

# A BRUSH WITH MY BRAIN

## THE STORY OF AN ART CLASS



*A travelling exhibition of paintings and drawings by  
18 Tasmanians living with an acquired brain injury  
February-December 2011*

Launceston - Kempton - Burnie - Smithton - Deloraine - George Town  
- Nubeena - St Marys - Sydney - Canberra

A travelling exhibition of paintings and drawings organised by the Tasmanian Acquired Brain Injury Service of Northern Tasmania, funded by Arts Tasmania and supported by Tasmanian Regional Arts and the Launceston General Hospital.



*The TABIS Art class, Autumn 2010  
From left to right; Paul L, Mark and Julie, Paul.S, Penny, Rhonda, Mary, Alan and Gordon.*

The TABIS Art class, directed since 2005 by Jonathan Bowden, is open to all Northern Tasmanians who live with some form of acquired brain injury. The work in this catalogue and in the exhibition has been drawn entirely from the work of 18 of the participants, some of whom have been attending the class since it began. With one exception, the students in the art class have not exhibited in public before.

Opening at the Launceston General Hospital in February 2011 the exhibition will tour to regional venues in Tasmania throughout 2011. A selection of works from the exhibition will also be exhibited at the Sydney

Rehabilitation hospital in September and at the Belconnen Arts Centre in Canberra in November 2011.

TABIS is an organisation dedicated to providing a range of specialised services to Northern Tasmanians who have suffered a brain injury. Funded by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Motor Accident Insurance Board, the offices of TABIS are located at 288 Invermay Road, Mowbray Heights, PO Box 329, Tas, 7248. Phone 6326 2022 Monday to Friday. Contact Russell Walker by phone, email; [rwalker@tabis.org.au](mailto:rwalker@tabis.org.au) or website [www.tabis.org.au](http://www.tabis.org.au)



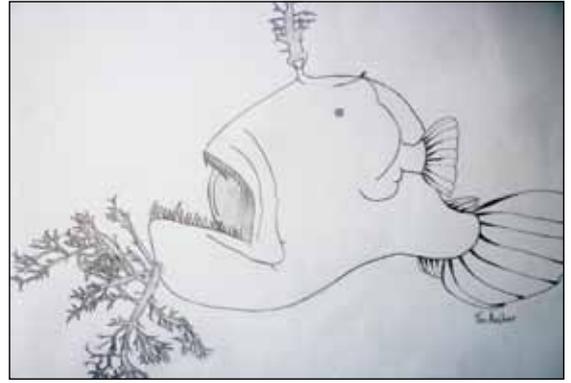
TABIS would also like to thank:

The Wellington Street Gallery for their professionalism and generosity in preparing the frames for this exhibition;  
Watkins Removals for helping out with transport and storage of artworks.

*Cover: Still life on an Indian rug. Mary Smith, pastel on paper 2010*

## TIM ARCHER

I enjoy using my creativity, starting out viewing a prop or another person's painting or drawing. Taking several weeks to complete a painting seems to trigger my memory, and encourages me to think ahead on the steps. Practice makes perfect! Everyone gets along well in the art class, and it has made it easier for me to talk about my brain injury. People without an ABI have difficulty understanding the injury unless it's something like a broken leg.



'Deep Sea' Pencil on paper Tim Archer 2010



Pastel on paper 2010

## KERRY BARWICK

I have always had an interest in drawing and painting. My early years were spent with my grandparents, and my grandmother bought me pencils and paints when I was about 4 or 5. I always enjoyed art at school. Before I joined the art class at TABIS I often felt quite lost and misunderstood, and I had very low self esteem. Expressing myself through art and being able to talk about my brain injury has given me confidence I lacked for over 30 years since my brain injury, which was acquired when I was 22. As a matter of fact it has changed my life and also my marriage as my husband has seen how much happier I am since I joined the class 5 years ago. I enjoy looking at work done by other artists. At TABIS our teacher Jonathan supplies many art books so I often spend part of an art lesson looking through the books as I find it gives me inspiration. The art class is my second family.

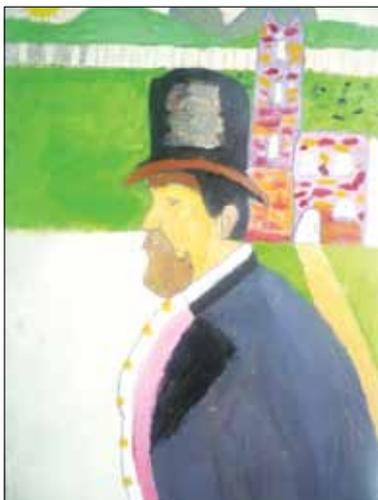
## GORDON BROOKES

What gets me started? A problem to be solved. Something I haven't done before. Painting and drawing has improved my memory more than you can imagine!!

I had dabbled with painting for years, but I always had negative feedback, I finally met a teacher who believed in me. I enjoy the class, but the funny thing is I often don't do anything except connect with others. This is in my mind the most valuable. The painting is exciting too, of course!! I have always loved animals, and painting them is one way to express that.



'Colt Resting' Pastel on paper 2010



Oil on board 2010

## MARCUS DAWKINS

What gets me started on a painting? Memories. I enjoy art and I'd like to do more of it. Art was one of my favourite subjects at school. I like looking at the books at the art class and I get ideas from them. I also paint from the still life on the table. I paint anything I can think of, skulls, dragons, dogs, flowers, human bodies, tropical stuff. I enjoy the company I get at the art class.

