

# “Peep Show”

## a testimony of cooperative, faith-led painting

**August 2013.**

**By now, I knew something unusual was afoot: I could paint.**

Not only that, I could paint well, in watercolours no less. I guess I’m glad now that no-one told me watercolour was supposedly the most challenging of the painting mediums. It might have stopped me. I had no art books, no formal art instruction<sup>1</sup>, no useful art experience – and still it was happening. The promise inherent in what I heard from God was real.<sup>2</sup>

The skill with which I was painting was enough to excite not only me, but also excite others into congratulatory comment, into purchase, and (for 3 of the first 5 paintings) into selection for exhibition. It’s tempting to lose one’s head when the plaudits come, but I knew where this gift had come from. God was using me. I was more than happy to give Him the glory.

Where could this go? The largest of the first five completed had been almost A3 size. I had a sense that more was to come and that I should tackle a large painting next. I had just the thing: a photograph of a beautiful vine that I had seen in the previous week.

Taking the photo was one of those odd situations that I was beginning to realise was God’s prompting. It had happened previously, and maybe it was shaping up to be the cue I should look for. I was staying at a friend’s place – I had it all to myself – and as I walked into the backyard for the first time, my eyes locked onto this lovely vine full of vibrant reds and yellows showing off in the morning light, set against a dark fence of blackened timber. My spirit quickened

immediately. I KNEW I would paint this.

Goosebumps. I remember racing to get the camera.



In the evening, at home with a nice fire going and replete with Joanne’s excellent cooking, I settled down to sketch up what I would paint. The paper had stretched without a hitch – something of a miracle and something I still *often* have trouble with – so I was filled with an expectation that this was going to go very well. There was no hesitation or lack in confidence at all despite there being a very large piece of paper in front of me. I sketched quickly and was pleased.

Sort of...

The vine was drawn, the composition was balanced, the light decisions made, but it just wasn’t right. Something was missing. I paused, prayed, and decided to leave it until I had an answer. I was sure God would reveal what he wanted.

Next morning, I awoke knowing what to do. Yep, just like that! In the centre right space on the vine, I would paint a bird. The thing that was missing was the vibrancy and immediacy of a living creature who could communicate out of the painting. I looked outside for inspiration – and there was a waxeye<sup>3</sup>. Thank you, Lord, that will do nicely.

I found lots of images in just a couple of minutes of web surfing, decided on the positioning/stance/interaction I wanted, and sketched up. NOW I was ready to paint.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I confess to being an occasional student of the school of YouTube: no classes as such, but gosh, there are some wonderfully talented people out there who have given a few minutes to show a tip or two. I have found that helpful for ideas.

<sup>2</sup> How I came to paint in the first place is an amazing story in itself. Our God is so generous!

<sup>3</sup> Some might know this bird as a silver eye. It’s a NZ native, *Zosterops lateralis*.

<sup>4</sup> Since painting “Peep Show”, I have often wondered: why a waxeye? I still don’t know. Today, I found that one of the Māori words for waxeye is **tauhou**. This word can mean “stranger” or “new arrival”. Is there something in that? Not

The whole time during this prep period, I had no doubt I would paint this thing. None at all. It was as though I had been asked to paint it, and therefore it would happen.

Yet I didn't know what to do. How to begin? How would I go about getting a loose but interesting background yet not go over the places where I wanted to keep white and keep the purity of where the leaves would be? How do I do this .. and that... and what about...????????????????

In complete contradiction to a few minutes previous then, I dived into a hole. I felt out of my depth. "Am I kidding? I can't do this? I'm getting way ahead of myself here! I'm a beginner at this. I..." Thoughts like that were part of my habitual makeup: words of doubt suddenly filled my head. I looked once again at this now seemingly huge piece of paper – and then I faltered and put it away!



## TWO WHOLE WEEKS ...

Can you believe it? One moment I am flying and confident and filled with the belief that God wants me to paint this. The next I'm playing "God who?" as though I don't believe Him and it isn't real and to even dream of painting this is so, so pretentious, it's bordering on fantasy, or worse, arrogance. So, yes, I put it aside and let two weeks pass.

Three things then happened:

- A good friend popped in. She looked at paintings I'd already done, and just quietly commented how much her elderly mother would enjoy them. Why, I asked? She would enjoy them because she too was a painter, a very good one it turns out, and my friend recognised in my paintings that I had a similar gift.
- I was on YouTube looking for some texturing examples in watercolour when I came across the idea of using frisket (rubber masking fluid). This neat little product allows you to cover areas you want to keep white. Once it dries on the paper, you can apply washes of

paint over the top and it won't penetrate where the masking is. Later you can peel it off. Wow, could this be an answer for my big painting? Surely that's what I was looking for.

- I was on my laptop sorting out my photos when I stumbled across the original photograph. Once again it grabbed my attention. Once again my spirit was engaged with an urgency to paint this. It was undeniable – and I knew then I had to give voice to it.

An encouragement, a technique, and an urging. Coincidental? Perhaps. Probably as coincidental as a teaching I heard at this time: that God doesn't ever set us up for failure. If He asks us to do something, it is because He knows we can because He has prepared the way.

Three prompts.

One simple truth.

It was enough. I began.

One week was all it took. About 30 hours in all. What commenced was a period of constant excitement: moments of incredible intimacy with Our Father, moments of absolute certainty of what to do next, moments when paused, asking for help, words came that gave explicit answers, and so many moments when I would rush to call my wife with the request: "Come and look what's happening now".

