

THE GALLERIST

Michael Levitt



FREMANTLE PRESS

*'Such is the true purpose of art – not to be a depicter of mini-truths,
but an imagiser of the Great Truth.'*

Ernest Philpot (1906–1985)

1. WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 13

Mark Lewis bade the customer farewell and returned to his desk. Alvin Teoh, a barrister working in chambers with one of Mark's established clients, was new to his gallery, and had dropped in a small work by John Passmore that he wanted Mark to sell for him. It was a lovely little painting, Mark thought, acquired by the early-career lawyer at an Eastern States auction three or four years earlier, although its setting – the Williamstown docks – was surprising. Passmore had lived and painted mostly from Sydney.

Mark had placed the Passmore on the easel next to his desk. He viewed it with interest and a little uncertainty as he headed to the kitchenette and switched on the kettle. He returned and opened his computer. The major auction houses had just made their spring sale catalogues available online and he was settling in to inspect the available works and projected prices before closing up at his leisure and heading home. It had, until Alvin's arrival, been a quiet Wednesday in his gallery after an uncharacteristically fresh and cloudy November day. The bubbling of the kettle announced the approach of a cup of tea to accompany his much-anticipated scan of the auction's offerings.

Lot 1 on the Sotheby's catalogue was a small portrait by William Dobell, the subject's face painted in a rounded and somewhat comical manner, unflattering yet full of empathy. Mark often wondered who, if not a close friend or relative, ever acquired these portraits. The pool of potential bidders for so many of the works throughout the catalogue was small, but for portraits especially – however well completed – that pool had to be truly tiny.

Unexpectedly, the gallery door opened and a gust of cool air blew in. Mark looked up, part in surprise given the hour, and part in

disappointment as the kettle beeped its climax; he politely shut his laptop. Every visitor to his gallery mattered, every potential client warranted his full attention.

He recognised the woman who had entered, not as a client or even as a visitor, but as a local Mount Lawley identity he had often seen along Beaufort Street, shuffling to and fro with her grocery shopping, distinctive in her plain apparel and ever-present beret. She was easily in her sixties, short and plump. Mark, despite never having spoken to her, had generally imagined her to be single and unsophisticated, a harmless soul.

In the woman's arms was what looked like a painting wrapped in brown paper – perhaps two foot by three foot or smaller, if it was in a frame, he estimated reflexively. Mark knew what was coming. It would be a painting from home she hoped she could sell. As much as he loved seeing what people brought in, irrespective of quality or saleability, he never liked disappointing them with the reality of their unremarkable and difficult-to-sell pieces of art; and, imagining his guest to be uncomfortable in, even a little intimidated by, the gallery environment, he was especially unhappy at the prospect of disappointing her.

‘Hello, come in, have you got something to show me?’ he asked.

‘Well I didn't drag this thing here in this breeze just to have a chat!’

He heard a broad Australian accent and no suggestion of any discomfort. There was a hint of mischief in her eye as she took off her beret, and Mark returned her smile. This would be fun, whatever he ultimately had to tell her.

‘Put the painting on the desk,’ he said, ‘and tell me about it. I'm Mark Lewis. I recognise you from these parts. Do you live nearby?’

‘Pleased to meet you too.’ She spoke slowly and deliberately. ‘I'm Jan Bilowski. I live in one of the apartments on Field Street, just behind here. I've walked past your gallery many times since you started it, but I've never come inside. To be honest, I hardly have any paintings and I often wonder what you or anyone else sees in the sort of paintings you sell here. If you ever do sell them!’

Mark smiled again. His was a gallery predominantly for the secondary market, older paintings often sold and bought many times before, and he expressed his own strong preference for abstract art in the works that

he handled. Many people simply don't like abstract art, but those who did – God bless them – liked what his gallery offered very much.

