



A picturesque life

Tasmanian watercolourist Patricia Giles has made her mark as an artist. Since the 1950s she has visited and painted remote locations in order to bring images of Tasmania's bush and coastal areas to a less intrepid audience

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PHOTOGRAPHY MATT THOMPSON

There are memories seeping out of every nook and cranny of the 100-year-old Sandy Bay address painter Patricia Giles has called home since she was six. They reach out like familiar arms and wrap her in a warm embrace. The comforting memories allow one of Tasmania's most significant watercolourists to escape the frustrations of the mobility walker she now relies on to get her from A to B. The walls in every room are laden with some of her more treasured framed paintings — as well as paintings gifted to her from her many artistic friends who, Giles sadly notes, are “mostly dead now”.

Every morning Giles wakes up and looks at the picturesque Coles Bay. Her view is through a stunning painting she created while standing on the edge of Honeymoon Bay looking out over to The Hazards.

The first thing she usually focuses on when she opens her

eyes are the native hens in the foreground of that painting. “They used to come around my feet like that when I was painting,” Giles laughs. “They were so cheeky! They are so nice to wake up to.”

Other paintings haven't quite made it to the premium hanging space of a wall — because there's no wall space left. There are dozens scattered around the house in a kind of languished limbo, leaning up against the lower walls hoping someone walks by with a hammer and a picture hook to rescue them.

There are many hundreds — perhaps thousands — more piled up on top of each other in an old bedroom or filed in big binders under the year she created them or the location at which they were painted.

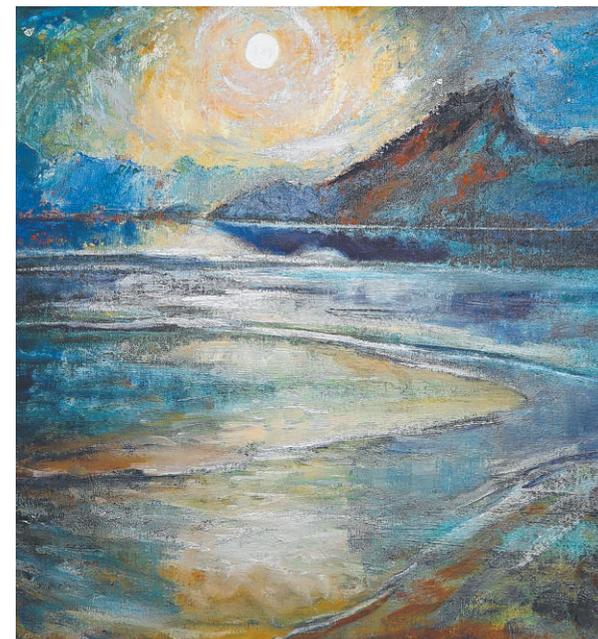
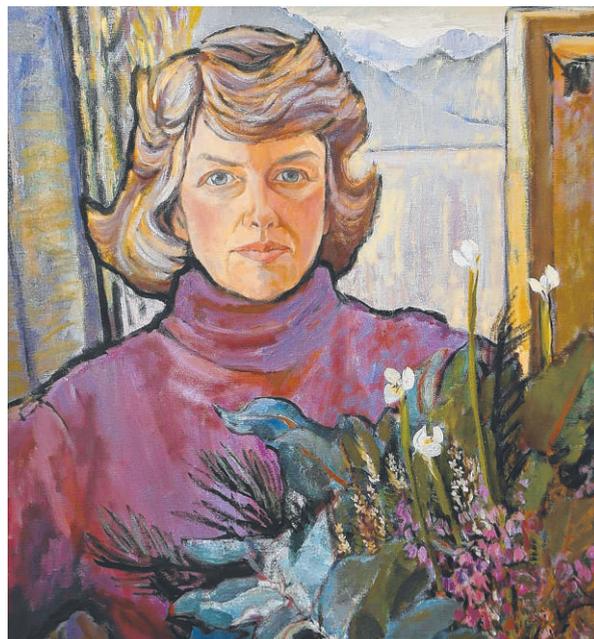
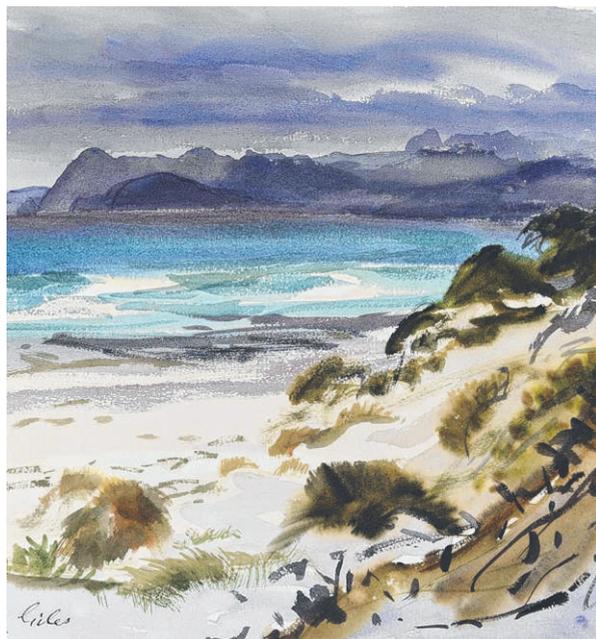
More of them should be hanging in galleries like Salamanca's Colville Gallery where you can see some of Giles creations, or breaking up the white space of walls in Tasmanian homes so

families who understand their specialness would be allowed to treasure them. Bookshelves bulge with the weight of not only books but other treasured trinkets. There's a big jar of tiny bird eggs collected by her grandfather decades ago, and shells and rocks she's picked up from probably every beach in Tasmania.

