

# Artist Max Angus celebrates 100th birthday with new exhibition

LINDA SMITH, Mercury, October 4, 2014 11:00am

MAX Angus says he has never harboured any great ambition to live to 100. The esteemed Tasmanian artist, who will celebrate his milestone birthday later this month, says the years just keep creeping up on him.

“It just happened,” Angus says simply, crediting his mother’s good genes (she lived to 97) and his passion for life for his good health and longevity.

The artist still paints a couple of times a week and is counting down to an exhibition to mark his October 30 birthday.

During an art career spanning many decades, Angus has produced thousands of paintings and a collection of books and has showcased work at countless sold-out exhibitions.



Max Angus is working on another of his famous landscape paintings. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

In the process he has won the hearts of Tasmanians from all walks of life, who not only admire his artistic contributions but are inspired by his good nature and sharp wit, passion for the environment, eloquent speaking voice and remarkable storytelling abilities.

When he’s not out in the field painting landscapes or doing portraiture work at a Hobart studio, Angus paints on a large timber easel in a sunlit corner of his room at Queenborough Rise nursing home in Sandy Bay, where he has lived with wife Thedda, 97, for the past five years.

It's a world away from his days as a youngster drawing on wallpaper scraps. Angus remembers his first foray into art like it was yesterday.

The born-and-bred Tasmanian says he was always destined to be an artist.

"My father was a house painter and decorator," Angus says. "He always brought home offcuts of wallpaper and my brother and I started drawing on them."



Max Angus adds figures to a Lake Pedder scene he is working on. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

By the time he was 12, Angus won his first art prize at Albuera Street Primary School.

When he started high school, it was noted that he was "an abject failure at maths, but got very high marks in art".

The headmaster gave him permission to skip carpentry and sheet-metal classes and study art with the senior students instead.

"I was a little boy in short pants and the bigger girls all said, 'Look at this brat'," he recalls.

But Angus, the eldest of three boys, didn't let the taunts deter him and when he finished school he worked as an apprentice for a local signwriting company by day and studied at art school by night, marrying Thedda along the way.

Angus and Thedda then went to Melbourne with his brother Don - the same brother he used to draw on wallpaper with - and set up a commercial art studio.

The business thrived, but the start of World War II led to a forced hiatus. "It was going well when along came Hitler and Mussolini and war broke out," Angus recalls.

He joined the army and ended up in Brisbane, where he was in charge of the drafting room at intelligence headquarters, overseeing the secret distribution of maps to General Douglas MacArthur to show him what the allied forces were up to.

“We used to rush maps on five-foot rolls of paper into the great man each morning,” recalls Angus, who used his free time to befriend, and sketch, Japanese prisoners of war.

When the war ended, Angus and his brother went back to their business in Melbourne.

But when Thedda’s mother had a heart attack, the couple and their young son Peter returned to Hobart.

Angus decided to try and make a name for himself as a painter in his home state, something he admits was easier said than done.

He did artwork for ABC Radio’s school broadcasting handbooks - drawing cartoons and other child-friendly creations to encourage a love of learning among children across Australia.



Some of Max Angus’s paintings, stacked behind a bedside table. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

Angus admits that while the handbooks were not masterpieces, it was a job he thoroughly enjoyed. He worked on the booklets for six months each year and that earned him enough money to spend the rest of the year painting.

When he left the army Angus bought a felt hat but quickly threw it away because he “couldn’t stand it” and set out to find another more suitable form of headwear, which has since become his trademark.

“I thought, ‘Well, what would an artist wear?’” he says.

“And the answer was a beret. I’ve been wearing them ever since.”

Over the years Angus has tried his hand at many forms of art - he has painted labels for apple crates, crafted opera sets at Hobart’s Theatre Royal and created murals on Hobart buildings - but his great love has always been watercolours.

And while Angus is fascinated by all facets of the Tasmanian landscape, whether it be native birds, lush green bush vistas or serene seascapes, one of his biggest inspirations has always been Lake Pedder.

From the early 1950s to the early ‘70s, Angus made many trips to this unspoilt patch of wilderness in the state’s south-west, before it was flooded by the hydro scheme in 1972.

And among the most memorable was his first trip, sitting in a light plane alongside his pilot friend Lloyd Jones.

“He was a very flamboyant character and great flyer,” Angus recalls of his mate.

“I’ll never forget the day he flew me in. A few miles before the beach he flew low over the buttongrass plains and rough scrubby stuff and then he pulled back on the stick and the plane went up and there was the beach.

“It was an immense sight - two miles long and 800 yards wide - and we landed on it beautifully. I was just enchanted with the place.”

Over the years he flew in and out many times to paint the landscape, often as part of camps of Lake Pedder supporters who were keen to celebrate the area and see it saved from flooding.

After friend, fellow conservationist and acclaimed wilderness photographer Olegas Truchanas died in 1972, Angus was moved to put together a book about the area and the man who had led campaign to try to save it.

“It was one of the whole turning points of me publishing four books,” he recalls.

“On the day of his funeral I was going down the steps of Scots Church and I turned to a friend and said, ‘I’m going to do a book on Olegas’ - I was certain I was going to do it.”

