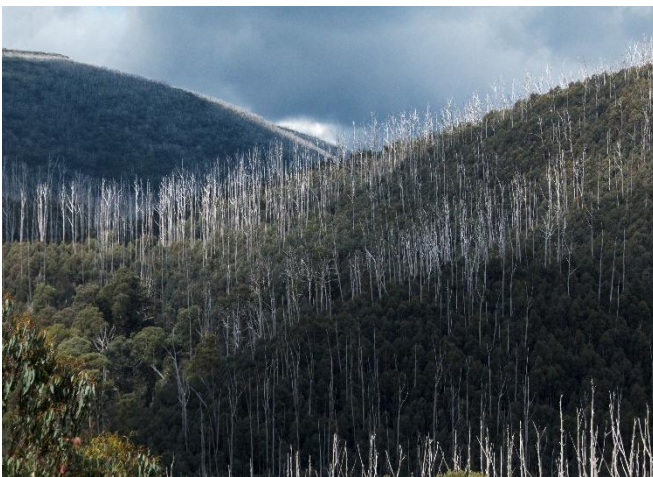
Architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Frank Gehry. Frank Lloyd Wright changed the aesthetics of what a house could look like. He considered passive solar heating and wide eave shading as far back as 1920.

Gehry is a conceptual artist. The Guggenheim in Bilbao is mind boggling (below left). The Louis Vuitton Centre (below right) in Paris is based on the theme of Clouds. Where would we mere mortals even begin to design to satisfy such an unusual brief?



Is there anything else you wish to share?

I've had interest in photography beyond happy snaps for many years. I joined a camera club when I retired. There is a different competition topic every month so there's a challenge to photograph subjects not normally on my radar. I have learnt to photograph the landscape more creatively including more abstract subject matter such as shadows.



Dead Trees Falls Creek



Front Gate Shadows

Thank you Ralph for giving us a sense of the breadth of your creative interests and the background that gave rise to them.