## RHONDA FERNIE

I draw what I see in front of me but on days when I'm down I don't choose bright cheerful colours: I look for a sad subject like a tree in winter. Being able to draw when I didn't think I could has made me wonder what else I could do. Mixing with other people with brain related injuries has helped me a lot. I used to feel like I had to explain myself a lot and go into details about why I couldn't do as much as other people. Now I don't feel so self conscious about my problems. I thought I wouldn't mind selling some work but when I realised I would have to cut pages out of my sketchbook I said no. I hadn't realised until then how much my work meant to me.



'Fairy' Pencil on paper 2010



'Venus' Pastel on paper 2010

## NORMAN GARDINER

'Sometimes I paint from memory, sometimes from the still life table, and when I can't think of anything I will look for a good book to find something interesting. I used to draw better, before my accident. Sometimes I think my painting is 'a bit shit', but as time has gone on I think I have got better.

Its good to get out and talk to the people at the art class; people there can be funny. I'd like to go to Madagascar and paint the wildlife and the women, if I could get there.



'Vincent' Watercolour Pencil 2010

## TREVOR HEXTALL

What gets me started on a painting? Its usually another painting or a sculpture; I look through all the art books that Jonathan brings, and I soon find something I want to work from. Occasionally I draw from the still life table but not often. I find pastel too messy so I usually work in inks, water colour pencil and sometimes oils; sometimes I spend two or three sessions on one drawing. I have always been interested in art. I used to study drawing at TAFE with Alan MacIntyre. I don't want to sell my drawings, I like to keep them to show to my family. I enjoy the company of the people at the art class.



'Jenna' Pastel over monotype 2010

## JENNA JOHNSON

After my stroke I assumed I would never be able to draw again but my art has gone off on a tangent that I enjoy. My brain structure changed. I became more acutely aware of composition and technique. Now that I have lost my verbal skills art helps me clarify what I feel. I realise that it is not the time that is spent on a painting that makes it uplifting. Art is in the eye of the beholder.

My background was as a social worker. The art class has made me realise that I can pursue art as a career. My art and social work complement each other.

(Jenna joined the art class in 2010. There is also another of her wonderful images 'Hope' on the back cover of this catalogue). JB

## AMANDA KERSHAW

I have always drawn, and I work at home a lot in my sketchbooks; this painting was big for me; usually I work smaller A4 or less. I paint whatever I am thinking about; sunsets, people, hands, faces, patterns, cartoons. I enjoy design, hiding a hand or a pair of hands inside a pattern. Sometimes its just abstract.



'Lost Boy'

Inks on paper

2010



'Bacchus'

Oil on board

2010

## PAUL LETCHFORD

I start by looking at the product I have chosen to draw and analyse the shade, angles and line the product encompasses. I believe painting has helped my memory because I am constantly using my brain in different ways to illustrate my point of view through drawing. During this class I have learnt all sorts of techniques which I have used effectively through my pieces. I really enjoy the company of the art class. I feel accepted among the group because they understand my struggles and ups and downs.

## IAN RODEN

I enjoy looking at the art books but mostly I paint from the still life on the table. I like doing sculpture - figures mostly: I made a clay box with figures for my wife to keep her rings in. I'd like to do more art again this year.



'Green still life'

Pastel on paper

2010



'After Rodin'

Pastel on board

2010

## PAUL SMEDLEY

I have always been interested in looking at paintings, at the National Gallery or wherever, but I had never tried painting until I joined the class three years ago.

I used to work in a paint shop, so I had to learn how to mix colours; I think that helps when you want to paint yourself. I get ideas from the art books or from still life on the table, anything really. I take most of my work home and my sisters frame it and keep it; I get orders from them!

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### MARY SMITH

Looking at something on the still life table or in a book gets me started on a painting. Before I started the art class I assumed I couldn't draw. I enjoy the art class, and I like the company of the people there.

Sometimes Jonathan loses my work which is a real pain, but he usually finds it again. He makes up for it by making me cups of tea. Has painting helped my memory? Stuffed if I know!



'Iranian Pot'

Pastel on paper

2010



Oil on board

2006

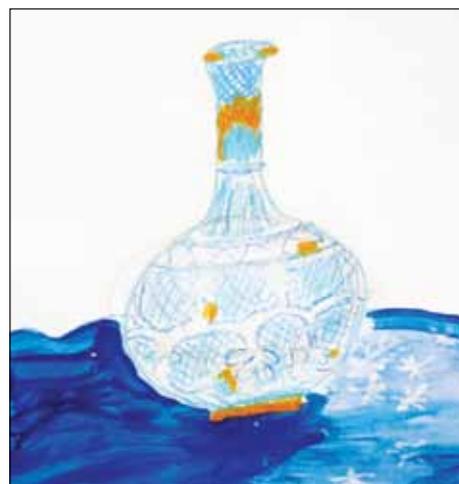
### NORMAN STANLEY

I had never painted at all before the Art class and I enjoyed going there and trying out painting, drawing, printing and sculpture.

I still have a mirror at home that I painted in 2007, and quite a few paintings. I enjoyed the clay modelling especially, but I haven't done art for a while, maybe I'll get round to it again, but I don't get out much, except to do the cookery class.

