

Gabby Malpas

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The art of Gabby Malpas is delicate, refined and Zen-like. So it's a bit of a surprise to see that she paints at her kitchen table while her husband tinkers with his motorbike on the tiled floor right next to her. It's a companionable scene. Perhaps the juxtaposition of grease and engine oil with art paper and watercolours helps Malpas focus on her detailed work.

Malpas is an emerging Sydney artist who works on pieces of high-quality art paper which she stitches together with a sewing machine before she starts to paint.

"It adds texture," she says. Another of her quirks is gluing antique documents to the surface of the paper. She's forever on eBay searching for old papers, and has used eighteenth-century French documents, stamps and even receipts from a Chinese bakery.

"It doesn't matter about the language, it's the age [that matters]," she says.

Malpas sells most of her beautiful and serene artworks on commission from clients. But on numerous occasions she has also exhibited them at the Botannix cafe and yoga studio in Botany. "These guys are art connoisseurs and they promote you and shift a lot of work," Malpas says. In 2011, she had a sellout show at St Vincent's Public Hospital and will exhibit her work there again in June 2013.

Her work was shown at Art Sydney 2009 and was seen again at Art Expo Sydney on 21-23 September this year. In 2011, Malpas showed her work at the Kerrie Lowe Gallery in Newtown.

Malpas's still-life paintings often feature flowers in pots and vases, and if they appear oriental in style then that should come as no surprise. Malpas's parents were both Chinese, although she was adopted as a baby and raised in Auckland, New Zealand.

Malpas attended Otago Polytechnic School of Fine Art from 1984 to 1986, majoring in ceramics. It was here that she began to believe that an individual's style of making art is related to genetics.

"I was making vases and bowls that looked like museum textbook Han Chinese pieces," she says. This was despite never having seen traditional Chinese pottery.

Malpas was to discover that her birth mother was an artist. They met for the first time in 2004, after Malpas had come to live in Australia in 2003.

In 1988, Malpas had departed New Zealand for South-East Asia, ending up in London where she lived at many different addresses and worked at myriad jobs including at Oxford University Press as art editor for academic books. "I went to night school and learned to type and fell into publishing," Malpas says. "I needed to pay for somewhere to paint."

Since 1994, Malpas has been project managing the creation of websites for clients. On a typical day she will put on a suit and go to a meeting, then return to the kitchen table to work on her latest still life. "I might be taking a conference call down one end of the table, waiting for the paint to dry," she says.

Malpas is accomplished in the art of life drawing and practises about once a month at the Arthouse Hotel in Pitt St, Sydney. Her life drawing tutor at art school had been trained at the Slade and turned his lessons into a marathon. "We stood before the model for six hours," Malpas says.

Malpas is mentally working towards a series of paintings on the subject of adoption.

"I have got to get the guts to do it first. Because it's a very personal thing. The other thing is consideration. I don't want to upset anyone but there's some stuff I want to do that might be confronting.

The other thing is, is it self-indulgent? Does anybody care?"

One thing is certain. This rigorous and skilled artist will put everything she has into the task.

Images from top:

Gabby Malpas, *Belladonnas in a blue dragon vase*, 2011, watercolour and pencil on Arches paper, 39 x 57cm.

Gabby Malpas, *Granny bonnets and teacup*, 2011, watercolour and pencil on Arches paper, 39 x 24cm.

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