



Richard Dunlop: Artist

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What did you want to be when you grew up?

It depends on how long ago you mean, but at one stage, travelling to freshwater creeks around the world to catch every type of fish and sell them to aquariums.

What did you become?

A professional artist.

What's your official title?

None that I use or expect others to apply.

What's your background - how did you end up here?

I've had countless solo exhibitions since 1985, and then eventually got around to completing a PhD in visual arts through Griffith University in 2007, for which I was awarded a University Medal for Academic Excellence. Prior to that, I worked in education fields, and completed an earlier PhD through University of Queensland in 1992. So, like everybody else, I ended up here through some focused planning but mostly trial and error.

How would you describe your work to a complete stranger?

I sometimes get asked what my works are like by strangers, and I often wonder what image they have in their heads after I've described them. It's always better, I think, for works to be seen in the flesh. Anything else can only be a lesser experience, equivalent to the difference between an e-mail conversation and a real conversation with the nuances of body language. And as I prefer to set myself new challenges with each exhibition, works from one exhibition to the next can vary considerably. Having said that, I have had an abiding interest, I guess, in reinventing the tradition of still life as a painting tradition, and hybridising it with traditions of landscape and botanical illustration, and somewhere in that mix, I'm exploring the various ways in which botany has been applied to various cultural ends. If a stranger can visualise what that mash-up would produce, that would be close to the current exhibition of works which also have some resonances with the works of Dutch, Italian and Spanish artists of past centuries.

What's the first thing career related you usually do each day?

Read a newspaper.

Can you describe an "average" working day for you?

There is no such thing as an 'average' day for me, in the sense of predictable daily routines. I can spend some months on end day and night painting a new body of work, but there will be days when arrangements are made for transport, framing, invitations, customising works to enter in awards, toeing up future exhibitions, visiting other galleries and auctions and all of the attendant issues associated with being a professional artist. This is but one reason why I love what I do. Every day is different.

Who or what in the arts world most inspires you?

I'm inspired by people like Ian Fairweather who sought to know himself intimately, and to craft an idiosyncratic language with paint. There are others I haven't met, like the Leipzig artist, Neo Rauch or the Dane, Per Kirkeby, who make paintings that, again, are about communicating to the world using a language of paint that they have created through hard-won and complex intellectual rigour. Although painting is seen as something that is not "conceptual" compared to (say) a pile of cut MDF in a room, it is anything but, for those who have grappled with its relentless challenges for decades.

What's the toughest challenge you've dealt with on the job?

Financial survival is always a real issue, with children and dogs and a mortgage. Most importantly, connecting with an audience allows you to make the next body of work, and build ambitious exhibitions. It is tremendously gratifying when an individual loves your work enough and believes in your future to back their judgement with their own money, and I distinguish that from the comparatively risk-free use of public money by institutions making purchases long after support was really needed, or witnessing public money wasted on works destined to languish eternally in basements.

What's the best piece of advice you were ever given for your career?

Art doesn't come out of a white box; it comes out of a life.

What are the top three skills you need in your particular role?

I'm quite proficient at two, and poor at the third: Trying to develop an encyclopaedic recall of art images, so that you can solve visual problems at hand; Working to deadlines; Being polite to people who relish reminding you of the power they can exercise over your career prospects.

What's the best thing about your job?

Flexibility.

And the worst?

Fluctuating fortunes, particularly susceptible to wild variations at present.

And if you had to sum your working life in a word or phrase, what would it be?

To be continued.

BIO

RICHARD DUNLOP

Richard Dunlop comes with a considerable reputation as an artist who extends the empirical accuracy of botanical illustration onto an unexpected scale, and into mysterious contexts.

Figure and still life are sometimes fused with plant form. A fecundity of exotic shapes, strokes, and smudges hint at hidden meanings. Isolated objects journey across the picture plane as gently as leaves in an autumn breeze. There are delicious moments on the surface of Dunlop's canvases, where the organic references dissolve into a fusion of glazed colour shifts.

These are romantic works that unlike pure abstract paintings are layered with secondary meanings.