

## PAT QUA: THE ART OF DOING YOUR OWN THING

by Fran Hernon

---

*This article appeared in Sydney's Daily Telegraph on Saturday, April 25, 1987, under the heading "FRAN HERNON talks to Pat Qua who gave up teaching economics for the joys of being an artist."*



*This shot of Pat Qua, putting the finishing touches on a portrait of her son Chris, illustrated this newspaper story...  
PHOTO CREDIT  
PHILIP BROWN*

One day in 1971 Pat Qua was sitting in the staff room at the Sydney high school where she taught economics, looking out over the roofs of nearby houses towards a distant gasometer. Hardly an inspiring vista, one would have thought, but into Pat Qua's mind popped a thought, and the thought was this: We only have one bite at the cherry. She was 46, and suddenly aware of mortality. So she cried "enough", there is more to life, I'm going to try something different. And she resigned, and became an artist.

"I think I read a book on Picasso which was rather inspiring," she reflects. "I liked the idea of his showing his little boy in the morning pictures that he'd painted last night. And I thought now that's different from people who take six months to paint a picture. He painted a picture in one night. I thought Wow!

"So I bought a whole lot of flowers and paints and canvas. I wanted to paint everything. I was just consumed with the joy and the freedom."



*L-R, Pat Qua, David Ridyard, Paul Finnerty, Tom Baker, Lyn Wallis, John Colborne-Veel, Don Heap, pictured in the backyard of the Qua home in Ashfield, Sydney... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

There it was, a whole world to paint and so little time to paint it in. Friends who called in to see her found themselves being asked to assume various poses. Even their dogs and cats weren't safe.

Pat built up a huge collection of paintings. They filled her house and the houses of her two sons. She would sit by her big picture window, looking out onto her Ashfield garden with its fountain, a little imp under an umbrella of water, and if friends and their pets failed her she would paint flowers. Eventually she felt she'd drained her long suffering friends almost dry. It was time to appeal to a wider audience — and find some room for the overflow.

So last month she started her own gallery. The long white-walled room in Glebe is stacked to the gunnels with Pat's work, plus a couple of pieces from friends in whom she believes. She has an extraordinary variety of styles — figurative, abstract, portraits, landscapes. She loves Mediterranean scenes — France, Greece, Spain, a legacy from her brother. He persuaded her to travel and she got the bug. Now she tries to go once a year. Sometimes she gets stranded.



*Pat Qua in front of one of her paintings, representing a Mediterranean scene...*

"I've left paintings all over the world," she confides. "I was marooned in London once with about 20 cents left. An Arab from Bahrein wanted some paintings done and gave me some photos of his four wives. I painted them and he took them away and paid me and I was able to come back home again.

"Other times I've been reduced — well not reduced," she hastily corrects herself, "because I like painting dogs — to doing portraits of dogs because the English love their dogs. And I've escaped again that way."

While she speaks two women wander in to the gallery. They stroll around peering critically at the paintings and passing comments like: "Very bright colours, aren't they?" and "Ooh, I don't like this one". Actually in a sense it's immaterial whether you like Pat's paintings or not. Her lesson is that with enough plain old-fashioned guts you can do anything. She says she's never had an art lesson in her life, apart from the odd one as a schoolgirl.

"I didn't want to have anyone else's ideas, I wanted to make my own mistakes and be absolutely free. So I've probably gone in where angels fear to tread. But it's been such a lovely time I've kept at it."



*Qua's painting of her partner for many years, the jazz musician Tom Baker...*

An admiration of a large green abstract reveals she obtained its Pollock-type effects by whacking it with a wet towel. "When you don't know what you're doing you can do anything," she says. Pat is a determined little character. A tactless comparison of that green abstract to Pollock solicits a mulish lift of the chin and an abrupt "It's my own idea".

She deliberately tries new styles all the time, because she doesn't want to be typecast. If this results in a patchwork quality to her work she would probably be the last to mind. She really doesn't care, she says, if she never sells another painting, she'll still keep on. That is, if she has the time between engagements.

Pat is also a jazz pianist — self-taught, naturally. "I did get sidetracked a bit into travelling with a jazz band," she admits. "I was with Ray Price's band for about three years. I think it just happened because I was at a party once — I'd been living in the country where my sons were born — and a band was playing and I was looking forlornly at the keyboard thinking "Gee I know three chords, maybe I could play them but I wasn't game to."



