



IN THE STUDIO WITH BELINDA FOX

By Verne
Maree,
photography
by Ken Tan

Decorated with startlingly orange shutters, artist BELINDA FOX's shophouse studio – or should that be garret? – in colourful Jalan Pisang, just a couple of *jalans* down from Arab Street, is easy to find. **Verne Maree** met up with her a few days after her return from a trip to Burma.

Belinda hails from Melbourne, and though she and her husband Brad have travelled extensively, this is their first overseas posting. He's a researcher for the International Baccalaureate, she tells me, and they live in an East Coast condo. But when their three-year-old daughter, Billie, is at kindergarten, this atmospheric space is where Belinda creates her art.

Is this your first time in Singapore?

Not quite. I did a month-long residency here in 2006 at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, which was enough for me to know that I would enjoy living here.

I love your hideaway. How did you find it?

It is cool, isn't it? There was no way I could work from home – there's just no room – so I started looking immediately after we arrived.

Arab Street is such a unique area and so lively and exciting, and completely different to anything I would experience in Melbourne. I love the mix of living in the East Coast – having the park so close and the amazing sea view from our apartment, and then going to my studio every day and experiencing a

whole other side to Singapore. I feel extremely lucky to have the best of both worlds.

How did you become an artist?

Art has always been in my life and has been my passion since I was a young child, so it seemed inevitable. I've been a full-time artist since 2006, somewhat less so while I was having Billie, of course.

I wasn't always a painter, though: I studied printmaking, and that is my artistic foundation. When I was pregnant, I became concerned about the toxicity of printmaking, so I made the shift to painting through necessity. Thankfully, it's been a success, but I'm very much still on a learning curve and getting to grips with the new media. I still do works on paper, and I will continue to do so – that's always been my great love.

How do you go about promoting your work?

I've known art consultant Anna Layard (now with Art Equity) for a long time. She knew my work in Sydney years ago, and when she herself moved to Singapore she got in touch and offered to sell my work.

I'm now also represented by Chan Hampe Galleries, and am excited about my upcoming October exhibition at their fantastic Raffles Arcade space. Gallery director Benjamin Hampe is very passionate about quality art in Singapore; he is extremely supportive of local artists and art projects, but with an international focus.

I love his enthusiasm for developing a strong Singaporean art collector base, too. He works hard to foster opportunities and dialogue within the local scene, so I am very happy to be part of his stable.

What inspires you?

My work has always been influenced by travel, mainly in Asia – I find it very inspirational to be out of my comfort zone. A whole flurry of work came from a trip I did to Tibet in 2006, as part of an

Australian Council art grant. Something similar happened in 2010, when I spent three weeks in Greece, including a two-week art workshop hosted by the Skopelos Art Foundation.

I recently started thinking about water in general, which took my mind back to our trip to Kerala, India; and now Brad and I have just returned from seeing Burma's lovely Inle Lake. There's something special about going out on a boat and watching people living their everyday lives, being part of their world, hopefully without intruding on them too much.

I take photographs wherever I go. Often, the things I initially think I'll use in my work are not the ones I end up using. Instead, my work usually emerges through a creative process of filtering images and experiences. I'm really interested in dualities: hope and doubt; positive and negative; the amazing things humanity is capable of and the awful deeds we sometimes do.

Sometimes a particular experience will trigger work, but I can never predict when that will happen. An event that I find revolting or repellent may later inspire me, once I've got over it; it's still a mystery, even to me, how that happens.

Do you ever suffer from lack of inspiration?

Yes, I do. It's ridiculous, but every time I start a new series I slip off the cliff into a state of frustration and despair, terrified that I'll never have another idea and never do anything good again. Then, when I'm at that low point, something small will happen to open up my world again and show me what I'm supposed to be doing – and off I'll go once more.

Though I know now that it's just part of the creative process, losing your confidence means it's very hard to produce work. It was worse when I was younger, but now, with more experience of the cycle, I think I'm more pragmatic. Having a child also adds a bit of maturity – basically, you realise you just have to get over yourself!

Tell me about these paintings you're working on.

