

'A Salute to Max Angus: Tasmanian Painter' by Alison Alexander.

Book Launch Sunday April 18<sup>th</sup> 2021 by Christine Milne AO

I acknowledge we are meeting on the land of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, the Palawa people and pay my respects to their elders past and present and emerging.

I also acknowledge that we are meeting at Lady Franklin Gallery, the home of the Tasmanian Art Society of which Max Angus became President in 1952 with a mission 'to reinvigorate' the Society, which he did. I am sure he would be chuffed that we are here launching this book.

I am deeply honoured to have been asked to launch this book, 'A Salute to Max Angus: Tasmanian Painter' by Tasmanian historian Alison Alexander. Alison and I go back nearly fifty years when we did History Honours together at University of Tasmania in 1974. Alison did her thesis celebrating the female writer Mary Grant Bruce and the Billabong books which introduced the Australian bush to the children of Australia in early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I did my thesis on the development of tourism to Tasmania from the end of convict transportation until 1900 showcasing the work of photographers like Beattie whose lantern slide shows brought the Tasmanian wilderness to Tasmanian urban communities.

Whilst our careers have gone in different directions, with Alison as the historian of Tasmanian places and characters and me as the Environmental activist and Parliamentarian working to protect many of those same places, it feels apt that we are here together today to salute another artist and great Tasmanian character, Max Angus: master water colourist, teacher, writer, book producer and advocate for wild Tasmania.

Max Angus born in 1914 died in 2017 aged 102 and was a much loved figure, described as a living legend and one of Tasmania's best known artists.

Because his life spanned the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is illustrative of Tasmania's social and environmental history over that period and that is what takes this book from a detailed and fascinating story of Max Angus, the artist and conservationist, to one which tells the story of Tasmania's cultural history over a century. So many will identify with Max's experiences.

Alison Alexander has approached Max's life chronologically and written about its many phases namely i) Young man growing up in Hobart, ii) Commercial artist, iii) WW2 artist, iv) Post war struggle as an independent artist, v) Sunday Painting Group or gang as Elspeth Vaughan described it, vi) Passion for Lake Pedder and Tasmanian Environment, vii) Book Producer, viii) Evolution of his art through portraiture, life drawing, painting schools, but always with water colour his passion and the heart and soul of his work.

His early life is particularly interesting in the light of the artist he was to become. Max, a working class boy who wanted to be an artist, was encouraged by his painter and decorator father who brought home used paper, remnants of wall paper, and old sheet music from a band in which he played so that his sons could draw. Max's visit to the Tasmanian Art Gallery where he saw a painting by Piguénit which made an indelible impression. Living in the working class suburb of Battery Point, he waggged sports practise to draw boats and slipways. His forays up the mountain, bushwalking around Hobart with sketchbook in hand gave him his love of the outdoors. His lifelong love of music was a consequence of his playing in a band with his

father and brother and the cornet at Church. At school as a left hander, he was forced to change hands and so wrote with his right hand all his life but drew with either hand.

Then the great teachers in the public schools system saw his talent and encouraged it such that he was allowed to attend the Adult Art classes at the Hobart Technical College when he was still a child. But as his family was poor he had to earn a living and so at 14 his headmaster organised for him to work for a commercial artist which led to sign writing and displays. But this beginning as a commercial artist was a huge burden to carry as an artist. The snobbery against commercial artists as artists was overwhelming and plagued Max Angus for decades. But he attributes his technical skills and mastery of the brush to the years he spent as a commercial artist.

His romance and marriage to Thedda is another example of the mores of the time. She was a brilliant scholar who achieved one of the top results in the intermediate exams for Tasmania in 1934; she was head girl and matriculated from Hobart High but not being wealthy enough to go to university, she became a teacher. She married Max at 23 years of age and gave up her career as a promising teacher and scholar to provide a home for Max. She always put his interests first and her management of the home and finances and her entertaining underpinned a busy social life and allowed Max to become the artist he became. They were a partnership. His son Peter described it 'Max was the driver and Thedda was the backstop.'

During the Second World War, Max enlisted and was sent to Brisbane which was alive with American troops. He was head of the draughting room and worked with Japanese prisoners of war writing and illustrating propaganda materials to be dropped in the Pacific. He was introduced to calligraphy and appreciated the 'beauty of brevity and subtlety' and fellow artist Tony Smibert noted that Max was strongly influenced by Oriental art. Max described the experience of meeting and working with people of different cultures during the war as having 'coloured my life'. It was also the army and its regular wage that enabled him to transition from commercial art to becoming a full time fine artist.

When he was discharged in 1945, Max decided he wanted to be a full time artist and a water colour artist at that. Not only did he carry the stigma of having been a commercial artist but he was strongly discouraged from water colour as it was out of favour, reviled by students, teachers and gallery directors alike. But he persisted and his first exhibition was at Sedon galleries in Melbourne in 1945 in a collection including Norman Lindsay and Frederick McCubbin.

In an era when men wore hats, Max asked himself what an artist would wear. He decided on a beret and from then on he wore Basque style berets made in France and bought from City Hatters in Flinders St Melbourne. The beret was his trademark. From the stage at any environmental rally or Greens meeting, it was always easy to pick out Max and Thedda Angus in the audience- he in his beret sitting beside a perfectly groomed and beautifully dressed woman, his wife Thedda.

