

# MR TODD GOES TO FLORENCE

by Inga Walton

> **Geoff TODD**, *Forest* 2009, acrylic on canvas, 168 x 183 cm.  
Collection Peter Kelly, Melbourne.

*Trouble* congratulates Geoff Todd on his appointment as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the Australia Day Honours list for “significant service to the visual arts as an artist and sculptor”. We published a version of this story a decade ago in *BIG Trouble* issue 64, December 2009/January 2010.



# “Because of my nature, my expectations are rather low!”

**In the cavernous rooms** of what was once the old Terminus Hotel in Ararat, renowned artist Geoff Todd has been completing three large-scale works in time for them to embark on a protracted and expensive journey to Florence. “I think to accept an invitation one should give the exhibition a serious go and be seen for real, represented by major pieces that really do reflect the artist’s *oeuvre*. This can cause a few logistical problems – not the least being that the paintings have to be freighted stretched,” he remarks dryly.

Todd was one of a dozen Australian artists selected for the seventh Biennale Internazionale dell’Arte Contemporanea di Firenze in 2009, when this interview took place. “My connection with Italy began with the solo exhibition *L’amore della figura* (1998), at Museo dei Bozzetti, Tuscany,” says Todd, “organised by Professor Guiseppe Cordoni. I am assuming that this may have attracted the attention of the jury deciding on which artists to invite to the Biennale this year. There seems to be a distinct Asian focus as well, with major artists from China as the main exhibitors. My long association with Indonesia and exhibiting regularly there, in Hong Kong and in Singapore may also have influenced the selection panel.”

While the organisers of arts events at this level no doubt want to look as inclusive as possible, for artists in the Australasian region participation requires a substantial logistical investment and a certain amount of fortitude. “While the realities of our technological world and the internet offers much, and is assuredly partly responsible for me being noticed, it also creates anxieties,” Todd believes. “Because of my nature, my expectations are rather low! On the one hand we can see a huge art exhibition of a particularly high standard being mounted, but also (what I hope is) cynical argument about it online from some past or previously ignored artists. It can make one of shaky confidence, wondering if the Biennale is little more than just another ‘Art Fair,’” he admits.

“I am, however, keen to find positive elements in the Biennale, and will be heading over to Florence to make the most of the experience. David Hockney, Christo and most recently Gilbert & George have been major exhibitors in the past, so I assume some level of artistic rigor is there.”

Since his début in 1969, Todd has held over one hundred solo exhibitions throughout Australia and further afield to England, Austria, and France, with countless invitational and group shows. The abiding preoccupations within his practice are landscape and female form. For Todd, the landscape – whether it be the baking heat of the Northern Territory, or the tropical humidity of Southeast Asia – acts as a framework for cultural exploration and mutual understanding. The female figure, in its many guises, is a potent and mysterious representation of shared humanity, commonality of experience, and the life force. In his works, the figure is not divorced from the landscape, as if it was some sort of imposed or transient entity, but exists as an integral part of it.

“I see the landscape as always sensuous, sometimes erotic, but most of all liberating, even in its many extremes. These qualities stimulate creative thought ... essentially the honesty of earth and sky allows me to think without boundaries,” Todd observes.

Todd is also known for the strong focus on social justice and activism which permeates his work, whether it be the perceptive and ongoing studies of indigenous communities, *Collateral Damage* (2004-05), which focused on displaced persons and civilian victims of conflict, a tribute to Australian VC winners (1995), and the bullet-ridden *Floral Tributes* (2007) series, which commemorated Australian war dead. Todd’s controversial ‘blood paintings’ (2001) were a response to the September 11 attacks. They consisted of a suite of nude women holding infants and young children – otherwise tender maternal scenes – depicted in his own blood.

“This touches on a point that occupies my thinking a lot, the obligation of the artist to reflect on or respond to the times. An artist needs to be moved sufficiently to do something,” Todd maintains. “It really must be an internal ‘burst’ to be effective for the artist, the driving force. I find myself outraged by an issue and immediately set to work with this



inspired conviction. Having done these works at a time of extraordinarily high energy and stimulus, I then don't know what to do with them when finished."

A lengthy friendship with the QC representing convicted drug trafficker Scott Rush led to Todd travelling to Bali's Kerobokan Prison in 2008, where he was permitted to paint and draw Rush with his Nigerian cellmate, Emmanuel Ihejirika. "My sadness in coming to terms with the ambience of the death tower environment was overwhelming, but the spirit of these two boys was inspirational," Todd recalls. "Scott and I discovered a mutual interest in art, especially drawing. He has an eye toward cartooning, and together we discussed ideas and medium. I see the 'Death Sentence' works as a tribute, one that will perhaps inspire Scott's artwork, once he is given a (hoped for) reprieve from the firing squad."

