

The Stroke of Joy: Ken Done's Brilliant Brush of Boundless Beauty!



Ken Done

By Imogen A. Rose

Ken Done is 77 years of age, yet there is a timelessness about both the artist and his work, a timelessness that seems related to the extraordinary impact of Ken Done upon the Australian cultural psyche.

Done is arguably Australia's most famous artist. Indeed, his work has been described as the "most original style to come out of Australia".

Great art is capable of communicating what words cannot.

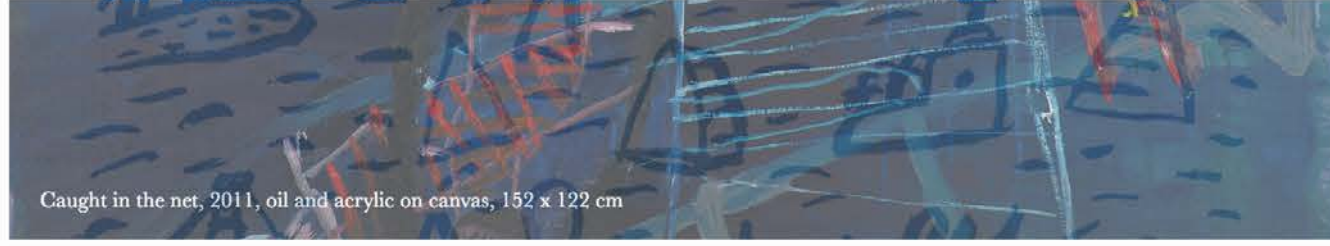
It has the capacity to move the mind, to speak to the soul and to harness the heart. There is a magnificence in that moment of truth when one looks at a piece of art, so compelling, so resoundingly authentic in its connection to the inner workings of oneself, that an indescribable feeling of recognition takes place.



Ken Done

The degree of this impact and its overall mood varies with the artist. In the case of Ken Done, there is an overwhelming consensus shared by viewers. It is one of joy – triumphant joy!

Indeed, there is an irrepressible optimism in Done's work that connects with people. A large part of this feeling derives from Done's seminal use of colour and pattern. His command of colour is so creative, potent and powerful that it breathes *life* into the canvas. One almost expects the water to *move*, the fish to *swim* or the magical myriads of colour to continue to evolve. Indeed, one cannot help but imagine what has transpired behind, as much as in front, of the canvas.



Caught in the net, 2011, oil and acrylic on canvas, 152 x 122 cm



Done makes an apt analogy to music, "Colours are just like notes of a piano. Whether you play them hard or soft, whether you put one against the other, you know put pink against a certain orange it will give it more pink, and there's a kind of thrill of those two colours together".

Done began his professional training as the youngest student to enter the esteemed East Sydney Technical College. The College's prestigious alumnae include Margaret Olley and John Olsen. Done subsequently began his career as art director and designer in the world of advertising and design. He travelled extensively and made a mark at some of the world's leading advertising firms in Australia, as well as on both sides of the Atlantic.

In London, he worked with Tim Brooke-Taylor and Bill Oddie (of *The Goodies* fame), on a series of cinema commercials for Campari. The project earned the prestigious 1967 Cannes Gold Lion award for best cinema commercial. In many ways, Done was enjoying a stellar career the heights of which, many could only but dream.

There is no question that Done is multiskilled having consistently demonstrated excellence across a broad professional spectrum.

Yet, like all true passions, a nagging longing, an alluring siren's call, remains ever-present in a constant ebb and flow with the reality of one's life. Thus, upon one bleak and dreary, cold London day in 1968, something of a spiritual tsunami hit the artist. Done had decided to visit a Matisse exhibition at the newly opened Hayward Gallery. He had studied Matisse certainly, but to stand before a work of great art in its original form is incomparable. Done described the encounter as "life changing". It was as if confronted by a compatriot whose visual symphony connected with Done's own artistic core. It was a catalyst for change, though one that would take time, since Done is both pragmatic as well as romantic, "I needed to support my wife and family, so it wasn't until I was 40 that I had my first exhibition."

This exhibition took place in Sydney in 1980. The shrewd marketing side of Done prompted him to design 12 simple, stylish T-shirts - a basic but cleverly effective blue and white drawing of Sydney Harbour - to give to the press at the launch. It proved a fortuitous decision. The enthusiastic response was such that it essentially provided the impetus for his subsequent iconic Australian brand, Done Art and Design.

It is perhaps ironic that the Art and the Brand of Ken Done should be borne of the same occasion. The two were always separate aspects of Done, yet, the extraordinary success of the Brand has at times unfairly clouded critical recognition of Done's artistic merit.

Despite this, Done does not believe that artists should shy away from entrepreneurial avenues. In fact, he believes it's an important part of being able to sustain longevity within a necessarily precarious profession.

Done is an artist whose gift has been honed over a lifetime. In fact it is only now that he feels comfortable describing himself as an artist.

He is also an exceptionally successful businessman whose clear sense of marketing enabled him to utilize such skills to build a family-run empire based upon his designs and art.

He enjoyed phenomenal commercial success, particularly in the eighties and nineties. However, he suffered severe financial losses upon the actions of a spurious accountant. He fought back by pursuing legal action and although he remained heavily out-of-pocket, he did not allow the experience to embitter him.

It is not in Done's nature to surrender or despair, even in the most challenging of situations. Indeed, it is significant that whilst recovering from prostate cancer he completed his acclaimed 2012 exhibition, *ATTACK: Japanese Midget Submarines in Sydney Harbour*.

This exhibition remains one of a very few projects within Done's career that contains a sombre theme. Rather, as Done says, his art is largely, "about how beautiful something is".

Beauty – powerful, passionate and persuasive. Beauty can raise one's heart in hope, reawaken slumbering senses, even speak to the soul. One thinks of John Keats, "Some shape of beauty moves away the pall From our dark spirits". With a euphony of the brush, Done creates a verse of joy and the beauty of this world draws the viewer into the image.

An extraordinary amount of Ken Done's work revolves around nature – the harbour, the reef, fish, flora and fauna. He sees nature as an infinitely inspiring, though essentially, unattainable muse, "You can't do better than nature. You can't make the flower more beautiful than it is, you can't make the Parrot Fish more beautiful than it is. So nature, although it might be the source, I can't compete with it. No artist can".

To surpass nature may well be out of human reach, but to communicate the meanings and moments of life for which language is non-existent is a gift. A gift that must be trained and nurtured over a lifetime, though a quality bestowed upon a very few.

In many ways, Done has retained that sense of the child that allows adults to see with clarity- to create without conformity.

Done has achieved an extraordinary mastery of the evocative, expressive language of colour and drawing. His colours are so often a marvellous marriage of vibrant strokes cleverly communed to gentle hues that all is within perfect harmony and balance.

It is Done's relationship to colour as demonstrated through finesse, flourish and virtuosity, and its power to generate a genuine feeling of joy, that arguably makes Done one of our most brilliant artists!