

Ensclosed in his light-filled Swains Yard studio in Obz, surrounded by magnificent work such as his current 'silver teapot' still life collection, Paul Birchall talks about the energy derived from a variety of artistic styles, the journey that brought him to our shores and colourful life in Obz. By Nelia Vivier.

In conversation with Paul Birchall

Born in the north of England "with its soft greys", a nice difference from the incredible light in Cape Town, Paul Birchall is at home in this small city. "Easy to get around, anywhere you want to be in under half an hour," the artist explains. "I like the mixture of everything from nature to culture and the friendliness of the people."

Equally, from graphic work, figures, print and landscape to still life and assemblage, he "likes variety, as opposed to being trapped into a style. There's such complete energy invested when you do a body of work, and building up to the climax of the exhibition," he says. "Often artists feel depleted, not working for long periods afterwards."

"Instead of reiterating what I've just completed, I venture off into a different direction, which rewards one with new

energy – although 'the tea pots' feel as if they may be around for a while; may become some sort of signature. Each one completed is my favourite piece of art until the next one is done. The silver teapot itself is mobile. It travels. And every time it ends up in a new place."

Funny story, it's not really his, but belongs to a friend. "I've polished it so often, it'll have to be re-plated," he says with a quiet smile. Known for his assemblage art, themed on World War, Paul is often told, "I've got something you'll love"; then when he sees it, nothing talks to him."

The silver teapot resonated with him, cued by what its surface reflected back. This led to his current work, more visual, less narrative for the artist than usual, but creating intricate stories of different interiors and lives for the viewer.

His technique is such that the different

brush strokes of oil on canvas make the silver teapot appear real 'to the touch'. It gets enhanced by the jewel colours reflected by its mirror surface, the detail of the table cloth it rests on, a painting in the background or the mint-green of a tea cup.

He was creative as a child, worked as a dental technician ("using my hands, you know") until age 28. "I drew and painted a bit, but studied photography on the side," he recalls. Then having saved some money, he went travelling to South East Asia.

"I never looked back," he says after entering art school on returning home, going on to complete his Honours in Fine Art Painting from the Wimbledon School of Art. Strong on technique, he's often stated, "I was taught to draw in a very logical and practical manner, using the point and line technique.

This has underpinned everything I've done as an artist."

He also remembers a time during his studies when "I didn't like the way I used my paints. I was never happy with the colours; it felt crude, until a tutor wisely instructed me to only do colour, no drawing, for a while".

Another significant influence, having been to India before, the young student asked 'if it's possible for a swop' in the school's exchange programme. With his recurring narrative themes of memory and loss, what did his time in India gift him?

"A lot," says Paul, "it infused my work with humour. I remember once walking into a student exhibition and there were all these monsters with outstretched arms, looking at me. I found it hilarious. I couldn't remember ever laughing out loud in an art gallery."

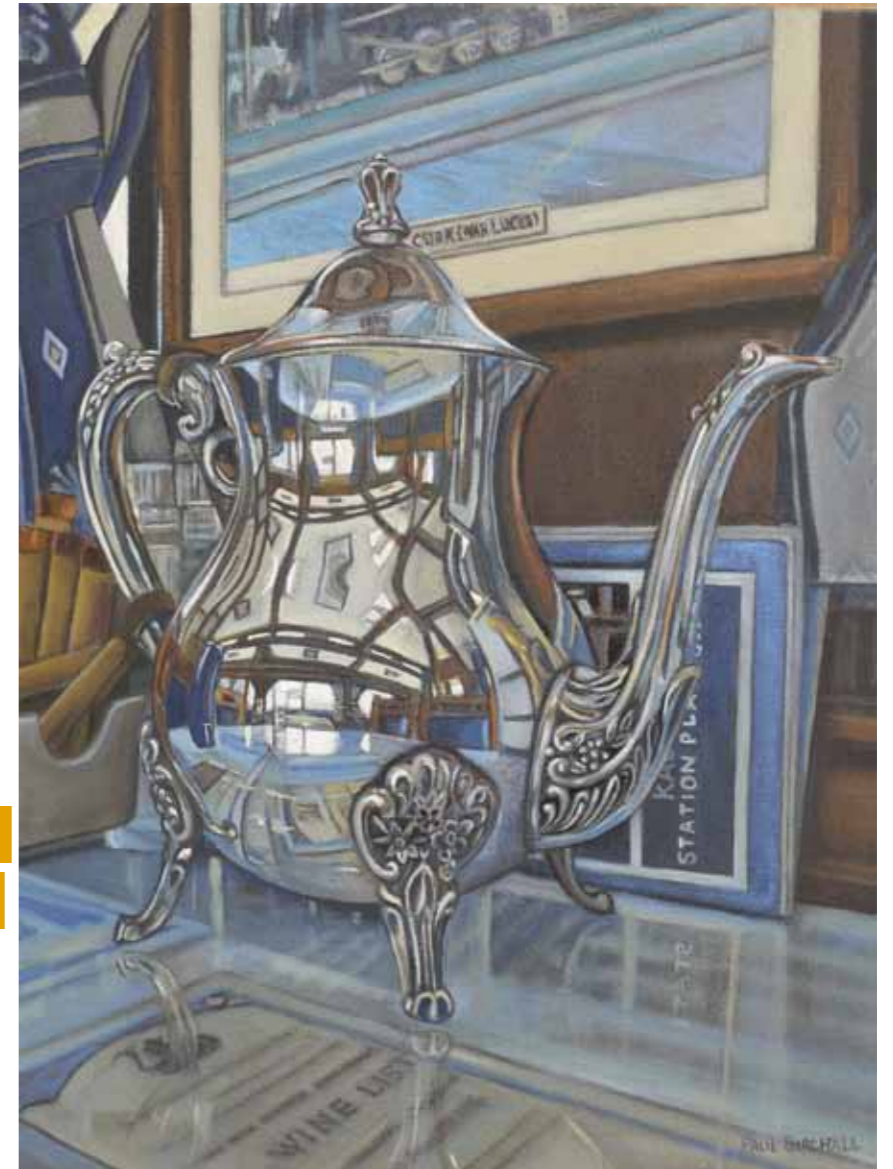
The different brush strokes of oil on canvas make the silver teapot appear real 'to the touch'

