

Lost in the wilderness

From its deep red mountains to its lush green rainforests, the West Coast landscape continues to inspire painter **Annette van Betlehem**

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If Queenstown artist Annette van Betlehem were a painting, she would be *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, by the 17th century Dutch master Vermeer, with her pale broad features and penetrating eyes. But it's with two very different Dutch painters that van Betlehem feels the affinity – her beloved Vincent van Gogh and the abstract artist Piet Mondrian.

Like van Gogh and Mondrian, she came from a severe Dutch Reformed Church background and, like them, she exploded into colour as she turned from the austerity of Calvinism to finding ecstasy in the visual.

The Tasmanian West Coast's dramatic landscape of valleys full of mountains, mists, rains, rivers, richly varied geology, raw red slopes and green rainforest is both captivating and challenging.

For a landscape painter it's pure gold.

"The West Coast landscape has thrilled me so much," van Betlehem says. "I went to Western Australia in 2008 and did some landscapes there but the desert's pretty boring, really. No texture and the light's harsh. The West Coast forest is almost like a vertical forest. I like the challenge of finding depth in an almost vertical wall of green."

The artist turns her thoughts over carefully before speaking then speaks tentatively, laughing often. A striking physical presence, she stoops a little, as tall women sometimes do to be less conspicuous. But when it comes to her work, she is all strong convictions and perfectionism.

Van Betlehem was among eight local artists who exhibited during October's Queenstown Heritage Festival. She had the walls of her exhibition space painted a very particular shade of grey to set off the colours in her paintings. And people who buy her works get a printed page of care instructions and advice on appropriate framing.

Born in Hobart, van Betlehem had an early career as a department-store window dresser and set maker. She moved to Queenstown in 1990 with her young son Alex and, for a while, commuted between her studies at art school in Hobart and the West Coast.

In 1998, van Betlehem took over the old weatherboard building that had once been the Queenstown Technical College. The building was used as a pottery studio by Pat Hull in the 1970s but had since fallen into dereliction.

She restored it to new life as the Hunter Street Studios, where she conducted workshops in ceramics, photography and painting for the next five years. More than 180 people graduated from short courses she ran over those five years. She also staged nine exhibitions of touring artists and local art shows.

In 2005, van Betlehem found herself still struggling to come to terms with the death of her boyfriend, Mick Shearing, who had drowned while rafting on the Franklin River four years earlier.

"He was my true unconditional love," she says.



CREATIVE: Above, *On the Ledge* by Annette van Betlehem; right, the artist in front of another one of her creations, *Radiant*, in her studio – the special-purpose room of the old Queenstown Central Primary School. "I like 'warming' old buildings and bringing them back to life," she says.

"I was a mess. I just used to sit in the studio doing nothing. I didn't paint at all for two years. When I started again I felt free to experiment because I felt I had nothing to lose."

That experimentation led to a shift from her painting the bare hills around Queenstown to the close-up studies of the bush landscape she does today. She sold the Hunter Street Studio to renowned printmaker Raymond Arnold, who renamed and reconfigured it as LARQ.

Nine years on, van Betlehem runs occasional art programs in West Coast schools and is the organiser of the annual Rosebery Festival Art Exhibition.

Mostly though, since her first solo exhibition in 2006, she has been focusing on her own painting. This year, she relocated from a studio space she set up in the former Rosebery Masonic Lodge to the special-purpose room of the old Queenstown Central Primary School.

"I like 'warming' old buildings and bringing them back to life," she says.

Previously she "warmed" an empty shop in Orr St, Queenstown, and the extraordinary Cabaret Flats building, which had been a dance hall, an ice-skating rink, apartments and a car repair shop over the years, before settling into decrepitude. ➤





I WAS SEEING THE FOREST WITH CITY EYES BEFORE – ONLY SEEING GREEN – BUT THERE'S ALL SORTS OF VIVID COLOURS OUT THERE



AT ONE WITH NATURE: Left, van Betlehem draws inspiration for her work from the landscape surrounding Queenstown; above, one of her creations called *Magnetic*.

The vacant primary school has been extensively vandalised, with smashed windows, crude graffiti and all the copper from the electrical wiring stripped and stolen. Van Betlehem worked through this winter without lighting or heating in her new studio space. She was, however, blessed by the pale light shining into the huge room from walls of windows either side.

