

STEVE WOODBURY REAL LIFE: ABSTRACT ART

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A work of art is like a monarch.
You have to stand before it and
wait until it speaks to you.
– Goethe.

The experience of standing before a large abstract painting is one that stumps a lot of people. 'What should I be thinking?' we whisper to ourselves. 'What shall I say about it?' These are the kinds of thoughts that often prevent a painting talking to us, as Goethe suggests it might.

Looking at large canvases, especially abstract oils, can be oddly daunting – especially when the artist is standing with you, interested in your response. But, actually, Steve Woodbury is an exception to this rule. Perhaps because his success has already been granted through numerous shows worldwide over the last 20 years. Perhaps because his background in psychology has liberated him from some of the anxieties that beset many artists, leaving him undefensive and genuinely interested in people's responses to his work. And perhaps because his experience of pain during his youth and beyond has pushed him towards a maturity, even fearlessness, which many of us struggle to assume.

The two striking things about Steve Woodbury, on a first meeting, is his stature – closer to an American baseballer than a wasted, garret-dwelling artist. The other striking thing is his calm, blue-eyed, level gaze. Apologising for his lack of gallery space, he takes me into a large downstairs area in his home, stacked thickly with cardboard boxes and bubble-wrapped canvases, many of them huge.

'There is,' he tells me, 'no right or wrong when it comes to responding to a painting. It doesn't have to be something. A painting will speak to you when you least expect it.' This may sound a little gnomic, but actually he doesn't mean it to be. 'The painting will guide you,' he adds, 'if you stop looking for the safety of what is familiar'.

At Steve's last exhibition in Japan, somewhat unusually, members of a blind society attended and were encouraged to get to know Steve's paintings by touching them, leading them to build up such a strong relationship that the blind society ended up acquiring a painting to hang in their offices. Steve saw this as a huge compliment, the fact that they were able to 'get' his paintings through touch, and that their eyes lit up 'like a kid' as they felt them.



Self Portrait

The process of a painting might, Steve suggests, be ultimately more important than the object it captures.

Steve Woodbury is a Tasmanian artist who loves the light of Hobart – with its dramatic landscape and down-to-earth people. Yet he's also drawn to other cultures – particularly Chinese, Japanese and Northern European. 'Painting here in Hobart is like painting in Sweden or Amsterdam – their northern light is like our southern light, only our shadows are harder. It makes my head feel good,' he says simply. But wherever he paints his main love, he tells me, is for paint itself. 'I love the lusciousness of paint', he admits with a quick smile, 'even though it's old technology, there's something beautiful to it – even without the smell of turps!'

'A painting doesn't have to be something', he says again, as if this might be the hardest point to convey about non-figurative painting. 'An apple is an apple is an apple', as Patrick Heron put it. The process of a painting might, Steve suggests, be ultimately more important than the object it captures. 'When you touch the essence of things – especially in paint – it stirs up big things in people. It reflects back the experiences of the viewer – ultimately whatever has happened to you in life will form and influence what you're going to get out of looking at a particular painting'.

As an artist Steve would much rather a strong reaction to one of his large abstracts than a simple "that's nice". Although he's a little diffident about talking about it too directly, Steve thinks that the most rewarding work taps into the unconscious, that knowing yet unknown part of ourselves that we immediately pick up on. This happens in a straightforward way when he has an intuitive vision for a painting, which he then captures on canvas. But it also happens within the viewer, when something in the painting draws him or her in at a deep level, and that can't be fully conveyed in words.

Some people, he tells me, will look out the window and see a tree, whereas others will look out the same window and see shape and colour. Steve sees the beauty beneath the formal qualities of an object.