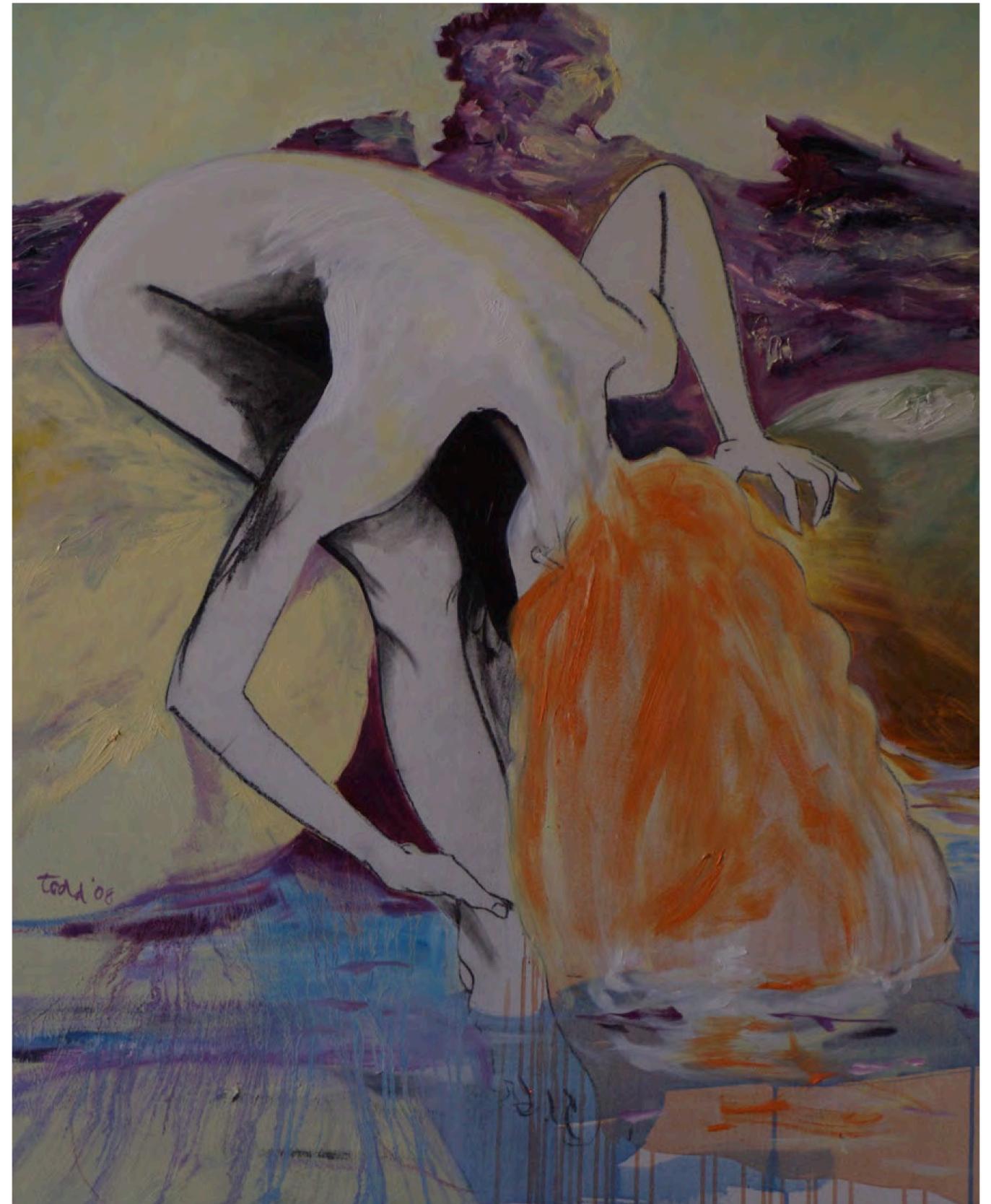
In tackling such emotive and 'raw nerve' issues there is always a dilemma that the work might be viewed as exploitative. "Within my heart I know there is no contrivance, chasing controversy or seeking attention, but I am not sure how one can avoid this misinterpretation being made quite often in the public arena," Todd laments. "I would be very hurt if the works were ever dismissed as a (media) stunt, so usually I hide them at home and in my work spaces, and regretfully admit a sort of defeat in terms of displaying them to the outside world."

Maintaining the focus and vitality evident in his work is a process for which Todd deliberately seeks isolation, eschews trends, and divorces himself from the often self-referential concerns of the 'arts industry'. "I'm forever grateful for those meditative years in Arnhem Land," he concurs. "They freed me from much of the pressure and a lot of the shackles that tend to harness artists in the mainstream art and gallery scene."

Todd's immersion in the Territory environment stretches back to 1984, and his time as a craft adviser in Maningrida. "I found the contrast in culture and landscape to inner Melbourne arresting in the most positive and inspirational way," he remembers. "This led to a freedom and acknowledgement from within me that artistic work is entirely about inspiration, not about trends, design or marketing."

> **Geoff TODD**, *Morning, Rainbow Valley* 2008  
oil on canvas, 111 x 91 cm. (Private Collection, Sydney).

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Integral to Todd’s artistic process are the long stretches of absorption and solitude, driving and painting, furthering his personal connection with the landscape. “I need that time alone, I drive for hours with no music or radio. I was in Arnhem Land working with an Aboriginal guy, Charlie Godjuwa, and he showed me how the landscape is music on long drives: with rhythm, variation, notes, harmonies, a beat. No one needs or wants any other distraction in the vehicle once this is understood.”

Working *en plein air* provides a necessary haptic resonance. “Sometimes I like to work with the unstretched canvas flat on the ground and pick up the texture,” Todd explains. “You have to be in the landscape to feel, sense, and understand that it surrounds you on a visceral level.” Todd has recently secured a permanent warehouse/workroom in Darwin to better facilitate his outback pilgrimages. “One’s space is so important and to have two of them, separated by 4000 kms of open landscape, is just what I need. I can drive alone and arrive at either end inspired and ready to work!”

Biennale di Firenze: Spadolini Hall, The Fortezza da Basso, 5-13 December, 2009 - [florencebiennale.org](http://florencebiennale.org) | Geoff Todd (AM) - [geofftodd.com](http://geofftodd.com)

> **Geoff TODD**, *White Bahinia and Lilies* 2008, acrylic and aluminium leaf on canvas, 152 x 92 cm. Collection Suzanne & Peter McGrath, New South Wales.

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