Tables are piled high with jars full of paintbrushes and piles of paperwork and photographs. There is stuff everywhere. It's organised chaos, Giles admits, as she slowly spoons a boiled egg into her mouth for a late lunch.

She knows exactly where everything is. She does wonder, though, whether she should maybe just call someone from TMAG to come and pick it all up or simply take away what they want. “I'm not really sure what else to do,” she says. “There's such an awful lot of stuff here.”

Everywhere she looks, Giles sees things that trigger a memory that plays out in her mind like an old-style movie projector.



Clockwise from main: Patricia Giles in her Sandy Bay home this week; Friendly Beaches, 1975-76; Self-portrait; Lake Pedder under moonlight; Organised chaos.

Sometimes, to help, the spinster and treasured Tasmanian artist closes her eyes to make it easier for those snippets of the past to seep back into her. Remembering can be exhausting, Giles says – and sometimes too much remembering in one day can muck up her sleep that night. When she's going back to the past, it's difficult for her to come back to the present. Sometimes she just wants to stay there.

She's a little girl again and trout fishing beside her Dad up at Great Lake. A platypus has just swum by. She's a young woman looking out of an aircraft and in an instant she's out of that plane and sitting in a sand dune painting the ocean. She's snuggled up in the rail car an old lorry dropped off at the high part of The Great Lake which became her family's shack haven. She's with her dear friends on their Sunday painting expeditions creating a painting from the feelings a view evokes in her.

Sunday. It was her favourite day of the week. "You get very tired after your mind stays back in the past," Giles tells *TasWeekend* two days before her 87th birthday. "And if you've been talking about a certain time, remembering the way it was, then your mind can stay there for a bit."

Walking down her hallway is like taking a trip to every special, natural place that's ever existed in Tasmania before they became such tourism drawcards. It's a memory lane filled with framed watercolour creations that celebrate what makes our state so great. A time, before we ruined it with too much tourism, she says.

"I don't like too much change. I don't like all the tourism business here. It's taking away the spirit of the place with too many tourist things happening." Landscapes of pristine and untouched locations, brought to life through the flick of her wrist holding a brush with some coloured water at the tip.

"I hope that my paintings help to preserve what makes Tasmania special," Giles says. "It's not why I painted them, though. It was just a strong feeling I had inside me. I had to paint."

It wasn't always easy going painting the kinds of scenes she was drawn to. Giles recalls trekking through thick snow, up and along cliffs, and sitting on uncomfortable boulders for hours at odd angles while big snowflakes fell all around her.

Sometimes she was so cold she could barely hold her brush. "I was in the most uncomfortable position you could possibly get, but I was just above a lagoon overlooking swans," Giles says. "I wanted to capture them as they took flight. It was a challenge that I wasn't going to let pass me by."

If she looks this way, Giles is camping again. This time she's at Lake Pedder, in South-West Tasmania, with a bunch of her friends, trying to capture the moonlight reflecting off the water. It's so beautiful she can recall she had to sketch it in pencil first just to make sure she could take it all in. She remembers how time stood still when she was painting that. Happiness washed over her too, she recalls.

If she turns her head a little to the right, she's transported to Lake Dobson, in Mt Field National Park, and she's frantically swishing her wrists again to capture the buttongrass she still adores decades later. Even now, she remembers the rush she felt to make sure she could get it all down. Then we are in a place called Swansea on the East Coast – it's at the end of the Swan River, and she can hear the swans flying over her tent at night.



As she points up at another painting perched a little higher up the wall, she winces for a second from the stabbing pain in her painting arm. It's riddled with osteoarthritis that now makes painting every day impossible.

It's a wretched condition she says was probably not helped by the pace at which she threw herself into painting. She worked quickly, she says, because of the excitement of it all. "I got lost in it like a conductor furiously moving his hands – I had to work like that."

Even getting up the steep steps to her back yard studio that her father built her in the 70s is proving to be too difficult these days, particularly on wet and cold days like the one when *TasWeekend* drops by. The studio looks lonely and unloved and is cluttered with piles and piles of beautiful watercolour creations stacked up sadly one on top of the other.

At the end of the interview, we are sitting in what was the dining room when Giles was a little girl, and she can remember the feeling of excitement as she waited for her grandfather to walk through the front door so he could scoop her up into a wheelbarrow and take her for a ride.

Looking out the front windows triggers one of her earliest memories of collecting pretty objects from the garden when she was aged around four at her house in Princes St (also in Sandy Bay), and arranging them into a pattern that was pleasing to her. It was probably her first artistic expression she says.

That memory then triggers another – she is looking up at her mother stooping over a sink in the old-style, outdoor wash house while Giles busies herself with scraps of paper and pastels on an overturned apple box.

"From an early age, I'd always wanted to make marks," Giles says. "It's just so good to be able to express what you see and what you feel. It's a memory you are bringing back with you and the feeling of what it was like."

"You know, when I woke up this morning I thought 'gee, it's cold, but I can't just step out into the snow like I used to up at The Great Lake'."

"I used to be able to just step out and paint. Now I'm just hanging on as best I can because I don't want to leave." ●

Patricia Giles's biography, a major study of one of Tasmania's most significant watercolourists, and a beautiful coffee table book – The waking dream of art: Patricia Giles, Painter, by Alison Alexander, Hardcover, Pillinger Press, RRP \$75 – will be launched by Hobart Lord Mayor Anna Reynolds at the Hobart Town Hall tomorrow, Sunday June 30, at 3pm.

