



Journey to Abstraction

As Martin Bush celebrates five years residency in Plymouth's historic Royal William Yard, Chris Penberthy explores the development of his art...

At the mouth of the River Tamar sits a Georgian Grade 1 listed ex-naval base designed by John Rennie. Currently undergoing a major award-winning redevelopment by Urban Splash, Plymouth's Royal William Yard is built of local limestone and granite, giving an initially austere impression. A sharp

contrast can be found when walking into the gallery and open studio of Artist in Residence Martin Bush, however, where vibrant abstract art is the order of the day.

Born in Oxfordshire, Martin Bush gained a BA (Hons)

in Art and Design at Birmingham Polytechnic in 1986. His love of form led him to design and build furniture and boat interiors before becoming a successful mural, chalkboard and graphic artist for independent brewery chains, restaurant groups and corporate customers.

By 1997 Martin felt stifled and in need of a new challenge; selling his business, he bought a round the world ticket. As he sat on beaches in Thailand, he was reminded of adolescent Eurorail adventures - once again he was experiencing a new sense of freedom. With charcoal and paper he began to experiment with fluid lines. Little did he know that his journey into abstract painting had begun.

Martin has always swum against the tide; he likes to explore and discover for himself. Martin's influences are not other artists, though some of his paintings

have echoes of Turner, Matisse and Picasso. He cites the environment, seaside, storms, nature, markets, women, Thailand, California and Greece as key inspirations.

The first series of paintings was completed in Thailand. Dreamlike contemplations of the human form in oil gave hints to his future direction, especially in the use of colour and fluid strokes. Certainly the female nude has become a thread through his work from that time, characteristically in the bold, fluid, clean strokes and textures of work such as *Blue Nude 1*. A visit to his studio gallery or website will quickly reveal other interpretations.

On his return from Thailand, Martin settled in Wales' Wye Valley whilst continuing to travel and experiment. His colour palette extended from the vibrant colours of Thailand, California, Africa and the

opposite: Art Deco, acrylic over oil on canvas, 122 x 91 cm

below: New Beginning, acrylic over oil on canvas, 102 x 76 cm



opposite: Musical Wood, acrylic over oil on canvas, 90 x 70 cm

below: Journey into Nature, acrylic over oil on canvas, 198 x 198 cm

Mediterranean to encompass the more muted tones of the British climate and environment. A visit to a Howard Hodgkin exhibit acted as a catalyst to his developing style. Through the freedom of the abstract, Martin discovered an ability to paint as an outworking of simultaneous mediation; he found the qualities of acrylic particularly suited to his work.

Inevitably, after a few years, Martin's wanderlust set in again. He wanted to work in a different environment. His search led him to Plymouth, a city he felt to be on the cusp of change and new beginnings. The Royal William Yard is part of that change. Its monumental nature triggered something in Martin: he wanted to develop larger scale in his work. So began an ongoing relationship with the site and Urban Splash (its developers); a relationship that has seen Martin explore further the emotional response to themes of journey, people, landscapes, and environments.

Over the last five years Martin has matured as an artist. He has been able to increase the scale of his work. Through experimentation, he has developed a bold style, worked simultaneously in oil and acrylic. He has discovered the ability to communicate a narrative in non-figurative paintings. New works, such as *Journey Through Nature* (a 2 metre square canvas inspired by a river valley near Usk) and *New Beginning* (a smaller piece reacting to changes in season and activity in the Royal William Yard), exemplify Martin's increasing confidence.

Some work pushes beyond a response to a person, place, event or emotion. Martin's greatest love is to create from within himself works of pure abstraction. The results often give a real sense of movement and journey – though from what to where remains elusive, only Martin could say (and he doesn't). The resulting complex paintings, such as *Art Deco*, add depth and mystery to the body of work, as well as to the artist himself.





Watching Martin paint gives an opportunity to see all of this come together. You quickly become aware that as Martin begins to liberally apply his background colour that he is lost in a world of canvas and paint. Martin paints with the canvas flat; scrapers push colour around, mixing pigments as part of the process. More paint adds depth to marks that will bring texture. Boldness and subtlety, balance and harmony begin to appear. The canvas is flipped and viewed from different angles; some areas are reworked, adding further depth. As the process comes to an end, highlights may be brought in through small interventions or the dribbling of yet more paint.

No matter what the painting looks like, it is impossible at this stage to tell whether it has worked. The drying process changes the nature of the art. Paints fuse, shrink and crack; some colours become dull as a result of the mixing they have undergone. Over a course of days and weeks the work will be

examined, retouched, added to and sometimes almost totally reworked.

So what will the future bring? Martin is about to show in Rus al Khaimah (Dubai) and is preparing an exhibition of new work for this autumn. He is contemplating more travel and building new relationships with galleries, but has no plans to relocate. He says, "I feel part of a new beginning in Plymouth; it emanates a modern fresh energy catalysing and transforming my experiences and emotions into painting. I have been welcomed by the city and inspired by its beauty, location and people."

Martin can be contacted at art@martinbush.co.uk, on Twitter www.twitter.com/marttheart, through the 'Martin Bush Fine Art' Facebook group or by phone on +44 (0)7703 231150. You can see his work at the eponymous Martin Bush Gallery Studio, New Cooperage, Royal William Yard, Plymouth, PL1 3RP or on his website www.martinbush.co.uk