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# MiNDFOOD

#SMARTTHINKING

## 5 Minutes With Artists Debbie Mackinnon and Mike Staniford

By MiNDFOOD | FEBRUARY 12, 2018



*MiNDFOOD caught up with the Australian locals to discuss their artistic inspiration, what it's like working as a couple and their new exhibition.*

Debbie Mackinnon and Mike Staniford are a couple who work, live, draw and paint together. Yet despite being together for 40 years, their venture into the art world has been quite different. While Debbie has been a full-time landscape painter with her very own studio for the past 13 years, Mike didn't fully commit to art until only a couple of years ago. Before becoming a full-time artist, he spent many successful years as an International Creative Director in the branding industry.

Now the couple works side-by-side on Sydney's lower north shore, creating beautiful landscape paintings inspired by their global travels and shared experiences and conversations. We caught up with the artists to discuss their carefully-curated exhibition, *Two artists, One journey*, which showcases a powerful body of work inspired from their travels through Spain and Italy.



Debbie's Forest sketchbook

**Debbie, you've been a full-time artist for over a decade. When did you know you wanted to be an artist? Did you study art?**

DEBBIE: I grew up with a pencil in my hand, always begging for larger pieces of paper to draw on, and telling anyone who asked, that I was going to be an artist when I grew up. After school, I went to art college in London to study illustration for four years. But I ended up using my drawing skills working as a book designer of highly illustrated books, and publishing became my career. I was an Art Director with prestigious London publishers before branching out to write and produce my own range of children's books. I've won awards, published many titles for the preschool market and sold over two million copies of my own book. But somehow that desire to be an artist when I grew up never went away.

**Mike, you only committed to being a full-time artist a couple of years ago. What made you decide to take the leap? And is it worth it?**

MIKE: I gave up painting in 2006 when my role as a Creative Director became too busy. I literally put the paints away and apart from holiday drawing, or quick, on the move sketching during business trips, I literally put things on hold for twelve years. By 2016, I was Regional Executive Creative Director for an international design agency, with responsibility for creative teams in Singapore, Mumbai, Tokyo as well as Australia. The travel became extensive and I spent hours on planes. A lot of time in non-productive meetings as opposed to creating ideas. I began to feel that I was losing touch with my own personal creativity.

Also, I started to embark on creative writing, which caused me to think about the visual narrative as much as the written word. Despite reducing work to a four-day week, the desire to start painting took hold. I wanted to be out in the landscape and not in the boardroom. After a month's leave, painting on the Greek island of Kefhalonia, I decided it was time to quit the corporate world and take painting and writing more seriously. 2017 was probably the best year of my life. Having the freedom to explore my own ideas and immerse myself in both writing and painting; which are a perfect antidote to one another, was incredible. I have no regrets about making the leap. My time in the design business was amazing. Great people and the chance to work on fascinating projects with prestige clients. But this new life feels like I'm discovering a new person within, someone whose passion has lain dormant for many years and has now been set free.



Mike drawing in Spain

### **Why landscape?**

DEBBIE: The move to Australia 24 years ago was a shock to the senses. In a good way! The amazing light: the sheer scale and space of the landscape; the incredible wild coastline, the sense of history in the rocks, not in the buildings. So different from Europe. I love walking in the landscape and observing all I see. All this made me want to pick up the paintbrush again. I don't try to 'copy' nature. Picasso said, "Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing". I merely seek to find my own interpretation and sensations. My works explore multiple moments in time and place, and I hope the viewer will find glimpses of their own memories when they look at my work.

MIKE: I grew up in the West Country of England and as a young boy spent hours walking along coastlines and moorlands. I suspect something took hold. Something visceral. Landscapes, wherever they are in the world and how we relate to them has always fascinated me. Everything about them is unique. Unless I've painted it, I haven't really been there.

### **Does your taste in art differ or is it quite similar?**

DEBBIE: We have some favourites together like Matisse, Richard Diebenkorn, David Hockney, but we also have our own particular preferences. We often discuss and show each other artists we have 'discovered'. Visiting galleries together especially on our travels, is a wonderful shared activity.

MIKE: I would say we share similar tastes. Debbie and I have stood in front of paintings in galleries the world over and differ surprisingly little on what we find most interesting. We both have formal art training so appreciate technical competency in figurative representation. But we also share a real love of abstract, particularly the modernists. The idea that emotions run higher in abstract expressionism touches both of us and we both try to convey this in our own work.



