







## BECKONING THE VIEWER

*The long and winding country driveway wends its way past grazing cattle, lush kiwifruit vines, then residences hidden away amidst large, established gardens. This French Provincial-inspired house is the home of celebrated artist Susan Harrison-Tustain. Story: Monique Balvert-O'Connor. Photography: Ross Brown, Vision Media*



THERE'S LITTLE CHANCE I WILL MISS THE RESIDENCE - after all, I have as my guide a home-made map, emailed through by Susan's marketing husband Richard Tustain. I'm tickled by the map gesture. It makes this venture all the more exciting. X marks the spot where I meet Susan amongst her canvasses. The experience is a treasure.

Coming face to face with her varied original pieces provides moving moments, the memory of which I will carry with me long after I leave her side. The naturalistic realism and use of light evident in her paintings are awe-inspiring. The purity and clarity of her work is powerfully poignant.

It's little wonder that the world has found this artist in her tucked-away Oropi haven.

About eight years ago Susan was prompted by an American art book editor to publish a book. 'Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor' has become an international best seller. It is in its fifth printing and has also been translated into Chinese. Spurred on by the book's success, Richard created a DVD of his talented wife's work, with help from a computer-savvy friend. Thousands of copies have found homes all over the world. Susan has since been invited to feature her work on the prestigious London-based Saatchi On-Line Gallery; and has been asked to share her knowledge by delivering teaching seminars in many different countries.

She's opted to hold two workshops a year in Maine, in the United States. There are waiting lists for both. Amongst those attending the last were an Icelander, and a Kiwi reluctant to wait for Susan's next biennial New Zealand workshop.

Similarly, her New Zealand workshops attract overseas artists, and Australians sometimes outnumber the Kiwis. She's made television appearances and her art has often featured on magazine covers, and internationally in art books and magazines. It's not unusual for her New Zealand exhibitions to draw art lovers from South Africa, the United States and Australia, for example. Attendees usually number around the 5,000 mark and queues are the norm.

Her next New Zealand exhibition will be open for public viewing on October 27 & 28 at Tauranga's Mills Reef Winery. (A preview to the exhibition can be seen at <http://www.susanart.com/exhibition/index.html>). And in amongst it all, she paints. Sometimes in oils, sometimes water colours.

#### DIVERSITY AND STYLE

Art on display on easels and walls in her home show her diversity of subject matter - wine bottles amongst time-worn leather-bound tomes, a kingfisher, roses, and a lone red apple on a peeling windowsill.

Her upcoming exhibition will also include a series featuring a young woman - her daughter Shelley - in Provence. In one, Shelley sits lost in thought on ancient, stone steps in a village; in another she's a beautiful bloom in a field of poppies.

These paintings are about elegance, grace and femininity. They could have been painted one hundred years ago - or a 100 years hence. The appeal of the subject and compositions is timeless. So life-like are these paintings that viewers can be excused for thinking they can smell the aromas of wild thyme and see the gentle breeze wafting through the grasses and poppies.

Susan says her backgrounds, foregrounds and objects are carefully chosen as they help define the person or subject. They are all essential to establishing a mood and an atmosphere that depict the nature and character of the subject. Thus, a frame will not confine a sensitively painted portrait.

"I want my work to engage the viewer and to beckon them to become immersed in the moment. I want my work to speak to those who wish to listen. These are the threads I love to weave together to lead us into a more private world where we can capture an unguarded expression or an emotion that describes the person within."

Susan says she's quite simply not happy to stick to one subject. "I'm always challenging myself. I have so many things I want to say through my paintings. One lifetime isn't enough."

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## TRIAL AND ERROR

Susan's a self-taught, Masterton-born artist who stresses she has learnt through trial and error. She's been painting since she was young, selling her first oil painting at age eight. "It wasn't even dry and Mum had it down at the framers and then one of her colleagues bought it."

But, art as a profession is something that's only come about in the last 15 years and it took a trip to Europe to make it happen.

In the early 1990s Susan and Richard travelled as newlyweds to places like Florence, Rome and Holland where they were exposed to "incredible art." Susan describes it as the turning point that fired a true passion to paint and ultimately exhibit and teach.

"When I was in front of these amazing masterpieces I knew what I wanted to do. I didn't envisage being able to paint like that but they touched me so deeply that I couldn't imagine doing anything else. They were so sensitively painted that when I left them I felt as if I knew the sitter, or had actually been in the room where the painting had been created and had felt its atmosphere. I knew then: that was what I wanted to capture. It was a feeling, an emotion, and my dream as an artist since then has been to captivate the viewers of my work in the same way. My art is about creating an atmosphere that is almost palpable."

Amongst the original masterpieces that mesmerised her was Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch'.

"I remember standing in the presence of this Rembrandt painting in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum and feeling an overwhelming excitement to see his amazing use of natural colours, light and shade and the deft moulding of form. I stood in awe to see a two dimensional piece of linen transformed into an almost tangible three dimensional reality."

## ENDURING IMPACT

She delved into other works by Rembrandt. Artistic greats like Vermeer and the more recent Andrew Wyeth are also favourites. The common ingredient, she says, is that their works seem to reach out and touch her in an enduring way. Her words about enduring impact and her praise for Rembrandt's use of light and shade resonate. Centuries later it's surely these qualities that people admire in her work?

Her painting 'I Didn't Hear You Leave' is inarguably a fine example. It depicts a serene, restful scene... with nuances. Her use of diffused light coming through a shaded window creates the intrigue. The painting is warm in hue but cool tones are used in the place Susan wants the viewers' eyes to rest - the vacated spot in the bed alongside the woman. It compels the viewer to stop and imagine. Has her partner left the bed to go and fetch the morning paper? Is he just in the other room? Or, has he left for good?

It's a fine example, she explains, of intelligent composition - how a painting has to be more than just a painting. It has to have a reason for its existence, like a narrative, Susan says. "Pretty is nice, but an intelligent composition holds the attention. It is the thing that can make a painting. It gives depth. This comes from constant observation of things such as dappled light shining through a canopy of leaves in contrast to light bouncing off the foliage on the forest floor. How subjects emerging from rich translucent shadows add mystery and beckon the viewer to delve deeper into the painting."

Such pointers, and so many, many more are what she shares with the students attending her workshops. She tells how one of her international students once asked what she considers the most important thing about her art. Her reply: "to feel the emotion of a moment and capture it for all time is a fascinating and fulfilling joy for me."

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She also tells them to enjoy the never ending journey. "Many of my students focus on 'arriving'. I tell them that this unfolding awareness never ends."

The promise of many more artistic treasures yet to come from Susan Harrison-Tustain's paintbrush is a thought to savour as I head back down the country lane. I leave Susan to her studio with its distant views of water and Mauao. While up close rosellas, wood-pigeons, quails and tui linger amongst the fruit trees and towering gum trees. Picture perfect. ■

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