

On the road to Caravaggio

Film, from road movies to film noir, has provided the inspiration for *Distraction*, the latest show by painter Tony Lloyd. **Gabriella Coslovich** reports.

For psychologists, film makers, painters, and writers, the road has proved an irresistible metaphor. As analogy, or reality, the road mesmerises and provokes, it beckons and dares, it is the unknown, the risk, the adventure, the journey — towards growth or fecklessness. Jack Kerouac dropped out and drifted in *On The Road*. M. Scott Peck showed us the winding path to enlightenment in *The Road Less Travelled*, and David Lynch led us astray in *The Lost Highway*.

Faced with the forked road, we are filled with doubt, conscious of potential regret for the route we didn't take. Are we on the road to freedom or complacency? Escape or submission? Dream or disaster?

So too the road has seduced Melbourne painter, Tony Lloyd. For the past two years Lloyd has produced brooding, mysterious canvases, dominated by nocturnal landscapes cleaved in two by hypnotic, murky highways. For anyone who has lived in Australia, who has travelled long distances overnight through empty expanses, watching the white-line blip blindingly past, Lloyd's paintings will trigger memories.

"It's such a fantastic universal metaphor. The road has some purpose to it, perhaps a destination, the possibility of becoming lost on the road. Sometimes that's an attractive option," says Lloyd, 32, who loses himself daily on the roads of his imagination, alone in his Flinders Lane studio, on the top floor of a magnificently dilapidated building so far spared from developers' sanitising hands.

From his *Rear Window*-style vantage point, he watches the tiny apartments across the way get auctioned off for exorbitant sums. Lloyd doesn't own real

estate. He rents a "crappy little place", manages a mercurial bank balance, but he is free. He chose the way of the artist, perhaps unconsciously taking the path his late-father never could.

"My father was a backyard landscape painter, so I grew up on the smell of oil paint. He had six children... so being an artist probably wasn't his first option," Lloyd laughs.

At his Catholic high school, however, students with artistic leanings were steered towards vocational courses such as graphic design. But Lloyd ignored those preaching common sense, took up fine arts, and, despite dropping out of university for a couple of years, ended up completing a masters — a qualification he says is virtually mandatory these days.

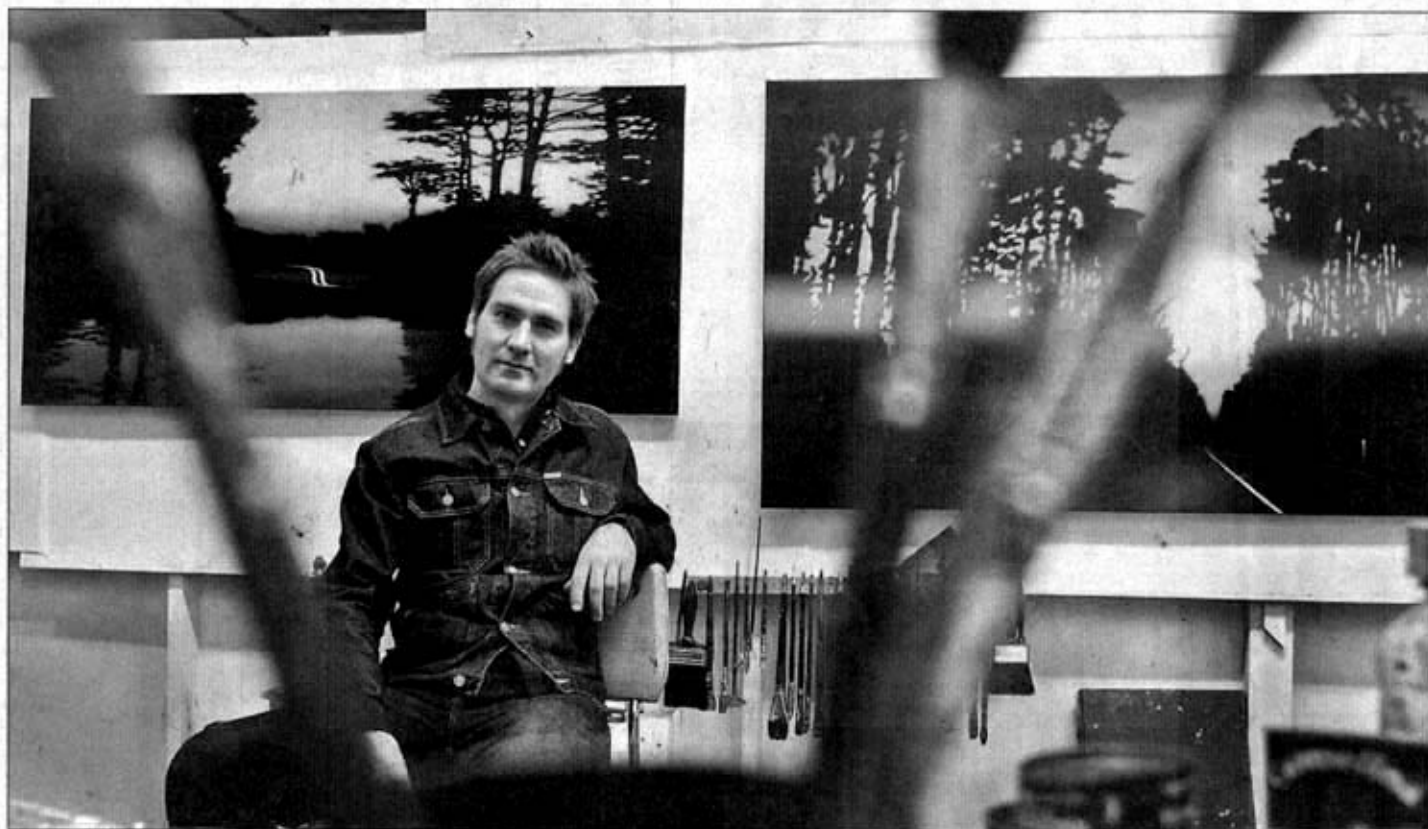
"Everyone has them, most (artists) are doing PhDs now."

