

MY ART IS ABOUT MOMENTS; PEOPLE ENJOYING PRECIOUS MOMENTS, MAKING MEMORIES WITH OUR CHILDREN. IN MY WORK, I'M OFTEN TRYING TO CAPTURE THE LAZY SUNDAY AFTERNOON FEELING. ONE OF MY FAVOURITE SAYINGS IS FROM JOHN LENNON: 'LIFE IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE BUSY MAKING OTHER PLANS'. MY DETERMINATION IS NOT TO JUST LET LIFE HAPPEN WHILE I'M MAKING OTHER PLANS, BUT TO ENJOY IT.

David Hooper's ability to put 'life happening' into context with the industrial environment, and his desire to record and preserve the moment through art are central to the paintings of *PORT*. The exhibition captures a quality that is site-specific to Port Hedland: the human story played out against

the massive industrial theatre of the region. It's no secret that everything in the Pilbara is super-sized: endless sky and landscape, mind-blowing amounts of iron ore. Even the trains are several kilometres long, and their ultimate destination is harbour-side here, on the edge of northwest Australia.

Shipping hundreds of millions of tonnes of cargo each year, Port Hedland is one of the world's largest and busiest harbours. Operations on this scale are often on a city's outskirts, invisible as well as inaccessible. But in Port Hedland, anyone coming to the centre of town has



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PORT

AN EXHIBITION BY
DAVID HOOPER



Above: David Hooper, *Palimpsest*, 50 x 60cm, mixed media on canvas, 2011

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a ringside seat for some of the greatest industrial drama in the Pilbara.

And that is one of the town's unique qualities: its ability to accommodate the might of the resource sector alongside everyday life on a human scale; life as it is lived by people not only connected to mining, but also working in retail, hospitality, pastoral and health care, education, public service; small business owners, entrepreneurs, artists like David Hooper.

David's relationship with art has arguably been one of the most enduring of his life. Originally from New Zealand, David came to Port Hedland at the end of the 1980s, after a period trying, but failing, to settle in Perth. When members of his wife's family re-located north, the couple decided to follow, not knowing what to expect, and in Port and South Hedland found the home they had been looking for, and the place where their three children would be born. David says his

instant attraction to the area was because it was so 'off-the-planet different' from New Zealand, the wide blue horizons almost a parody of the storybook phrase 'not a cloud in the sky'.

Initially, David worked as the town's only jeweller, an occupation for which he had trained in New Zealand, but which, during the 1990s, he began to find less fulfilling. Meanwhile his involvement with his local church in South Hedland grew. By the turn of the millennium, David decided to re-train, this time as a pastor, and over the past decade he has built up a loyal congregation at the C3 Church. Throughout all these changes in his life, art and painting has remained a constant, though he still does not have a dedicated space in which to work; his 'studio' is an anteroom at the church where each Sunday, the canvases and tables have to be pushed to one side. But it sounds like he's always managed to find both space and time for his art in the midst of his family and professional lives:

My family are fairly artistic too, though most of them are musical. I think they just think 'Dad paints – that's what Dad does'. They've grown up with me painting in the lounge with a big roll out blind so I didn't get the carpet [covered with] paint, which I usually do anyway, all my clothes get paint on them. [I am self-taught, pretty much, I've learned through books and through practice, experience, through teaching art.] I started by trying to reproduce exact copies of what I was painting, but since then I have been trying to push away from photorealism, be a little bit more abstract.

When David talks of the artists who have influenced him, it is possible to trace the development in his artwork. An early influence was New Zealand artist Graham Braddock, whose meticulously executed rural scenes are characterised by strong use of light. You can see how David's early work carefully explores the intricacies and challenges of this realism. Then Monet



and Dali begin to win through, resulting in a looser, more impressionistic technique, a broader palette, alongside a surrealistic eye. Finally, the influence of contemporary Canadian colourist Mike Svob starts to show. Svob's landscapes push colour way beyond a naturalistic range. But then, boldness with colour is so appropriate for the Pilbara. When you look at one of David's harbour scenes, the bulk of a massive ore carrier in silhouette against the sky, just at the angle of time between sunset and darkness, you are struck by the energy and scorch of it: apricot, amber, carmine darkening through to jasper, carnelian and mulberry. And you realise this is not artistic licence; this palette is played out each day and night against the coastline of northwest Australia. It takes an artist of courage and conviction not to tone it down, but to show it in its almost atomic intensity.

