

Susan Harrison-Tustain

a world of watercolour

A midnight phone call from the US gave Susan Harrison-Tustain's career as a professional artist an added dimension.

From humble beginnings Susan is now an internationally recognised artist. Encouraged by her mum to paint as a child, it was only after a visit to Europe in 1990 that she developed the courage to take her artwork to a professional level. Previously painting exclusively in oils, Susan wanted to delve into watercolour as well.

The midnight phone call was an indication of Susan's success in achieving her goal. It was from a large American publisher asking if she would write a book on her painting style for them. *Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor* published by North Light Books of Cincinnati was the result. It is now in its 5th printing, has sold over 50,000 copies worldwide and has even been translated into Chinese. Susan commented that there must be a huge pool of American artists who would love this opportunity and was pleasantly amazed to hear that her work and skill were just what the publishers were looking for.

The added dimension this opportunity gave to Susan's career was exposure in the huge American market and beyond. As a result she is in demand to teach workshops there, and orders for her two instructional DVDs come via her website from all over the world. They also sell well through Amazon.com.

Last year Susan began conducting US workshops. More are scheduled – for Maine in 2008 and Oregon in 2009, with others perhaps in Arizona, California and Florida. "One of the bonuses of conducting the international workshops is visiting new and interesting places with the chance of finding some wonderful painting subjects too."

Susan believes in the importance of sharing her knowledge and experience and conducts workshops in her home city of Tauranga as well. There are two planned for March 2008 and, in addition to Kiwis, there are quite a few Australians attending.

"It's incredibly rewarding to see artists leave my workshops feeling as if they can fly. My style of tutoring is not a 'step



one... step two...' traditional teaching method. I teach an understanding of *how* and *why* watercolour reacts and how to use this knowledge to create paintings that 'speak' to the viewers of the work. It's a little like taking my students to a window and throwing it open so they can see a whole new world of possibilities."

Rembrandt remains Susan's greatest inspiration. His lighting and use of colour, intelligent composition and impeccable observation skills remain her stimulus. She now paints in watercolour and oil. In both mediums her technique consists of building up fine layers of transparent colour. She also paints in great detail which means that her larger works can take months to complete. Not surprisingly her output of originals is small and she only exhibits every three to four years.

"My art journey has been somewhat unconventional. I wasn't taught formally how to paint and I don't exhibit in the traditional gallery manner. Initially I did exhibit in commercial galleries and was fortunate to have sold-out exhibitions, but I always wanted to put my personal stamp on them."

Susan began arranging and hosting her own exhibitions. "I love to create a mood and an atmosphere in my paintings and also at my exhibitions. My goal is to create an 'event' - something that will remain in the memories of those who visit the exhibitions. I feel humbled by the demand for my work and it is a joy to see people become connected to, and absorbed by, the paintings. I aim to

capture the moment and transport the viewer to that 'place' that compelled me to create the painting. The greatest joy for me is when its emotion engages the viewer and stays with them long after they have left its presence."

There's a huge amount of organisation and planning necessary to put one of her major exhibitions together. In the past Susan has done almost everything herself, but for over a year her husband, Richard, has been working alongside her full time. "He does a great job with the administration and he has skills which complement mine. This arrangement allows me more painting time, and it's great working together as a team."

Susan's most recent exhibition was during the last weekend in October at Mills Reef Winery in Tauranga. With large floral arrangements and live music from a chamber trio, Susan aimed to create a tranquil and uplifting atmosphere to complement the style of her work. The official Opening on the Friday evening was attended by 300 people from all over New Zealand in addition to a couple from California. "There's always a big demand for Admission Passes to the Opening, but for practical reasons we need to put a limit on it. It's a great occasion that I look forward to with a mixture of excitement and trepidation."

The paintings are veiled until the exhibition is officially pronounced 'Open'. "When the drapes came down and I heard a collective gasp, I knew that all the long hours of painting and preparation had been worthwhile. Everything ran smoothly during the

evening and on the Saturday and Sunday. I received wonderful comments and feedback and quite a number of people approached me with tears of emotion rolling down their cheeks. It was all extremely humbling."

Of the 23 original paintings for sale at the exhibition most were sold and now have new homes throughout New Zealand, from the Bay of Islands to Christchurch, and two will soon be winging their way to Europe. "I enjoy the notion that something I've created can give pleasure and inspiration to others, not just now, but for years and generations to come." 

To see some of the paintings from Susan's latest exhibition visit: www.susanart.com/exhibition

Artists' truths

- 1 Believe in yourself and your work.
 - 2 A rejection is the best motivation to succeed.
 - 3 'Feel' your subject.
 - 4 Paint what you feel.
 - 5 Reach for the stars.
 - 6 Enjoy the journey - an artist never reaches an end-point.
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