



Words by Ruth Pringle.

THE ACCIDENTAL ARTIST

Discovering something you're good at and actually managing to make a living from it, is a fortunate combination of talents. When that talent is within the creative field, the ability to combine sound business sense is not only auspicious but also quite rare, according to local artist Ian Fraser.

‘I have always painted but up until eight years ago, I didn’t approach it in a commercial way,’ he explains. ‘Like a lot of artists, I thrived on the creative output, but I just hadn’t explored how to translate that into a viable business that could make me a living. It just seems a little incongruous to the job, don’t you think? Producing art is such an enjoyable, inventive and ultimately fun expression, that combining it with a business, with targets and projections, can you imagine! It seemed so bizarre to apply business talk to my art which is packed with exploration, creativity and development.’

However, the turning point came along with Herbie. Perhaps Ian’s best known subject matter; the infamous black cat was the beginning of this painter’s road to success. ‘For thirteen years, we had a great cat called Herbie and he really was a part of the family. About three months after he passed away, I woke up and saw a painting of him in my imagination.’ Ian went straight to his studio and the first reincarnated Herbie appeared on canvas. ‘I think my paintings of Herbie have a sense of fun and energy. The canvases grab your attention. I was lucky to discover that I enjoy painting black cats and people enjoy looking at them.’

Bold silhouettes, full of dramatic expression and lively background colour; the Herbie paintings were – and continue to be – a sell-out success. Whether stretching or lying down (always staring with vivid yellow eyes), Herbie became a signature for Ian and the spring board not only to his success as a full-time artist, but the canvases gave him the confidence to strive. ‘It did boil down to a matter of confidence. You can really only measure your success by what people say about you and by how many canvases you sell. You can think you’re the best – or the worst – artist in the world, but until you have some yard stick of this, you’ll never know.’

Ian recounts that it was his wife Sheila who provided the ‘prodding’ for this yard stick of calculable success. ‘I have always painted, but after a

long period of inactivity, Sheila called me the painter that never paints. I took on board what she said and decided to knuckle down and start painting regularly. From this work emerged paintings and styles that surprised me. As a result, I’ve been regularly showing in galleries for the last eight years.’

Habitual showings in Northern Ireland take place in local galleries across the country and even further afield in Italy and USA.

‘I am only just beginning to explore ways of getting my paintings into more galleries. There are so many throughout Ireland and England alone that there’s lots of scope for me for the future. I guess that’s the business sense kicking in now!’

It seems that he will have no problem raising his profile, as he tells a story about one gallery. ‘They placed Herbie in the window and apparently they have never been so busy! Herbie caused quite a stir. Incidentally, it was at this time that I decided to increase the canvas size up from 20 x 20. When I saw the cat canvas in the window, I just knew it would look great bigger. I discovered that I’m able to scale up visually and I think that comes from my cartoon background.’

Cats are by no means Ian’s only subject. Painting whatever catches his eye, the subjects include nudes, portraits and dogs – in a variety of mediums and styles. ‘Although I might start to paint a cat or a dog, it’s the challenge of the painting that interests me.’

The subject matter almost becomes secondary, once the painting begins. The viewer might see a black cat stretching, but I see the negative space around the cat, the blobs of paint, values, rhythms and composition.’

‘Whenever I travel, I find I get lots of ideas for painting. I keep a notebook with me at all times and often refer to it when I’m experimenting at home.’ With a property in Tuscany, Ian and Sheila enjoy regular trips away. ‘Despite the recent development of excellent restaurants here, it’s hard to beat the pasta from Italy! I also have a studio there and it’s interesting to see how my paintings change from this setting.’ In addition, the couple enjoy travelling in the Far East, Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, the Philippines and Australia.



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Home for Ian is Whitehead. Living in a property that dates back to 1870, he finds the coastal location an ideal spot to work from. 'I must have one of the nicest views from my studio. We do plan to stay here, but in the future we would ideally like to split our time between Northern Ireland and Italy.'

Creative stimulus tends to come from change and new experiences – a sentiment which Ian agrees with. 'I'm an ideas painter. When something interests me, I start painting and see how it develops through the painting process of discovery, happy accidents, observations, taking chances, and, above all, surprising myself. The culmination is what I call an 'aha' moment, when I think, where did that come from? It's a career that I believe I'm only just beginning, it's so exciting and I'm looking forward to developing in the year ahead. Thankfully, people seem to get a lot of enjoyment and fun from my paintings, which is great!'

For further information on Ian: www.ianfraser.biz