

TONY SMIBERT



'apprentice'

Tony Smibert, Deloraine-based watercolourist, is following in the footsteps of J.M.W. Turner. Working with Tate Britain he is researching the techniques of the master he so admires

in watercolours and is universally considered as having raised this medium to the level of a serious art form.

Recognised as having a precocious talent, he was fortunate in that his good business sense enabled him to create new markets for his art, which allowed him to freely innovate. He did not take on apprentices to whom he could pass on his techniques. It was his hope that the Turner Bequest – a gift to the nation of his studio contents – would enable others to understand his methods by study of the works themselves. When Turner died he reputedly bequeathed more than 300 oils, 40,000 works on paper (including 20,000 watercolours) and about 300 sketchbooks. Most revealing were the countless colour studies and sketches he left. A substantial collection of Turner's work is housed in what is now called Tate Britain.

Englishman J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) is widely regarded as one of the finest landscape painters of his era and one of the greatest and most admired watercolourists of all time. He also excelled in oils. Considered an artistic genius, he became known as 'the painter of light'. He used watercolour techniques with oil paints, '[creating] lightness, fluency, and ephemeral atmospheric effects' in his extraordinary and exciting pictures (Piper, 1994, *The Illustrated History of Art*). His later paintings are considered to have been a major influence in the development of French impressionism. Throughout his long career he continued working

WRITER

Lyn Wilson

PHOTOGRAPHER

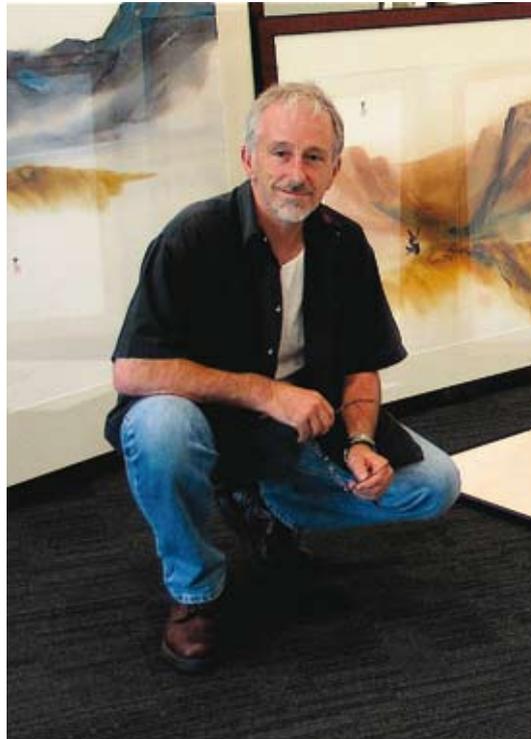
Dave Newlands

ART



Tasmanian watercolourist Tony Smibert is well known throughout Australia and abroad. (See Issue 21.) His life-long passion for Turner started while he was studying at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School and attended a Turner exhibition. The glowing, jewel-like quality of the artist's European studies made a lasting impression. Some years later he came to realise that Turner was an absolute virtuoso. Driven by his enthusiasm for both nature and painting Turner took watercolour into completely new realms, which prompted Tony to 'apprentice' himself to Turner. For many years he has travelled to the UK and Europe, to work where Turner worked, making his own studies on location as well as from Turner's originals.

He admits to being surprised that he was able to identify some of the keys that might now be used to help others understand Turner's methods – to 'unlock', even rediscover, his craft. It is popularly assumed that Turner worked in a chaotic frenzy – driving the paints around in a



