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THE ARTIST'S WAY

His wife Alla may be the public face of Daylesford's celebrated Lake House restaurant and hotel, but Allan Wolf-Tasker is the man behind the unique art which hangs throughout the establishment. By Anne Derham.

ALLAN WOLF-TASKER is a laconic man with restless eyes, a sharp sense of humour and a love of the good life. He is personally supervised and manages the extensive cellar that makes Lake House its impressive establishment. He has also provided a clear vision for growth that has allowed his wife Alla, chef and tireless promoter of the restaurant, to get on and do what she does best. Usually, it's Alla's name that appears in print, and not always Alla whose picture is on the paper.

But everyone realises that the man behind the woman who drives the Lake House is much more than a spokesman and host. He is also an artist who, even after 25 years of running Lake House can still find time to spend around 40 hours a week in his studio creating and painting, flitting from project to project. At other times, he can be

found doing something else entirely to fill in the spaces between inspiration and creation.

Anyone who has visited Lake House in Daylesford for a well-deserved indulgence, an anniversary celebration or just to dine from one of the best menus of local produce in Australia, will probably have admired the spirited art collection in the public rooms and accommodation suites.

These works are a small part of the collection that remains unsold after successful exhibitions, and they testify to his various periods, or "series" as he calls them.

Allan started life a stone's throw from Station Pier where his Australian father and English mother disembarked just after the end of World War 2, in which Wolf-Tasker senior had flown Lancaster bombers.

Allan was born here, but as he puts it, "I only just missed out on

being a 10-pound pom". Later the family moved to Chelsea, via Kew, and Allan went to Edithvale Primary School, later Bonbeach High and Mordialloc High. He completed his tertiary studies at Caulfield Institute, now a campus of Monash University where he majored in sculpture and did a minor in printmaking.

But that is not to suggest that his sculpture training has left him. At one point, his painting took on a three-dimensional aspect and he created a whole series of painted pieces which blurred the traditional lines between painting and sculpture. Some of them are still hanging in Daylesford, but most found homes immediately following a 1996 exhibition.

"Sculpture has to be monumental (to have an impact)", says Allan, "and by painting, I can express myself faster". Even a cursory glance at his work shows how his

style and content has evolved. Indeed, a stroll through the Lake House collection is very revealing. In the meeting and reception centre, there are examples from his "whip" series. These are landscapes created by dipping colours into string and whipping the canvas to build a truthful evocation of the Australian landscape and the familiar grasses that blanket it.

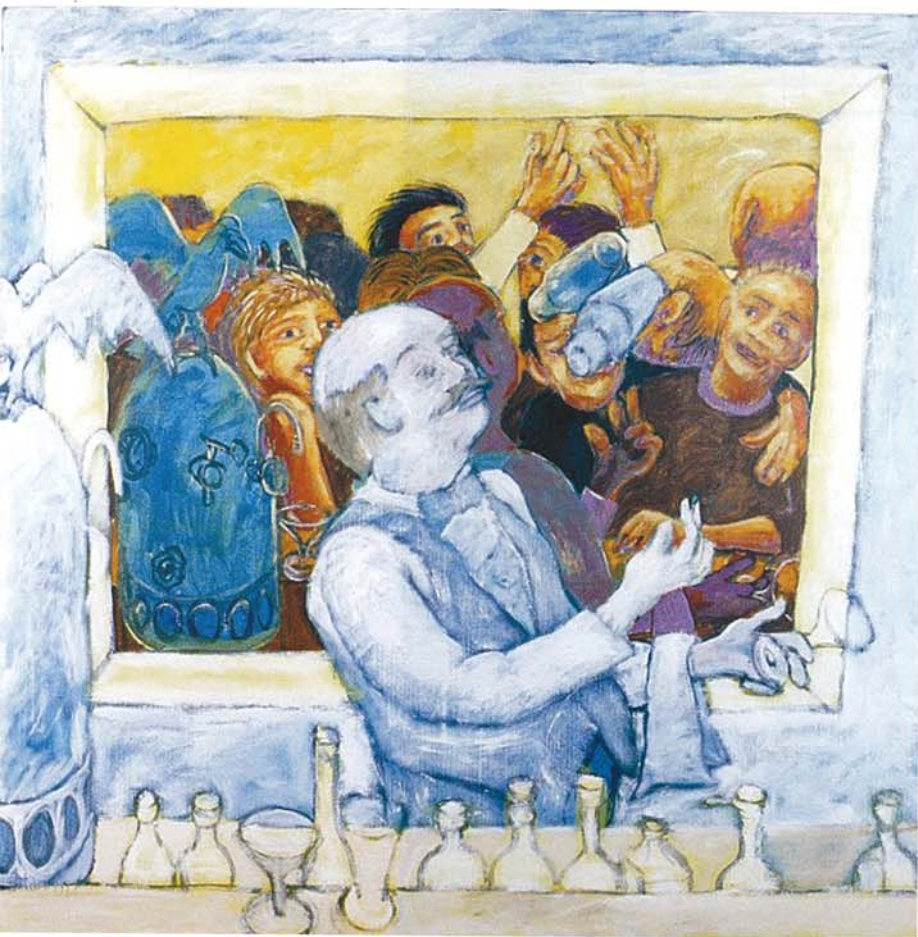
These are quintessential Australian paintings and offer a sense of space and freedom that is only matched by the landscape itself.

