

KEEP THE HOME FIRE BURNING

Artist Peter Brown may always be on the lookout for new landscapes to capture, but as he tells DERI ROBINS, his love affair with Bath shows no sign of abating

Peter Brown '12.



(Above) *Sunset from Bathwick Fields, 2013*; (left page) *Morning Sparkle from Walcot Parade, 2012*

As The Victoria Art Gallery unfurls a fresh roll of picture wire in order to hang Peter Brown's latest exhibition, Bath's best-loved artist is musing on the nature of mortality.

Well, sort of.

"I guess I have become more and more obsessed with recording a time and a place," says Pete. "With the kids growing up, and reaching that time of your life when people are beginning to disappear, I want to record as much and as well as I can: be it the family, the weather or new landscapes – life today in general. This means I am constantly looking for new landscapes to capture."

But you're still going to carry on painting Bath – aren't you, Pete? He is, he says – but he has to be careful.

"When I used to flog my drawings on Milsom Street, it wasn't long before I realised I could probably make a living painting The Royal Crescent until the day I died, should I want to. It would be hell!"

"I do sometimes lose interest in painting Bath, if I'm honest. For this show, I can remember one particular day when I drove

around for two hours and just gave up. The inspiration can come in waves, and it's usually due to the light or weather, and then you see how beautiful this city is afresh. I can usually force the inspiration by getting out there. It's how I work. I stumble across things. The rule is 'if it tickles me, I paint it'.

Fortunately, there's still plenty to tickle him here. The title of the new show, *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, is "a reference to my enduring love of this city, and my passion to keep painting it. I've travelled a bit in the last four years to Canada, India, France and Spain, and I may go to New

York this year. I have a couple of long-term projects: painting the English coastline; painting every bit of London and walking and painting the Thames path. But the bottom line is that I just want to paint things that scream out to be painted, and while there's a thrill finding those subjects in foreign parts, I am still finding them in Bath.

"Working in among the bustle can be so exhilarating. I know it sounds pompous, but I feel so alive painting and drawing in busy streets. You chat to people, and you are surrounded by onlookers. You smell the smells and feel the heat, so all your senses are going as you try and distil as much of it as possible on the canvas. Sometimes I'm a grumpy git – these 'sometimes' are becoming the norm the older I get – but art is such a naval-gazing profession that it's great to have people come up and chat."

And yet some of his landscapes are quiet, peaceful and people-free.

"Sometimes I want to get away from it," Pete agrees. "I just see a view that 'sits well' and I want to capture it. It's nice to have a bit of stillness every now and then."

I ask Pete to tell us about three favourite paintings from the exhibition. With seasonal appropriateness, he kicks off with a snow scene.

Twilight Snow from the Golf Course, 2013

"I spotted the view one early evening while sledging with Ned, Ella and Hattie, and painted it over several sittings either at twilight or at dawn. It was just great fun to do."



A studio selfie . . .

"I COULD MAKE A LIVING PAINTING THE ROYAL CRESCENT UNTIL THE DAY I DIED, IF I WANTED TO"





Twilight Snow from the Golf Course, 2013
(left) *Oldfield Park Station, 2013*



Oldfield Park Station, 2013

"I was going to paint Moorland Road, but as I was setting up a lady started to tell me all about her links with the railway and the station. It was quite moving, and so I decided to paint the station instead. It was a revelation. I met the 'onboarders', led by June, who care for the station with shrubs and flowers, and I watched commuters wait for and board trains east and west, with the

scene getting busier and quieter. I had a model railway when I was a kid, too, and I think that has a lot to do with it!"

Sunset from Bathwick Fields, 2013

"I painted this view in 1986 when my tutor David Cobb kicked us out of the studios at Sydney Place to go and do some studies.

"This one was painted in the studio, as was the one in '86 (which is horrendous, by

the way, although I was very pleased with it at the time). I wanted to work on something big away from the subject – to be a proper artist in the studio.

"It was inspired by a very small oil sketch I did in the fields. I always struggle with the squaring-up process, and so I thought if I worked on something huge from a sketchy impression I really would have to paint.

"It was mad painting it. I was keen to keep the idea of an impression, and I wanted to have a real energy in the way the paint was applied. So much of painting on-site relies on 'happy accident,' and I wanted some of that. So I got very mucky.

"The canvas spent most of its time flat on the studio floor while pools of paint dried. I splattered it and scrubbed areas back, and had a rare old time over a few weeks. My wife Lisa came in at one point, and I was laughing. I said "I'm not sure I have a clue what I'm doing". I kept sneaking back to the fields to do another sketch or a drawing to remind me how the landscape lay, but I was keen not to get involved in describing windows and roofs. Anyway it's 9ft by 4.5ft, and my biggest painting to date."

The fiery sunset that lights this sweeping view could hardly make a better centrepiece for Keep the Home Fires Burning – Pete's latest, but almost definitely not his last, love letter to the city of Bath. **BT**

Peter Brown: Keep the Home Fires Burning is at the Victoria Art Gallery 8 February- 27 March 2014, tickets £2 • victoriagal.org.uk