



AN ARTIST IN HIS ELEMENT

Georgette McCready talked to artist Peter Brown ahead of his major exhibition, A Bath Painter's Travels, which opens at the Victoria Art Gallery in early December

As a successful artist, showing in some of London's smartest galleries and about to open his second major exhibition at Bath's Victoria Art Gallery, does Peter Brown, master en plein air artist and member of a number of august painterly societies, mind people hailing him familiarly as 'Pete the Street'?

"Not at all, it's lovely," says Pete as we sit down to discuss his forthcoming exhibition of more than 100 paintings, *A Bath Painter's Travels*, which opens at the publicly owned gallery on Saturday 3 December. "It's great when you've got your easel up and you're working away and someone pops their head over a garden wall and says to his family 'there's some bloke out there painting our backyard and our road' – people like the fact that they see you appreciate where they live."

Who first called this Reading-born adopted son of Bath by this nickname? "I'd got my mate Charlie to take some paintings down to the Victoria Art Gallery for the annual Bath Society of Artists' summer exhibition. There was a dear elderly lady on the door signing people in and she looked at him and the paintings and said 'you must be Pete the Street' – so Charlie came back and told me. It kind of stuck."

Pete's family, of wife Lisa and five children, live in Bath and he spends many days outside literally on the streets of the city. He's a familiar sight in his baseball cap, with his paint-spattered easel, working in sun, rain and even snow. People feel free to come up and chat to



him, which he says he enjoys. One of the most common requests is for Pete to include them in the painting, others think that he's a busking artist and offer him coins. "I always say thanks, but you're all right," he says. He also turns down cups of tea, largely he laughs, because once he's set his canvas up he can't just tuck it under his arm to go in search of a toilet.

Over the years Pete's work has become increasingly collectable, but he remains down-

to-earth, funny and self-deprecating.

He has told the tale many times of his experience studying art in Manchester, where he tried being a modernist artist, painstakingly turning out coloured squares in an effort to conform. It wasn't until years later – after training as a teacher and a spell working with aerials – that he found the authentic clear-sighted vision of street life that his legions of admirers love so much.

This summer was Pete's first experience of Glastonbury Festival – "I can't believe it's not been part of my life before, it was an amazing experience." He doesn't want to be seen as political but was moved to paint a Brexit piece on the morning when the festival woke up to find the rest of the country hadn't voted the way they thought it would. Over the mud and the puddles the spirit of Glastonbury brought the sun out. He adds: "It was a great atmosphere. Lovely people, I'd go again."

There can be few corners of Bath that Pete hasn't painted. Does he ever get tired of, say, looking at George Street?

"Not at all. I absolutely love what I do and I like it when you get that moment when you see somewhere in a new way and there's that 'wow!' moment."

You may have seen Pete en plein air, but he can also be glimpsed driving his van around the city. "My van's full of parking tickets," he jokes. He's always glimpsing a fresh view from its windows.

Pete also admits to scaring a few people in his



ENGLISH IMPRESSIONISM: opposite page, main picture, *Over Pulteney Bridge, the day Grayson Perry came to town* and inset, *the artist at work in Fleet Street*

This page, top left to right, *Saumur across the Loire*, detail from *Milky sun, morning in Fleet Street* and *Brexit morning, the puddle angler, Green Field, Glastonbury*

Below, *Professor Brown near Laura Place* and *Sun after rain, Lansdown Crescent*

time. In order to check that his work has a pleasing balance of content he likes to look at it in a mirror. A handy parked car windscreen stands in as a reflective surface, but this has sometimes resulted in an awkward eyeball to eyeball moment as he realises that there is someone inside the car peering anxiously back at him.

A man may not be tired of Bath or of life, but the artist's wanderlust has seen him travel the British isles, Spain, France and India. "It's all about the light," he enthuses. One of his latest passions is for nocturnes, which can involve driving the van to London, painting the bright lights around him, grabbing a few hours sleep in the van and then getting up early to work a bit more before coming home. Last year he published a beautiful coffee table book, *London: Paintings by Peter Brown*, (published by Sansom and Company, with a foreword by David Messum of Messum gallery, which regularly shows Pete's work) which takes a loving look at some of the capital's best loved views, as you might expect, captured in sunshine, mist and rain.

While Pete was in India – "that was pretty full on, I always had at least four people jostling at my elbows" – he was capturing a colourful street scene when he suddenly noticed his view 'going a bit

wobbly'. Someone had lit a fire inside an upstairs room and heat and smoke were filling the air. Naturally he included it in his painting.

What advice does he give artists who aspire to be able to make a living from their work?

"I always say it's important to love what you do. I also tell them you need good luck and visibility. My best marketing tool is that people see me working on their doorstep. I'm in their faces."

And while some of Pete's work can be seen hanging in Bath's most prestigious homes, he seems to belong very much to us, the people. We can have a Peter Brown hanging on our own walls if we buy his annual calendar for a tenner and frame those views of the streets of Bath. "Sure, I don't have any problem with people doing that."

What are his plans and ambitions now? "Well having five kids, life is pretty full on, which I enjoy. I'd like to get myself a dog, one who'll sit next to me in the van or lie at my feet while I'm working."

He's also got a trip to Vietnam planned and in the back of his mind are ambitions to take his easel to New York and Cuba.

Finally, narrowing his eyes as though he's about to impart a secret he says he

quite fancies having a go at painting on the streets of Bristol. I'm not sure how the inter-city rivalry will cope with that – possibly by Bathonians starting to refer to him as "Pete the Bath Street"? ■ **Peter Brown: A Bath Painter's Travels** at Victoria Art Gallery runs from Saturday 3 December – 19 February 2017. A book to accompany the exhibition of the same name, running to 112 pages is published by Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, and features more than 100 new oil paintings and drawings, alongside diary commentaries by the artist.

Works of art featured include Bath locations such as Milsom Street, Lansdown Road, Bath Abbey and Pulteney Bridge, captured at different times of day and months of the year, alongside views of less well known but equally beautiful corners. Bath's streetscapes can be compared with other locations the artist has visited, including Arles, Dublin, Granada, London and Seville

The gallery, which is owned by Bath and North East Somerset Council is open daily, 10.30am to 5pm. Entrance to the main gallery is free, but entrance to the exhibition is £4, although free to under 21s and holders of the Bath Discovery card. Pete will be giving a talk and doing a book signing on Saturday 3 December from 11.30am. Admission is free with an exhibition ticket.