He stayed on the outskirts of Delhi, with artist Goutam Roy in small two-roomed house; its little windows up high on the walls. "In the morning you'd wake up and found a cow in the doorway. It was fantastic experiencing a different culture. You realise how self-centred one's view of the world can be," Paul says.

Apart from introducing the quirky element of juxtaposition in his art ("I often liked putting things together"), India whetted his appreciation for figurative drawing.

'Men-etched-in-memory' often serves as Paul's inspiration. "Once a friend sent me a 'battered and cracked' picture of his grandfather snapped at age 17, asking, 'Can you scan and restore it and send it back to me?', which I did, and then animated it. The recipient was delighted to have his young grandfather winking back at him."

Autobiographical, with no visual reference as to who Jeffery was, so "I was free to invent him (from a red cartoon abstract to a portly man), the artist often





The tutor

Working in a commercial art studio alongside talented artists – exchange of knowledge and practical techniques across mediums gifted me a wide base of skills. **Combined with my formal training** I engage students in exploring **both techniques and intellectual ideas** about the images they create. **Most people believe they need to learn to draw** before they can create a finished art work. **I've always said, if you can do a crossword puzzle, I can teach you to draw.**

Learning to draw as a discipline takes hours of dedication, trial and error, exploring different techniques.

For information on structured drawing programmes and one-day workshops and contact details, visit paulbirchall.co.za

He has exhibited solo and in group shows here and abroad in galleries such as Cut, Ivan Tenant, Diorama and The Edge Soho in London, and Everard Read, The Haas Collective, The Association for Visual Arts and at Absa KKNK in Oudtshoorn. His works are found worldwide in **private, public and corporate collections**, such as the Royal Caribbean Cruises, P&O Cruises, Robert Horn ADP Northampton, Adobe Software London and ASK Restaurants in London.

portrays his older brother who died before he was born. More narrative art evokes two men from WWI: the young lover killed on the front; the older one, mad from grief, leaving his marriage for solitary life, then outed by someone revealing his private diary.

Another collection captures calmness; an innate stillness in each of the male figures caught up in their own thoughts and life ("I saw something in this one guy's face; asked if he'd pose for me. During our session he revealed a late marriage, the loss of an unborn child and his wife shortly thereafter. Yet he had this calmness about him.")

Commercial versus serious art

As part-time art teacher (Michaelis UCT, township children and at his own studio), working at London Contemporary Art fine art publishers gifted valuable skills, but slowly eroded his own style ... as he and others produced limited works on demand. On being retrenched, then holding an exhibition at The Association for Visual Arts, "it all just flowed from there to where I am today," he says.

The issues he presently addresses as artist, a little bit of punk or classical music playing in the background, are purely visual – about space and light in

relation to the flat surface he works on. "A painting should successfully grab you as an image, and then on further investigation make you revisit it again as you keep seeing more," the artist believes.

Perhaps after the tea pots, he'll do big paintings, but "my quirky interpretations may be commercially problematic for current 'huge decor' trends." His joy in teaching is summed up by "one of those first kids I taught in Oscar Mpethe School in Nyanga. He had such a hunger. Now eight years later, Mawanda Zenzile is doing his first exhibition at the Stevenson gallery in Woodstock."

And as for himself as artist, "I'll always be looking, the eternal observer."

Visit paulbirchall.co.za and catch his exhibition at *Rust-en-Vrede Gallery, 10 Wellington Road, Durbanville, rust-en-vrede.com* until 6th November.



On the home front

Across from our eclectic Victorian home in Observatory is a cross-cultural school with learners coming from townships like Langa. A welcome-to-the-neighbourhood letter read that the children made lots of mess and lots of noise and that the school was underfunded, so any support would be appreciated.

After speaking to the **Truworthis Social Involvement Trust** they sponsor me to teach art twice a year at Observatory Junior School. Others teach dance and chess, there's an aftercare centre and **The Shine Centre volunteers** give literacy support to learners.