### RACHEL WALLASTON

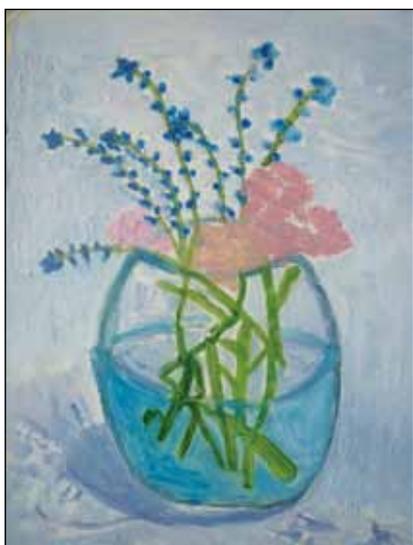
The exercise of painting in this social situation, acts as a catalyst for memories. I try to express thoughts both verbally, and physically, through the act of art. The still life on the table starts me off, but then as my thoughts drift, so does my art. In the class I feel at ease, not having to excuse or explain myself or my poor memory, as we are all aware of each other and thus have patience with each other.



'Iranian Jar'

Acrylic on paper

2010



Oil on board

2008

### ALAN WILLIAMS

At the time I joined the art class in 2005 I thought I could not draw, but when I saw other people in the class drawing I thought perhaps I could do that too. I enjoy coming to the class because of the general interaction of the 'characters' who attend. I feel I'm on a level playing field.

My speech and ability to communicate have been severely affected, however since joining the class I realise my situation is not so isolated, there are other people with significant problems. Painting is a means of expressing myself, it is an outlet.



Rachel Walleston

Acrylic on paper

2010

## A MORNING IN THE LIFE OF THE ART CLASS

The Art Class starts at ten, and is held in a large hall off Prince's Square, rented out to us by St Johns Anglican Church, conveniently located near the centre of Launceston. Every Wednesday I load my van with paints, art books, flowers for a still life, and a folder of the previous weeks work and set off, stopping only to buy a cake from the Country Women's Association: you can't paint without fuel, and the wheels of our work and conversations are oiled with endless cups of tea and coffee.

When I arrive in the hall at 9.30 Trevor is sitting quietly at the table. We chat about the events of the week. Trevor suffered a severe brain injury from a fall down a flight of stairs and it has affected his short term memory, but not his speech, and he usually walks to the class from his home a couple of kilometres away. Soon Alan arrives and starts to help me arrange the tables - Alan suffered a stroke a few years back and his speech has been severely affected, together with the right side of his body. He walks with a limp but retains good coordination and tremendous strength in his left arm, and picks up the folding tables as if they were made of cardboard. A man of good humour and few words, he has over the last four years, learnt to paint spare, elegant still lifes and figure work.

Soon the room starts to take shape: Paul L. appears, at 24, one of the youngest members of the class. He suffered severe brain damage in a car accident but has irrepressible good humour and a string of lewd jokes which keep the whole class entertained, until he starts to go over the top and has to be brought back into line by Mary or Kerry, who with Alan, have been with the

class since the beginnings in 2005, and count as tribal elders.

Soon Kerry appears, fresh off the community bus from Deloraine. Kerry is one of the few in the class who had any experience as an artist before her injury, sustained in a car accident at the age of 22. Kerry produces exquisitely drawn portraits and formal still lifes, usually in pastel or watercolor.

Penny and Rhonda are next to arrive. Penny is one of the older members of the class, and the newest to it: she suffered a brain tumor two years ago and if she is drawing, for instance, a regular shape such as a vase, she will only draw one side of it curved - the other side will appear quite flat. Penny has only been attending the class for 3 months but she is already learning how to cope with this and to draw the right and left hand side of a face, for instance, without any apparent distortion. She will still be unable to perceive the right hand side of any object, and that might never change.

Following Penny, Rhonda glides in quietly, a slim, subdued figure dressed in subtle shades of black, green and violet with earrings to match. I am reminded we haven't done self portraits for a while - we try to do one a year, and I show Rhonda a book of Frida Kahlo's self portraits. She is enthused, but not ready to confront the mirror yet, and so she continues with a delicate miniature rendering of a Japanese fan.

While all these meetings and greetings are happening in different corners of the room I am, with Alan and Paul's help, arranging tables in a stockade around the centre piece still life, and distributing pencils and blank paper to those who need them. The pastel boxes are an indispensable part of the table, along with oil paints and a slab of polished marble for monoprints. We are still awaiting others, and soon Mary bustles in on a walking frame, calling out alluring endearments to the class, and cheerful insults to me, including 'Why haven't you got me a cup of tea yet?' We all bustle to help, and Mary settles down to one of her wonderful complex still lifes which are drawn in pencil at great speed on a full Imperial sheet of paper and then filled in, sometimes over a period of weeks, with strong, joyous, harmonious contrasts of colour, usually in pastel, though Mary's oils can be highly accomplished too.

Soon Gordon comes in unobtrusively bearing a glowing pastel seascape, his latest, beautifully framed, and sets it against the wall. There are murmurs of appreciation; Mary says, 'That's wonderful Gordon', and words of quiet praise flutter around the table. Gordon has only

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attended the class for 18 months, but since joining the class, painting has become a major part of his life. His blend of wisdom and generous praise for other peoples' work has been a major addition to the group: a natural mentor and leader himself, it is comforting to see his warm encouragement of others reflected back on him.

