



## TODD HUNTER: NAILING THE GESTURE

THE CHARACTERS THAT INHABIT TODD HUNTER'S WORLDS ARE GESTURES, DRAWING ON SPEED, CHANCE, MEMORY AND SENSIBILITY, WRITES **ASHLEY CRAWFORD**. PORTRAIT BY **NICHOLAS WATT**.

**T**odd Hunter is an alchemist of form. Neither strictly speaking a figurative or abstract artist, he takes the colours and shapes of the natural world and pushes them through the blender of his fecund imagination. In many ways it is a ruse; we see a landscape or a figure even though he actively avoids the literal rendering of tree and sky, or, as in these most recent works, the human form. But they are clearly, vividly there.

Hunter began showing in 1991 and held his first solo exhibition in 1994. Since then his career seems, like his painting, to have taken off with a turpentine-fuelled life of its own with immensely successful exhibitions at GRANTPIRRIE in Sydney, Scott Livesey in Melbourne, BMGArt in Adelaide and Andrew Baker in Brisbane.

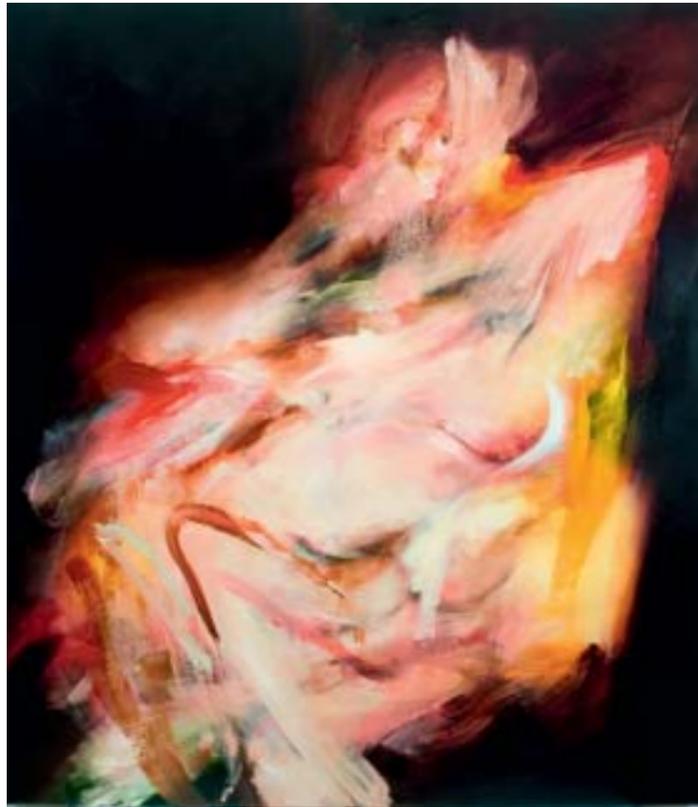
In essence this is because, unlike so many of his contemporaries, Hunter truly loves to paint. There is simultaneously a gentle lyricism and a violent cacophony occurring in these paintings, as though he is capturing the shifting seasons, the movement of light, the sensual form of the female figure, through some system of time-lapse capture. The paint is applied with an energy that reflects the winds, the tides and the power of light as it reflects off thighs and breasts on the beach, swirling us into his almost hallucinogenic world.

Hunter's most recent work embraces that iconic Sydney subject: the beach, what the artist describes as "this great arena of playful activity, changing weather and sensuality/sexuality".

Indeed, if there is a singular core thematic to Hunter's oeuvre it is sensuality. In the past he has tackled the bush of Central Australia and the female nude with equal exuberance. His disparate subjects are linked by a languid sense of line work and a distinctive palette that, while at times muted, is applied with such vigour as to take on a life of its own. "The painting studio resembles an abattoir and reeks of paint and turps," says his Melbourne dealer, **Scott Livesey**, "like blood in a slaughterhouse, paint covers every surface."

Invariably there is an element of abstraction. The figure is "imagined and remembered," he says. "The landscape and figure interpreted in the state of flux in which they both meet and interact. To discover through paint a human presence excavated through the armature of landscape and the expression inherent in this form."

In many ways Hunter is an old school artist, relying upon the power of the line, even when applied with punishing force. "The figure is very much informed from my life



drawing heritage where it was stressed not to illustrate, but rather *nail* the gesture," he says. "Subsequently the human presence is, if successful, essentially a gesture. 'The sensation without the boredom of its conveyance,' as **Francis Bacon** would say."

