



JUN CHEN

STORY **LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW**





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The beauty of what Jun Chen creates is strenuous, with his insistent technique needling the viewer, to prevent a blissful relaxation into the image. It is a reminder of a virtuoso painter, but also the distance Jun has travelled, his dedication to art and its necessary vehemence.

A NEW PORTRAIT OF RAY HUGHES DOMINATES JUN Chen's studio. The use of scale, and Jun's dark, brooding painterly treatment is a tribute to Hughes's stature and influence, both as a gallerist and as his own first dealer. Sitting in a now-necessary wheelchair, Hughes remains in command by sheer force of personality. His retirement in 2015 is acknowledged in the partial concealment of his figure by closed doors with a black wall beyond.

This painting is Jun's entry for the 2017 Archibald Prize, and he laughs, "Lucy Culliton says that painting Ray means I won't win – but do you think it a good likeness?" And it is: uncannily evocative of the man who remains, despite ill health and retirement, a towering figure in the careers of so many contemporary Australian artists. He was the dealer who put Jun Chen's fresh, muscular painting style on the radar of art collectors. (The Ray Hughes portrait won a Highly Commended.)

The day that I visit Jun's studio in the outer suburbs of Brisbane, his first exhibition with Philip Bacon – colourful landscapes with dark skies, foregrounded by thickly painted flowers – has sold out. He declares, "I feel lucky to be here in Australia. After 27 years here, I can still do art and live and support my family. Here I will keep going and paint more stronger, in the future with *more* power."

Jun has loved painting in oil since he was a teenager. Born in 1960 in China, he reached university age during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The universities were closed for these 10 years and, when they reopened in 1977, the intake to the oil painting department was only every second year. For Jun, "The intake in 1982 was to learn Chinese brush painting, but I had to start." Only 12 other students

started with Jun at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts – with a student/teacher ratio almost one to one, his learning was intensive.

This early training, in traditional Chinese brush painting, created a strong technical base for Jun's work. He explains, "Using a big brush, ink painters may make a few marks for a bird or flower, using many tones. We learnt theory, culture, everything for the technique." This skills-based training was similar to 19th-century practices. "A nude drawing may take six days, with also training in landscape, flowers and figures, in watercolour as well."

After 1989, and the military suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests, Jun was part of a significant wave of students who left China. "Thirty years ago it was very hard to leave China, to get a visa. People wanted to go out and see the world but I just wanted to study."

Initially Jun settled in Melbourne where he studied English. In 1993 he was admitted to the Masters of Fine Arts program at Brisbane's QUT, completing his postgraduate degree over three years. His Australian experience of university was different from China. He says, "Here, you can go to the museum, there are more books. With your supervisors, you can talk more. It was self-directed learning."

Over this period, he approached paint differently. With the freedoms offered by an Australian university, he picked up the oils he had left behind in the 1980s. "I like oil paint," he says. "I had new ideas and developed a new technique for my art. I started using the palette knife, to pick up colours." The style brokered in this maturing period has been compared to the School of London painters – Lucian Freud,



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Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff – expressively thick paint, evoking emotion and the physical nature of its application.

While Jun studied, he was also working to establish himself financially, finding employment in a Japanese restaurant. Completion of the MA meant that he was able to secure Australian residency. "In 1998 I took a chance and bought the restaurant. But I was still painting, working at the restaurant three or four days and painting on the weekend and other days. I was very busy, and didn't show much."

An early exhibition at Doggett Street Studio in 1997 featured paintings that were more abstract, but gradually the landscape was taking hold, so too figuration, both executed in thick paint. For his next show in

1998, he developed images of the country around him, with a sense that "the landscape is more important for Australian art history. It is very different to China. Queensland has dry country, different again to northern New South Wales. It is so much greener even two hours south." This work elicited interest from Noosa Regional Gallery who offered him a solo exhibition in 1999.

Jun also entered competitions, first entering the Archibald and Sulman Prizes in 1997. He remembers thinking, "All can join the competition."

02 Four Figures, 2015, oil on canvas, 141 x 250cm, photographer Carl Warner

03 Beijing Opera, 2015, oil on canvas, 100 x 102cm, photographer Carl Warner



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It made me confident for the future." His work was chosen to hang in the Sulman Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1997, 1998 and 2001. In 2006, Jun's portrait of friend and fellow artist Joe Furlonger was included in the Archibald Prize and this offered important exposure.

"After that I started with Ray. He sold well – always. A good dealer is very important for an artist. He showed me every year. I was part of a group show, *Three Australian Painters*, in China in 2007, with Ian Smith and Joe Furlonger." By 2010, the lease on Jun's restaurant expired and, with a good dealer (albeit, "Wife must work!" he tells me), he has pursued his art practice full-time ever since.

The paintings in Jun's 2017 Philip Bacon exhibition are landscapes, the most dramatic inspired by the regional Queensland town of Toowoomba. 'Red fields' (2016) has strong abstract qualities, with a



04 Red Fields, 2016, oil on canvas, 136 x 160cm, photographer Carl Warner

05 New Generation China, 2014, oil on canvas, 100 x 102cm, photographer Carl Warner

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red carpet of flowers that cover the ground, but also float up with wind in front of a moody grey sky.

Others offer a tilted horizon line, with 'Purple world' (2017) similarly floating flowers (as painted touches) across the entire picture plane. The eye is drawn to explore the differentiation between the floral foreground, the brief mid ground further in the distance, and the darkening sky on the horizon. In this painting, the horizon line is interrupted with a section of paint which breaks through, a cloud juggernaut in the sky, a dramatic device of perspective that focuses attention on this point in the middle of the field.

In my view, Jun's most interesting paintings take us in close, with the viewer looking through the trees to decipher the hilly landscape and moody sky beyond. His thickly and wetly applied paint has the ability to show us more than we know.

Jun applies the paint in its pure colour, touching the canvas lightly and painting with very large brushes and the knife. "I don't mix the oils. I paint wet to wet, and use control to cover the depth of things, I want to imbue the freshness with feeling. I like colour very strong, and do my painting in my own way. I love the black and grey." The muscularity of



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After my Joe Furlonger portrait in the 2006 Archibald, I started with Ray Hughes. He sold well – always. A good dealer is very important for an artist. He showed me every year.

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these works are influenced by the physicality of their application. "People like the feeling inside, same as for artists, to see the feelings. This is very important."

His subjects are wide-ranging, yet even the most figurative are imbued with the abstract structure, almost sculptural, of the paint. People and food from the Sydney Fish Markets, dramatic views of the dying fire, and open stark landscapes are juxtaposed with the vibrancy of paintings like 'Red magnolia' (2016), dramatic in its counterpoint of the tree's slight trunks overwhelmed with the size and abundance of red flowers, and a rolling series of hills below. The sky is sketched in broad sweeps of colour, yet expresses the dying day, the last rays of sun that enliven the colour of the flowers.

Furlonger has described Jun's approach as "like a performance: preparation, sketches, poses, then thick wet oil paint applied within a time limit ..." Critic John McDonald notes, "It takes remarkable skill to manipulate paint in such volcanic quantities and not have everything turn to mud ... in these pictures every millimetre of the canvas is covered in heavy, viscous oil." ■

Jun Chen is represented by Australian Galleries, Sydney and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
australiangalleries.com.au
www.philipbacongalleries.com.au

06 Ray Hughes, 2017, oil on canvas, 277 x 173cm

07 White flower trees, 2016, oil on canvas, 100 x 102cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries, Sydney