

Bill Burke is one of Nelson's better-known full-time artists. His multi-award-winning, vibrantly colourful oils and chalk pastel paintings grace many Top of the South homes and businesses, as well as those of collectors throughout New Zealand and abroad.

He is also an exacting portraitist, creating contemplative, character-driven, black-and-white pencil drawings that, in contrast to his painted scenes, seem quiet and understated.

Bill is modest about his success, and reserved in discussing his art: "I'd rather just do the work – let the paintings do the talking."

But it's always intriguing to learn what drives an artist to excellence in their craft, and how they go about producing their distinctive work.

In Bill's case, two seemingly contrasting approaches are at work; the freedom and expressive joy of colour, and the careful control of the pencil.

He is quick to point out that these dual personalities come together as one in a single, all-encompassing motivation: drawing.

"As a young man, I first began my journey into art with pen-and-ink drawings that I exhibited at Chez Eelco," he says. "For me it has always come down to the drawing – I've spent decades at it. Everything else evolved from there."

And true to his word, beneath every one of Bill's exuberant paintings is a carefully thought out, skilfully executed under-drawing. "It's where I work things out – composition, lighting, perspective."

In terms of his subject matter, anything that takes his fancy is fair game: landscapes, seascapes, gardens, livestock, Nelson landmarks, people's pets.

"I take a lot of photos as resource material. They are my starting point. Then I alter things, adding and subtracting to achieve the effect I see in my head."

Light also plays a big role in Bill's work, especially with his landscapes, but also in his pencil portraits.

"Good lighting will always add visual excitement and drama to a piece, and with portraiture it is particularly important. It helps you capture the character and personality of your subject."

Because art is his livelihood, Bill has to think about what will sell. Small iconic local scenes are a sure hit with both tourists and locals, while his large



Duality in Bill Burke's output

BY JOHN COHEN-DU FOUR PHOTOGRAPHY TODD STARR



TOP Bill in front of his works

BELOW Bill painting over his pencil under-drawing of Cardrona Hotel

oils of colourful garden scenes and classic clinker boats have proven very popular over the years. His pencil portraits are usually commissioned pieces.

Bill's studio practice is to have at least two painted pieces on the go at the same time. "It means while one is drying, I can work on the other. And as I come back to each one, I see it with fresh eyes, which helps me better see

what's needed next.

"Of course, with chalk pastels there is no drying time required. I like that about them – their immediacy."

Bill smiles. "But truthfully, nothing really beats simply drawing things with a pencil." **WT**

Bill Burke's gallery/studio is at 15B Ajax Ave, next to Collingwood Bridge.