They're for an August show in Melbourne. These two are views of the backwaters of Kerala, India, where we cruised on a cockroach-infested houseboat. It was an interesting contrast – beautiful, awe-inspiring scenery juxtaposed with the skin-crawling horror of our pestilential



accommodation. It was like something out of *Aliens*. Probably *because* of that conflict, a lot of work has come out of that trip!

I have always used lotus flowers in my work – they have a special resonance for me. The lotus flower is a symbol of hope, being something beautiful that rises from the muddy water below; and in Indian culture it can also mean transition, which is quite apt for what's been happening in my own life.

I have mirrored and reflected the lotus form so that it creates gateways and entry points. I guess I'm thinking a lot about entering new territories and unknown futures.

What media do you use?

This particular collection is modest-scale watercolour, ink and drawing on board. I've used encaustic wax, too – feel the texture. When you buff that up, it gives a lovely sheen. For the same show, I'm also planning on making some large works on paper, and I'm excited to be working on paper again after quite a break.

What are all these bits of paper stuck on the wall behind your trestle table?

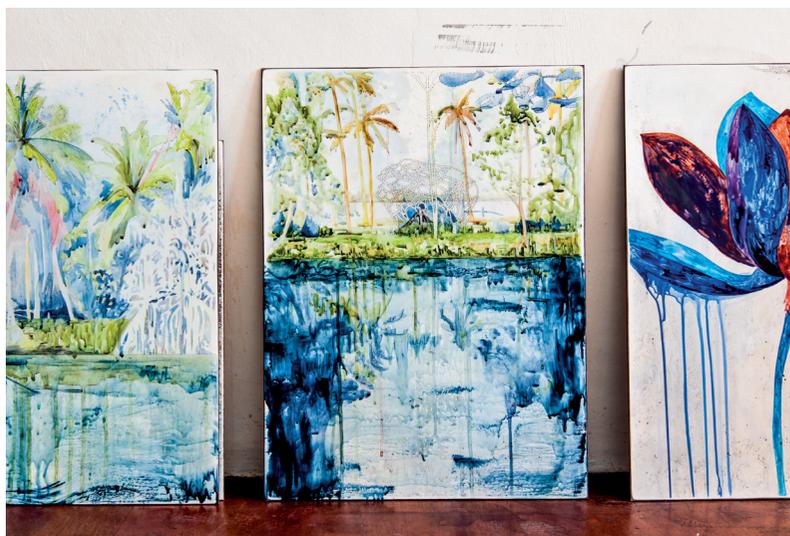
Generally, they're things that inspire me: friends, fellow artists, found objects and so on. Some are postcards from shows I've seen. This is one by a dear friend, David Band, a fantastic artist who died two years ago; I like to have him here with me. This is one by Louise Bourgeois, a famous artist that I find infinitely inspiring.

This is from the recent Art Stage, and these scraps of antique embroidered fabric were kindly given to me by the framer at Merlin Framing here in Singapore: he had them in his front window!

That's a photograph of my husband, and there are a few of our travel photographs, too.

What is it like to be an artist in Singapore?

The great thing about Singapore is that it's a growing art market, so people in the arts are extremely supportive of one another. Rather than being too competitive, everyone seems to be aware that we have to work together to build the art scene, and that supporting



quality artists and both promoting and sharing publicity and clients is going to help everyone in the long run.

Though I feel that being in Singapore has amazing potential for me as an artist, I don't know yet whether it will be a long-term prospect. I will do my best to make it work.

I've come from a strong art community where the art market is more established and I was able to earn a living. But most of the artists I've met here are under no illusion that they can earn a living from art; they have to do all sorts of other things. It takes time to develop a good collector base that supports artists, but I believe that will happen in Singapore.

How do you balance motherhood and being an artist?

At the start, I really didn't know whether I could be both an artist and a mother, and I'm deeply grateful that it's all working out so well. It's easier now that Billie goes to kindergarten every weekday.

Once you have a child, you develop a new way of looking at time. I now value the time I have so much more, and I find I'm able to get more done in a shorter period. This year is a busy year for me, though, and I'm not yet sure how I'm going to manage to get everything done! 🙌

belindafox.com.au