

PERSONALITY

PICTURES: GREGORY BURNS

# ART AS TRAVEL, TRAVEL AS ART

Greg Waldron finds the long-dead romance of travel in Gregory Burns' new book, *Painted Journey*



Burns' book includes photographs of pictures that inspired his paintings



Photography, travel and solid writing make this the perfect coffee-table book

Gregory Burns' book, *Painted Journey*, belongs in the library of anyone interested in art, photography, travel and solid writing. The book traces Burns' journeys throughout the world, with a focus on Asia. It also tracks his development as a painter, offering a complete range of his work, from basic, pencilled sketches of subjects like yaks in the Himalayas to reproductions of full-scale abstract paintings that clearly required considerable time and effort to compose.

*Painted Journey* works on a number of levels. Perhaps the most compelling is how Burns, through the use of three media (paint, photography and writing) is able to return a sense of romance and adventure to travel, something that has all but disappeared in this world of group tours and soulless concrete hotel blocks. "The fog has lifted and the sunrise is spectacular," he writes in the chapter about Nepal. "I can see the first snow-covered peaks of our trek through the window...; I scramble for my sketchbook and camera and begin recording images."

The book also offers unique insight into the roots of inspiration for artists. The paintings, generally composed using strong colours, are shown with photographs of the location that inspired them. Burns' painting *Inner Sanctum III*, for instance, is placed con-

veniently next to a photograph of the Burmese shrine where he spent many hours painting this particular work. The chapter about Burns' painting mission to Angkor Wat (arguably the best chapter in the book) boasts superb candid shots of him painting among the ruins as curious Cambodians look on, giving the pictures a distinctly more human feel than exists in much of the photography I've seen of this dramatic site. That the pictures (all in black and white) are juxtaposed with Burns' brightly coloured paintings gives the reader a far deeper experience of what Angkor is all about than any number of colour photographs could do on their own.

Well-placed bits of humour keep the tone fun and easy. Of his experience selecting a Sherpa in Nepal, Burns has this to say: "Though dozens of men will claim to have been Sir Edmund Hillary's Sherpa, we can attest to the wisdom of using additional criteria. For starters, choose one whose breath cannot be ignited: Drunken porters can be a worry. Of course, we learn this only well after we've selected ours." Out on the mountain trails, he discovers that yaks, which will quite happily shoulder one off a cliff, are more amenable beasts after a sharp poke with the tip of a crutch. At a famous church in Rome, a stern female guard approaches when Burns unfurls a 20 sq ft canvas on the

## When life hands you lemons...

Gregory Burns, now in his late forties, makes the most out of life. He has travelled to some of the roughest, most remote places despite relying on crutches to move about — when he was a baby, polio forever deprived him of the use of his legs. Nonetheless, he's just as comfortable clambering up mountainsides or over boulder-strewn riverbeds as anyone else, and has a great passion for, as he puts it, travelling "third class in the third world".

His accomplishments span many fields. As a swimmer, he won five medals and set four world records in the 1992, 1996 and 2000 Paralympic Games. Also in the 1990s, he had the courage to leave a well-paid position as a public relations executive at PepsiCo to become a full-time painter. Burns' paintings now sell for thousands of dollars and reside in dozens of private and corporate collections. Holders of his work range from former US

President Bill Clinton to Credit Suisse Singapore.

In spite of the time Burns dedicates to travelling and painting, he also works to improve the plight of the disabled. He's active in Very Special Arts Singapore (VSA), a charitable organisation that provides individuals with disabilities the chance to access art for the purpose of rehabilitation and social integration.

As for how Singapore society deals with disabled people, Burns says: "People need to be educated that disabled people are just like them, but they just have some physical challenges. They have feelings and they don't like to be stared at, just as you wouldn't like to be stared at. They also like to be included, just as you like to be included. They're just normal people with aspirations like you, and they're not contagious." He says educating children about disabled people from an early age would make a big difference, but he feels this is lacking at the moment.



Some of Burns' art, such as *Sun Temple*, resides in private and corporate collections



An acrylic on canvas work



*Painted Journey* traces Burns' trek throughout the world, with a focus on Asia

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floor and begins to paint. Instead of chasing him off, she sets up a velvet rope around him and then keeps everyone from disturbing him or spoiling his view.

Aside from detailing Burns' travels in Myanmar, Nepal, Europe and Cambodia, *Painted Journey* also visits India, China, California, Laos and Singapore. "Singapore doubles as my training ground and Asian sanctuary," writes Burns. "In a region where life often deals harsh blows and affords a scant existence for huge swathes of humanity, Singapore is an oasis of dependability." Burns, an American, now divides his time equally between California and Singapore.

Perhaps the only thing that could be added to this fascinating, eclectic book are maps so that the reader can quickly locate the places that Burns brings alive so well. In addition, the adventurous reader is left wondering what Burns could do with other famous subjects such as Egypt's Pyramids of Giza or Peru's Machu Picchu. In any case, *Painted Journey* is a must-read for anyone who wants to connect with the spirituality and adventures the world has to offer. **E**

*Painted Journey* is available at select bookstores or via [www.gregoryburns.com](http://www.gregoryburns.com). Greg Waldron is an American freelance writer based in Singapore.



Polio did not stop Burns from pursuing his dreams

"We're all here with talents and gifts and we're all meant to maximise them," he says. "Once you decide what you want to do, then it's up to you to persevere and make the best of what you've got."