

ETTELSON JAMES

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THE PAINTER JAMES ETTELSON IS A POINTILLIST. THIS MEANS HE WORKS BY MAKING MANY, MANY DOT-LIKE MARKS ON A CANVAS. THIS IS A NEO-IMPRESSIONIST TECHNIQUE, POPULARISED BY AN UNAPOLOGETICALLY FRENCH MAN NAMED SEURAT. SEURAT THE UNREPENTANT FRENCHMAN WAS A VERY GOOD PAINTER. JAMES ETTELSON IS ALSO A VERY GOOD PAINTER, BUT HE IS NOT FRENCH; HE IS AUSTRALIAN BY WAY OF SYDNEY—SPECIFICALLY THE NORTH SHORE. JAMES IS ALSO AN AUTODIDACT, WHICH MEANS HE SAVED THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS AND THREE YEARS OF HIS LIFE BY TEACHING HIMSELF TO PAINT. UNIVERSITIES GENERALLY DON'T RECOMMEND YOU TEACH YOURSELF ANYTHING, BECAUSE WITHOUT THEIR GUIDANCE YOU'LL END UP WATCHING CANNED TOMATOES WHIZ BY ON A CONVEYER BELT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. BUT JAMES TAUGHT HIMSELF, AND NOW HE'S ENJOYING THE KIND OF SUCCESS ART SCHOOL CAN'T GUARANTEE. MONSTER CHILDREN GAVE HIM A BUZZ TO SAY 'NICE ONE'.

INTERVIEW: JASON CROMBIE
PORTRAITS: LINCOLN JUBB



James!

Hey!

How are ya?

I'm good, mate, how are you?

Not bad, not bad. You ready to do this?

Yeah, I'm ready to go.

Okay. So you're turning thirty this year, right?

Yeah, the big three-0. On the twelfth of July, right before my show.

Which means you're a Gemini.

No, Cancer.

Right. And you've got a show coming up?

Yeah, I've got a show on July 23, so I'm kind of working like crazy at the moment, trying to get that done.

So you're in the studio all day, every day?

Yeah, I've just moved to Palmy [Palm Beach, Sydney], into this big old mansion with so many rooms. It's getting knocked down so I set up a proper little studio. It's a really good space. I'll have been working on the show for seven months by the time I finish.

Wow.

Yeah, pretty solid.

Explain that to me again. You've moved into a mansion that's going to be knocked down?

My friend lives in Palm Beach, and I grew up around here, but

I haven't lived here for, like, nine years. Anyway, my mate was like, 'Dude, I'm getting this mansion that's due to be knocked down, and it's got a tennis court, a swimming pool, heaps of room; you should come work from here.' So now I've got this amazing space right near the beach. It's a little secluded, but I love it. I mean, if I didn't have my girlfriend it would kinda suck.

You'd go mad.

Yeah. But it's an amazing old house. I love it here.

So when is it due to be demolished? I don't know—it could be in six months, or it could be a year, maybe even longer.

Fuck, that's so cool.

It's so cool.

Is it cheap?

Yeah! It's, like, really cheap. And it's got a tennis court, and that's something I'll never have again.

Don't say that, man. You might have a tennis court someday. I like to think we can all have a tennis court if we really want it.

You're right, you're right.

So, while I was reading about you today, I discovered that your work—and this is a new word for me—is pointillistic, which means you are a pointillist, and that

means you use multi-coloured dots instead of brush strokes, right?

Yeah, I guess it's a kind of pointillistic effect. I work with lots of layers, so that creates lots of depth. But the dots are almost like strokes. There's a lot of detail and layers, and that creates depth.

It's pretty detailed. Your eyes must be fucked.

People say that, but my eyes barely ever have any trouble. Sometimes late at night they might get a bit blurry when I'm getting tired, like they would if I was reading a book, you know? But no, they're fine.

How do you make a painting? Do you draw it up on the canvas first?

I actually just visualise the image, the painting in my head; I never draw on the canvas. I start with a theme and a nice colour palette that I've chosen, and then I just work from the image in my head. That's how all my paintings pan out.

So they just evolve from an idea you have in your mind?

Yeah, especially these new paintings—they're super-abstract and there's a lot going on compared with my last show. Kind of structured; very modern.

You're self-taught, right?

Yeah, yeah, self-trained. My gallery wanted me to go to the National Art

School, and right at the last minute I pulled out. I was working on my first solo show when I went for the NAS interview, and they were asking me what I was doing and stuff, and I told them I was doing this show, you know, and they asked if I'd be prepared to be stripped back and forget about the style I was working with, whether I was ready to learn what they were teaching. I don't know, I'm more of a hands-on sort of person, and I decided not to do it. I haven't really looked back since.

Wait—they were trying to get you to change the way you work, your style of painting?

Yeah, they were like, 'We hope you're ready to forget the way you're currently working and learn what we're teaching.'

Right. So they were basically asking you to abandon your way of expressing yourself through art?