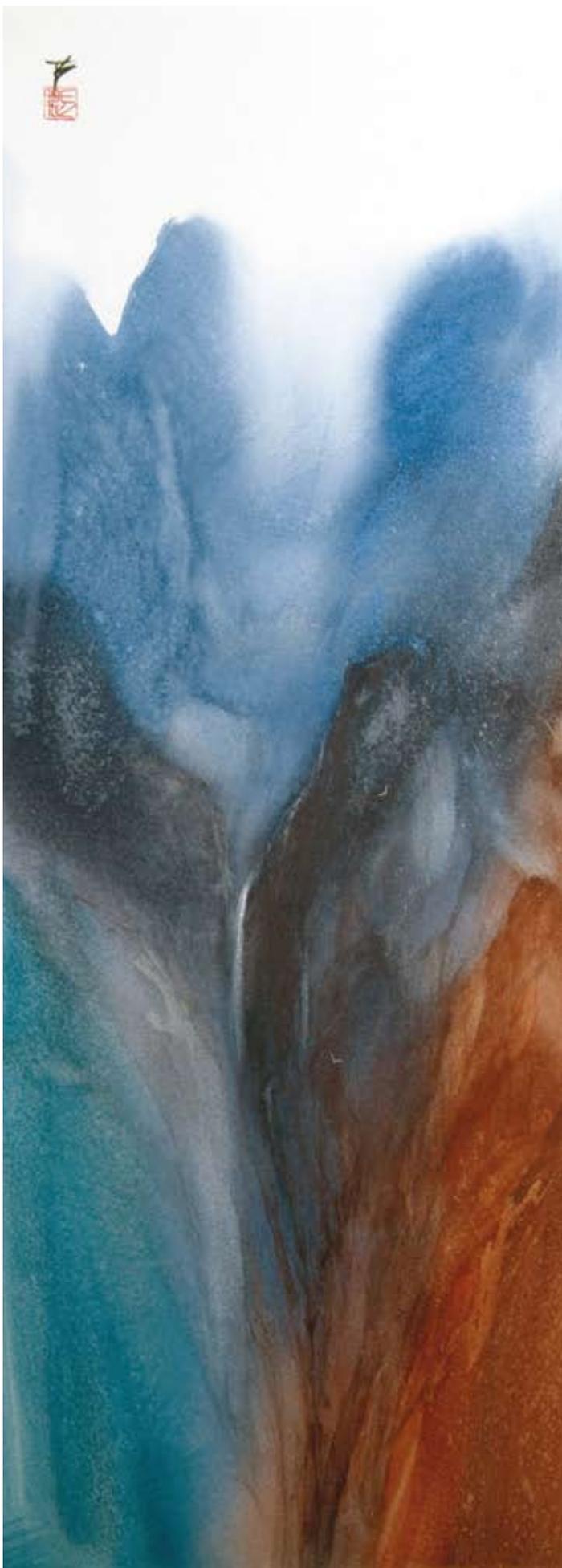
OPPOSITE
Nineteenth-century
watercolour
materials and a
sample of Turner's
own Prussian blue
(top)

ABOVE
*High force, Fall of
the Tees, Yorkshire,*
1816,
J.M.W. Turner
(1775–1851)

Watercolour and
scraping out

Courtesy of the
ART GALLERY OF NEW
SOUTH WALES

LEFT
Tony Smibert



random fashion until he could miraculously proceed to the next stage – the laying in of the wonderful details that are associated with his finished watercolours. The very few observers of Turner at work in a frenzy of activity described his methods as appearing to be formless. In reality, however, he knew exactly what he was doing: Tony's studies have revealed Turner to be a very systematic painter – using and repeating colour harmonies again and again – and far more organised than might have been assumed. Curiously, Turner's techniques were clearly understood by many artists in his own time, but then lost during the twentieth century with its emphasis on creativity rather than craft.

In 1996 The National Gallery of Australia held an exhibition of Turner's work in Canberra. A successful painter in his own right, Tony was invited to lecture at the gallery and demonstrate Turner's methods in conjunction with the show. He met Dr Joyce Townsend, the senior conservation scientist at Tate Britain and a leading authority on Turner (and nineteenth-century British artists' materials). Her book, *Turner's Painting Techniques*, is the definitive reference on the subject. In Dr Townsend's words: 'Turner was an innovative and influential artist who developed modern watercolour methods as we