Jan unwrapped the painting with little flourish or care. She opened the brown paper revealing the back of a cheaply framed masonite board, its portrait orientation evidenced by the frayed hanging wire secured to the frame at its top end and by the placement of the words written beneath the wire. The board was stained by age but had definitely once been white, and on it was painted:

To Katy
Love Charlie
November 1972

'Katy was my sister – Katarina – and this painting was hers. I suppose you could say that Charlie was her boyfriend. Anyway, that was ages ago.' Jan ran her hand lightly over the painted words to the edge of the board, her index finger dwelling on the edge for a moment. 'Katy had a disability from birth – cerebral palsy – and she lived with me for all of her adult life.

'Our parents died when we were both in our early twenties,' she added. 'Katy died last month. She treasured this painting, but I've never liked it at all.' She looked up at Mark. 'I'd like you to sell it for me. It looks like the sort of thing you'd sell.'

Mark turned over the painting and a ripple of shock ran through him. The work was bold, dark, abstract, powerful. It was immediately disturbing in its own right – but more, confusing and alarming because it looked so much like a James Devlin. Mark was not known for his poker face but he'd worked hard to mask his immediate reactions. Remaining composed and giving the appearance of considered thought – especially when confronted with something about which he knew little – was critical to building confidence and, ultimately, trust among clients and artists alike.

Despite his instant sense of recognition, Mark knew it was incredibly unlikely that this was a Devlin, and worryingly possible that this was some sort of scam. After all, the Australian art world had recently been damaged by forgery scams and was literally buzzing at the celebrated Victorian abstract artist's nomination for 2020 Australian of the Year.

Every major gallery in the country was displaying the Devlins in their collections, and Mark was aware that Sotheby's had even been able to extract a major work for their autumn auction. The time was ripe for a scammer to test the market with a fake Devlin.

But Jan wasn't making any effort to present the work to him as a Devlin. If someone had been trying to pass it off as such, the first thing they'd have done would be to ensure that it bore the distinctive red emblem that Devlin had always used as his signature. This painting had no such mark. And the date didn't fit – Devlin's short but intense period of fame came more than a decade later in his hometown of Melbourne. According to Jan's account, this work had been painted in Perth and had quite literally never left the state.

Mark stroked his chin as he studied the painting. 'Well this is very much the sort of piece that I would handle. I am sure you can tell that I like it.'

He felt her looking at him closely. 'You did go rather pale. I thought you might have seen it before.'

'Honestly, I never have.' Mark paused. 'I've just boiled the kettle – would you join me for a cup of tea?'

Jan was happy to do so. Mark made the tea, put some Tim Tams onto a plate and, putting the small Passmore aside, placed the painting on the easel for better viewing.

He sat down opposite her. 'What is the painting called?'

'I don't think it has a name. Katy always called it *Charlie's Painting*.'

'You said he was her boyfriend. Did you ever meet Charlie?'

'No, I didn't. He and Katy were students at the Sir James Mitchell School together. Charlie also had cerebral palsy.'

Mark raised his eyebrows and immediately regretted it, Jan reacting briskly.

'Actually, lots of the students had quite mild disability but still went there. He was always just Charlie to Katy,' she said. 'I never even knew his surname.' Jan took a breath as if to compose herself. 'They were at the school together before it was closed and moved to Coolbinia. Katy was really keen on him and she always said that he was very bright, and that he loved to paint. He gave Katy that painting as a gift when he finished at the school. I've always assumed he and his family moved away from Perth, which was why he never maintained contact. She was devastated

when he left, and she hung that painting on her bedroom wall her entire life.’

‘How old would he have been?’ Mark asked, battling to connect such a sophisticated artwork with Jan’s description of the artist.

Jan shrugged. ‘I think he was a year older than Katy. This was around the time of her sixteenth birthday, so I suppose he was seventeen when he painted it for her.’