Yeah. **Interesting. I've always felt that you can be taught the basics of technique, but you can't be taught how to be creative. You know what I mean?**

I know. That's what I think too. In the end it comes down to your way of making your own art.

There are a lot of successful self-taught artists.

Yeah, there are heaps out there.

There have been a bunch of self-taught writers too. Hemingway had a high school-level education; Melville was self-taught; Jack London... Shakespeare never attended university.

Really?

Yeah. Anyway, you don't need art school, and your career is a testament to that.

Yeah, ever since I turned down school it's been going really well. It was definitely a good decision.

How many solo shows have you had since then?

Four.

That's great. What do you think would've happened if you had gone to art school?

Hopefully I'd still be painting, but in a way I feel like it would have become something really forced, that by the third year I would have just had enough and would've wanted a break. And then six years later I might've started painting again. But I didn't go, and now I've got my fifth solo show coming up, y'know?

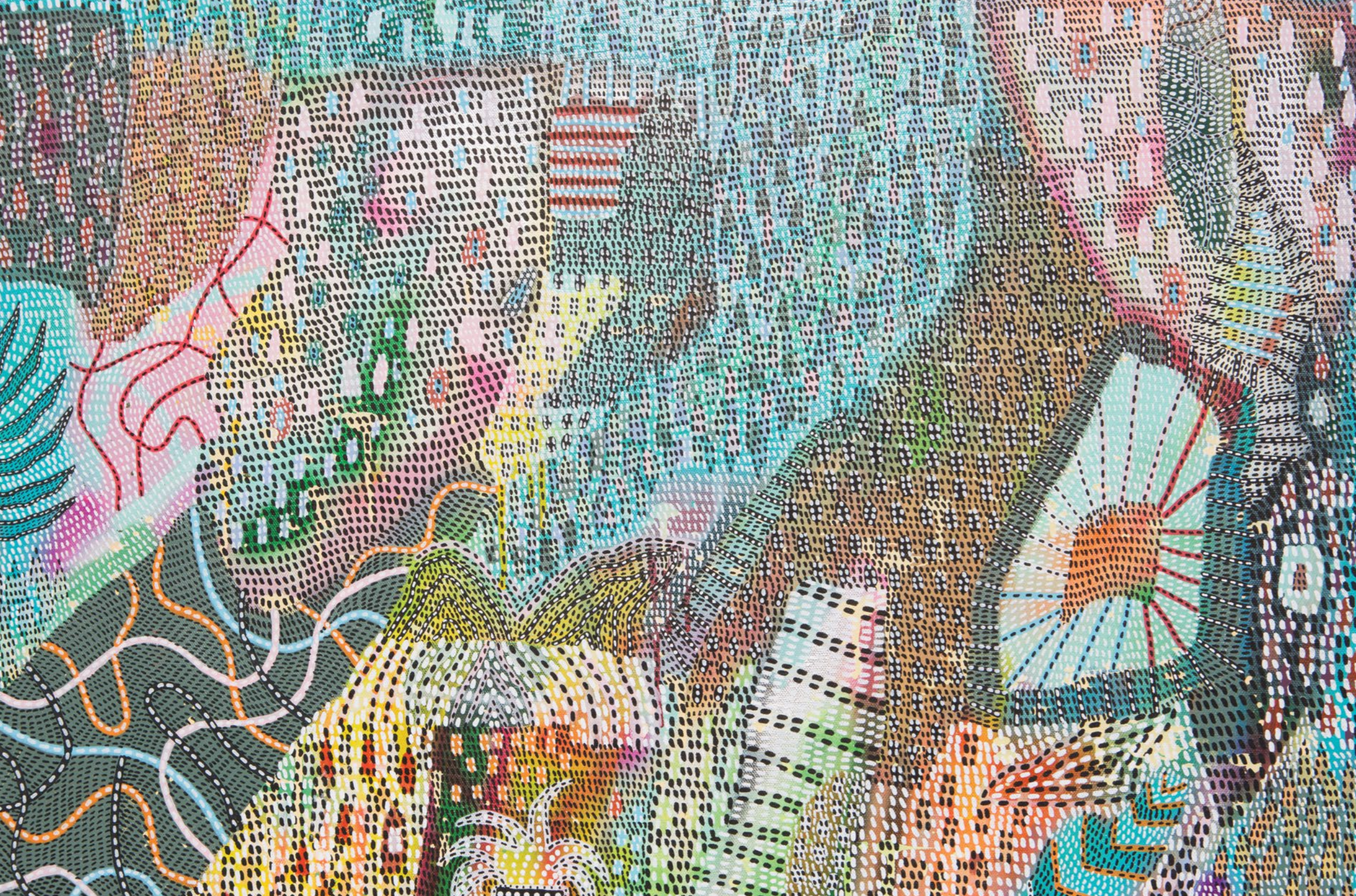
Right.

It's going really well, and every piece I've done has sold, so I just want to keep doing what I'm doing. And the work is definitely progressing each year, I think.