On one wall of the studio is pinned a quote: "The studio is an instrument as the piano is to Mozart".

In this studio there are works in progress everywhere you look, bright paint-smeared rags, tables and easels, books about the West Coast's geology and plants, jars of pigment with names such as "Mars orange", "cobalt teal" and "phthalo green", the odd recalcitrant painting with its face to the wall like a naughty schoolchild, survey maps of the West Coast and scenery photos pinned up for reference.

Also pinned to the wall, the words: "Breathing clouds". The latter is a partial quote from the American desert artist Georgia O'Keeffe. Read the full quote and you'll find O'Keeffe was scoffing at the romantic notion that she, as an artist, subsisted on clouds rather than food: "They make me seem like some strange unearthly creature floating in the air - breathing in clouds for nourishment - when the truth is that I like beef steak and like it rare at that."



PLENTY ON HER PALETTE: Above, van Betlehem at work in her Queenstown studio; left, a piece called *Shrouded*. Van Betlehem typically applies 27 layers of paint to each work so she generally has dozens of pieces on the go at any one time – to allow the paint to dry before she applies the next layer.



But van Betlehem's life and art is closer to that romantic notion of drinking clouds. When she is not working alone in her cold pale studio, she is walking alone through the rainforest, or exploring the remnants of past West Coast mining activities, soaking up the sounds of the birds and the wind, the colours and textures of the trees, rocks and capillary-like rills left in the ground by the trickle of natural springs.

"I am more of nature than the human world now," she says.

"I don't notice I'm alone."

Van Betlehem carries the joy she finds in these wild surroundings back to her studio and her work. She mixes her own oil paints from pigments and linseed oil.

"This is to get more control over the colour: you get a purer colour than with pre-mixed paints," she says.

And she encourages the paint to disperse itself across the canvas. You will struggle to see a brushstroke in her work. She typically applies 27 layers of paint to each work. That's why she has as many as 92 paintings on the go at once – to allow the paint to dry before she applies the next layer. The effect is dense, complex, intense and surprising.

Her startling use of colour came about by happy accident – in 2005 she bought a cheap camera to take photos of the local landscape and the camera distorted the colours, making them more lurid.

She started to look at the scenery a bit more closely and found that what she had previously thought of as green was actually shot through with a whole spectrum of colours.

"I was seeing the forest with city eyes before – only seeing

green – but there's all sorts of vivid colours out there," she says. "My daggy point-and-shoot camera transformed my way of seeing."

Another happy accident in August this year led her to experimenting with a stripped-down monochrome palette.

"I took a Dutch student, who was this year's winner of the Abel Tasman Art Prize, on a Gordon River cruise, and there was a big fat cold front coming through. It was a day before there was a big snowfall," van Betlehem says. "I took photos of the scenery that day and they look like black-and-white photos. The cold front had sucked all the colour out of the landscape."

Her paintings bear titles such as *If Solitude Has Ever Led Your Steps*, *Minerals @ Waters Edge* and *Finding North*. They are steeped in the place she lives in and loves.

In 2011, van Betlehem won a scholarship to spend two months in Paris. There she studied the Old Masters in the Louvre and other galleries.

"I also followed Vincent's [van Gogh's] movements a bit and there was one grey and blue self-portrait of his in the Musee d'Orsay that was vibrating on the wall, it was throbbing, pulsating," she says. "In terms of application of paint he used a brush and paint straight from the tube and worked very quickly; it must have been the colour that gave it its depth. Colour was why I liked Vincent so much."

She used her time in Paris to experiment and found herself being influenced by the city's man-made beauty.

"I was also struck by the antique fabrics on sale at a market – the tapestry and, particularly, the lace. And my artwork became much more refined," she says.

"But I still paint landscapes. I've moved from more definite landscapes to concentrate on textures but I'm definitely painting nature and trying to replicate the effects of the elements in landscapes, whether that be wind or light, or rain or running water. I'm getting in closer to the primal constituents of the landscape."

Annette van Betlehem's exhibition *Proposition: Monochrome* is on at the Sidespace Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart from today until Sunday, December 7, 10am-5pm, daily