In the main buildings there are some works that represent another period of his output; a series that he calls "still-life"; they evoke a feeling of a moment just passed. Each incorporates a newspaper, dated, with a topical headline, and an overwhelming sense that someone has just left the scene. Titles like *She's gone for a swim*,



Opposite page: Allan Wolf-Tasker at work in his studio. Left: *Red or White*, below left: *Butcher Boy*, below, *Veggie Vendor*.





Here's Looking At You Kid.

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which shows a towel, newspaper, sunglasses and a lounge chair by the pool, are all inevitable clues that combine to make the viewer think that whoever “she” is, she'll be back any second. His colours are light, airy and lend a cool, relaxing tone to the proceedings. Like the David Hockney series of “pool” paintings, these works capture a sense of endless summer.

In more recent years, Allan has concentrated on subjects that reflect the sense of fun and good humour that regularly fills Lake House. These paintings show a much freer use of colour and line, but like most of his work, none is drawn or drafted beforehand. They come from his head, and they land on the canvas, cartoon-like, yet fully-formed. He makes it up as he goes. Central to all his recent work is the theme of celebration. You can almost hear the noise of the revellers depicted in his paintings. In a couple of the works, you may even recognise some of the faces if you look carefully. You'll also notice that within the paintings,

there are people connecting with one another, unaware of their surroundings. Chances are you'll also see someone looking back at you — someone in the work will engage your gaze and you'll suddenly feel as though the work has come to life, and you've been caught peeping, so powerful is the dynamic of his work.

Fortunately for lovers of art, Allan doesn't see himself slowing down as an artist any time soon. His last show was in 1998 so as he puts it, “I have to do another one. Probably this year, but I'm not sure what. Maybe it's the good-time people, maybe not.

“It might be a theme that's exhausted now,” he says, “But I don't know. I never know what's next. Maybe it'll go on for another 10 years. That's the trap for a painter; always trying to decide whether a direction is becoming too comfortable, or whether there really is something left to find”.

For inspiration, Allan reads a great deal. He loves poetry, browses through books of great literature

and great paintings, and this research is evident in his own work.

Next time you're at Lake House, have a look in the main dining room. With a nod to *The Sleeping Gypsy* by Henri Rousseau, Allan's personal favourite among his own work is titled *Rousseau's Sleeping Chef*. It's Alla sleeping, surrounded by her knives, pots and pans and dressed in her chefs' uniform, watched over by her beloved Dalmatian dog, Booker. This is one that's not for sale, for obvious reasons.

At the moment, Allan is finding inspiration in a magnificent book — a limited edition hand-bound in emu leather, of Geoffrey Dutton's *New York Nowhere* with inspired illustrations by John Olsen. He's enthralled with this and hints that the poem might be the foundation for his next series.

Balancing painting with the Lake House might seem a Herculean task, but Allan describes himself as “just Alla's

support act”, and says that “the place really is food driven, so it was a process of natural selection: chef means chief, so it had to be Alla”. Incidentally, since finishing her degree, their daughter Larissa has also joined the business. Perhaps a second generation of Wolf-Tasker management is not out of the question.

With the front end of the business safely in the hands of these women and a brilliant staff, he manages a solid studio stint every week. But what continues to drive him to paint?

“Because I can and because I love it. And anyway, someone has to record the things that exist in the world, some way or another. I could be a golfer, or some other kind of sportsman, but it doesn't really change anything or leave much behind. Also, when I'm painting well, I'm a nicer person. I get cranky when things aren't going well.”

Visitors to Lake House can assume that things must go well in his studio most of the time. vL