



King *of the* Road

Pete Brown might claim he paints outdoors because he has no imagination for studio work, but his successful scenes of everyday life are compiling a steady record of our times. Words: **Lynn Parr**

YOU CAN RECOGNISE a 'Pete The Street' painting whenever you see one. Rich, creamy textures, atmosphere: but most of all, *stories*. Just ordinary people going about their everyday business on an ordinary street: but there's so much going on, you can look at the painting and hear stories about each one of them weaving through the air like radio waves.

If you listened to Brown first, though, you might not bother looking at the paintings at

all. According to him, he puts in "dodgy figures that need an osteopath" and only paints *en plein air* because "there's not much between my ears, so I have to take my inspiration from what's in front of me."

But whatever he mischievously claims is his motivation, every brushstroke is deliberate, considered and expertly placed. He might not know where he is going each morning, he may have no idea what he will paint until he sees it; but one thing's for certain: the end result will sing.

"Finding a painting to paint is the hardest thing. When my wife asks on a Sunday night, 'where are you going?' I say I'm going up the M1 but I don't know if I'm turning left or right. Usually, it depends on the weather, or I get an idea. I just have to just go somewhere and start doing something. I'll wander off and think about things that I thought about in my last show. And more often than not these are dribbly beginnings that won't go in the next show.

"But when there's something really lush

that hits you in the face, that's when it's really great. A view, a street or whatever, the light's right, it's all there... But I get nervous about mucking it up, not getting stuff down in time before the light changes; and also about trying to be spontaneous and organised, and getting the tones and drawing right. Just trying to paint as best I can."

Finding his subject, he sets up and starts painting directly, without drawing first. This has come from experience – from wasting hours of beautiful light trying to draw in the shapes before committing paint.

"You've really got to see a place, love the lighting or the atmosphere, and just go for that as much as possible without being a nutter. I work on drawing a bit, but I don't want to get too fussy. I'll look back at paintings that have got too real and I don't think they benefit – they're a bit stale. So I always try to approach it like an *alla prima*, like I'm going to do it in one go."

He does admit to returning to a scene to finish off a painting he doesn't feel is quite right. "That sounds a bit anal, a bit fiddly. But you have your best go at it, you take it away and think, yeah, that's all right, but you bring it back and you can get it better, closer. Rather than doing another painting, it's worth bringing that painting up to as good as you can get it.

"Sometimes there's no bloody difference," he laughs, "and I've spent three hours in really good light for nothing. But at least I feel better about it. I hate to think a painting isn't finished."



Does that mean all his paintings are finished in the field? He grins sheepishly. "I do fiddle with the paintings at home sometimes but I try not to. I put a green sail in a painting recently because it needed a bit of green – which was a bit daring for me, because it wasn't really there."

And painting what's there has always been the key to his success. "How I was taught at art college was to work from sketches and to paint in the studio. But I've never gone with that. The sketches I do just don't have enough information, so I'm lost. I need the information in front of me."

Photographs, however, are of no use to him. He prefers the excitement of spontaneity; of things happening while he is painting. He would rather put in a "dodgy" figure that looks like it is moving than draw outlines and fill in the colours. "What keeps me going in painting, my challenge, which goes through every painting, is simply converting a 3D space and a period of time – like a four-hour sitting – where lots of things happen, onto a canvas in frozen oil paints. That's painting for me."

Brown's paintings of London and Bath have sometimes been compared to those of Ken Howard, something that worries Brown at times, since he doesn't want to "step on anyone's toes". But one thing he does admit to sharing with Howard is an ability to ▷



ABOVE Albert Bridge, Midday, oil on canvas, 50.8x63.5cm

LEFT Melting Snow, Belvedere, Bath, II, oil on canvas, 101.6x127cm

FAR LEFT Oxford Circus, Rain, oil on canvas, 91.4x121.9cm



ABOVE *Marylebone High Street*, oil on canvas, 76.2x88.9cm

concentrate on a painting while on a busy street, and liking people to come up and comment on the work in progress.

"My kids can do their homework in front of the telly, and it's probably the same thing with painting. If I'm alone in a quiet studio I can't concentrate, but in amongst masses of people and noise on a really busy pavement is when I concentrate most. The input from the public is quite nice

– I quite like it. I don't know if it's to do with the fact that you're working on your own – it's quite a solitary profession. People will always say nice things, even about the ground, because British people are quite nice, in my experience. Driving home sometimes I'll think, that didn't go very well,

and I'll realise it's because no one actually said anything nice to me. You lose your own judgment to a certain extent."

So as long as the public keep saying nice things about his work, Brown will keep travelling and painting, recording the lives of

Britain's towns and people, and looking for the next view.

"I was painting in college and some old boffy came up and asked how it was

going and I said it might be a better view from round there. He set me straight. He said, the thing is, it just has to be good enough, and as long as it's good enough, the rest is up to you. You don't have to worry about doing a better one, do you?"

Read on for Pete's outdoor advice...