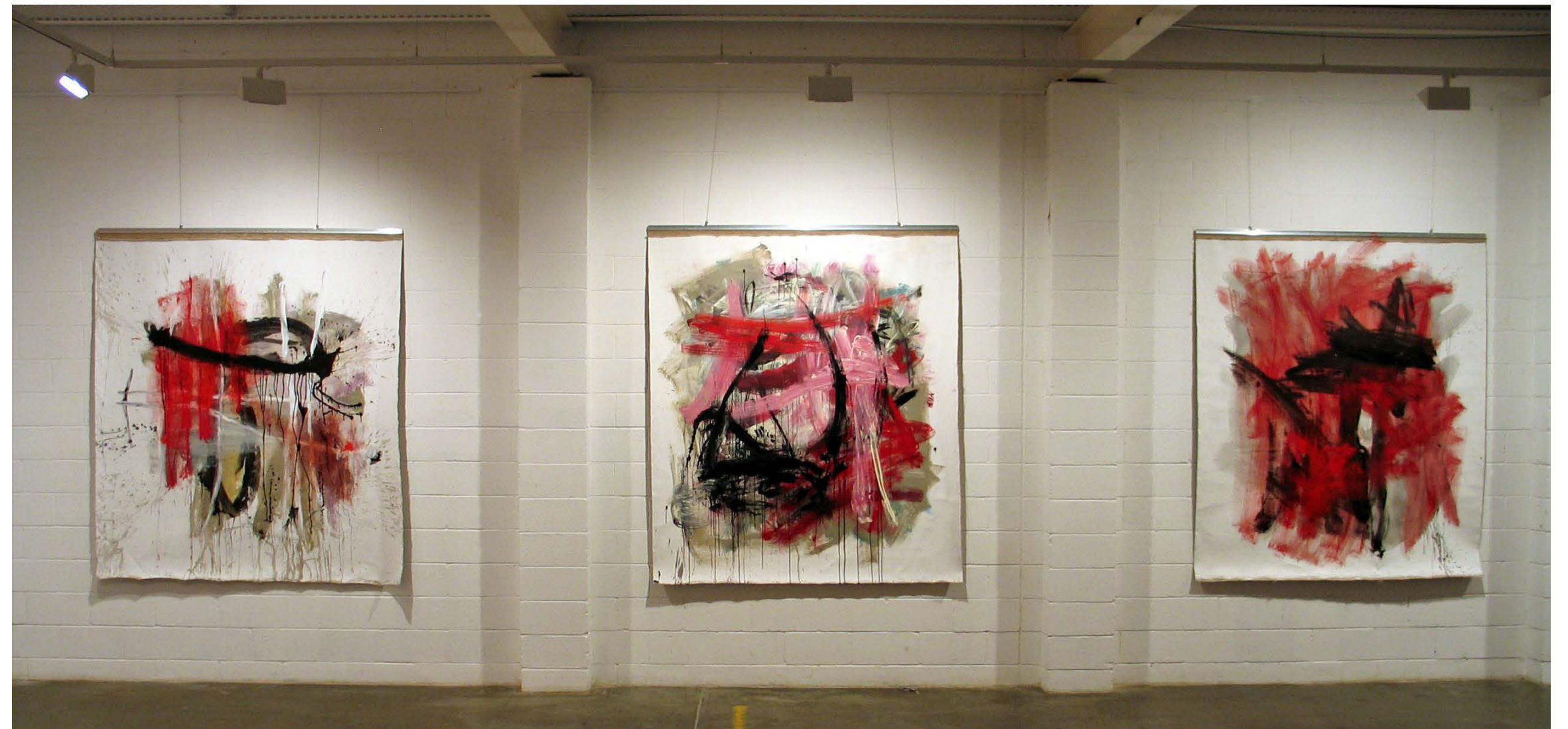


Omnipotent, installation

A painting with these qualities, Steve suggests, is never tired of. It always has something new to offer, another avenue of possibility or train of associations. Contemplating a painting, taking the time to plumb its essence by slowing your mind and letting it speak to you is, in his view, vastly underrated. Many of us, he suggests, are made nervous by this process, instinctively defending ourselves from the dark side that he reckons is within us all. Narcissus leans over to contemplate the water in the famous myth. But what is less well known is that, in one of the myth's variations, Narcissus is dragged beneath the water's glassy surface by a wild man who reaches up from underneath. Steve feels that many of us have preconceived fears about these murky depths within ourselves, and his paintings are partly an attempt to liberate us from them. Wherever there is light, there is dark. 'Black just highlights the light, what you focus on more is up to you,' he says.

Some people, he tells me, will look out the window and see a tree, whereas others will look out the same window and see shape and colour. Steve sees the beauty beneath the formal qualities of an object. He feels that 'people tend to look for what they recognise because there is an illusionary safety in that'. Creativity is, he says, so important. And yet, he says, more and more of our natural creativity is 'taught out of us as kids. When you bribe kids with rewards they soon lose interest in authentic creativity because they start to think more consciously.'

Steve Woodbury is one of a rare breed – a successful Tasmanian abstract painter with no hang-ups. Who, I ask him, is he painting for? Who, I wonder, is his intended audience? Does he paint according to a fashion, or for what a particular dealer thinks might sell? 'Well, no,' he says – 'because to do that would be to lose that vital spark of unconscious intuition, which is the basis for true creativity.'



Omnipotent Shadow, installation

For Steve a painting shouldn't try to stroke the viewer, or make him or her too comfortable. His work is more demanding than this. Like poems, which he also writes, his paintings come from a part of the mind that is more connected to what he calls Universal Truths. Truths like Life, Death, Beauty - and the fact that we begin to die as soon as we are born. These are the truths that, in his mind, affect us all - 'whether we paint realistically or not'.

What, I ask him, marked his move from figurative to abstract paintings? 'I think', he replies, 'that I got bored with technique'. It may have been the inspiration of his father, a proficient drawer and a man of few lines on paper. 'Dad could sketch a dog and you always knew which dog - a few lines and he had the thing. Matisse was the same - three or four lines, with feeling, and you knew exactly who it was'.

'When I was a teenager and had a motorbike accident, it left me with a lot of pain and complications.' But then he found a way through the pain via hypnosis, and realised that he could use this process of conscious and unconscious alignment to tap into his creativity, and even heal his own body. 'After all that experience, I found it left me not so satisfied with drawing like a photo. As a child I got real good at drawing things. I had a good technique'. 'But this didn't mean that the drawing was any the more interesting to look at'. He feels there is an elegance in finding the essence. Auerbach, Soutine, Goya and even Zorn all have an economy of marks which he enjoys. Although there is a similarity to some of the New York School painters like Kline and DeKooning, he feels more of an affinity with the Chinese ink drawers and calligraphers of centuries ago. 'When you look at any great painting you soon realise that for all its technique, there is something more to it beyond technique, something that you can't learn. And it's this bit, for me, that's the most important bit.'

For Steve, the whole trick with looking at art, and even life, is to get the right balance between thinking and intuition to yield the best result. The art of creativity, he feels, is to involve the unconscious without thinking about it consciously. 'It's similar to what happens in sport. If you're standing with a bat in your hands in front of a ball coming at you at 100 mph, and you think about the bat too much, it slows down your reflexes. And it's the same when you're painting or appreciating painting - think less, feel more.'

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Dying from Birth