



Surfing for code breakers

Artist Fred Fowler surfs the net to find landscapes to paint from above, such as his beloved Stradbroke Island

FIONA PURDON

Stradbroke Island's spectacular beauty has provided a creative spark for Fred Fowler's new series of cultural landscapes, highlighted by his unique morse code of symbols, for his first Brisbane solo gallery show.

Stradbroke's breathtaking beaches and wildlife influenced the first two works of Fowler's 17-painting series at Jan Murphy gallery, Fortitude Valley, this month.

"I was above Cylinder Beach when I did my first painting. It was where we were swimming a lot. It is also where I proposed to my wife in 2015. We've had many magical little experiences with

dolphins, whales and kangaroos," says Fowler, who also started the work *Mirrored Plateau* on Stradbroke, inspired by the native birds.

Fowler, of Melbourne, has visited Stradbroke about 20 times since he was introduced to the island by his Brisbane wife Bridge O'Shea, a film producer, almost 10 years ago.

"We came up for Christmas and I packed 10 canvases in the back of my ute and a bunch of paint and I had a little makeshift studio downstairs on the deck. The painting *Above Cylinder Beach* is my most abstract in the show. I don't have as many symbols because there are not many buildings on Stradbroke. I've include some greenery and surfboards," he says.

Fowler, 38, says many paintings have been inspired by Google Earth searches of unique Australian landscapes such as the Western Australian works *Peppermint Grove* and *Approaching Roy Hill*, a remote mine.

"This is the first exhibition I've done primarily using Google Maps. It's a sign of the times, to paint landscapes, not by going out 'plein air', but instead ... on the computer and googling places."

For the past five years Fowler has developed a sophisticated language of symbols.

"My paintings are like maps or geography with little symbols. A lot of my symbols are native species and I also have symbols for urbanisation, buildings and mobile phone towers."

Fowler's ability to capture Australia's overwhelming sense of space, punctuated by recognisable symbols and landmarks, is reminiscent of Fred Williams' (1927-1982) vision.

"My pictures are about migration and urbanisation and culture," Fowler says.

As a teenager he was drawn to Melbourne's street art scene and won a cult following.

"I liked the directness of street art. You paint something and the next day, if it is in a prominent location, thousands of people would be seeing it."

A fine artist for the past decade, Fowler has created murals and public artworks in Barcelona, Berlin, Paris, Lyon and New York. The National Gallery of Australia has acquired his work.

Fred Fowler's exhibition at Jan Murphy Gallery, 486 Brunswick St, Fortitude Valley, June 26-July 21

EYES IN THE SKY: Fred Fowler's latest show includes the Stradbroke-inspired *Above Cylinder Beach* (hanging on wall, above and to right of Fowler) and *Mirrored Plateau* (inset, top); as well as *Understood, forgotten* (inset, above). Main picture: Amelia Stanwix

