

creative artist in print



jeffrey baker

Jeffrey Baker's positive and bright celebrations of the Australian landscape highlight the sheer beauty of our environment: the arc of a crystal blue wave with a layer of fish dancing beneath the water and a sun-drenched beach so vivid you feel almost immersed in the warmth of the scene.

The artist himself has a warm but quiet stillness about him, a calm and heartfelt intensity. There's certainly no sign of the flamboyant extrovert you may conjure, having seen his contemporary fine art first and then met the man behind it later.

With his curly blonde locks, long board shorts and boaties, his explanation of his Coffs Harbour studio is modest. The gallery itself is layered with his prolific works, all so bright and intricate they command immediate attention. Wrest your eyes off them if you can.

Jeffrey and wife Gail have just returned from commercial exhibitions in Sydney, thankful they have the chance to work in metropolitan centres then return to their more serene environment, the place they have chosen to raise their three children, in a timber house on the fringe of Coffs Harbour's CBD.

At the time of our interview, preparation had commenced on Jeffrey's seventh annual summer exhibition at Quality Resort Nautilus which runs from December 30, 2004 to January 23, 2005, a showcase of his latest works which sees him interacting with visitors, some of whom will ultimately be purchasers.

It is an unusual arena: Jeffrey is personally on hand for much of the four week exhibit, acting as much as 'an ambassador for Coffs Harbour' as an artist discussing his work with the tourists and locals who come to view it. There are those who schedule a visit every year, journeying varying distances to see his latest collection.

Those who knew Jeffrey in his early artistic days 26 years ago would certainly find the set-up unusual. An almost reclusive man in his late teens and early 20s who wasn't comfortable in larger groups, he spent most of his time alone

visiting galleries and being paid for commission work under the umbrella of a Bondi gallery owner.

His unease in a broad social context was the legacy of a childhood on the move. Prior to his parents' break-up during his teenage years, Jeffrey shifted from country to city for his father's role as a sheriff, never settling long enough to make solid friendships or hone a particular interest, such as art.

"I had no idea what I would be in my life. I guess the only linkage that I can recall is my mother talking about Norman Lindsay. He was a relative of my mother's and they used to have lunches together, and Norman would be there drawing on the kitchen napkins. They always used to enjoy these times together as a family," Jeffrey said.

"My mum painted, but not to the degree that I'm doing it. She started later in life and did mainly oil painting and pastel work as a hobby."

Perhaps because he was never introduced to art in a formal environment, Jeffrey's first foray into paid artistic work was with an unusual medium – he painted on surfboards.

"I became aware of colour, of shape and form and things of that nature and as I grew I became involved in the surfing industry up and down the east coast of Australia. I used to paint wonderful surfboards," he said.

"I was able to travel for my work at this stage, having no commitments or connections grounding me to any one area."

Jeffrey worked in Coffs Harbour for a while, and also spent a year in New Zealand, where he realised he needed to consider career goals and set a plan for his life.

"I was sitting in my car one day staring at a New Zealand beach. It was a very busy Sunday, and every surfboard that I could see had my artwork on it. I thought at that moment: 'I've done as much as I can do here'."

A move to Sydney's northern beaches was soon traded for life on the other side of the Bridge after Jeffrey found himself drawn to the galleries of the eastern suburbs. An architect friend from Coffs had told him to contact a gallery operator at Bondi, who began helping Jeffrey pay the bills as an artist.

"He was pretty supportive really. He set me up in a studio space and provided for me financially to start to paint and he also knew a lot of people.

"I think my life at that stage was a little Bohemian because I didn't have a lot of friends. Socially, I felt very much an outsider. I went head-long into it, looked at art all the time, went to galleries, went on gallery mailing lists and absorbed myself in the whole process," he said.

By the time the gallery owner relocated to Queensland, Jeffrey decided to break away from Sydney, moving north to Coffs Harbour where he'd met future wife Gail, who had a printing business.

He continued working with a variety of mediums, until a visitor to one of his exhibitions commented on an abstract painting of particularly high artistic value, and urged Jeffrey to be 'true to himself,' and 'close the books' on other styles of work.

As a result, Jeffrey's career started to become more focussed.

"I did close the books, I didn't go looking any more. I didn't go to visit galleries like I had, seeking my source of inspiration. It was already installed within me. I just needed to know how to tap into it and get it acting," he said truthfully.

Around the same time (12 years ago) Jeffrey was going through a difficult period personally and found himself sitting in a Sydney church listening to an evangelist. The experience struck a chord and Jeffrey credits his subsequent decision to become a Christian with the positive and enriching outlook of his work. He believes his faith improved every facet of his life.

"I wanted to be a happy man, to try to be something worthwhile in my life. It's not a religious thing, it's a relationship with God in your heart," he said.

His new positive outlook and inner peace was reflected in his work, his bold and bright landscapes offering a contemporary bent to an ever-popular form of artistic expression.

"I wanted to make my pictures a lot more interesting, a lot more diverse than just a flat screen. So I started to work with all these different sections (of technology) and realised it wasn't just a fashionable thing to adopt, there was a whole new vehicle of design, of colour.

"Being able to use the landscape, using all the formulas that are part of our world, the rocks, the trees, the skies, the earth the plant shapes and combining them into one thing. They're really good fun to do," Jeffrey said.

Aside from the commissions, private collections and awards over the years, Jeffrey also has public work, including a piece titled 'Let's Be Thankful' which he said he was inspired to do for the new Coffs Harbour Health Campus.

Jeffrey says his ultimate aim is to be a good 'storyteller' with his work and an 'author of pictures'.

"I want the pictures to be like you've heard a really good song, and it's a song that just won't leave you alone and you're attracted to that song because it's got all these really nice components to it. I like to do the exhibitions because they're more than just one song. It's actually my whole album," he said.

Jeffrey Baker's studio and gallery is at 72 Moonee Street, Coffs Harbour and is open from Wednesday to Saturday from 10.30 am to 5.00 pm and Sunday 1.30 pm to 4.30 pm. For more information or a special appointment contact Jeffrey on 6652 8099 or 0403 202 699. www.jeffreybakerstudios.com.au



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