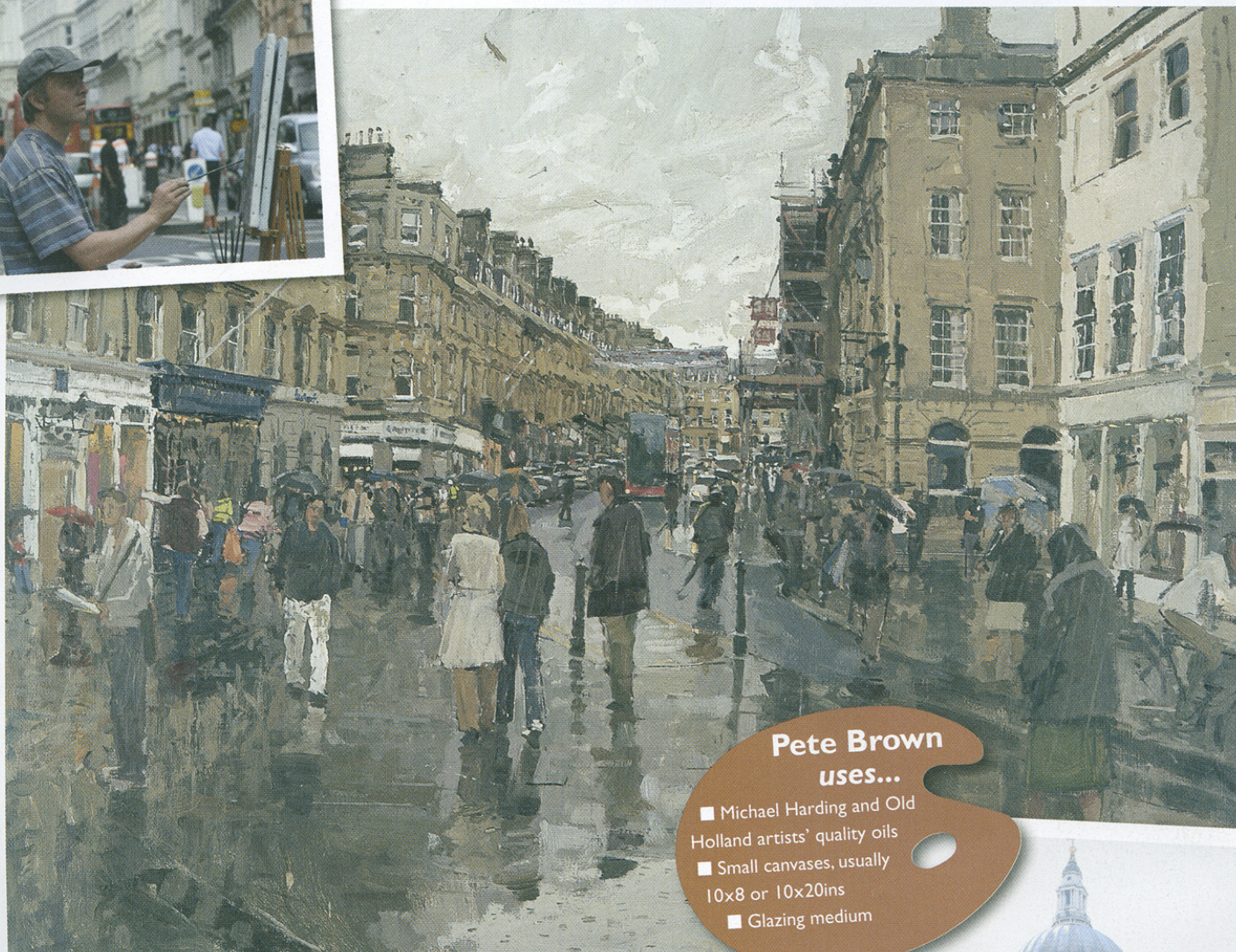
"In amongst masses of people and noise on a really busy pavement is when I concentrate most"

Profile

Pete Brown studied an art foundation in Bath in 1986 and then a BA in Fine Art at Manchester Polytechnic. He has won numerous prizes for painting his trademark street scenes and his work has been exhibited extensively. In 2006, he became the first artist-in-residence at the Savoy Hotel, London. His new book, *Brown's Bath*, (written with Jonathan Benington and published by Brown Fine Art) is available in London's Mall Galleries and from www.peterbrownneac.com. He exhibits his work through Messum's Gallery in London. See www.messums.com.

Paint with the Professionals

Paint like Pete The Street



Pete Brown uses...

- Michael Harding and Old Holland artists' quality oils
- Small canvases, usually 10x8 or 10x20ins
- Glazing medium

FIRST OF ALL, find a view to paint, then plonk yourself down and make yourself comfortable. Then put down as much of the ground as you can to cover up the canvas. I mix up large areas of tone – tarmac or sky – and that is my key to the painting. I then work out from there, tonally, what's lighter, what's darker, how much lighter or darker, or warmer or cooler.

"Then I just say, right, that traffic light will sit there. Then I work from there across the canvas. If I think I'm floundering, I'm a bit insecure, I get into some details quite quickly, like a bit of a car, to work out scale, how big things are. Then I realise: Pete, you've three acres of wall missing here.

"The way I approach it is by doing it then correcting it. I'm constantly correcting and adjusting and trying to get it right. I use a

glazing medium that's got a drier in it so the paint goes off quickly so I can paint on top of it. I don't do layers. I do like painting wet into wet – that's the point of doing small paintings.

"It would be great if I could paint how I imagine Sargent painted. He effortlessly slapped on paint, the colours magically mixed on the brush and he just swirled it round. And that's always what I've got in the back of my head. I'm not saying Sargent's slick – I don't want to be slick. It's kind of good to struggle and make it a bit messy and a bit dirty, and not be sure what I'm doing. I try not to have too much of a method at all. I just like to leave it in the hands of whatever's in front of me."

ABOVE *From the Bottom of Milsom Street, Bath – A Rainy Afternoon*, oil on canvas, 91x121.5cm

