

pushing paint around

From skimming stones at Lake Tekapo to crafting giant canvasses in Berlin, Pete Wheeler has let his artistic passion guide his journey.

WORDS Craig Sistorson

Each weekday morning, Pete Wheeler wakes around 6 am, gets breakfast going before getting his three kids up, then helps the two older ones get ready and head off to their schools. Pete arrives at his workplace in the hip, multicultural Wedding district of Berlin around 9 am, spends each day pushing paper around, then heads home around 5 pm. The Timaru-born man has a typical working dad routine, but his office hours aren't full of white-collar work. Pete may be a paper-pusher, but he pushes it with a paintbrush.

'After 20 years of being an artist, I'm still excited to do it,' he says. 'I wake up loving what I do. Many people hate their jobs and I'm just fortunate. Somehow pushing paint around on canvas feels like it can solve all your problems; it gives me that release. Now I just do it like a regular job. Before my kids I was perhaps the more typical all-in artist, working obsessively from like 10 pm to 4 am, sleeping through to midday. Having kids, I think that structure and normalness has actually made me more creative. It's been really good for me.'

Pete's childhood years were spent living at Lake Tekapo. 'My fondest memories are just the landscapes. Being a kid and just being able to roam free. Those hot summer days where you'd go out after breakfast and not come back until the evening, building a treehouse, playing outside. The simple life, like an iconic film. Being a rural New Zealand 1980s kid.'

The youngest of five kids, with his closest sister nine years older, Pete says that in a way he grew up as a bit of an only child. 'I remember drawing and painting to entertain myself. My dad was a good artist, even though he worked as an engineer, so I think I got it from him. I'd get Dad to draw pictures for me when I was five/six years old, then I'd try to copy them.'

By the time he began Geraldine High School, Pete knew what he wanted to do with his life. 'I was 12 or 13 years old and it just came to me that I wanted to be an artist – it's strange, because I didn't really know what that meant as a job,' he says with a chuckle. 'I grew up in rural New Zealand where it seemed like everyone played sport or were farmers, but it just came into my head that painting was what I really wanted to do – maybe out of necessity.'

After high school, Pete headed to Otago to study fine arts, and upon graduation in 2000 he continued to focus on his life dream rather than a more traditional path.

'Many of my classmates were heading off to Wellington, but I thought if I did that, I'd just have to get a regular job to survive, because Wellington was expensive,' he recalls. 'I was in the mentality of just becoming an artist – so getting a studio, building up a portfolio. I had a part-time job at the Captain Cook Tavern while studying, and somehow that was enough for me to get a graduate loan. So I set up a studio in Dunedin with my loan.'

Over the next few years Pete worked as a full-time artist, including having a studio above a record shop in Tuam Street, Christchurch when he moved back to Canterbury. 'I did quite well, got a body of work, got gallery representation, and managed to sell my paintings quite regularly.'

Pete's striking early work saw his paintings exhibited around New Zealand and in the United States. Critics compared them to a mixture of American artist Leon Golub, famed for his unflinching depictions of brutality and war, and rock albums. In *Art New Zealand* in 2004, Edward Hanfling praised Wheeler's Auckland exhibition for engaging with 'urgent social and political concerns' and being 'evocative in their style as much as in their signification'.



LEFT / Right from the beginning, Pete Wheeler bet on himself as a full-time artist. **ABOVE** / Pete is looking forward to bringing his German-speaking family to New Zealand for a few months.

Looking back, Pete says he was lucky to have so many exhibitions at a young age. 'I think there was a real change in New Zealand around that time,' he explains. 'Suddenly at the beginning of the 2000s art became important. People were buying and selling houses in their thirties and forties; people had disposable income and were actually buying art.'

The good times didn't last. A global financial crisis loomed, and Pete's first marriage ended. He'd heard great things about a resurgence of new German painting, and an old flatmate from Otago who'd bought a flat in Berlin invited him over. He sold a painting for the airfare.

Pete bounced between Berlin and New Zealand over the next couple of years, including living in a studio in St Kevins Arcade in Auckland, converting an old flour mill in Christchurch into an art space, and completing an MFA at the University of Canterbury in only six months. He returned to Berlin in late 2009, marrying the woman he met and fell for during his first visit.

'I'm still here, still painting,' he says. 'Being a Kiwi, I often think about this little kid at Lake Tekapo, skimming stones across the water, and now here I am, living overseas, married to a wonderful lady from another country, with three kids who speak German, not English.'

While Berlin is a big city, it doesn't feel like a big city, says Pete. 'It's very laid-back, there's no real skyscrapers like you see in big US cities. So it wasn't a huge shock to move here.

'Being a Kiwi, I often think about this little kid at Lake Tekapo, skimming stones across the water, and now here I am, living overseas...'

It felt kind of easy to get a studio and live day to day. In some ways, Auckland feels bigger.'

Though Pete says he does miss the Canterbury countryside. He's looking forward to bringing the whole family back in October for an extended visit. 'I want to get the kids bilingual.'

Throughout it all, Pete's driven to keep painting. He loves it now as much as he did when he began 30 years ago, while not really being able to explain why. 'It's not something that's conscious,' he says. 'Somehow, I just love putting colour on a surface. It's just the way it is. I think art is just something inherently in us as kids, and some of us carry that through life.' ●



From studios in New Zealand to the hip Berlin district of Wedding, Pete Wheeler has created striking images on gigantic canvasses.