This first hour is the most frantic of the day. While everyone hunts for an idea on the table or plucks one out of thin air or finds one in the pages of a book, materials and mediums have to be matched to their needs. The chatter subsides slightly. Paul obviously thinks things are too quiet so he asks us all *'How do you get a fat lady into bed?'* We spread our hands in despair and no one hazards a guess. *'Piece of cake'*, Paul answers with a satisfied cackle, and everyone else laughs too, partly because we had been waiting for something truly awful.

Today, our conversation turns to depression, that dark crow that flaps down and settles on the shoulder of so many people, whether brain injured or not. We discuss the social isolation that goes with society's perception that brain injured people are inferior and can no longer contribute anything worthwhile. Gordon, himself the victim of two major strokes, and a highly resourceful and intelligent man despite his disability, has an interesting take on this topic. *'You know'*, he says quietly, *'if you allow your injury to define the rest of your life, it will, and you will suffer depression badly - but if you think of your brain damage as opening a door to something you couldn't have done if you hadn't been injured, then you'll begin to find a way out. I would never have picked up a brush if I hadn't had a stroke, but now that I have, I want to put my available energy into painting, and that thought inspires me every day'*. Gordon tells us of his plan to build a horse drawn caravan equipped as a studio and tour rural Victoria in the summer - and no one doubts that he is capable of doing it.

By now everyone who is going to draw has something on the go and the conversation becomes more general: accidents, celebrity scandal, murders; our politics never rise above personalities, so it doesn't become an issue.

Later the conversation turns to short term memory loss which is almost universal among brain injured people. Light hearted recipes are offered for improving the faculty - or jokes exchanged about not worrying about it and getting a double enjoyment from life because you can do things twice without remembering what happened the first time.

Gordon has some useful ideas because he had to relearn his skills of addition and multiplication after his stroke, and had used mnemonics and visual jokes to jog his

memory, even before his stroke. Paul L. finds this useful because he is active and athletic looking and does not, four years after a car crash, present as obviously brain injured despite losing the sight in one eye and having spent four months in a coma. *'My friends or people I meet in a pub say to me, hey, you're not brain injured. But I know I am because I know what I can't do, including having a drink, and being able to find things I put down or remembering if I've eaten my breakfast twice or just once'*. Paul is currently completing an education degree and still runs or walks in long races and has endless energy; he is also in demand as a highly effective communicator to high school students on the perils of driving fast at night while talking into your mobile phone, which is how he very nearly met his end one summers night on the Midland Highway.

His words gather a ripple of agreement around the table: and so our conversation weaves between recollection, fantasy, cures for absent mindedness, the marginal place for brain damaged people in society, mild smut, and praise for one others work, especially towards the finish time when I pass round the collection bowl to cover expenses. No one talks much about their life before injury; perhaps it is too hard to confront what you no longer have? Over the year our conversations range over a vast field, and that does include the experience of sickness and coma, which brings me to the next part of our story and an earlier aspect of the history of the class - the coma panel.



Alan Williams

2010



Coma Panel

Permaset Dye screenprinted on canvas 2500cm x 3500cm

2006

## THE COMA PANEL 2006

The Coma panel project was undertaken for three reasons; the first of these was simply to explain coma through the experience of those in the class who had lived through it.

The second was to encourage the group, which was much smaller at the time, to get to know each other better by creating something co-operatively, as a team.

The third was more general, and connected with other projects we had already worked on; this was to use the process of drawing and thinking in images to access memories of life prior to brain injury, including childhood.

These recollections of early family life, which we had expressed through a sculpture series, had marked a turning point in the way the class operated; aesthetic decisions about how to place an arm or draw an eye were no longer so personal, others were facing the same problems too.

The making of these sculptures had been a turning point in itself. Brain injury does not necessarily affect the long term memory of those who suffer from it, but at the same time there can be a reluctance to engage with the memory of events before the injury: this reluctance to revisit personal aspects of the past is understandable, and perhaps involuntary, as if the brain had set up road blocks to protect itself from memories of a life lived by different rules and bounded by different and less restrictive horizons.

In the process of working backwards into the light and dark of childhood, other memories began to emerge too, of which perhaps the most intriguing were of coma.

As we met, drew, and painted over the weeks and months, and our group's confidence grew, it became easier to talk about this experience, which, in its intensity and pattern would be very difficult to convey to anyone else who had not experienced it. Several people in the class had never confided their story to anyone at all, and it was not difficult to understand why: not simply because it was deeply traumatising, but because it was almost universally a vision of another world.

Listening to their stories I was reminded of the mediaeval visionaries, of Dante and Hieronymus Bosch, painters of Heaven and Hell to whom demons and angels were quite as real as the face across the table at the farm kitchen or in the pub.

Although the accident itself was usually inaccessible to memory, the time afterward, when they lay unconscious in the ambulance or on the operating table, in some instances for weeks or months before arousal, was often recalled with great vividness, usually from a point well outside their body and looking down not just on themselves, but on everyone else in the ambulance or the theatre... and listening to conversations between nursing staff which turned out later to be accurate in every detail.

These stories are quite common among those who survive coma, but astonishing as they seem they were not as remarkable to me as the universality and vividness of the descriptions of the state of coma itself.

