

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Artist Martin Tighe invites us into his studio and his mind to share the journey of creation for the Spirit of Football exhibition.

By Janelle Ward.



Australian Football has been good to Martin Tighe. He's not passionate about any particular team and doesn't see too many matches from start to finish. In fact, rugby is his sport of choice, both as coach and player. Just the same, Australian Football and Martin Tighe have a thing going on.

He's an artist, though not just a football artist. He's had four entries in the Archibald Prize and exhibitions of landscapes and works with a rural theme, but it's football themes that have been monopolising

his time in the past few months.

Along with 22 other artists, Tighe was commissioned to contribute to the inaugural Spirit of Football exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. The invitation arrived in the mail in mid-April. The brief? Create a two-dimensional piece no more than two metres square relating to Australian Football and developing the theme, the spirit of football. Tighe has slightly less than four months to have his work at the gallery ready to hang.

Not a problem.

He'll have to rearrange his schedule, but he sees this as a great opportunity to give life to another idea. He has a lot of ideas you see. He's constantly finding,

seeing football images that he'd love to turn into one of his trademark relief paintings. That's why he watches the game - not to see a favoured team get up, but to see the players, the physical contest, the emotions, both on the field and off. That's why he haunts new and used bookshops where he finds football images that similarly fire the imagination. That's why he frequently heads off to suburban club matches with camera and sketchpad to capture images, information. The Spirit of Football commission will ease the cerebral congestion by one.

For Martin Tighe, it's game on.

Tighe is still preparing for his exhibition of Mallee landscapes at HoGan Gallery in Collingwood when he receives the invitation, but immediately starts thinking about which image he will let out.

"I have a treasury of ideas I can draw from. I'm fascinated with defeat - it's a much more complex emotion than victory - but I chose not to paint that for this exhibition. I could have aspects of that in the background, but the primary image is going to show the balletic aspects of football. The background will indicate the more emotional aspects of the games - the crowd, the coaches, the people who support football."

One suspects that Martin Tighe sees football in a series of stills. Spectacular moments, like Nick Riewoldt's courageous hurtling mark in round 11, are burnt on his brain awaiting their chance. But this time, it's the late, great Ted Whitten's turn at the easel.

"I've always wanted to do something with a particular Ted Whitten mark. In the last few years, I have revisited some of the old classic images of football. Most of those images are in black and white and, for the most part, are held as small photos at clubs or in books on bookshelves. I feel I could reinvent the majesty of these moments."

The finished work takes shape in the artist's mind as he works through the pressing duties he must clear first. It's called vision. Just as a writer must know

how the story will end, the artist must know exactly what he is aiming to achieve. The voyage of discovery takes place before the paints are even considered.

"Once I settle on an idea, I have a picture of the finished work in my mind. That's an important part of making an art piece. If you know what it's going to look like, it's a very solid start."

The vision centres on Whitten, but includes players in vertical stripes, hooped socks, strong arms. In the background will be other football images - Barry Breen, Bob Rose, Allan Jeans, Alex Jesaulenko, Royce Hart, Bob Pratt taking a mark. Layers and layers of images that will be painted over.

The concept complete; the study is next.



"I start on a small scale. That's very beneficial because you can resolve problems more quickly on a small scale. Embarking on a major piece for a major exhibition, I want to make sure that what I'm doing is right. It's an age-old system; artists have been doing studies for works for 500 years. We know it works."

Satisfied with the study, time for the real thing. The size of the finished work is generally determined on another age-old tradition: what fits in the car. For Tighe, the hard labour kicks in now. His signature technique, relief painting, is physically demanding: timber, saws, noise, dust, building layers, fitting together images, gluing and, finally, painting.

The artist's home in Moonee Ponds is, as you'd expect, perfect for the task. Originally belonging to Tighe's grandfather, who bottled milk in the dairy, now the kitchen, then delivered supplies in his horse-drawn carts, the house and stables are set up to perfection. In the crisp winter air of one of the stables, Tighe takes to drawing and sawing.

"The technique I use involves a big labour content. The (relief work) can take a long time and is very demanding. The first hour and the last hour are critical; everything else is a lot of labour. The first hour involves the conception of the idea and in the last hour, you decide if you've finished it."

After three labour-intensive days, Tighe is satisfied with the built image and carefully fits it onto the background. It's time to exchange saw for paintbrush.

"Once I get into my studio and I'm just using paint, it is pure pleasure."

All other projects are pushed aside now. There is a deadline to meet. Tighe works in the biting cold of the early winter mornings and into the evenings. His studio is not heated and open to the elements; his choice.

"I like the vibe in my studio in summer and to heat it ... well, I just accept it. I rug up, wear two jumpers and a beanie."

The built images are brought to life with enamel paint. Tighe prefers enamel to traditional oils because it dries far more rapidly - an important consideration given the cold, damp air in the studio.

The family dog is snoozing in a corner. She's elderly, and obsessive, and follows Tighe wherever he goes. There's a CD playing in the background - it might be Neil Young, Paul Kelly, classical music. Tighe's mind might wander, but he's adept at keeping the visual controls focused on bringing this work to life.

Once Tighe declares the day done, the work goes indoors to speed up the drying process. Wife Jennifer and children Wilson, 16, Lewis, 15, and Frances,

12, will note his progress. The kids might comment, they might say nothing; it is Jennifer who is Tighe's most important critic.

"The advantage of one particular person seeing a lot of your work evolve is that they can see whether you're on the right track. I'd never show a half-finished painting to anyone else (apart from Jennifer)."

Mid-June. Tighe is happy with the progress."

I know where I'm going. I was very happy with the study and I'm happy with how it looks even at this preliminary stage. You can't beat hooped socks because they show the form of the legs; you can't beat the vertical stripes. Seeing how colours sit beside each other in the background is a critical element to success.

Success can be measured in two dimensions. Tighe can work on a piece until he believes he has succeeded in depicting exactly what he wants to create. But success, in the world outside his home, hangs on praise and criticism. Tighe accepts and invites both. It is part of an artist's lot, part of a balance he worked out earlier in his career - with help from friends.

"I painted Jonathan Mills, director of the Melbourne International Arts Festival, for the Archibald one year and he summed up an artist's lot very well. He said: 'An artist has to be sensitive enough to be any good and tough enough to survive.' He's right. You need balance. If you are too sensitive, you won't be able to handle the knockbacks, the setbacks and there are setbacks. There are a lot of disappointments in being an artist. You need to be sensitive enough to formulate the ideas that resonate in the community, but tough enough to handle setbacks. If you are too tough, the sensitivity is not likely to be there."

Late June. The *Spirit of Football* vision is reality. Ready for collection, ahead of the July 1 deadline set by the gallery. Ready to hang. Game over? Never. Martin Tighe has already moved on. The next portrait, the next exhibition, the 2.5 metre version of the bronze study, *Victory and Defeat*, that he hopes will get the nod ... His life is a work in progress.