Debbie's Olive Grove sketchbook

**Do you each have a favourite work or artist that has really inspired you?**

DEBBIE: There are so many. David Hockney and his dedication to exploring and drawing the landscape, especially his monumental multi-panelled works. Elisabeth Cummings and her beautiful evocative Australian landscapes, full of colour and emotion. The sheer energy of Francis Bacon and his works that bridge the narrow road between abstraction and figurative painting. It's always a fragile boundary and one I'm keen to explore in my own work.

MIKE: I paint with bold gestural strokes, I don't tinker or fuss over unnecessary detail. I draw fast and therefore the work of Frank Auerbach has always intrigued me, especially his bold scribbles of North London. Richard Diebenkorn's perception of the landscape and his journey through it, has been enormously influential. From the original more figurative Berkley series, through to Albuquerque and Ocean Park, he's made me realise the importance of seeing things from different perspectives. And for their sheer audacity, I admire The Fauvists (Wild Beasts), especially Andre Derain, who took so much liberty with colour and construct and outraged the establishment at the time.

**You work, live and create together. What's that like?**

BOTH: It feels wonderful. Totally grateful that we each have a partner who shares the vision. We give each other space to do our own thing.

**How does your creative process work? Do you begin a piece with a clear idea in mind, do you work from loose themes or colours, or do you simply sit down and begin? Or all three!**

DEBBIE: my process almost always begins with walking outside and looking. And then drawing. Lots of drawing and sketchbooks. The abstracting of the landscape comes in stages. I take many photos but I never work directly from them; they are just a means of pushing the memories and colours into my head. Large works are never merely copies of a drawing but a combination of multiple drawings even on different days, and I let the painting itself speak to me too. Random moments and happy accidents are truly part of it. The bit that isn't an accident, is deciding which bits to keep in. Sometimes you need to be pretty radical. It's a continual editing process.

MIKE: I tend to make field studies, quick sketches, a sort of visual shorthand that help me to assess a landscape on so many levels. They are mostly in black and white, often with whatever pencil or pen I happen to be carrying. I can decide what to leave out, what to alter or exaggerate, where the emotion of the scene really lies, and what is it I want to convey. Sometimes I will work in gouache or acrylic and make quick paintings – and surprisingly they end up being amongst my favourites for their sheer spontaneity – or they might sit in the studio for days or weeks until I think about how they inform my next piece of work. These studies are all the reference I need to develop a larger work in the studio. I'm not interested in perfection. I don't want to create an accurate picture of a scene. I want to make a work that entertains, arrests or even unsettles the viewer. My starting point is to use large brushes and palette knives and to apply paint liberally, on to canvas or board, one eye always on my field studies, to recollect how the five senses perceived the landscape that day. The painting builds from there until the moment when I let go of my original idea and the painting assumes an identity all its own. Then I don't hold back.



Debbie drawing in Spain

**Your new exhibition, *Two artists, One journey*, kicks off in March. What was the inspiration for this exhibition?**

BOTH: The journey through Spain and Italy and in particular our time at Joya Air art residency in Andalusia, shows us at our most prolific. It had a profound impact on us both, painting side by side for 8 – 9 hours a day and generating so much work. We were surprised how much of Australia we saw in the landscape, even in remote rural Spain. We have both come back as quite different artists; more confident, more intuitive and probably more demanding of ourselves. We felt that we wanted to share that experience with our friends, colleagues, other artists and those who love to travel.

**How long was the creating and curating process?**

BOTH: We've been planning the exhibition for the past four months. It takes a lot of time, especially in the selection and framing of so much work. As with all galleries, wall space is at a premium, so agreeing on which pieces to hang was time-consuming. There was inevitably some lively debate about which work to show. We are both passionately opinionated with huge respect for one another. However we both want the show to be entertaining and so our best work will be on display, large and small, as well as sketchbooks for people to pick up and study.

**You're also hosting workshops. What can people expect from these?**

DEBBIE: My mantra is 'If you always do what you always did, then you'll always get what you always got.' Workshops are always a beginning, not an ending. Participants have time to play and really experiment. 'Textures In The Landscape' will be all about that – it's a totally experimental process, where mistakes may well happen, but we learn so much from them. And have a lot of fun doing it!

MIKE: I want to encourage artists to draw differently. I've come to realise that so much happens with hand/eye coordination when you draw consciously. I am going to encourage artists not to seek perfection but to create alternative interpretations. To use implements that they are less familiar with, to see hills and contours as competing shapes and forms. To draw fast and let their pens and brushes dance across the paper. My tutorial is entitled 'Drawing into the Landscape.' By that I mean getting closer to it as opposed to simply observing it. Not to copy accurately but to portray some of its underlying qualities. I guess I'm asking them to suspend their beliefs in some way, to sacrifice their need for realism and logic for the sake of enjoyment.

*View three of Mike's works in the gallery below.*