*Pat was with Ray Price for some three years. Here she is pictured when on tour in regional New South Wales with the Ray Price Quintet, seated in the doorway of the bus. Others are Graham Spedding (far left), Len Barnard (second from left), Price (standing in the doorway of the bus) and Tom Baker (far right)... PHOTO COURTESY BILL HAESLER*

A friend said: "Now you sit down and you play." Pat protested, upon which her friend whacked her on the head – not too hard, she says – and said: "NOW sit down and play", which she did. "I recognised male superiority," she giggled. The band told her she'd have to get a chord book. "What's that?" she said, and they explained it was a book where the skeletons of tunes are written in chords so you don't have to read music to be able to play.



*Pat Qua playing the piano in her Ashfield home on Christmas Day in 2012... PHOTO COURTESY TESSA QUA*

"So I started sitting in with bands, and since I couldn't get any worse I suppose I had to get a bit better. I've played with a lot of bands all over Sydney. I probably know every golf club and every yacht club in the metropolis," she says wryly. Pat's unusual talent, nurtured during a low period in her life when she bought an old second-hand piano and listened to Jelly Roll Morton records to get a feeling for the blues, has been passed down to her two sons Willie and Chris. They were the founding members of one of the most respected jazz bands in Australia, Galapagos Duck.



*Pat's two sons Chris (left) and Willy, who were founding members of one of the most respected jazz bands in Australia, Galapagos Duck...*

"I couldn't get them to sleep at night or up in the mornings so the only thing they could be was musicians," says Pat. But she's uncomfortable with remarks about raw talent. "Well any person should be able to find things out for themselves if they listen or look," she says.

"Talent? I think it's more of a matter of being frantically neurotic and having to do something or you'll go crazy. "I've always found it a great release. The keyboard offers unlimited opportunities for happiness. And anyone has it in them to play around with paints and colors.

"I think most people are too happy. You have to have motivation, it has to be important to you. It's no good saying, oh, one day, one day. I think they should do it yesterday!" Although Pat doesn't profess to have any favorites: "They're all happy paintings, there are no gloomy death scenes," she says.

Unarguably, her portraits are probably the most eye-catching aspect of her work. She sighs. "In portraiture it's so difficult to get the eyes right. There's one painting I've done of my son Christopher and I just can't get the eyes right and I've been looking at it for ten years. It's like Dorian Gray. Every now and then I go and touch it up a bit, move the eye a tenth of an inch one way — I don't think I'll ever get it right."



*Movie still from "Dorian Gray", Ben Barnes, 2009, directed by Oliver Parker...  
PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

"Portraiture's hard. But it's also very rewarding if you can catch them in some moment of dynamic action."

She scurries away to fetch a portrait of her friend, comedienne Su Cruickshank. It's large and lively, like the lady herself. At one stage Pat made a few "feeble attempts" to convince commercial galleries to give her a showing. "But I think they all want paintings of Australia," she says, resigned.

Pat works like a demon because, "teetering towards my early 60s," as she puts it, she's become more and more conscious of the passage of time. "You become aware of the finiteness of life after a while," she muses, nursing a cigarette. "You realise you have to work hard to get everything done. I'm going to be very annoyed on my death bed. With my last gasp I'll think oh I should have altered that, I shouldn't have left that like that. And then it'll be too late."

The break she made from a safe secure job which, after all, she quite enjoyed, has given her the satisfaction of knowing she's used all her talents. The price is that she's

engaged herself in a race against time. But there are compensations. "If you feel lonely you can create people or a fantasy world. The canvas is a window and you create marks and imaginative adventures on it. That plus the actual physical pleasure of putting paint onto canvas. Nobody ever mentions that but it is a pleasant sensation to squeeze out those lovely colors. So that's why I stick to oil painting. And also if you make a mistake you can scrape it off and fix it up," she adds, incurably honest.



*Pat Qua, pictured at the 1961 Australian Jazz Convention in Adelaide... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

In the course of conversation she has been asked how she learned the technique of oil painting, which is not like painting by numbers. "Techniques?" she replied. "Oh, that's easy." The art colleges are going to hate you, she is told. "Oh yes, well how can we soften that one?" she says, instantly alert to charges of rampant ego. "I think you'd better put: Fools rush in where angels fear to tread and Where ignorance is bliss it is folly to be wise." So we did.

---