

30TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
3 DECADES OF DESIGN
THE BEST *(and the worst)*

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Gallery living *The artist at home*

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**WINNER
GARDEN OF
THE YEAR**



330 PAGES OF DESIGN, TRAVEL & ENTERTAINING



if walls could talk

Painter *George Raftopoulos* opens up, to reveal the view from the inside.
Text by Geraldine Haigh. Produced by Jean Wright. Photography by Jason Loucas.

Opposite page Detail from *Aeschylos*—an oil on canvas for a corporate client in London. “My work is about layering...paintings have to have scars,” says George Raftopoulos. *This page* In his home studio the artist mixes pigments to create subtly different tones of blue, yellow and red for his deceptively complex works, such as this special commission in the background.





Opposite page "My paintings are an emotional response to my experiences," says Raptopoulos, who often includes map references and frantic scratchings in his energetic "personal tableaux", such as *Solarus 6*.

This page The artist at work in his Rose Bay home. He knocked down a dividing wall – built originally to divide the bungalow into two residences – to make way for the studio and storeroom.



"Painting is like a romance. One moment you love each other, the next you can't stand each other."



This page clockwise from left A ceramic by the artist sits on the bookshelf next to *L'Histoire* over the fireplace; A Louise Tuckwell at the end of the corridor; paint in progress.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD. CHATTING TO 32-YEAR-old painter George Raftopoulos in the shaded garden of his Rose Bay bungalow – a gate leads directly onto the tiny secluded sandy cove where the artist's dinghy is moored and which boasts boat-studded views across Sydney Harbour – it dawns on us that we actually lived around the corner from each other in London for years.

"That's freaky," says the excitable painter (who grew up with his "big Greek family" five hours from Sydney in the country town of Grenfell), eyes agog. Unsettling experiences are what Raftopoulos thrives on. "I love chaos, in everything," he tells me. And despite the tranquility of the garden setting (as we talk, sea kayakers glide past the garden, which at a stretch of the imagination could be an olive tree-lined yard on his parent's home isle of Corfu), I sense there's a lot of turbulence in the artist's mind, in his studio

behind me, and in his work. "I need hustle and bustle and strange noises, but then I need to be able to pull out," says the painter on his decision to move his home, and studio, into the peaceful Eastern Suburbs cottage 10 minutes from the CBD. "It's about experiencing life, then pulling away and reacting to it. This place serves two purposes; it's far enough removed from the madness, yet it's sitting on the border."

A lot of Raftopoulos's work is, he says, about layering. "Paintings have to have a soul," he says. "They have to scream something, have to have scars, and real guts behind them." Saying that, one of the favourite pieces in his home is an abstract piece by Louise Tuckwell, with vibrant, if not vibrating, geometric shapes: "This painting seems simplistic, yet it's extremely complex."

The fact that he refers to his light-filled studio

– one half of the building he used to rent out as two separate units, which is surprisingly clean and tidy on the day *belle* visits – as "the madhouse" hints again at Raftopoulos's contradictory nature. "For me painting is almost like a romance," he says. "One moment you love each other, the next moment you can't stand each other. You're telling *it* things, it's telling you things. It's controlling you, you're controlling it. It's a give and take thing."

On the studio wall are three works in progress – huge textured canvases destined for clients in London, Paris and New York. These apparently obvious works, and others around the house, are more complex than would first appear, like the artist. Each of his paintings is an autobiographical floating – seek and you shall find an elliptical figure floating like a spirit over the canvas, as well as a scorching "which is, in a sense, my signature, my name carved

This page clockwise from top left Essential material; The artist often includes Greek words in his autobiographical paintings; *Pausanias at the Tabac*, in the artist's living

into the tree", says the contrary artist who is expecting his first child this year. Each work is built up with splats, smears and blobs of either red, blue or yellow oil paint, which have been scratched over with Greek words and scraps of paper added. The primary colours are intentional. "It's a play on making people think the paintings are just about primary colours. But it's not that simple."

He was so captured by the tonalities of the earth on a light airplane tour from Bendigo to the Northern Territory, Raftopoulos filtered the memories, feelings and scribbled notes he made on the journey into his subsequent works, which he says are "personal, soulful journeys; historical tableaux, remnants of my mind". Travelling is something he says is integral to his role as a painter. "This is from my wild and crazy days when I was a lot younger, free and single and travelling the world," says Raftopoulos pointing to

the massive ochre-toned *Pausanias at the Tabac* which looms over the dining table.

Doesn't he ever feel exposed, a bit weird, with strangers having these personal visual notebooks hanging in their homes? "Yes all the time," says the artist who originally wanted to be an architect, but found it "too contrived". He recalls one day he passed a Paddington house, only to spot one of his paintings above someone else's fireplace. Intrigued, he went to knock on the front door when a stranger poked his head out of a window and invited him in. "I had no idea who this guy was, but he had my work in every room. It was like my whole life was contained in his house." Raftopoulos walked around in disbelief. "All these emotions were stirring up inside me and I couldn't speak." It was, he says, "totally freaky". □

George Raftopoulos is represented by Australian Art Resources, tel (02) 9363 3063, www.artresources.com.au

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