These descriptions were generally of a peaceful, but not sleeping state, where they felt themselves watched, looked after, and held up by forces they could only describe as angelic.

There were other presences too, some of them family members long dead, who were engaged in a struggle over their bodies and their destiny. They form the subject of the centrepiece of the coma panel, which was drawn, and exquisitely cut in stencil by one of my private students, Leonie, who had listened to the stories I had been telling about my TABIS class. Leonie put her own stamp on their visions, influenced, I am convinced, by the terminal illness of a close friend of hers.

Another student, Matthew, who at 18 was a brilliant talent in his own right, drew and sculptured the wasp demons who Andrew ( a visitor to the class) had described as trying to drag him off to a cave where they would have eaten him alive. Andrew was too shy to draw but his descriptions were quite vivid enough to fuel Matthew's imagination, even in the retelling by me. There were other areas of Andrew's visions I would have included if I could, the most remarkable of which was his time after he managed to escape from the mechanized, humanoid wasps and lived a peaceful life for six months in what sounded very like a hill village in Burma - participating in everything the villagers did, from tilling the fields to smoking a pipe and sharing meals, day after day,

week after week until after six months he woke up and found he was Andrew again.

Not every person's story was as terrifying or as lucid as Andrew's, but all of them had a distinct dream footprint which I got them to draw onto butcher's paper; these I took back to the studio, and cut into stencils to print onto the three large canvas panels which were later sewn together in the local sail loft to make the coma panel.

Aside from the centre panel by Leonie which shows angels holding a sleeping figure , the lunettes in the side panels of the canvas were all drawn by class members, and the faces and figures, usually of a parent or relative, are as near to the guardian spirits who visited them as I could guess from a verbal description.

By the end of the 'memory sessions' when each member of the class described what sort of presences surrounded them and consoled or terrorized them while they were comatose, the air in our dark basement was littered with drawings on butcher's paper and felt as thick with half seen presences as Piccadilly Circus at night, during a power cut.

When we all saw the panel again after a lapse of several years, and no-one could remember much about it, there were a few giggles, naturally; but forgetting all except the outlines of something you have painted or drawn is not unique to brain injured people and I think the experience of working together as a group on a single idea gave us coherence as a group and helped form the basis of understanding from which friendships could be born.



Andrew's Coma Memory, sculptured by Matt Viney

## ON LEARNING WITHOUT BEING TAUGHT

How do you teach a group of people who have no confidence in their own skills to draw and paint?

This was the problem that confronted me when I was asked to run the first TABIS Art class in 2005. It was not the first time I had faced it, as in addition to my own practice as a landscape and figure painter, I had run private classes for adults and children for many years.

The answer I believe is that you don't need to teach people how to paint any more than you need to teach them how to observe nature, or read facial expressions, or tap time to music. The sense of line, colour and rhythm is innate in everyone and people will teach themselves if you can give them confidence and belief in themselves as artists.

They will need to be shown how to use materials and it is important to correct their drawing at least initially: but this is no more than giving them the tools and letting them finish the job for themselves.

In that sense I never saw the class as therapy, although a regular meeting together of people who face similar problems can be highly therapeutic, especially when the atmosphere is a friendly and supportive one.

I know the class feels this too because when I told Gordon I didn't see myself as a therapist he commented, *'No, we don't either. You are an artist who gives us confidence to be artists. If I thought I was being offered therapy I'd feel patronised and I wouldn't bother to come back.'*

Gordon's words set me thinking about the days when I first started teaching Art at secondary schools in South London. The Art Studio was always on the top floor and when the stones were not whistling through the windows from the asphalt playground below, they could be surprisingly peaceful places. It was in one of these Victorian Palazzos that I gave my first art lesson.

The children had more interest in wrecking the studio than in learning painting, until one day, almost in despair, I gave them each a postcard of a mediaeval manuscript, sable brushes, inks, and watercolour paper. Many of them had never seen a painting before and I watched in amazement as a great silence descended and they began to put down the story of their lives in brilliantly coloured imagery improvised from a mediaeval psaltery.

It was from that moment I realised that everyone is potentially an artist and given the right circumstances and some encouragement, these gifts can be awakened at any stage in their lives.

So when I started the TABIS class in 2005 and the no nonsense Mary assured me that she couldn't draw and would never be able to, (the rest of the class agreed with her) I assured them all that stick men were fine for a beginning. I then gave them each a lump of clay and spent the first day hand building little figures. Soon we were onto coiled pots and heads of animals and later, little groups of figures describing their life as children and their earliest memories of their parents, pets, and favourite dolls - or toolkit in the case of the males. After a few sessions of this they picked up a pencil again and the stick men were looking a lot more solid.

We had been incising Mayan and Celtic patterns and designs into the clay pots. When I produced the first set of pastels we looked at the decorative arts, using strong coloured backgrounds to isolate a figure. We also looked at decorative artists like Matisse and used cut paper stencils to produce designs that could be screen printed onto cloth or paper.

By the end of the second year everyone had produced designs in clay and on fabric or paper; everyone had attempted a self portrait, as well as groups of figures in oils and pastels. Everyone had completed sculptures in clay or paper maché: most had started landscapes and dreamscapes which we incorporated into the coma panel.