Hunter's love for music is abundantly clear in these epic canvases and in conversation he cites its importance with regularity. "The songwriters that I am influenced by – The Dirty Three, The Drones, **Bob Dylan**, **Nick Cave**, **Tom Waits** – often use the landscape as a metaphorical space for their characters to inhabit," he says. "So, when painting, and listening, these characters and landscapes begin to take on a form in my head, which can then be interpreted in paint, and hence influence the marks being made. And like music, the paintings evolve from the successful pulling together of disparate elements – speed, chance, memory and sensibility – that need to be harnessed to create a cohesive whole."

"While Hunter's works tip their hat to the past masters of abstract expressionism, they more importantly reveal an artist seeking to redefine this classification of painting for the future," says **Tony Stephens**, director of GRANTPIRRIE. "With a deftness of touch and resolute determination, Hunter creates canvases of both aesthetic and conceptual grace."

**Andrew Frost**, writing on Hunter's work for the blog *The Art Life*, took a similar line. "He's a painter who knows how to do something so very few know how to do – push paint around a canvas," Frost stated. "With a solid education

*"The painting studio resembles an abattoir and reeks of paint and turps. Like blood in a slaughterhouse, paint covers every surface."*

From left:

Todd Hunter, *Some Summers*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 183 x 160cm.

Todd Hunter, *About a Girl*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 160 x 150cm.

Todd Hunter, *Untitled 12*, 2006. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 48 x 39cm.

Todd Hunter, *I don't mind you coming here and wasting all my time*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 183 x 160cm.

PHOTO: JENNI CARTER. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

## SCOTT LIVESEY DIRECTOR, SCOTT LIVESEY GALLERIES

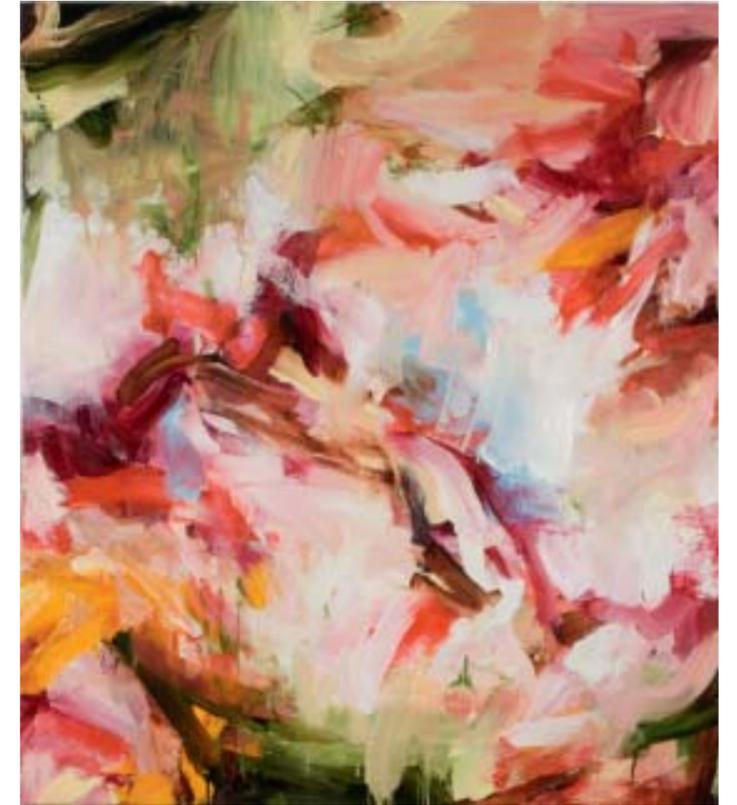
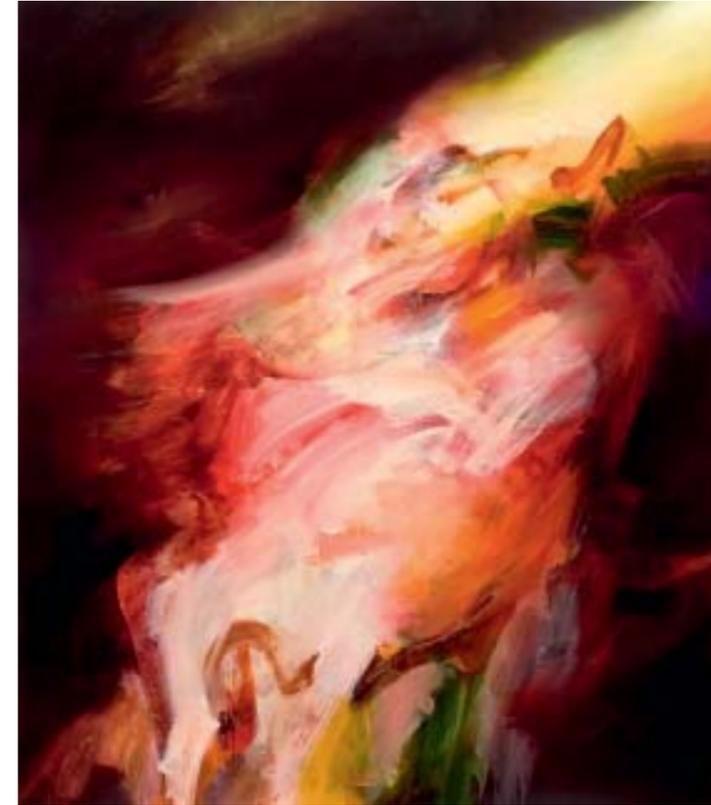
"In a world of video and conception, smoke and mirrors, **Todd Hunter** is a breath of fresh air. An exciting painter, bold and confronting with a very renaissance approach.

