

ART AND ARTISANS | MALCOLM KOCH



# King of Contours

Growing up with profoundly deaf parents gave artist Malcolm Koch an independent spirit – one which is now expressed in his explosive and colourful painting depicting South Australia's ancient geological formations.

**C**an you imagine an artwork that begins life as a three-dimensional sculpture and then morphs into two dimensions to become an oil-on-canvas? That's exactly what happens with each of Malcolm Koch's landscape paintings. These distinctive works express South Australia's varied geology through the medium he calls 'membrane art'. The technique involves physically rippling an unframed canvas – which Malcolm lays on his garage floor – into a landscape of hills and valleys. The paint is then dripped onto the hilltops and allowed to run down into the valleys.

Over time, Malcolm builds the Art Spectrum oils to a rich texture, then flattens the canvas, undulates it in a different direction and starts over. When the work is flattened for the final time and stretched, the geography he is painting is preserved in the oils. Similar to the curved lines in a sedimentary rock face, his paintings tell the story of the landscape without depicting a single hill, valley or plain.

Malcolm is a youthful 44-year-old with a quiet intensity and vivid

pale blue eyes. His dissatisfaction with painting hills and valleys on a flat canvas prompted a quest for a more natural approach to landscape art.

"It just felt wrong to portray landscapes on a flat surface – it felt unnatural. So to me, it made sense to do this," he says. "The two-dimensional picture plane is what interests me as an artist, and it's what has interested artists over the centuries. But the problem is how to make the observer transcend and permeate beyond the picture plane."

Not only does membrane art achieve this purpose, Malcolm believes the pioneering technique – like Cubism and Minimalism – could grow into a true art movement. "I believe it is as influential as Cubism was – I think eventually membrane art will be taken on as a movement. I know what I'm doing is right, and it's going to be my life's pursuit."

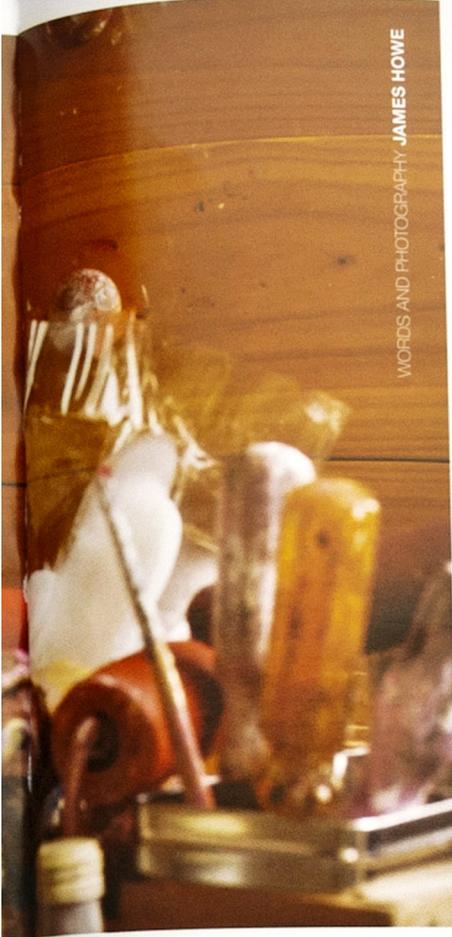
Malcolm never received formal training as an artist. Instead, he studied a Bachelor of Visual Design at the University of South Australia graduating in 1989, and today works as a professional graphic designer as well as an artist.

But his greatest strength when growing up was physics. For a couple of years

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WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES HOWE



he was top of the school in the subject. He now recognises that his membrane art is profoundly influenced by the forces at play in the natural world. "I never thought of that connection – of how the physical world and physics influenced my art. But I'm fascinated by physics and how nature works," he says.

For Malcolm, South Australian geological formations such as the Adelaide Hills and the Flinders Ranges provide a wealth of inspiration. "At Hallett Cove, for example, geologists haven't worked out exactly what's going on there," he says.

"There was a glacier going through, pulling out boulders and ripping up the landscape – and this glacial movement extends right along the coast to Granite Island."

But perhaps the biggest single factor shaping Malcolm as an artist was his upbringing as a child of deaf parents, who met through the Royal South Australian Deaf Society. Malcolm grew up speaking sign language at home and learned English in the schoolyard as a second language.

"SCODA (Society of Children of Deaf Adults) is a psychological phenomenon to itself," he says. "When a six month old child cries out in the middle of the night, generally a parent goes to them and soothes them. If you've got deaf parents, that doesn't necessarily happen. You realise very early on that you've got to be totally independent."

In addition, Malcolm's father was a finger speller, which means he didn't use the more streamlined and expressive Auslan. This made communication difficult. "The types of conversations boys have with

their fathers – about girls, life and growing up – never happened," he says. Malcolm links his discovery of membrane art to the independence he gained from growing up in a deaf family. "It's probably why I've developed it – because I've had to work everything out for myself," he says. "It just made me psychologically a different, more interesting person, who sees the world in a different way."

Having his work on exhibition at the Barossa Living Gallery is a return to his ancestral home. The Koch family was among the third group of Germans to travel to South Australia in search of religious freedom. They arrived in Adelaide in 1839, and in 1844 built a cottage in Rowland Flat – now the heritage-listed cellar door at Jenke Vineyards.

Malcolm, who lives in Payneham South, is the first generation from his family to grow up outside the Barossa – his father left the region because of a lack of opportunities for the hearing impaired – but the Barossa remains a big part of Malcolm's identity.

His uncle Michael Koch, a vigneron, still lives and farms in the Eden Valley, and Malcolm draws a lot of inspiration from the region. "Eden Valley is an absolutely unique environment," he says. "There's inspiration just in its visual presence." **21**

*Malcolm Koch's exhibition is on show at Barossa Living Gallery (28 Murray Street, Tanunda) until 17 November, 2012. The gallery is closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Phone 08 8563 3668; [www.barossalivinggallery.com.au](http://www.barossalivinggallery.com.au)*