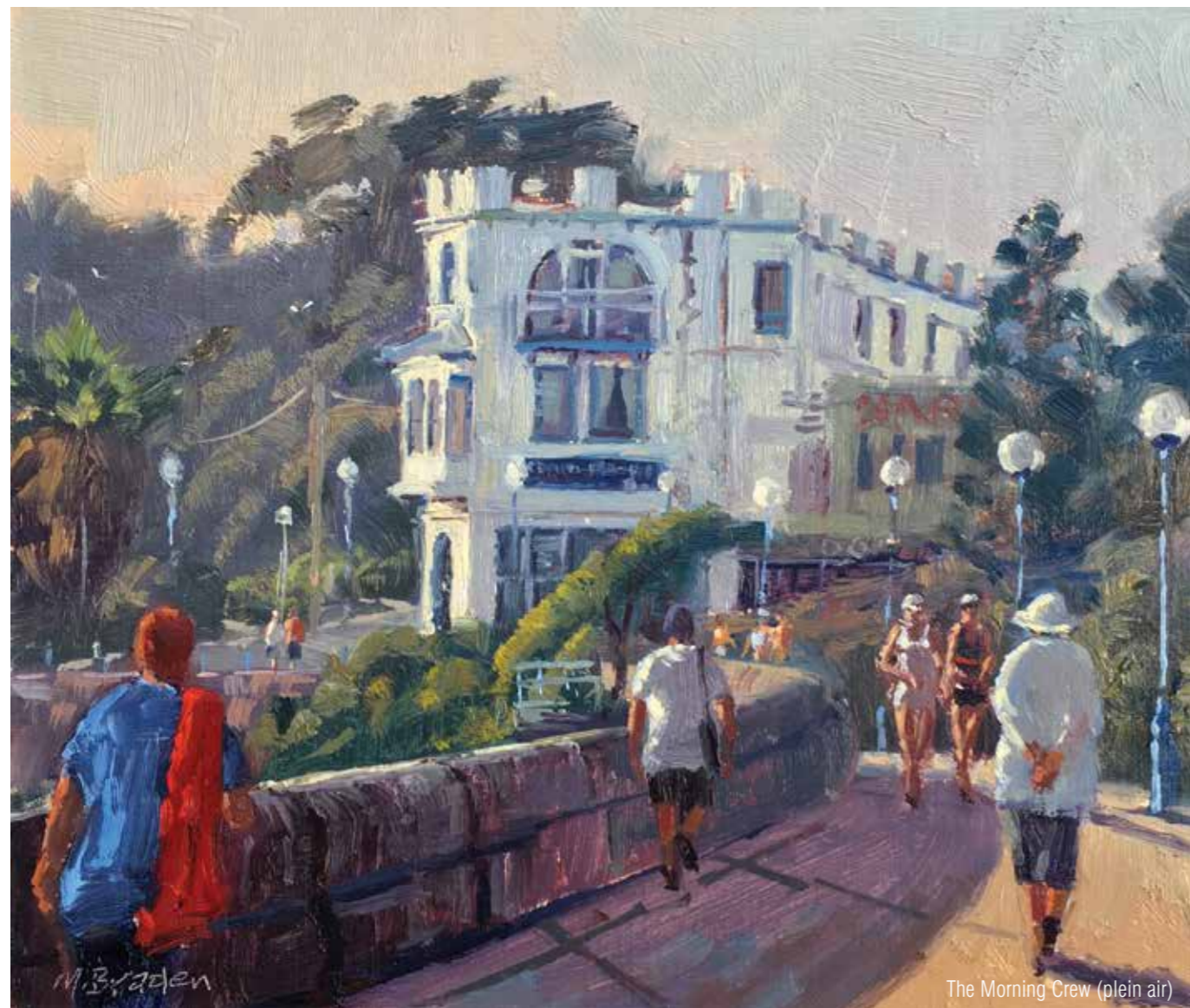


Michael Braden

Crayon on Lounge Room Wall

This prize-winning two-year-old is still painting today!



The Morning Crew (plein air)



Simon's Paradise (studio)



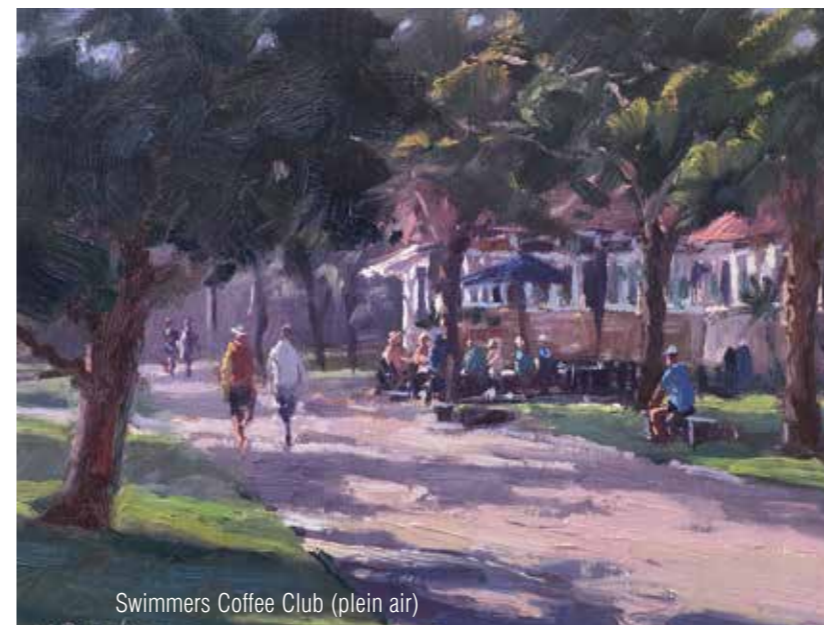
Morning Ferry (plein air)

Drawing and painting has always interested me. My first masterpiece as a two-year-old entitled 'Crayon on Lounge Room Wall' (which earned me a rather unexpected prize), would lead to less destructive experiments with different mediums and varying results throughout my primary and high school years.