Mark continued to probe Jan for more information, about Charlie, Katy, her own life and her thoughts and preferences about art. Nothing gave Mark more pleasure than learning about the origins of the artworks that he handled, the stories of the people who painted and owned them, the times in which they were created, bought and sold. And Jan seemed pleased to have some company; her family’s story of immigration and struggle, and her parents’ untimely deaths was imparted with little hesitation.

Mark glanced repeatedly at the painting, its blue tones like those of Perth’s summertime sky contrasting with the black at the painting’s centre, full of foreboding and sadness. He imagined Katy and Charlie, two teenagers whose lives went in different directions, and the dark hole that separation left in each of their hearts. Had Charlie known he was leaving Katy when he made this painting? Mark looked again. The colours and the depth of emotions it evoked, the urgency of its brushstrokes, were typical of James Devlin. But who was Charlie and how did a mere teenager create this small masterpiece?

Tea and biscuits finished, and the sad story of the Bilowski family told, Mark formulated his response. ‘I am happy to try to sell this work for you. For works that are brought into the gallery like this, I take exactly twenty percent of the total sale price, whatever that turns out to be. But honestly, Jan, I have no idea what this painting is worth. I’ve been obsessively interested in Australian art for over twenty years and I’ve never heard of any artist whose first name is Charles or Charlie who paints or painted works like these. I’m sorry to say it, but it will probably not be a valuable painting. But I need to find out if he went on to do anything else, if there are any other works of his around, if there is any reason to believe that this might be worth more than one or two hundred dollars.’

Mark saw concentration rather than disappointment on Jan’s face.

'Can you leave it with me?' he asked. 'It'll probably be at least a fortnight before I can give you a more accurate price.'

'That's fine with me. There's no hurry.' Mark wrote out the receipt: 'Abstract painting. *Untitled (Charlie's Painting)*. Acrylic on masonite board. 90cm × 60cm. Inscribed verso: *To Katy. Love Charlie. November 1972.*'

2. WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 13

Long before he opened his gallery, Mark had fantasised about stumbling upon a hidden art treasure. He imagined himself driving down a country road and seeing a handwritten sign – ‘Art for sale’ – then popping inside an old farmhouse to discover a rare work by Balson or Fairweather, Beckett or Preston, its value and importance unappreciated by its owners. And then figuring out the story that explained how it came to be where it was – the sequence of events, the personal tales of death and departure, the gifting and the purchase, the many layers of human experience that enriched the work.

And, having secured the treasure for sale in his own gallery, Mark fantasised also about the subsequent exchange between him and Patrick O’Beirne, fellow gallerist and mentor, when he would proudly uncover the work at their weekly catch-up. He imagined a multitude of pleasures: surprising Pat, the satisfaction of him confirming that Mark had accurately recognised the work for what it was, hypotheses batted back and forth, and the abiding delight of recounting the unique human story of the discovered painting. Mark was experiencing that fantasy now. Yet, rather than positive anticipation, he felt disquiet. For an hour after Jan left his gallery, Mark stood in front of Charlie’s painting. What he felt most acutely was its sense of turmoil. The painting itself was dynamic, profoundly moving and full of mystery. As Pat would say of only the very best works, Charlie’s painting was a work of which one would never become tired.

To Mark’s eye, the painting was so similar to those of James Devlin – Mark was confident that it would rank very much among his best works: courageous in its execution, evocative and mesmerising in its impact

upon the viewer. He continued to look at it, examining its colour scheme and rough brushwork, its energy and its depth.

By Mark's judgement, however, Jan's account of events surrounding the painting's provenance had a ring of authenticity. So, who had really painted this work? Charlie, probably; surely not James Devlin. Or had it been someone altogether more cunning? And, Mark wondered, was he simply overreacting, over-interpreting the work, because of his desire to unearth a rare treasure? This might be nothing more than Charlie's untitled painting, exactly as Jan described it. He needed a second opinion – he needed to consult Pat O'Beirne.

