

THE CAPITAL WITH THE EYE OF AN EXPAT

CHERNOBYL DIARIES

Of all the questions expats ask of each other, what do you do is probably right up there as the most common. I'm in finance. I'm in sales. I'm in publishing. Package expats, those working in Hungary for a multinational, are a breed apart from the freelancers, the English teachers, the artists. And while the paid pensionable positions significantly outnumber less lucrative take-the-work-when-you-get-it (in my experience), there's an undercoat of artistry and creativity seeping to the surface.

MARY MURPHY

I first came across British artist Michael Pettet a couple of years ago. At the forefront of digital art, Pettet embraced the challenge of imbuing the product of technology with soul. He showed me how his canvas is his drawing tablet; his paintbrush, a touch-sensitive electronic pen; his palette, Photoshop. He approaches his digital paintings much as he did when he used traditional materials. The end result evolves from the interweaving of thought and inner dialogue and, as with any art, the magic lies in its interpretation.

With his environment a major influencer of his work, Pettet's portfolio can be categorised by location. One of my favourites, "Lament", harks back to memories of his childhood holidays in Scotland, a series entitled "Scapa Flow". Another, one I still covet, is

from the Sala de Uyuni (salt flats) from his time in Bolivia.

A huge fan of his work, I was intrigued to hear of his "Chernobyl Diaries", most likely because Chernobyl is the bogeyman in my life, the personification of a danger that has indelibly tainted the power of nuclear in my mind. In the aftermath of the 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, Irish activist Adi Roche went to help with the children who had suffered the consequences, and in 1991 set up Chernobyl Children International.

That the environment was damaged is a given. But the lasting human scars, the legacy of that radioactive explosion, removed from the abstract of news reporting and made all so real to the Irish of my generation by Roche's work are something nightmares are made of. It may have happened over 30 years ago but the disaster that is Chernobyl isn't going anywhere.

The Chernobyl Children Inter-

national website says: "Two million people in Belarus, of whom 500,000 are children are high-risk, still live in heavily contaminated zones. Continuing low dose exposure through the food chain remains a huge risk for the populations: Some areas of land will be radioactive for 24,000 years, as much as 1 million hectares cannot be farmed for 100 years."

Pettet recently visited the ghost town of Pripjat, Ukraine. What he saw there left a lasting impression, an impression he has diarised in his art, covering the explosion and its aftermath and the faint attempt at rejuvenation. But his artistic commentary isn't limited to one incident and its consequences. Pettet's latest series holds up a mirror to our global self-indulgence and reflects the consequence of our failure to adjust our lifestyle to mitigate climate change.

That we are ignorant of what might be in store is no longer cred-



ible. The evidence is there. Science has spoken. That we are ignoring the signs of what the future holds speaks either to a seriously misguided optimism that it'll all work out, or a carpe diem lassitude that takes living in the present a step too far. Twenty-first century hedonism has little regard for consequences. Consumerism is our new mantra, smartphone screens our preferred landscape.

We've eschewed both the broader picture and the microscopic viewpoint, preferring to live in echo chambers of our own making. Our complete disregard for nature, our wanton destruction of our natural habitats, and our reckless depletion of our natural resources mark us as misguided idiots, at best. For Pettet, Chernobyl embodies the "conflict between humanity and nature, how we are going to manage our existence with ever-increasing energy demands and how

things can abundant resources, but nevertheless, recover it will."

Viewed through this lens, this body of work is both inspiring and chastening. Each piece, like a single diary entry, can be taken alone, but together they tell a story of evacuation and desertion driven by radiation and destruction. They tell a story of reclamation and rejuvenation. They tell a story of resilience, of how the planet will recover, of how it will survive, despite our best efforts to destroy it.

The pieces that make up the "Chernobyl Diaries" include broad sweeping images of an empty world and smaller compositions of the

minutest detail that suggest atoms at play. Each one speaks to the viewer and positions itself in their memory, coloured by their recollection and knowledge of what happened in 1986. Pettet deliberately plays to our fears, tapping into the concerns that riddle our collective consciousness. Although no stranger to the topic of war and disaster (most of his work is about conflict, even his portrait series, which deals with internal conflict as we enter the age of real versus virtual existence), the "Chernobyl Diaries" are more about the tenacity of nature rather than the horror of nuclear disaster.

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"I decided not to challenge myself to deal with the horror as above all I wanted to impress that whatever we do to the planet, it will survive us," he says. "It may take many thousands of years to recover from our parasitic consumption of its

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