The road is Lloyd's subject but also his means. He loves driving, especially at night. With a video camera fixed to his trusty old Commodore, he drives for hours, filling hundreds of tapes. From these, he will select frames to transpose onto the canvas. Lloyd's latest show, *Distraction*, which opens at Span Galleries tonight, was inspired by drives through the Dandenongs and Tasmania earlier this year.

Some of the paintings are large, sweeping landscapes, others are smaller, like a series of storyboards for a forthcoming thriller. The image of a dimly-lit road is usually central, bordered by ominous silhouettes of trees.

Lloyd used to transfer his chosen film frames on to the canvas by drawing free-hand. These days, after reworking the images with software, he creates slides and projects them onto a canvas covered in hues of blue and green so dark, they could be black — although black is never on Lloyd's palette.

Using the projected image as



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PICTURE: EDDIE JIM

a reference, he begins to carve away at the surface of the paint with cotton buds to create areas of light, thus forming the final design. It's a process of removing paint and reapplying small quantities where necessary.

"It's the way Caravaggio worked. I'm carrying on that tradition, but I want to give it a really contemporary feel. I want to have that fused, slick surface that most things have today, and also that soft blur, that soft sense of movement," Lloyd says.

Except Caravaggio wouldn't have used a projector. Does Lloyd consider this cheating?

"Was Michelangelo cheating when he was gridding up the Sistine Chapel? I think, whatever it takes to make a great painting. I used to think of it as cheating until about a year-and-a-half ago and then I borrowed Stephen (Haley, the artist) next door's projector and the paintings just came out so much

better. The composition, the drawing was so much stronger..."

Because the process requires the oil-paint to stay wet and pliable, Lloyd must work rapidly, sometimes for 20 hours at a stretch — occasionally to no end.

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"Sometimes I'll be working for 18 hours and it'll be drying too quickly and I'll have to scrape it all off," he says.

Lloyd likens it to alchemy, a magical process that, with luck, transforms rudimentary materials — ground pigments and vegetable oil — into pictures that an audience will want to contemplate. As alchemist at play, Lloyd recently discovered

that adding essential oil of clove to his paint mix dramatically reduced the drying time, with the added bonus of giving his canvases the heady smell of Indonesian cigarettes.

The soft, fused-lines and blurred movement Lloyd achieves with his process has fooled some critics into describing him as an airbrush artist — a tool he has never employed.

Video is Lloyd's primary source, and film his inspiration, especially noir and thrillers from the 1940s and '50s, such as *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Panic in the Streets* and *Detour*, after which he named one of his shows. The work of directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick and David Lynch, have also been influential.

"I've always been interested in film and I'd read a lot about early film makers like Eisenstein, and how he based a lot of his set-ups on paintings, and the more I explored film, the

more directors, like Hitchcock and Kubrick, I found who based their set-ups on paintings. Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* is like a series of Vermeer or Hogarth paintings. It's his most underrated film," Lloyd says.

On the fine art side, Lloyd has been inspired by artists including 19th-century German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, contemporary German painter Anselm Kiefer, and American pop artist Ed Ruscha.

Lloyd, who grew up in Mitcham in an "ocean of brick venereal disease", has a fine sense of the absurd. Although he wants to continue meshing film and painting, and hopes to make a film, Lloyd is not entirely certain what subject will next attract him. He is content to wander wherever the road leads.

Distraction opens at Span Galleries, 45 Flinders Lane tonight and runs until October 26.