Mark collected the mugs and plates and washed them in the kitchenette. He dried them and put them away, leaving the gallery pristine so that he would be greeted by it in that state the next morning. He returned to his laptop and went to close it down – the image of the Dobell portrait prompting him to stop for a moment and search the catalogue for the Devlin that Sotheby's had listed for auction.

Lot 38: *Paradise* (1982) James Devlin, Acrylic on board, 120cm × 90cm, \$30,000–\$40,000.

Paradise was larger than Charlie's painting, but the materials were the same, and it also observed a portrait orientation. The blue of the online image, however, was of a deeper tone, the main colour was white rather than black, the dominant features were two geometric shapes painted in a pink hue that was nowhere to be seen in Charlie's painting; and the essential sentiment was lighter, almost joyous, in comparison to Charlie's ominous mood.

But the likeness of the two works was unmistakable – the rough, dynamic brushstrokes, the sense of urgency and energy, and the power of the impression conveyed. *Paradise* was a strong work, and the price estimate indicated the auction house's confidence in Devlin's burgeoning appeal in the secondary market. But what was the significance, if any, of that generous price estimate for Jan and for Charlie's painting?

Mark picked up the new work, wrapped it again in Jan's brown paper, took it upstairs and placed it against the wall in the gallery's storage area. The painting, and Jan's story, had left him feeling unsettled and he preferred not to leave it on display.



Mark's townhouse in North Perth was a gallery in its own right. Its walls were covered in paintings of different styles and sizes, different artists and periods, although the vast majority were abstract, originals and generally of no great monetary value. The larger, older and more valuable works that he and Sharon had collected over the years were, by Australian Government decree, on loan to a variety of institutions around Perth, where they would remain until either they were sold, or Australian law was changed.

In Australia, remarkably, some art acquired for the purposes of providing a benefit in retirement could not lawfully be seen and enjoyed by its owners. Years of trying to get through to politicians of all stripes to change this odious legislation had proved futile, other than for the insight it had given Mark into the constrained, unimaginative and fearful lives of Australian taxation officials, politicians and their bureaucrats.

Mark accepted that he would not see his major works again until they were ultimately sold. Still, he and Patrick continued to seek out politicians and journalists in the hope they might see the error and the risk attached to what amounted to state-sponsored censorship of art. The newly appointed Federal Arts Minister was a Western Australian with her offices based in Perth – they would be meeting her in the new year. They continued to hope.

Saddest of all, however, was that Sharon would never see any of their paintings again. She had died about three years ago as a consequence of the side-effects of medication for a particularly aggressive form of arthritis. Sharon had suffered stoically and – Mark gave thanks – only briefly. He felt sure that she would have enjoyed the display of art on his townhouse walls – brightly coloured and sophisticated but unpretentious. Mark remained grateful for what he had in life, but the hole in it left by Sharon's death was always most painful when he returned to his empty home.

Mark sat down and sent Pat a text: *Can we meet at Beaufort instead tomorrow? Have some new things to show you. Check out Sotheby's autumn catalogue. M*

A response immediately: *Will do – see you at 10. P*

3. THURSDAY NOVEMBER 14

Mark's world had disintegrated after Sharon's death. The self-belief and nerve that were so crucial for any surgeon to embark upon all but the most minor of operations had deserted him and he had lost any sense of the 'thrill of battle' that he had previously found invigorating. Each new patient became a source of anxiety and he knew that he risked making the wrong decisions about when to operate or even which operation to recommend.

Mark had felt the need to stop, and to stop immediately. His roles as surgeon, teacher, mentor and employer were wound up with minimal delay. The sad, irreconcilable fact of Sharon's life insurance payout had enabled him to settle all expenses and debts, step away completely from his thirty-five year-long medical career and reinvent himself as the owner-operator of a small art gallery. The income was modest by comparison, but the outlays were minimal given that he had been able to secure at very little cost a long-term lease of the gallery space.