I was experiencing something utterly amazing and so, so new to my Christian experience: I had a Lord who not only gave me a gift of painting, He wanted to be – and WAS – intimately involved in the expressions of that gift. I prayed my way through this painting, offering every obstacle and every success to Him. Every obstacle was overcome so easily – what an Instructor I had! Every success was so exciting, so joyful, I was busting to tell any who would listen before I burst with it!

Let me give you an example of what was going on, a wee part of this painting testimony I love to tell people:

Once I had the frisket in place, I was ready to paint the background. The original fence behind the vine was black stained boarding. Though I was painting from a photograph, I didn't want to adhere slavishly to it. Besides, this fence had the propensity to swamp all else. It was too dark, too heavy, so overbearing that it was in danger of seizing an importance of its own when in actual fact it didn't have any merit at all. It was a good lesson: focus on what is important! Delete all else.

But what to do? I prayed, "Lord, how can I develop an interesting textural layer behind my painting? You know what is wanted here. What shall I do?"

He answered! Flooding into my head came two distinct words: GIB TAPE.

Gib tape?  
Really???

Remember, I'm new to painting. I haven't got a clue what I'm doing really. But I know what He said, I know what gib tape is, and what's more, I know where I have some – out in the garage. Sure enough, there it is: fibreglass gib mesh tape.

Very quickly, very confidently now, I place strips of this tape onto the background of the painting. It only takes a couple of minutes to do this. I sit back, briefly wonder if I'm going nuts - then dismiss that thought very quickly as unworthy, grab brush and paint and go for it. Remember, I have my rubber cement on the key areas so I can be pretty messy here. Blues, browns, greens, hints of yellow: lovely creamy washes of paint plied over the mesh. Five minutes and it's done.

Clean up the brushes, let it dry, leave it alone! This is hard to do. Good painters are disciplined. I'm not. In the end, I quelled the excitement, stopped watching the paint dry, and buried myself in some gardening for an hour or two. I came back inside and abuzz with anticipation, I peeled off the tape.

It looked fantastic! Wow, wow and double wow!  
*Joanne, come look at this....*

In places the tape had locked the water based pigments into pixelated textures that looked

perfect for suggesting fencing or a wall behind the leaves. In other places, the water had leaked underneath and flooded - *which looked perfect for suggesting fencing or a wall behind the leaves.* It was an incredible moment, one in which I began to fully realise the depth and veracity of this, a truly **cooperative painting process**. God was interested in ensuring His story would be told through a painting testimony – and He was **intimately involved** in guiding me to this end.

I set about removing the masking fluid, the frisket. On the YouTube video, it had suggested this fluid should be used sparingly. I had used lots! Actually, make that LOTS!!! I prayed, then peeled. It came away perfectly. Thank you, Lord. Now I begin to see what is coming. The background is complete; the rest sits in white relief, awaiting the brush.

I decided to offer each leaf to God, and so began the sequence of pray, pause, paint;

***pray - pause - paint***

... and each leaf was a joy to behold. One at a time, I painted until the leaf was completely finished. I don't know whether this is good technique, but then I wasn't bothered with technique. Some leaves seem to want to be carefully defined and strongly opaque, others demanded fluidity and transparency and light. Some leaves kept me restless for layer after layer – in one leaf, 12 washes were applied – until they let me go. It was as though I was being guided and encouraged until HE was satisfied.

*Joanne, come and look at this one....*

*.... And this one!*



One day, only the waxeye remained to be done. I was hesitant: this would either make or break the painting. I was thrilled with the rest, and sensed that my Father was also pleased. It was a battle to not let my head get in the way. I had the formula now, and it would be folly not to adhere:

***pray - pause - paint***

OH, MR. WAXEYE, WELCOME!  
HOW BOLDLY YOUR GAZE ENGAGES.  
HOW FIRMLY YOUR FEET LOCK ON THAT VINE.  
HOW YOU COMMAND ATTENTION, DEMANDING YOUR SAY ON YOUR RED AND  
GOLD THRONE.  
THOUGH THE LEAVES COMPETE FOR GLORY, IT IS ONLY YOURS.  
ONLY YOURS.

YOU ARE NOT LOCKED TO THIS EARTH: WHEN THOSE LEAVES WITHER AND  
FALL, AS ALL WHO HAVE SEASONS WILL COME TO IN TIME, YOU REPRESENT  
LIFE BEYOND. YOUR SPIRIT AND EXUBERANCE AND PRESENCE IN THIS  
PAINTING GROUND IT AND GIVE IT FOCUS AND COMPLETE IT.

THIS IS WHAT YOU DO, LORD.

AS MY SEASONS MATURE, COLOUR ME WITH YOUR VIBRANT COLOURS, MAKE  
ME TRANSPARENT WHERE I HIDE THINGS, STRENGTHEN ME WHERE THERE IS  
NEED, AND SHOW ME HOW TO DRAW OTHERS TO YOUR PRESENCE ERE I  
FALL.



Thank you, my Creator.  
Thank you for the GIFT of painting.  
Thank you for THIS painting. It's a beauty, isn't it!  
  
I pray that it will bring GLORY to you.  
Amen.

God bless,  
Russell

*Russell Perry, En Hakkore,  
revised April 2017*