



Music and MOVEMENT

Aussie Michael Berry tells Lynn Parr about hearing music in pictures and seeing art in science

Michael Berry has an unusual gift, one that most artists would covet: he hears music when he sees pictures. It's a form of synaesthesia – a neurological condition in which the senses are linked – and Berry has used it to great effect in his swirling, vibrant paintings, which vibrate and fizz with orchestral grandeur.

"My brain seems wired to be dominated by visual perceptions," he says. "I'm fascinated with the images we make, both technically and psychologically – it is the predominant way the brain processes information."

His paintings express what he calls "symphonic space", the area beyond ordinary space and perception, which follows the laws of musical

composition rather than the traditional rules of art. In this world, the viewer is part of the painting: vanishing points lead down alleys and present unexpected views and emotions – you see with peripheral vision and hear the music of the painting, rather than just look objectively at a flat surface.

This visual appreciation of the world was pronounced at an early age; teachers at school thought he had a reading problem because he only read books with pictures. Though both parents could draw, and his mother grew up with famous Australian artist Arthur Boyd and his artistic family, art took a back seat to their careers in medical research, since art was not

considered a suitable career choice at that time. Berry also went into science at first, working as a pharmacology lab technician. Yet art remained at the back of his mind.

"When I was about five years old I asked my mother why anyone would bother to paint the *Mona Lisa* because she seemed so miserable. Her answer stunned me at the time and I've never forgotten it, as it started me thinking about art, its meaning and how it related to human thinking and consciousness. She said: 'You have not understood. If you look at her hands, you will see that they are the most beautiful ever painted'."

Berry began studying the work of the Old Masters, and did well in art at school. But science

dominated. "Although I have always seen the art in science and the science in art, both depend totally on universality, not subjectivity." His first foray into art as an adult was illustrating scientific publications at Melbourne University, where he worked. In the 1970s, he studied with sculptor Robert Langley, then started exhibiting his own carved stone sculptures.

In 1979, he began painting while continuing with sculpture. Many of his large works are in public spaces in Australia and the US. "There is only one medium in art: 'thinking'. I don't confine my art practice to painting. There is also collage, assemblage and sculptural installations."

Then, in 1988, just as his career was taking off, he had a sudden clarity of vision, which resulted in him 'rebooting' himself. "I realized I was a totally self-centered artist who thought he was a genius, who talked big, justified big and clever and painted little. That was precisely when I saw that 'I' was the ego game and that I no longer wanted to play that game. So I destroyed all my work that I could get my hands on – all press clippings, photos, drawing books, materials."

A year later, he picked up the brush and began again. "I contend that Australia has not yet had an artist who has significantly contributed to the universal language of art. I also deny that 'painting is dead', so that is from where my current work arises."

Drawing is an important part of his continuing artistic development. "To me, drawing is the basis of all spatial illusion and visual thinking. This doesn't mean that all my paintings arise from drawing, but without constantly drawing and developing the 'mind space', there is no visual prepared zone in which to function as an artist. To me, art and life are not separate, so self-inquiry precedes and overlaps all pictorial realization of thinking processes and patterns."

As his artistic vision has developed, he has



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tried to paint what he believes other artists leave out. He even started leaving out himself by signing his works on the back instead of the front. "The work started connecting with people as it was not compromised by other ego issues. A collector then invested in over 35 works and things slowly opened up."

Allergic to turpentine, Berry mainly uses acrylics for his paintings. "I regularly combine drawings executed in different mediums such as charcoal, graphite, coloured pencil, pen and ink and occasional combinations," he says. "I often spend from 200 to 300 hours on a work. One collage took me nearly a year (probably over 600 hours). As I don't repeat myself, I treat each work as a masterpiece and don't cut corners. I have completed a large canvas in a few hours, but the result is very different in its intent. I am at my painterly happiest when I am pushing into unknown and unfamiliar territory, so time doesn't really matter. After all, you don't value a painting

by an hourly monetary rate."

Although he began with realism, after studying the work of other artists, he concluded that the only way to adequately express what the imagination could see was to use abstract forms. "It seems obvious that there is only one possible avenue open to understanding the brain's reliance on the visual for knowledge and new information, and that is to decode the building blocks of the imagination. The work I explore has its roots in the brain's memory as knowledge, encoded and retrieved as tangential thinking. It's how animals perceive, using the area of vision from the peripheral to the focus; it's how they pick up movement of potential friends, enemies and food in their environment. So the abstraction I explore is from peripheral to focused vision – along with colour depth perception, and implied linear movement across, through and off the picture plane."

In other words, the viewer becomes part of the

work, which changes their perception of reality.

"Occasionally, I reintroduce realism as a way of unblocking any rut my eye and hand might have unknowingly fallen into – copying oneself and recycling only breeds conditioned responses and lifeless pictures. For a painting to remain dynamic it must have change built into its structure."

Although well-known in Australia as a sculptor, art journalist and author, Berry believes his painting is not always understood Down Under.

"In Australia I am quite out of step with current trends. That said, those who connect with my work do so wholly. When a viewer 'gets' my work they get it completely; there are no half measures. I have had a number of offers to exhibit in New York and other similar art centres, but it's more important for me to find the right relationship with the gallery. The agent's personality and vision and the artist's vision need to be in tight sympathy; otherwise, exhibiting just becomes a fashionable and commercial concern, and then art becomes dictated by forces outside, rather than arising from an artist's inquiry. I refuse to compromise just for commercial success or public fame: the bigger artistic picture is far more important to me."

Berry is currently designing a pair of large stained-glass panels for a client's home, and has been invited to submit a proposal for four large

paintings, "which will give me a fantastic opportunity to work on an expanded scale, which I love."

"However, my dominating preoccupation remains that of developing the universal language of art; opening doors in the mind that were slammed shut by critics such as Clement Rosenberg, who promoted the dead end of 'flat-plane abstraction' by sidelining and ignoring brilliant spatial illusionists such as Chilean artist Roberto Matta. The message I'm trying to get across is that abstraction arises out of skill; not because the artist is a bad painter, or doesn't have anything to say except statements about one's personal experiences, political views, emotional intelligence and the fashionable kinky-funky-bent school of conceptualism – all fine but missing the point about the value of purely visual thinking."

Brief life

Michael Berry began his artistic career as a scientific illustrator for Melbourne University, Australia, 1972-77. His first exhibition as a sculptor was in 1977, and he later began exhibiting his paintings and drawings. His sculptures, paintings and installations are in public and private collections worldwide, and he is also an art journalist and author. See www.michaelberry.com.au.

Page 47:
Michael Berry with *Sunset Sea*, acrylic on canvas, 4.3m x 1.5m, a commission for Singapore Marina

Above:
Sea Change, oil on canvas, 92cm x 153cm

Page 47 bottom:
Serenade to Peace, acrylic on canvas, 102cm x 102cm

Right:
Migration, acrylic on canvas, 92cm x 122cm