Not long after Cyclone Tracy, I moved to Darwin to begin my first job as a sign-writing apprentice. After

standing on planks all week in the hot sun, most weekends were spent 'down the track' for swimming and camping trips by the river. On one such trip, I awoke one morning to a glorious sunrise skimming the tops of mangroves and gums, casting long, cool shadows across deep reflections in the water. I rushed to the car glove box for my camera and snapped away, all my senses momentarily engaged with this beautiful scene I had caught on film.

When my photos were developed a week later, I eagerly opened the envelope to relive that special morning. Whilst viewing the photos, I began to realise how little they resembled the sense of place I had experienced that particular morning. My feelings of disappointment now seemed in equal proportion to the elation I had felt just one week prior. Thus, without knowing it at the time, it would be my first plein air painting lesson.



Swimmers Coffee Club (plein air)



Elizabeth Bay (plein air)



Big Business on Bridge (studio)



Alone Beneath the Wharf (plein air)

Some years later, technology and computers would eventually destroy the market for the artistry and brushwork required of the sign writer, which basically coincided with my desire for a new challenge in life and creativity. With my bookshelves beginning to fill with art books and tutorials and a few bad paintings made from photos leaning on walls, frustration was mounting. Something was amiss.

A major turning point for me came 20 years ago in Sydney, with a chance meeting with a plein air painter who suggested I do a workshop with renowned Australian landscape painter John Wilson.

John's friendly and humble style of teaching easily conveyed the core principles to successful plein air work. Concepts such as tonal recession,

mixing greys, creating atmosphere, colour theory et cetera, steered me on the right path and emboldened me with a fresh desire to improve as a painter.

Those who have taken up painting may agree that, after initial tuition, the rate of progress is quite fast. Then we might find that our progress reaches a plateau. After more hard yards and some breakthroughs, we find ourselves on yet another plateau. It seems our critical eye has somehow caught up with our ability to paint.

Whilst DVDs and books do offer good advice and inspiration, they don't answer specific questions we may have on a particular matter regarding our work, nor do they offer the all-important critique and feedback critical to one's advancement as a painter. Of course, long hours and practice are essential to mastering any craft. However, if you are left unguided, painting hundreds of paintings, you may well end up with hundreds of unsatisfactory works, or, at best, mediocre ones.

The short answer, I believe, is mentorship.

Painting outdoors with experienced artists is invaluable. The friendships and camaraderie gleaned from adventures such as camping out, with constructive critique sessions at the end of the day dramatically increase your skill level and incentive to learn, keeping you motivated and inspired.

Most of the great landscape painters we hear of today (past and present) were privy to such experiences. Nowadays of course, computer technology allows us mentorship via live online tutoring sessions from anywhere around the world.

When painting outdoors, my first consideration is a good idea or concept. Composition, value, colour and edges, pretty much in that order, are then thought out. Sometimes I will go out with a scene in mind, usually because I had been there before and was familiar with how the light plays on the subject. However, as often is the case, a more interesting subject or



Beare Park Light Show (studio)



The Harbour's Misty Morning (plein air)



First thing (plein air)



Clearing the Deck (studio)



The Climb up Awaba (plein air)

weather condition will present itself unexpectedly.

I have no preference for subject matter, as I believe a well-painted scene of some rubbish cans lit by a single light bulb in a dark alley can be as evocative as a scenic vista with sunlit bluffs and distant hills.

If you have captured the ‘essence’ of a scene, the painting may well be a success. Which brings to mind a good saying that ‘an artist starts the painting and the viewer should finish it’.

Most, if not all representational artists I know, use photos in some way for reference, myself included. However, this is usually in conjunction with field studies and/or sketches done on location. I will often use photo references if I wish to do a much larger version of a worthy plein air work in the studio. The trouble with photos as ‘sole’ reference are multiple.

The camera warps perspective and drawing, very important and subtle reflected colours are lost in shadow areas, and colour in general is mostly incorrect in the photo, just to name a few. Which is why working on location is so important to learning about the effects of light, atmosphere and perspective.

When working outdoors I feel so much more engaged with the subject in front of me, and because I have limited time to finish the work, the painting generally has a more painterly, spontaneous and fresh look about it than a laboured studio piece.

It is in these plein air paintings that hopefully lead us to find our unique ‘voice’ as artists, and not just another poor copy of someone else’s style. I once read that “You do not search for a style in which to paint, a style will find you”.

Plein air painting is now enjoying a new growth around the world, and has even been referred to as the ‘New Golf’ in some circles. The emergence of ‘Plein air invitationals’ in the USA (an event in which artists are invited to paint outdoors at a particular location) has brought about a new awareness of plein air painting to both artists and the general public.

For those beginning on this journey, enjoy the process of learning, learn from the mistakes and ‘duds’ you will inevitably produce (as I do), whilst savouring the successes which will come as you practice, paint, and learn more about this wonderful and mysterious craft that is PLEIN AIR painting.

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