

WATERCOLOUR is the most difficult of painting mediums.

It is difficult because of its sheer delicacy and inherent translucency. It is unforgiving of being overworked and requires a balance between careful forethought and spontaneous application.

Peter Davis, who is currently exhibiting at Vailla Fine Art, is an acknowledged master of this most difficult of mediums. There is a collection of 18 new watercolours on show, all inspired by a recent study trip to Ecuador.

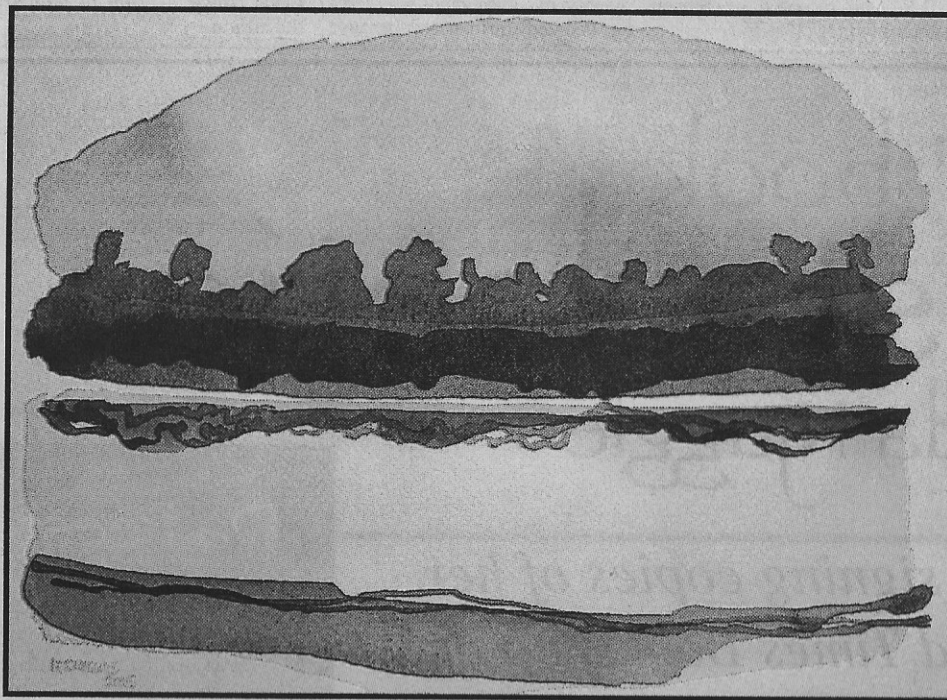
The artist travelled with a group of environmentalists and teachers on a journey that took in the cloud forests of the Northern Andes as well as the Amazon basin.

The intense humidity meant that painting in watercolour was extremely difficult because the paint would not dry. Peter filled pocket sketchbooks as he toured the area, often in small canoes. The heat was so intense that the oil pastels he used for sketching would melt in the hand.

"The most powerful impression," Peter said, "was the greenness of things and the colourful chaos all around. Each time it rained the landscape became one vast watercolour itself, the colour suddenly draining and then quickly returning to brilliance."

The large *Downpour* in the exhibition brings those words to life. The gentle shades of green emanate with the steam of a tropical rainfall over the jungle and the picture hints at a new direction in painterly freedom for the artist.

The painting was built up with layer over layer of green shades that Peter felt was becoming too intense, so in a moment of boldness, genius or madness he took his garden hose to the picture. Scrubbing brush in hand he began to draw back to the white of the page and the result is a magical vague impression of water pouring down on the rain



Songs by the River . . .

forest then rising again in a shroud of tropical steam.

Peter makes many of his paints by hand and for those unfamiliar with the medium, watercolour is a mixture of pigment ground in gum Arabic solution.

Handmade paint gives an artist the chance to personally know each colour on an intimate level as well as understand the unique property of each pigment. For example Viridian green (which makes a big outing in this show) is very transparent, but capable of putting a deep stain on water-colour paper, while ultramarine blue veers towards opacity and likes to dry in a very granular way.

It is the years of experimentation and experience that allow Peter the creative freedom to fully exploit the personality of each pigment when it is mixed with water.

There are lots of variables to take into consideration when using watercolour. For example how much water to apply, how

wet or dry is the paper, how absorbent is the paper, what angle is the paper when the paint is applied and how does the air temperature affect the drying speed of the paint. Peter thinks about all of these variables.

The Napo features a large vortex of a cloud formed out of the most beautiful granular ultramarine that has been allowed to dry into the texture of the paper. Below it the landscape seems to drain into the muddy Amazon.

Some of the smaller works show a more conventional technique where vibrant transparent layer is laid over vibrant transparent layer with a mixture of wet and dry paint. When watercolour is applied wet paint into wet paint it almost takes on a life of its own as colours run into each other and grow into crystalline formations upon drying.

Dryish paint on dry paint is more predictable and controllable, giving a harder edge. In *Rapids, Ria Napo* the effect of this dry paint on dry paint is reminiscent of stained glass. The

luminosity is dependant on the white of the paper shining through the transparent pigment. Consequently the lightest tones in watercolour are usually those with the least amount of paint and the darkest tones are those with the most paint.

One of the Peter's personal favourites in the show is *Songs by the River*, painted in the gloaming evening light when he had wandered off alone. In the distance his companions had begun singing and playing music, which echoed and intermingled with the sounds of the jungle and river.

What is not so well known is that Peter is a very accomplished composer of classical music and I have often pondered on the relationship between music and painting?

Some people have the ability to make colour sing. Are these the musically-minded artists? Others have a stronger leaning towards a more linear, tonal narrative-based art. Are these the artists that have a leaning

towards words? I can't give a definite answer but it is an interesting trail of thought to follow.

A good example in this show of colour being able to sing is *Morning by the River*. Look at the violet blue of the water in the foreground, which is again echoed in the sky. Coloured music singing the song of light breaking over the jungle and muddy riverbank.

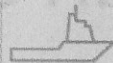
Peter is donating a percentage of the sales from this show to a

charitable organisation engaged in conservation and ecology in Ecuador. The rain forest is a living, breathing part of our planet essential for our survival and in desperate need of protection from deforestation. These paintings live and breathe the colours of the rainforest.

The exhibition runs until 31st January and Vailla Fine Art is open on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays or by appointment on (01595) 697374.

Paul Bloomer

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