"Hunter can draw. A master of form and space, with a stroke of lead or pastel often smudged or sanded back, remarkable forms appear. Whether figure or landscape, like **Rees** or **Whiteley**, an inescapable physicality or eroticism exists.

"The studio occupies the middle level of his vast terrace house on the park in Randwick. The drawing room is clean and solitary – a simple wicker chair and easel. The wall is peppered with images of his numerous icons – **Guston**, **Baselitz**, **Rembrandt** and **Bacon**, **Dylan**, **Richards** and The Drones. Music is a seminal part of the process. Each room has its own sound system and is littered with records and CDs. The painting studio resembles an abattoir and reeks of paint and turps. Like blood in a slaughterhouse, paint covers every surface – the walls, floor, stereo and bar fridge. This is where drawing gives birth through paint to his confronting canvases. On his eight-foot trestle live dozens of paint tins, brushes and pallet knives.

"Some nights are spent listening to music and just mixing paint – others, all night frenzied sessions – pushing and pulling across the canvas. For those who love and collect paintings in oil, Hunter's work is modern and exciting. His dark canvases have a luminosity of old master painting from any century whilst his explosive colour paintings owes a debt to [avant garde movement] Cobra and the great expressionist painters of the last century."

*Ashley Crawford*



in the hard-luck boot camp of Julian Ashton [Art School] and a degree from Griffith University, he knows how to work oils. You find in his large canvases gestural elements sitting next to subtle illusionist effects like light and volume.”

For so long the critical line had it that painting was dead, which would certainly make Hunter’s work – let alone his subject matter – obsolete. It takes either enormous courage or a purely devil-may-care attitude to even contemplate going back to the female figure on the beach, with its inevitable suggestion of another Sydney-based artist who was also inspired by Francis Bacon. But where **Brett Whiteley** became more and more graphic (and more and more commercial), Hunter is on another trajectory altogether. He is seeking the essence, not the simple form. He eschews the literal to seek the core, the *feel* of the flesh in sun and water and its inevitable attendant eroticism.

“Todd Hunter’s fleshy flourishes return us to the curves of **Rubens** while his exuberant paintwork recalls the epic gestures of **de Kooning**,” says writer and curator **Natalie King**. “Together, Hunter relishes the expanded possibilities of paint on canvas with all its historical overlays.” n

Todd Hunter is exhibiting at Scott Livesey Galleries in Melbourne until 25 April 2009. He will also be staging a solo exhibition at Sydney’s GRANTPIRRIE in October this year.

*“Like music, the paintings evolve from the successful pulling together of disparate elements – speed, chance, memory and sensibility.”*

From far left:

Todd Hunter, *Out in the Rain*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 160 x 140cm.

Todd Hunter, *Waiting for the Sun*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 160 x 150cm.

Todd Hunter, *Shark Fin Blues*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 183 x 160cm.

PHOTO: JENNI CARTER. COURTESY: THE ARTIST