Establishing Beaufort Gallery had been a lifesaver. He loved the gentle pace and rhythm of this job, the joy of looking at the art he handled, his fascination at the provenance of each and every piece. He loved the artists despite their frequently disorganised behaviour and unrealistic expectations. He loved the clients too, notwithstanding their propensity to indecision, remorse and, occasionally, outright stinginess.

And, as much as anything, he loved that his daughter Olivia had come to work as his second in command. He trusted her opinion about art, about how to deal with clients, her astute judgement of character and her ability to hold the line when it came to dealing with difficult clients. On Thursdays, Mark would open up at nine, Olivia would breeze in, all smiles and full of the latest updates about her household, filled as it was

with children and animals, and he would head off for his weekly catch-up with Patrick.

By the time Olivia arrived this Thursday, Mark had replaced Charlie's painting on the easel in the main gallery where he looked at it with undiminished disquiet.

'Ooh! That's new. When did that come in?'

'Yesterday, just as I was about to close. What do you think?'

Mark doubted that Olivia would instantly recognise a Devlin, but he was interested in her reaction to the work itself. Olivia took her time, looked carefully for any signature, assessed the condition of the work, looking for any obvious signs of attempted restoration, and leaned the painting forward to see if there were any clues to its origins and history written on its back. Many times, Mark had rushed to pass comment on a work that Patrick had shown him, a test of sorts as well as an education, only to end up looking foolish for lack of simple inspection. Not so, Olivia.

'Do we know who Charlie is?'

'I don't even know his surname, darling. From what I do know – and that's not an awful lot – he isn't anyone who has figured prominently in Australian art. What do you make of it?'

'Well, it looks like acrylic on ... is that masonite?'

Mark nodded.

'And it looks kind of radical for the early seventies, if that date is correct. As a work, it's got lots of dark energy, a bit tough to look at. Just your kind of thing, Dad.'

The door opened and Patrick entered, with his typically pinched smile and a cheeky glint in his eye.

'Good morning, Olivia, how are you and your tribe?'

Patrick and his wife Helen had become firm friends with the entire Lewis clan, even more so since Sharon's death. Their warmth and their generosity, particularly in assisting with the establishment of the gallery, had been pivotal in rescuing Mark from the spiral of misery and self-doubt that had threatened him and his relationship with his children.

As Olivia delivered her cheerful account of the comings and goings in her own home, Charlie's painting remaining obscured from Pat's line of vision. When Olivia was done, Mark stepped in.

'I've got a couple of things to show you, Pat. Have a look at this one –

it was brought in by a woman who lives locally and who has had it hanging in her home for fifty years.’

Patrick moved around to look at the painting standing on its easel. Like Olivia, he took his time. He also looked at the back of the painting, then stepped away to consider it from a distance. He tilted his head briefly to the side, and grimaced.

‘You’ve got to give me more, Mark.’

‘It came in last evening. According to the woman who brought it in, Katy was her sister and Charlie – and that’s his only name so far – was Katy’s boyfriend. He was about seventeen years old and he painted it for her in nineteen seventy-two.’ Mark recounted the entire story, as Jan had told it.

Pat cradled his chin in his right hand and tapped the tip of his nose with his index finger. ‘You see, Olivia, your dad thinks this might have been painted by someone altogether more famous.’ Patrick had clearly connected Mark’s text reference to the spring catalogue to this new work, having noted in particular – as would many Australian gallerists and collectors – the work by James Devlin being offered for sale. ‘I’d have called this a Devlin too, Mark. I wonder if her story is really correct. If it is a Devlin, it’s a mighty good one and should be worth quite a bit.’

‘I’ve heard of Devlin,’ said Olivia, ‘but wasn’t he an eighties artist?’

‘Yes, darling, that’s exactly right. It’s a mystery, really, because the story behind this work is simple and rings true to me, but the painting looks like a Devlin through and through.’