By that time everyone in the class (which had grown to 5 or 6) was making a beeline for my library of books as soon as they arrived. Soon the colour harmonies of the Post Impressionists were starting to appear in their works, which included oil or pastel on a prepared board.

Even at the beginning, each student had a distinct character to their work, which has, over the intervening four years, become increasingly confident and refined. Their greatest difficulty at the beginning was with the proportions of the human figure, hands and face: so we copied, and still copy hands and faces in pencil, charcoal, reed pen and ink. We made studies from sculptures by Rodin and Degas in pastel, using a cool colour for the darks and a warm one for the lights and blending them so the result would look rounded and solid.

We always came back to stories as a way of linking the life experiences of the group. Everyone decorated the surround of a mirror with paintings of house, family, childhood and their favourite painting. Everyone talked more and more freely about their lives and the issues that brain injured people face in the community. Gordon had valuable insights. *'When people meet me the first time, they don't notice I'm brain damaged, but once they see me hesitate, or lose my balance, or fall into repetitive behaviours, they start to treat me differently. I have to demonstrate to them that my brain and my planning skills are as good or better than theirs before they realise that my brain injury is a problem for them rather than me.'*



*'Childhood Memory'* Clay Loretta 2006



*'Head of Giraffe'* Clay Mary 2006



*'Women Running'* Clay Norman Stanley 2008

Gordon, who is financially very savvy, is involved in a variety of public causes including charitable fundraising and is a member of several Boards including his local bank, so these are not empty words. A man of gentle charm and firm character, he acts on the principle that a business does not become successful by trying to make money but by encouraging good relationships between the people who he employs and their client base. It's not surprising to find that he is in demand as a motivational speaker as well as being a very successful businessman in his own right. Although he has only been with the class for 18 months his support and enthusiasm for everyone's work has left an indelible stamp on the class and we are as keen to stay in touch with him as he is with us. This has been a feature of the class from the beginning, that the friendships started within it are sustained outside, and there is real concern among the class for each others welfare.

Interestingly enough, the class now know each other so well that after four years some aspects of our meetings are self organising: certainly the rolling out of tables and chairs, the ferrying in of loads of materials from my van and then rushing out again at the end. Cleaning up takes place with many hands and hardly a word from me except to chat to Mary who refuses to put down her handful of pastels and is still determinedly working on one of her colour symphonies when everyone else has left the room.

At the beginning of any of our sessions and once greetings are over there is quiet for the first hour as work progresses: it is only toward the end that everyone looks up to see what the other is doing, when comments and appreciation are exchanged. Self deprecation was banned from the beginning but constructive criticism is not and Alan, who has become an excellent colourist shakes his head as he watches Gordon put in a green field behind the head of a leopard cub he is drawing: 'No No' says Alan, laughing... After a moments reflection Gordon changes the green field to the burnt ochre of an African Savannah and lo! The painting is alive again: at these moments the class proves they have become their own best teacher.

Of necessity, some of what we paint is drawn from the Art books I bring each week. Drawing is a process of engaging with your subject and for that purpose it need not matter whether your subject comes from a book, or your memory or the table in front of you. So I rejoice that I have the opportunity to share these books around because there is no way to introduce the diversity and power of painting and sculpture without adequate source material.

As I see it anyone who picks up a pencil to express a connection with what they are looking at becomes an artist in the process. It is a matter of intention rather than skill.

Before anything else however, we are simply a group of artists who meet in a rather hastily organized studio once a week. From the first occasion of our meeting five years ago the level of skills has risen gradually and in this process the class have become friends and mentors to each other as well as to me; this is how the arts work; they are not hierarchical societies. In the arts, as Jenna puts it, *'Everyone is a bullshitter, that's why very clever people avoid the arts because they are afraid to do anything less than perfectly; but artists don't really care about what anyone else thinks, they just go ahead and do it anyway'*.

Perhaps that is the lesson my teaching has taught me; that because the act of painting is improvised and spontaneous it is best taught by encouraging people to have confidence in their own ability and by giving them good materials to work with. After that they become their own and each others teacher and start to do things for themselves that they may have regarded as impossible a few weeks or months before.

## ART & HEALING

For anyone not familiar with acquired brain injury the symptoms are often hard to detect. Where the injury has been mild it can be no more obvious than a slight limp, a difficulty remembering recent events, or even just a certain shyness and reserve, and a propensity to fatigue. Where the injury has been more severe, the individual realizes that their life has changed irrevocably and they can never again be the person they were.

The greater the injury, the more profound the divide between their old and new selves becomes, and it affects everyone around them, beginning with their immediate family who are suddenly called to step in and become their helper and surrogate memory.

The process of recovery is long and it takes a great deal of determination and willpower on the part of anyone who has suffered brain injury to mend the psychic catastrophe which has torn their world apart. Often the difficulties seem inconceivably huge, and the social isolation they find themselves condemned to looks irreversible. Many contemplate suicide, and some, for whom the odds against a meaningful existence seem too great, do take their own lives.

Those who recover best from brain injury have, almost without exception, an active intelligence and a tremendously strong will. They accept what has happened to them, set themselves goals, and find a pathway out of a limbo in which they might otherwise find themselves condemned to wander forever. This is the positive side of recovery from brain injury, both for



*Laser copied cast of Tim's skull (see text)*

those who suffer it and those who treat it, and anyone who has worked in the field will have some wonderful stories to tell of the triumph of ingenuity over adversity; of the refusal of those who have suffered stroke or accident to let their injury dominate their existence for the rest of their lives.