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This coming show I'm super-happy about; I'm excited to show, so, yeah, it's going really well.

That's awesome. Did you always like art?

Yeah, always. My mum is super-creative.

What does she do?

She makes these amazing mosaics, mosaic mirrors, and she's always painting.

Cool.

Yeah. She's super-creative. And I always loved art, I was always making it; in the back of my mind I'd think, I'd love to be an artist, but I never thought it'd be a possibility.

So I did photography for ages, like, assisted in fashion photography, and I didn't really like that.

How did you get started with painting?

I just did a painting one day and someone liked it, and it kinda just went from there.

So you were an assistant photographer and one day you went out and bought a canvas and some paints?

Yeah. I studied photography for two years at TAFE, and I was getting assisting jobs here and there; then, I don't know, I just realised I didn't like doing it.

And then you did a painting.

And then I did a painting. And one of my mum's friends bought it for, like, two hundred bucks, so I did a few more. Then I decided to get a body of work together, and I showed that to Ed [Woodley] at China Heights Gallery in Sydney, and ended up having a show with him. Then my nana, who knows a few people in the art world, invited some folks along to the show, and they really liked my work. They were the owners of Arthouse Gallery, and they took a few pieces, and they sold; and then I ended up having my first solo show. I was super-lucky.

When did you realise that painting could be your thing?

When I had the show at Arthouse Gallery I was really happy, and I thought, Okay, this could definitely be a career. I was super-stoked.

You grew up on the northern beaches of Sydney, correct?

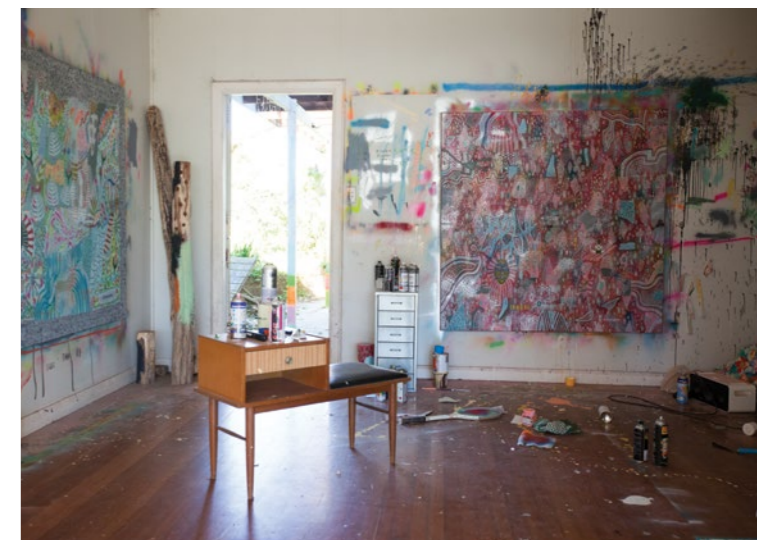
Yeah. I grew up in Avalon.

Did you surf and skate?

Yeah. I grew up surfing my whole life. About two years after I finished school I moved to the city and I skated for ages. I lived in the city for about six years. I've just come back to surfing in the last three years; I need it. I need to be in the water every day. It's, like, the one time I can just stop thinking.



In the back of my mind
I'd think, I'd love to be an artist.



And then I come out of the water and feel all fresh and ready to paint again. It's perfect for me.

Nice. What else have you got coming up work-wise?

Well, I'm working on this show that's coming up on July 23, and I'm trying to get represented by Edwina Corlette Gallery in Brisbane, so I'm hoping she's going to come to the show. What else... I had a meeting in New York with a gallery that wants me to take art over there, so I'm visiting New York and taking some rolled-up work with me.

Are you planning a move to New York?

A lot of my friends are like, 'You're coming to New York. You've got to be amongst it,' and I'm like, 'I don't know.' Some artists need to be in the hustle and bustle, but I like to paint by myself with a lot of space around me.

Totally. And the thing is, you don't need to be anywhere to do anything anymore; that's a myth now, thanks to the internet. You don't actually have to move to New York or wherever to have a career in the arts.

I'm so glad you said that. A lot of people have actually started to say that to me, but then I've got this other bunch of people who

are like, 'No, you've got to be in New York. It's where the action is.'

I don't think that's a thing anymore. And anyway, New York is going through a really dull stage right now.

Right. And Sydney is so beautiful. I mean, look at Australia. We're so lucky over here.

It's pretty good.

It's perfect.

Take me through a workday.

I know you get up after 10am, because you wanted me to call you after 10am.

Yeah. I normally paint really late. The work is really time-consuming because there's so much detail. So I normally paint until about 2am or 3am, and then I get up around ten, have coffee, go for a surf and come back and paint for the rest of the day.

That's so sick. That's, like, the best life anyone could ever want.

And then I might go for another surf at the end of the day, and then paint until bedtime.

You're killing me. Is there anything shitty in your day-to-day life, anything you'd change?

Nah, mate. Nothing.

END