Patrick approached within centimetres of the painting, as if he could penetrate its depths and discover the truth about it. ‘I’m not sure what to think,’ he said. ‘It hasn’t been signed by Devlin.’

Mark then showed them both the small Passmore, replacing Charlie’s painting on the easel. As Pat examined it, Mark said to his daughter, ‘We’re going to head down to the art gallery and I’ll be back around midday. If Tony Peterson calls about his Dickerson, tell him I can call him back any time that suits him after then.’ Mark had managed to secure a major work in oil, painted in the 1960s by the very popular Australian artist Robert Dickerson for his biggest although by no means most agreeable collector.

‘And would you put Charlie’s painting back upstairs? I don’t want too many people looking at it just yet.’



Coffee this Thursday was at Frank, the State Gallery café in Northbridge. It was quiet, not a school excursion in sight. Patrick had been silent since leaving Mark's gallery but spoke up as he drank his coffee.

'That Passmore isn't quite right, Mark. I think it needs a bit more work before you can put a price on it. And, as for the other painting, you'll need to do some research. I'd start at the Cerebral Palsy Association and go from there. But you need to tread carefully with James Devlin. He is a successful gallerist and there's no doubt about his ability to pick great new talent. He's a generous supporter of a number of charities and he's an absolute darling of those media lefties. The fact is, Helen and I love his paintings – you probably don't know it, but we bought one of his works for our bloody super fund about twenty years ago.

'But I just don't trust him. I know in my bones that he ramps the prices of some works at auction so that he can inflate the prices he gets in his own gallery.' Pat pulled on the shoulders of his shirt and lifted both sides a little self-consciously, letting in some air to cool him down. 'Don't get me wrong – he's been a great judge of new artists and handles works from all the great Australians. He gets the most for his artists, he doesn't sell bad works, and he doesn't deal in fakes.' He looked around the café, as if checking for someone listening to their conversation. The place was mostly empty. 'But there is something fishy about aspects of his set-up and I would stay well away from him if I was you.'

'OK,' said Mark. 'I had actually thought I might send him an image of Charlie's painting and ask his opinion.'

'Don't do that!' Patrick barked. Then he gave a thin, apologetic smile. 'Figure out as much as you can about the painting and then we can reconsider. You see what you can find out about Charlie and I'll try to find out more about Devlin. You know,' Pat added, 'his career as an artist was only very short – perhaps about four or five years, no more. He left for London in the late eighties and returned to set up his gallery in Melbourne, but he never painted again. He's an enigma, but Helen and I both think he is cunning and slippery, so you need to be careful.'

Patrick's vehemence towards Devlin was a surprise to Mark. Even as a relative novice, he knew that there were many shades of unprofessional and frankly manipulative behaviour in the art industry the world over.

And that Pat and Helen were intermittently aggrieved by the injustice of it whenever they sensed that this had taken place, and forlorn at the damage it did to their industry.

Although Mark had been familiar with Devlin's brief career as an artist, the sudden and mysterious appearance of Charlie's painting cast Devlin's strange story in an even more perplexing light.

'I'd love to see your Devlin one day.' Mark got to his feet. 'Shall we have a look at AGWA's? It was on display last week when I came in.'

On level 1, they found *Constellation* (1984), 100cm squared. The materials, colours and raw energy were identical to Charlie's painting. The central, black, rectangular void of Charlie's painting was emulated in *Constellation* in the form of a similar but larger and less well-defined grey void. The scale of the state gallery's work was larger, and the use of a little pink in the upper aspect suggested a progression from Charlie's painting through *Constellation* to *Paradise*, the work listed for sale at auction later that month.

The two men gazed into the work, each lost in contemplation, their thoughts swirling through its layers. What did it know, this seemingly formless aggregation of acrylic paint on wooden board? Where had it been painted? And what, if anything, connected it to the piece tucked away in Mark's gallery?