This catalogue, which is based on my experience of an art class for brain injured people which I have held every Wednesday morning since March 2005, is both a study of the artistic development of a group of individuals and the growth within the class of a community of friendship and support. From small beginnings, the class has grown into a regular group of ten to fifteen members and the sessions are noisy, busy, festival occasions where jokes, chat, cake and tea provide the fuel for some very good painting and drawing.



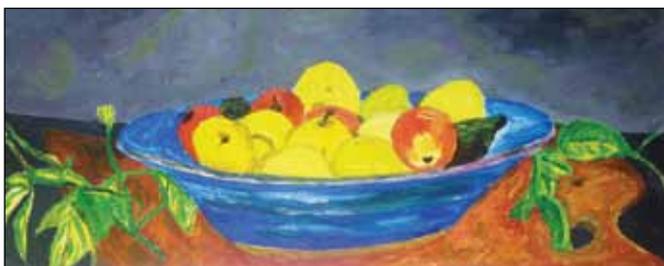
*Portrait Study by Penny Richardson Graphite on paper 2010*



Norman Stanley at home with his mirror 2007

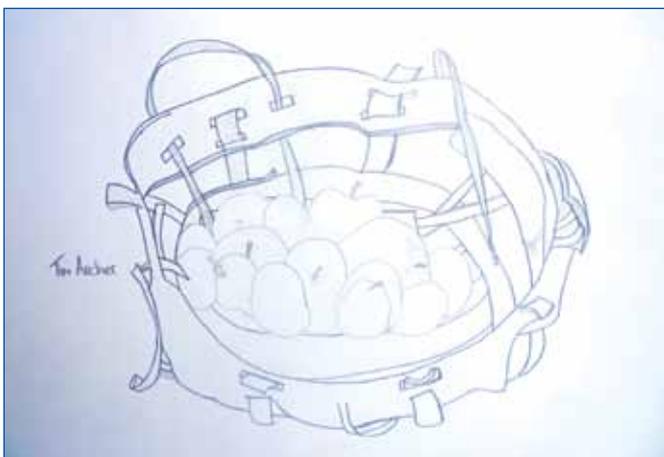
If the paintings are the subject of the exhibition which is associated with this catalogue, it is the lives and thoughts of the artists themselves which provide the *Story of an Art Class*; a glimpse through the obscured window through which the world perceives 'Neurological deficit' into the struggle and achievements of a remarkable group of individuals.

As the class has grown, and especially over the last two years it has come to include a number of people who had drawn and painted for many years before the onset of their brain injury; the most prolific of these has been Jenna, who had a stroke only a year ago, in her thirty fifth year. Prior to that Jenna had gained a degree and worked as a counsellor, but the stroke, which has affected her speech, sight and motor coordination quite severely has put that career out of mind, at least for the foreseeable future. For Jenna, reacquainting herself with painting has been a way of coming to terms with her sense of grief, loss, and imprisonment. Watching Jenna at work in her wheelchair, completely focused on one of her visionary drawings for two hours at a time, or listening to her conversation which is full of humour and hope it might be hard to guess this; but one glance at the world which she conjures up in her dark and powerful drawings, all of them drawn from a vivid and brooding intelligence conveys the pain and the aspiration of the world of the brain injured with sincerity and power.



'The Still Life Table' Oil on board Paul Smedley 2010

If Jennas work is a story in itself, as represented in our first exhibition, who knows where it may lead her? From the captive in a cage at the beginning of this catalogue to the marvellous evocation of hope at the end of it, less than eight months has elapsed; over that time Jenna's external life has not changed a great deal, at least to an outside observer; she is still the watchful and affectionate mother of eight year old twins and a teenage son and her family home is a warm and supportive one.



'Bark Basket' Pencil on paper Tim Archer 2010

The issue of treatment for brain injury (outside of painting) is naturally something that engenders interested discussion among our group, one of whom, Tim, is currently making great strides at a Neurotherapy Centre in Melbourne. Tim, who is 26, led an incredibly adventurous life until about three years ago, when he began having seizures. His treatment has involved sending the precise measurements of his cranium to the USA. A perfect plastic replica was moulded, and a part cut from it to repair a section of his skull which became infected after an operation to relieve his temporal lobe epilepsy.



'Resting' Pastel on paper Jenna Johnson 2010

Tim's treatment at the clinic in Melbourne which is carefully monitored but quite exhausting, involves stimulating the brain's capacity to redesign itself after injury, using variants of computer games to stimulate areas of the cortex which have been lost or cut off from

each other by the injury. Naturally there are others in the class who are interested to hear about it, including of course Jenna, who has already made noticeable gains in her fine motor skills with her daily practice of painting in her home studio.

Others in the class, some of whom have been painting for several years now, have noticed advances in their own memory and motor skills and I find myself speculating how many senses, apart from sight are drawn into the process of painting; rhythm, form, harmony, contrast, colour, balance and counterpoint all have parallels in music too, and the act of painting involves long and short term memory to a high degree. Is it not possible that physically and intellectually demanding activities such as painting and music could be healing as well as simply therapeutic? Studies in brain plasticity indicate that the cortex of professional musicians is immensely well developed as a result of their continual practice. Could the same be true for artists?

I believe it is very likely that it is.

