

Artist's African watercolours are simply 'uplifting and inspiring'

■ Trip to Ghana brings colour into Davis vision

■ Storms and droughts give images real depth

VAILA Fine art is currently holding an uplifting and inspiring exhibition of watercolour paintings by well known local artist Peter Davis.

Davis has recently returned from two years spent in West Africa with VSO where he was training teachers. Based in Bongo in the Upper East of Ghana, he also travelled widely in the region.

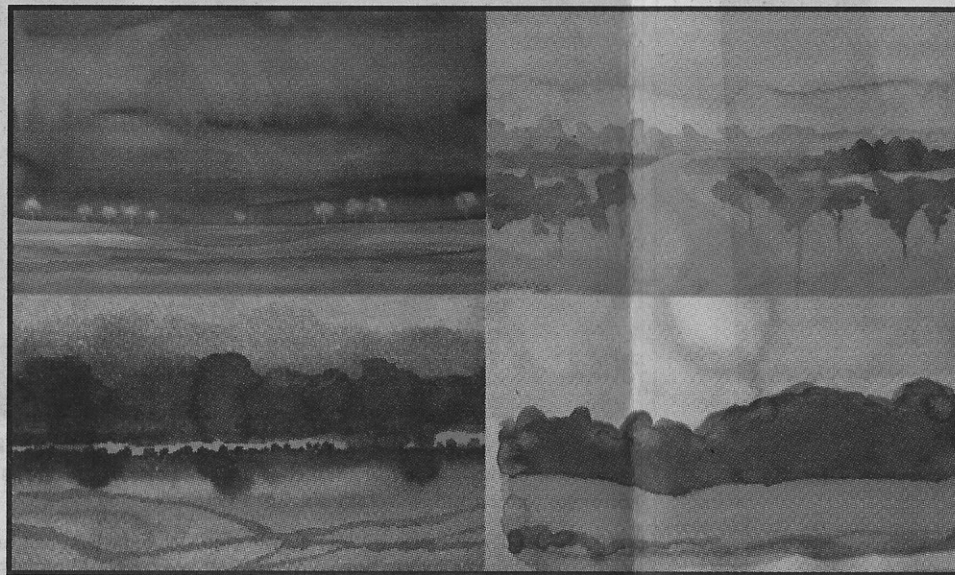
All the works except for the three larger pieces were painted in Africa and they document the artist's adventures in this beautiful and dramatic landscape.

The paintings veer towards topographical depictions of the landscape, and are a marked departure from the floating abstracted watercolour forms that have dominated his Shetland work.

Colour is probably the biggest change in his work and the gallery hums with vibrant pinks, glowing oranges, heady deep purples and refreshing greens.

Working over a period of two years gave Davis time to experience the different seasons which are "only wet or dry" and to see and feel the specific colour changes associated with them.

He says: "In the dry season every



patch of green turns brown or yellow and in the wet season the vivid colours return, especially green. And then you get the violent storms with purple or even dark brown skies."

His favourite time to paint was dawn and dusk and the larger work called *Heat* is dominated by the intense glowing red band of setting or rising sun on the horizon. This piece demonstrates the artist's mastery of watercolour in pulling off the difficult task of making the sun glow brightly from within the painting.

There is a powerful work on the end wall called *Approaching*

Storm, inspired by a motorbike ride in which he was being pursued by giant storm clouds and as he looked over his shoulder the trees glowed near white against the violent grey sky.

The artist has obviously been very deeply touched by his time in West Africa and the drama inherent in many of the works is testament to this.

Some of the works take on a near mystical edge, hinting at an underlying spirituality finding expression with colour and light.

Indeed the work could be read not just as a record of a physical journey but a spiritual journey in

which the artist has left behind the comfort and security of his western life and headed into a culture that is in closer contact with and more dependent on the land.

The Orange Road leads us through an arid sun-baked landscape towards a cooling blue horizon hinting at release and refreshment from the overpowering heat of the sun. Other works depict a landscape criss-crossed by a myriad of tracks and Davis says in his introductory text: "Take one and it will divide many times, insisting on decisions - which path do I take?" He dedicates the show to the people of West Africa who he says

"showed him the right tracks to take".

Watercolour dries fast in Africa, meaning he was able to finish a piece in a day keeping the works fresh and spontaneous. The artist says he was constantly surrounded by people when he worked, and this is possibly why the work has moved away from the deep abstract musical introspection of his studio based Shetland work.

Taking a lesson from Turner, he has included opaque white body-colour in his pallet, enabling him to put glowing light tones over intense darks. However, these works are not so much painted in the spirit of Turner as in the northern expressionist tradition epitomised by that other master of watercolour Emil Nolde.

Broadly speaking the work is divided into two categories, the lightly worked transparent on the spot studies often torn from sketch books and the more heavily worked pieces that are redolent with emotion.

This show will make you want to paint and it complements perfectly the superb draughtsmanship and graphic genius of Ron Sandford who is also exhibiting there.

It is a privilege to be able to see the work of these two highly talented local artists who are arguably at the peak of their creative powers and the show demands several repeat visits.

The exhibition runs until the end of January.

Paul Bloomer