

Winter Retreat Magnetic Island

I never quite know what I'm going to learn or from whom. Sometimes the other artists around me contribute by simply giving encouragement, sharing their own expertise or creating a sense of acceptance – that it is okay to leave one's comfort zone. The landscapes of workshops are enigmatic, spiritual and intoxicating.

Anita West, Birkdale

Magnetic Island, off the Queensland coast near Townsville, was the location for Flying Arts' 2005 artists' retreat. Winter is a strange word in the tropics, because it is warm, always. So an emphasis on being outside and working with the natural environment seemed an appropriate direction in which to steer the activities.

A tropical island off the coast can feel as remote as a far western property. To be surrounded by sea gives a particular sense of isolation and retreat. All is quiet when the ferry has berthed and only the short snappy break of its bow wave on the beach can be heard: a good place to be lifted away from everyday routines, in order to concentrate on the individual self and the creative impulse.

In designing the week's program, my co-tutor Ron McBurnie and I decided to focus on developing students' individual vision rather than persuading them to work the way we do ourselves. We felt that it was important for them to choose areas of interest, both formally and conceptually, which would be the basis for individual progress. For this purpose our schedule included short lecture sessions in the morning, focusing on specific areas such as the *picture space*, *installation*, *text and image*, *working the dynamics*, and longer studio periods in the afternoons, when the individualised work program came into full swing with half the group doing printmaking and the other half painting. Those who wanted swapped in the middle of the week.

With a holiday camp as our venue two large halls were available as studios. The cool working areas had windows on all sides and the intense light bounced in all directions. The workspace accommodated all participants with a private corner for individual work in the afternoon (or any time for that matter). And, indeed, some worked around the clock, while others at the end of the day relocated to the veranda of the Picnic Bay pub for light pre-dinner relief.

Assured of good weather we could start each day with an outdoor drawing session, exploring various island environments: giant round rocks strewn along the beach and headlands; dense paper bark groves; a bay hemmed with mangroves, their large arched roots like the legs of giant crabs. In the darker distances lurked danger: "Mind the crocodiles!" the locals said but luckily we found none (and none found us!) despite the fact that reputedly five live in the thicker mangrove collars. An unclothed model was organised to pose amongst

the rocks for one slightly overcast morning and, typical of the casual style of the island, no curious spectators came anywhere near us.

Printmaking concentrated on some of the lesser-known techniques – mezzotint, roulette and drypoint – labour intensive but producing stunning tonal results. Not many will forget the ‘rocker’ (I’m not referring to the local talent) and the way it built muscle stamina! The results were quite magical, not only the prints themselves but also the warm glowing copper plate. There were delicate studies of the patterns of palm trunks; the curly leaves of the acacia; the skeletal shape of the large pine trees that find a way of growing between the rocks; a sprig of leaves; a shell or stone found along the path to the beach; or just tiny moody scenes.

In the painting sessions, a very wide range of work was undertaken in about as many techniques as there were participants. There was pen and wash; multimedia assemblage highly individualised in a choice of found materials; traditional watercolour; acrylics, oil and gouache; pastels and collage. The purposes for which these media were used varied from the pursuit of representational correctness to painterly interpretations of the island’s environment, concept-based work and combinations of these suited to total beginners and experienced professionals alike. In the afternoon sessions participants set their own agenda: we were there to discuss or to give critical or technical advice, to have just a good conversation or be left alone if they so wished. For some this meant one to one tutorials to, for instance, improve their use of watercolour while others experimented with new techniques and combinations of media. Several participants produced enough for an entire exhibition in ‘their corner’.

With such individual choices, results varied from sparse pen drawings on rich Indian ink washes to densely textured and lavishly expressive paintings. Some opted for intense realism, while others built bridges between the early morning drawing sessions, the figure and what they had explored in printmaking. Sometimes the work was discussed in group critiques. At all times there was a tremendous link between exploratory process of drawing and the eventual outcomes in printmaking and painting. An exciting mix and, as always when it is good, we as tutors were run of our feet and wished we had more time to spend with each.

After dinner a large variety of topics were tackled and Ron and I spoke about our own work as did many of the participants. Lively discussion followed and bedtime was a flexible curve, with many returning to the studio.

In addition to the formal program we had a little project running the whole week, which was to produce a small installation or mixed media work from found objects. The fruits of this experiment were named and displayed at the end of each day in the dining room and it was almost like Christmas to see what people

had produced. Some highly humorous, rude and lyrical combinations were made and wittily titled involving, amongst many other materials, feathers, coffee mugs or tiny seeds. The favourite installation ploy of repetition was used in innovative ways and found objects were bound, stacked, threaded and juxtaposed. Larger environmental works were also produced on a beach or rocky grove. These were photographed and projected. In many cases new ideas bounced off these whimsical experiments for further application to studio work.

As always at the end of such an intense week it was sad to suddenly disband and not see everyone for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Many group photos were made and exchanged. Mine take pride of place on my studio wall!

I think I speak for all when I say that it was a warm, wonderful and productive week and that it could have lasted longer.

Anneke Silver