It is fascinating to find that the auditory and visual centres of the brain, although spatially quite separate can take over each others function and the blind be taught to see by 'rewiring' their damaged visual centres to that part of their brain that deals with hearing.

As the class has developed over the years we find ourselves discussing these issues more and more, and a well thumbed copy of Norman Doidge's book, *'The Brain That Changes Itself'*, (Scribe Books, Melbourne) has been circulating among the art books and biscuit crumbs for some time now.

*'A Brush With My Brain'*, represents the condensed life stories of 18 Tasmanians who have all reached outside the limits imposed on them by brain injury to communicate their essential delight in painting to a wider audience.

I am very grateful for the support TABIS has given over the last five years in allowing this to happen. To Arts Tasmania and Tasmanian Regional Arts for supporting this exhibition and catalogue, and to the Belconnen Arts Centre, Canberra and the Royal Rehabilitation Hospital, Sydney.

I would especially like to thank Dr Gillian Ross, Geoff Goodfellow and Delys Sargeant for helping to edit and proof read this catalogue.

**Jonathan Bowden. Curator; Jan 2011.**

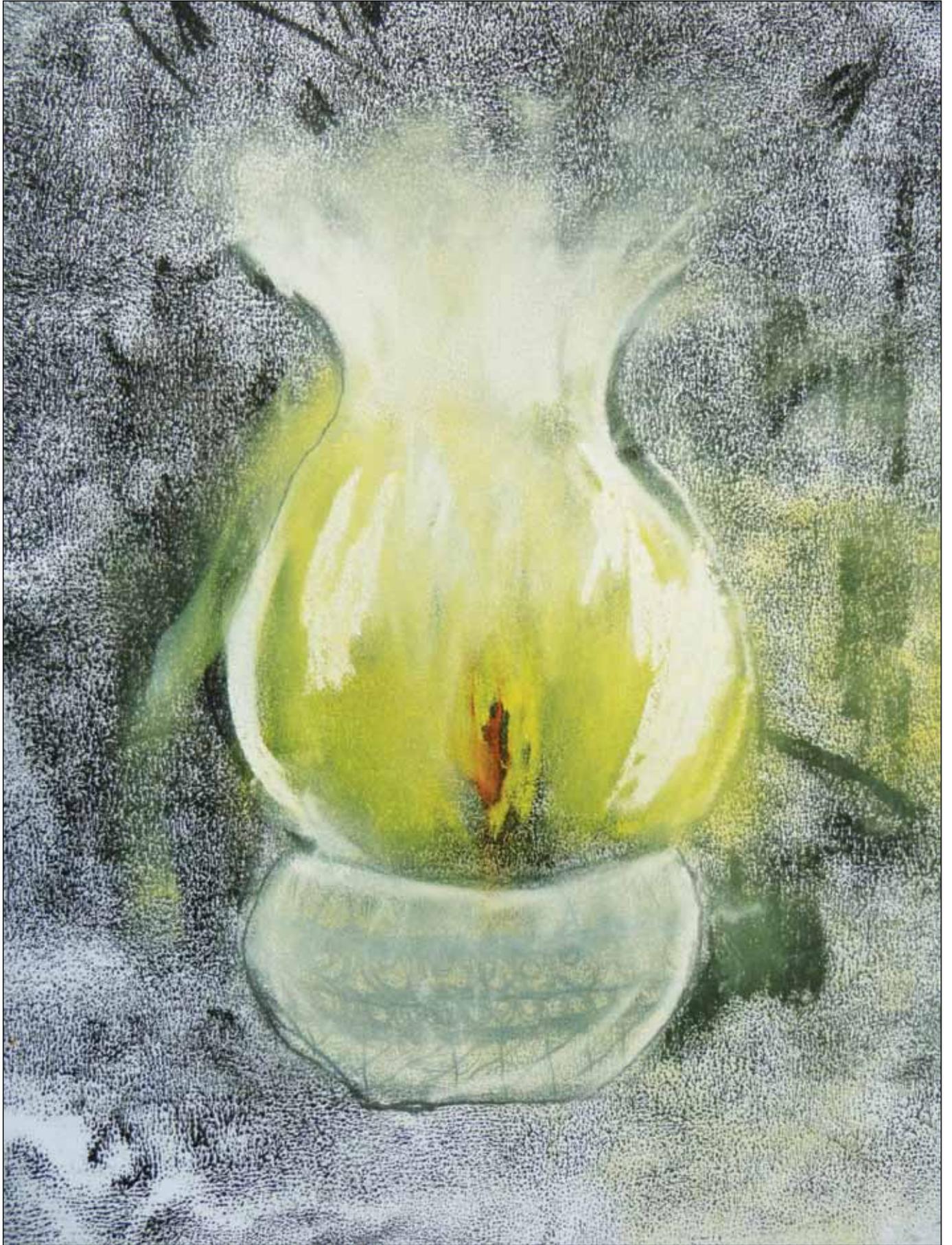
*Jonathan Bowden is an artist who exhibited and taught in England before arriving in Australia in 1981, further details of his work may be found on his website [www.jbowden.net](http://www.jbowden.net)*



*'Mandrill'* Pastel on paper Gordon Brooks 2010



*'Flower Piece'* Oil on board Kerry Eiszelle 2010



'Hope'

Pastel over monotype

Jenna Johnson 2010