The result was *The World of Olegas Truchanas*, which was followed by his next book *Simpkinson de Wesselow*, an ode to the Van Diemen’s Land painter of the same name, then *A Salute to Watercolour*. His latest book *Pedder: The Story - The Paintings* was published in 2008.



Max Angus's signature on a recent painting. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

Former Greens leader Bob Brown said that from the minute he heard Angus give evidence to a parliamentary committee during the Lake Pedder campaign he had been “enraptured” by “this great role model”.

And he continues to be inspired by Angus today, with the pair regularly crossing paths at art exhibitions, book launches and other social events.

“I know he’s been a doyen of the arts in Tasmania but he has also been inspiring to the ongoing campaign for Tasmania’s wild and scenic heritage,” Brown says, reflecting on his early interactions with Angus.

“He was the most marvellous advocate for Lake Pedder. He had a mellifluous voice. The poetry of his descriptions is still etched in my mind. And here we are 40 years down the track and he’s still sparking along.”

Angus refuses to let age slow him down. He now walks with the help of a walking frame, but not entirely out of necessity - it’s largely at the insistence of Thedda, who has suffered some bad falls in recent times and wants to ensure her hardy husband stays fit and well for as long as possible.

Angus finds great joy in sharing his art and connecting with the owners of his paintings.

Up until his 80s Angus was still driving a car. Between the ages of 70 and 90 he ran annual two-week landscape painting classes for aspiring artists at Binalong Bay on the state’s East Coast, a spot that has a special place in his heart.

He bought a block of land there in the 1960s, at the insistence of a neighbour who sold it to him at a “very reasonable” price, and built a log cabin, enjoying family holidays there several times a year.

The property remains in the family and his three grandchildren and five great grandchildren continue the holiday tradition.

He said that with such famous rockscapes and seascapes, Binalong Bay was the ideal place to teach art - some students made the pilgrimage to his classes every year for 20 years to learn from such a master of the art world.

The memory of those days still makes Angus smile, and Thedda still teases him about his dedicated following of fans.

“Thedda would always say, ‘You must be a lousy teacher if they have to keep coming back every year for 20 years’,” Angus says cheekily.

He admits his wife has always been his toughest critic.

“She doesn’t paint, but she’s quick to tell me if she doesn’t like a painting,” he says.



One of Max Angus's well-used palettes. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

The couple have been married for 74 years and Angus is still clearly smitten as he recounts details of their courtship and wedding. Angus was 17 and Thedda just 14 when they met at Princes St methodist church.

“We met at a church guild for young people to keep us off the streets during the 1929 Great Depression,” he recalls.

“It was run by the pastor and we used to debate and play in the orchestra.” The teens lost contact, but met again three years later when Thedda, 17, was studying at teachers’ college.

Angus, then 20, had been playing in a band with his brothers. Thedda knew Angus enjoyed dancing so she invited him to a function at the college.

They married six years later at the same church where they met, and celebrated with a wedding breakfast for about 100 guests at a hotel in Macquarie St.

They bought a home in Sandy Bay and spent 53 years there.

But their lives were rocked when Thedda lost a leg after surgery for a blocked artery failed. She could no longer navigate their multi-level home and the couple moved to Queenborough Rise.

At first they lived in a three-bedroom apartment in the grounds of the sprawling aged care facility, but recently moved into the main residential complex, where the hallways are lined with Angus' paintings.

Angus often donates his work to various charitable causes.

In recent times he has donated art for fundraisers to support flood and bushfire victims, handed over a large collection of art books to Taroom School and has continued to support groups such as City Mission, Rotary and the Tasmanian Greens.

Angus finds great joy in sharing his art and connecting with the owners of his paintings.

"I prefer to share the beauty that I feel in the landscape with others. I don't want to shock anybody - I just want them to enjoy it."

"In the past Thedda and I would be walking around the point at Blinking Billy and people would stop and say, 'I've had a painting of yours for 40 years and I still love it'," Angus says.

At previous exhibitions his work has sold out even before it has been hung on the walls.

TasWeekend art reviewer Clyde Selby says Angus' "refreshing" style of painting, which steers away from scenic cliches and instead takes a more rugged approach to capturing the landscape, had made him a huge asset to the Tasmanian arts community.

Selby said that while some artists were content to paint from photographs, Angus liked to sit out in the elements, braving the cold, heat and wild winds in order to capture the essence of a landscape - something which was evident in his paintings.

Selby also admires Angus' passion and optimistic outlook on life.

"He's a delight and so is his wife - they are delightful people and I adore them," he says.

Despite the accolades, Angus remains humble about his achievements.

"I let it roll over me. I don't take much notice of those sorts of things," he says.

He's simply happy making, and sharing, art.

"A lot of contemporary art is designed to shock people," he says.

"I prefer to share the beauty that I feel in the landscape with others. I don't want to shock anybody - I just want them to enjoy it."

[ Max Angus celebrated his 100th birthday with 100 Years - an exhibition of old and new work at Colville Gallery, Salamanca, which opened on Wednesday, October 22, 2014. An official opening was held on Friday, October 31, 2014, the day after Angus became a centenarian.

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