TONY SWIBERT

OPPOSITE LEFT
Chasm,
2007,
Tony Smibert
Watercolour

OPPOSITE BELOW
Dr Joyce Townsend
preparing paints
at Smibert's
Deloraine studio

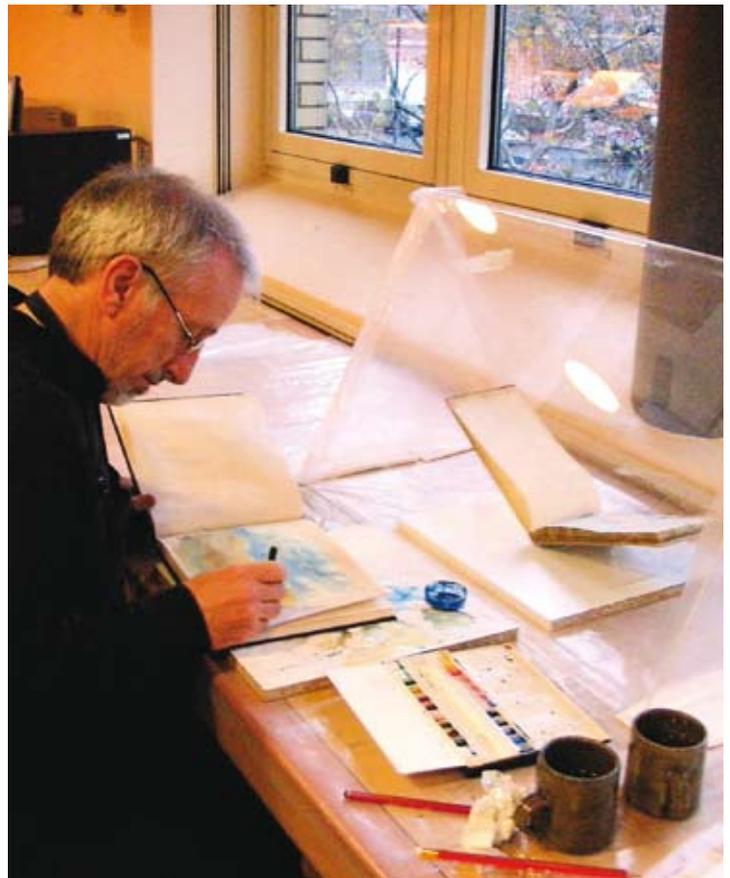
RIGHT
Sentinel,
2007,
Tony Smibert
Watercolour

BELOW
Smibert working
from a Turner
notebook, Tate
Gallery, London



understand them today. He brought the colour and transparency of new ... colours into both oil and watercolour media. His work has spoken to generations of artists as well as to millions of visitors to Tate ... Many of them [ask how he did it]. To answer this fully, it's necessary to work with another artist skilled in the same medium. Tony brings ... a unique combination of sympathy with the artist through close observation of his work, a high level of mastery of watercolour painting, and the ability to communicate about art and painting to people of all ages and levels of experience as artists. He often does this through painting demonstrations as well as words.'

Over the years Dr Townsend and Tony Smibert have developed a working friendship that has led to his collaboration with the Tate as a visiting artist researcher – helping Tate to understand, explain and conserve Turner's watercolours. Tate Britain personnel want to recreate Turner's papers, paints and techniques and see how these are affected by different conservation practices. As well, Joyce Townsend and Tony are collaborating with Tate curators to produce a book for Tate Publications that will explain and illustrate Turner's methods – for the



JULIA BEAUMONT/JONES



*This Fleeting
Moment,
2007*
Watercolour

public in general, and specifically for students, artists and researchers. A documentary about Turner's life and art is also planned. In addition it is hoped that display materials will be created to illustrate key stages in some of Turner's major works in the Tate collection.

Tony's interest in the 'golden age of English watercolour' (1750–1850) and pursuit of Turner's approach have revealed that 'what I once called "traditional" watercolours are, in fact, relatively modern, yet the great tradition of Western watercolour is actually very experimental and creative. I think Turner would certainly have been an abstract painter and in one sense, by the end of his life, he was!'

Working at the Tate amongst Turner's originals and occasionally using Turner's own paints to create watercolours himself is something of a dream come true for Tony Smibert. Talking to him about his collaboration with the Tate you can sense his exhilaration: 'It is one of the most

exciting projects I have ever had the privilege of being involved in.'

And a rare honour too, that a Tasmanian artist has been chosen to assist this famous institution. ☒

Further reading

Jonathan Bowden

'Zen and Watercolour: Tony Smibert'
Craft Arts International
Issue 38, 1996–97, pp. 57–60

Turner, 1996

Michael Lloyd (ed.)

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Tony Smibert *et al.*, 2006

*The Art of Tony Smibert: The St John
Ambulance Collection* [WA]
Studio Editions, Deloraine, Tasmania

Joyce Townsend, 1993

Turner's Painting Techniques
Tate Gallery, London



Tony Smibert

Based in Tasmania, Tony Smibert is a watercolourist represented in numerous corporate, public and private collections. He has been acclaimed for his art, his contribution to art research and his skills as a teacher and communicator. He is best known for his non-figurative images, 'traditional' landscape studies and minimalist images. His paintings are frequently described as being a synthesis of East and West, the

result of a lifetime's interest in art and Asia. In the words of Tasmanian artist Jonathan Bowden: 'Few artists have succeeded in reconciling the romanticism of Western landscape painting and the pantheism of Eastern artistic tradition as effectively as Tony Smibert.' Tony has had more than 40 solo exhibitions throughout Australia and around the world, and is the author of a best-selling book on watercolour methods.