In 1947, Max enrolled in a Diploma of Art and found himself back in the same classroom at Hobart Technical College where he had studied as a boy. He graduated in 1950 and the next decade was a frenzy of work, entertaining and social activity as Max struggled to establish himself as an artist. He painted murals, stage sets, posters, illustrated brochures for the Hydro

Electric Commission and the Tourist Bureau and advertisements for everything from Holden cars to Kia ora cordial. He even painted an apple case label for Henry Jones, 'Rooster', after Matisse. At the same time he did ABC radio broadcasts on art for children. He had little time to build up a body of his own work.

So in 1960 when Ray Cox suggested that he and Max and Harry Buckie paint together, Max jumped at the chance and soon Patricia Giles was invited to come along. So began the Sunday Painting group. Max devised painting apparatus called the Box Kite which enabled them to paint more easily outdoors and they set off on Sundays to paint untouched bush. Transport was difficult so they painted close to Hobart with occasional trips elsewhere. Over the years the group included Elspeth Vaughan, Mollie Maxwell, Mollie Stephens, Graeme Salmon, Geoff Tyson, Ray Barnes, Jenny Young and many more. Over a ten year period they painted on 270 Sundays. You can't help feeling sorry for their families.

Patricia Giles worked at the Aero Club with Lloyd Jones and so occasionally had access to free flights and so Max landed on Lake Pedder beach in 1953. It turned him into a life long conservationist and supporter of Green politics. He described that experience,

*'To land on it, to stand on it, to walk endlessly on its pink white sandy beach during summer was to walk with the Gods.'*

When in 1960s the Hydro Electric Commission's plans to flood Lake Pedder were announced Max Angus was outraged. Because Max had paid work illustrating HEC materials and Olegas Truchanas worked for them, the protests had to be through their photographs and paintings. As Sunday Painting Group they had brought the environment to the fore as an artistic subject but with Lake Pedder it became a political statement.

Camps were organised in 1968, 1969 and 1971 for artists to go to Lake Pedder to produce materials for the campaign. It was the first time Art had been used as a political tool in Tasmania. Writers like Patsy Adams Smith, joined photographers including Olegas Truchanas and the Sunday Group of Painters producing work that brought the natural beauty of Lake Pedder to Tasmanian, mainland and overseas audiences. It was so powerful it almost persuaded the Whitlam Government of the day to save the Lake except that Tasmanian Premier Eric Reece was intransigent.

In 1972 Olegas Truchanas drowned in the South West and Max immediately announced he would do a book about Olegas. For three years he and a Committee of friends worked tirelessly to produce it but Max wrote the beautiful memoir, oversaw the design and flew to Melbourne to supervise the printing. The quality of the work was critically important to him. 'The World of Olegas Truchanas' was published in 1975 and 40,000 copies of this outstandingly beautiful book were sold.

We lost Lake Pedder to the Hydro impoundment but through Max's eyes we still see it. For those of us who never saw the Lake, Max makes the invisible visible. He was determined that the Lake would be restored and thought young people were key to that and invited a young woman Courtney Wise to speak at the launch of his stunning book 'Pedder. The Story. The paintings.'

He produced two more high quality, beautifully written books 'Simpkinson de Wesselow: Landscape Painter in Van Diemen's Land', and a 'A Salute to Watercolour'. He was so passionate about water colour and knew just about all there was to know about it and was

determined watercolour must be defended from its position as unfashionable, *'seen as an embarrassment by the cognoscenti, held in contempt by the establishment.'* He was also a wonderful, patient and generous teacher of water colour and ran annual art schools for over twenty years focussed on the Bay of Fires. He gave his students the benefit of his lifelong passion and experience as a water colourist.

He used to say he wanted to paint until he dropped and he almost achieved it with his last exhibition and Sunday painting trips in 2016. He died in February 2017.

Max Angus was a master water colourist, a generous teacher, a writer of evocative prose, a producer of high quality and influential books, a great Tasmanian artist but his gift to Tasmanians, through his work, is the insight he has given us into how beautiful and precious the colours, the moods and spirit of our wild landscapes and environment really are.

As Convenor of the Lake Pedder Restoration Committee, and I know I speak for my young campaigners and fellow activists, the Lake Pedder we know is not the impoundment but what lies beneath, revealed in all its glory - made visible- by those artists like Max Angus, who cared enough to capture its beauty and hand on that love of place to us. Max supported the restoration of Lake Pedder and placed his faith in the next generations to make it happen and we will. Lake Pedder, the heart of the south west wilderness, will be restored.

Thank you Alison for bringing Max's work, his life, his warm, generous, gregarious presence and his legacy to us in such a high quality, beautifully designed book full of anecdotes, photos, sketches and art works.

Max said of Olegas Truchanas,  
*'I had been determined to create a book about Olegas, so that he and his work would not be forgotten'* and he did.

You have now done the same for him and for his friends, family and artists from the 1930's onwards. You could have given him no greater compliment.

I have much pleasure in launching Alison Alexander's  
*'A Salute to Max Angus: Tasmanian Painter'*.