What I've noticed about myself is that when I'm looking at an artwork, I love to see simplicity: simplicity but effectiveness.

Anything worth watching in art – whether it's a gymnast, or a diver, or something of beauty – they make it look so easy and yet it's only because they're putting all the effort beforehand; and so I like to see that in art: I want to make it look easy.

David does not only make it look easy, he makes it look fun. Not for him the quiet contemplation at an easel. His canvas flat on a table, or propped against a wall, he works at great speed, his body constantly moving, squirting acrylic from plastic bottles, spraying the surface with water, rubbing with a cloth to intensify spread and depth of colour. He uses paintbrushes, rags, rollers, spatulas, and hands to work the pigment; applies texture paste, fabric, newspaper cuttings and paper bark to create a patina, which builds up almost like back-story. The image that anchors the painting is extrapolated from a photograph of a Hedland or family scene, which David either uses whole or condenses to a single



detail, then enlarges and photocopies, and applies to the canvas. Acrylic and glue dry rapidly so David applies more paint, maybe this time using alkyd oils. If he has an audience, he tends to work even faster, finding that being observed can bring better results:

I work far freer if people are watching. If I'm on my own, I tend to slow down, but if I'm working in front of somebody I haven't got time to do that, no time for second-guessing, so teaching art has been one of the best things to further my work in the last ten years. I find that demonstrations often bring out some of my best artwork.

He tends to work across a number of canvases at once, each canvas perhaps taking five to eight hours to complete. It's a big contrast to his photorealism days:

If I can't paint it fast, then pretty much I'm not going to paint it. I'm not going to weigh myself down. I don't need the angst;



Spend time with a David Hooper painting and you are interacting with more than one world, more than one perspective.

I don't need to spend three months of time working on one work alone, which is what I've done in the past. I've come to really enjoy experimenting, so I'll try all sorts of different things. You have to get a sense of abandon, a sense of 'uncaring'. Once upon a time if I had brush hairs sitting in the paint or a speckle across the sky in the wrong colour, I'd get so upset and try and remove it or mask it, but now, it's a sense of 'let's see what happens'.

This openness to experimentation means David does not shy away from depicting the personal alongside the abstract, whether he uses a photo of a Sunday afternoon family barbecue on Finucane Island, pastes in extracts torn from a bible which belonged to a late friend, or attaches local newspaper cuttings referring to people he likes or admires. He regards these collaged elements as 'compliments' to those people. Fragments of his daughter's shirt are stuck to one painting, alongside a part of a map of the



Pilbara coastline, the words 'North West Shelf' still visible through the agitation of brushwork on its surface. The colossal hull of a ship awaiting cargo dominates the top half of the painting. But these are not paintings that seek to make a statement. They are visual palimpsests of place and circumstance which have focused on the personal, and which allow the observer to put themselves in the scene, to renegotiate their relationship with the artwork and see it not only as a view of the port, but as a moment which perhaps they could recognise or have experienced. 'My art is for enjoyment', David says. 'Not for making political statements.'

Spend time with a David Hooper painting and you are interacting with more than one world, more than one perspective. His canvases, vigorous with texture and pigment, offer you wide panoramas, a generosity of colour, shape and form that embraces the industrial landscape of his beloved hometown. But when you look closer, investigate the layers

of paint and mixed media, you begin to perceive a deeper subtlety of content, a level of detail that is scaled-down and intimate, almost hidden, yet in no way withheld. You realise that David's renditions of port life, canvases that initially appear loose and expansive, almost to the point of abstraction, are in fact finely-honed portraiture of place; and place in which the human moment is codified and enshrined. The port, its movement and geometry, is the backdrop against which personal story, life experience, family, are lovingly fore-grounded and placed centre stage.

Words by Mags Webster. Photos by Samantha Bell.

A. David Hooper, *Lazy Sunday Afternoon*, 61 x 91cm, mixed media on canvas, 2011
B. David Hooper, *Livvy Loving the Sunset & the Sea*, 45 x 60cm, mixed media on canvas, 2011
C. In the studio with David Hooper
D. David Hooper at work
E. David Hooper
F. David Hooper, *Movers & Shakers*, 30 x 40cm, mixed media on canvas, 2011