

# Water Colour Man

Surf photographer extraordinaire, Dave Sparkes, takes to the brush and easel.

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**Rumours that Tracks senior contributor Dave Sparkes had quit surf photography after 25 years of sustained excellence and taken up painting and beret wearing have been greatly exaggerated.** He stills shoots surf action around his adopted hometown of Bryon Bay. Still disappears to places known and unknown on assignment for Tracks and Rip Curl. Still ditches the cameras when its pumping and surfs like a truanting grommet. And we have confirmation that he still wears sensible hats or factor 50 sunscreen on his shaved cranium. But the painting thing is for real. Water colours are his medium and atmospheric seascapes devoid of surf porn are his preferred subject. They sell like hot cakes. We caught up with Sparksey on the eve of his first solo exhibition ("*Illumination*" at Byron's *Lone Goat Gallery* from February 3rd to February 15<sup>th</sup>) to find out more...

**Tracks: Is painting a relatively new thing for you or have you always dabbled?**

*Dave:* I drew and painted even as a young kid, and I was beginning to be attracted to photography as I hit my teens. At that point I got my first dog, Basil, and so started to photograph him. He was a hyper little fox terrier and a mad jumper with incredible ball skills; very photogenic! Like a punter who gets a first up win and is hooked, I got some pretty cool images of the dear old mutt right away, and from then on photography took over a bit. Naturally, as a rabid surfer, surf photography became the genre of choice. I painted only intermittently for years, but it was always on my mind.



**You still shoot photos but you're painting a lot. What gives you the most personal satisfaction and why?**

For many years it was photography, as I've been able to make a good living from it as well as being fortunate enough to be sent to some amazing places - at someone else's expense. Rip Curl and Tracks in particular have been hugely supportive and my relationship with Tracks goes back 24 years, and Rip Curl 18 years. I've achieved everything I aspired to and more with surf photography: the publishing by Hachette of my book, "The Wave"; Tracks covers; numerous other international magazine covers (including a Surfer Magazine Photo Annual cover); and some original contributions to surf photography, most notably my split shots of waves, a decade before GoPros made them a no brainer and ruined my niche! Painting, however, is the same as it was 500 years ago, or as it ever was. There are no modern fail safe methods, no new easy technologies to render those skills redundant. It is a pure form and it is

endlessly challenging. And it can be done when the mood or muse strikes, without the endless chase of surf photography. The speculative organizing of trips or shoots, hunting the right conditions and the best surfers can be a pain. And then when you do produce the goods, trying to sell the material to a market that has been diluted by a glut of imagery created by thousands of digitally enhanced kids, combined with a magazine scene that is being starved of budget due to competition with instant, cheap and disposable online content. Current magazine rates of pay are about where they were at in 1985. Not many people can pay the rent on a 30 year old pay scale.

### **What led you to choose water colours as your preferred medium?**

When I was younger and painting a fair bit, it was always acrylics and oils, but at the same time I was fascinated by the luminosity, the freshness of watercolours. I would see them reproduced here and there, and immediately know they were watercolours. They have a reputation for being difficult, though, and I shied away for years until eventually I felt I had to have a go. And I found they were even more difficult and exasperating than I thought. They are best when they are left to "paint themselves", and not messed around with too much; forcing them can be like trying to push a cat through a doorway. With an oil or acrylic you can muck around with them for months if you like, and make changes or cover up mistakes, due to the opaque nature of the pigments. Watercolours are transparent, and you can't paint a light tone over a dark one. You have to plan them from the beginning, work out where your lightest tones will be and save them - the lightest tones are the actual white of the paper, you don't use white paint. That's what gives them their luminous quality, as light is actually passing through the pigment and bouncing back off the paper. But then when you start to paint you have to be a bit bold and go for it, then get out! If you overwork them or get too fiddly they turn to mud and die a gloomy death. A good analogy is a person's signature. You have to write it with a flourish and flair, if you do it slowly and carefully it is not your signature at all - just a series of letters. Basically, the old watercolour mantra is "Plan like a tortoise, paint like a hare, and start light, finish dark."

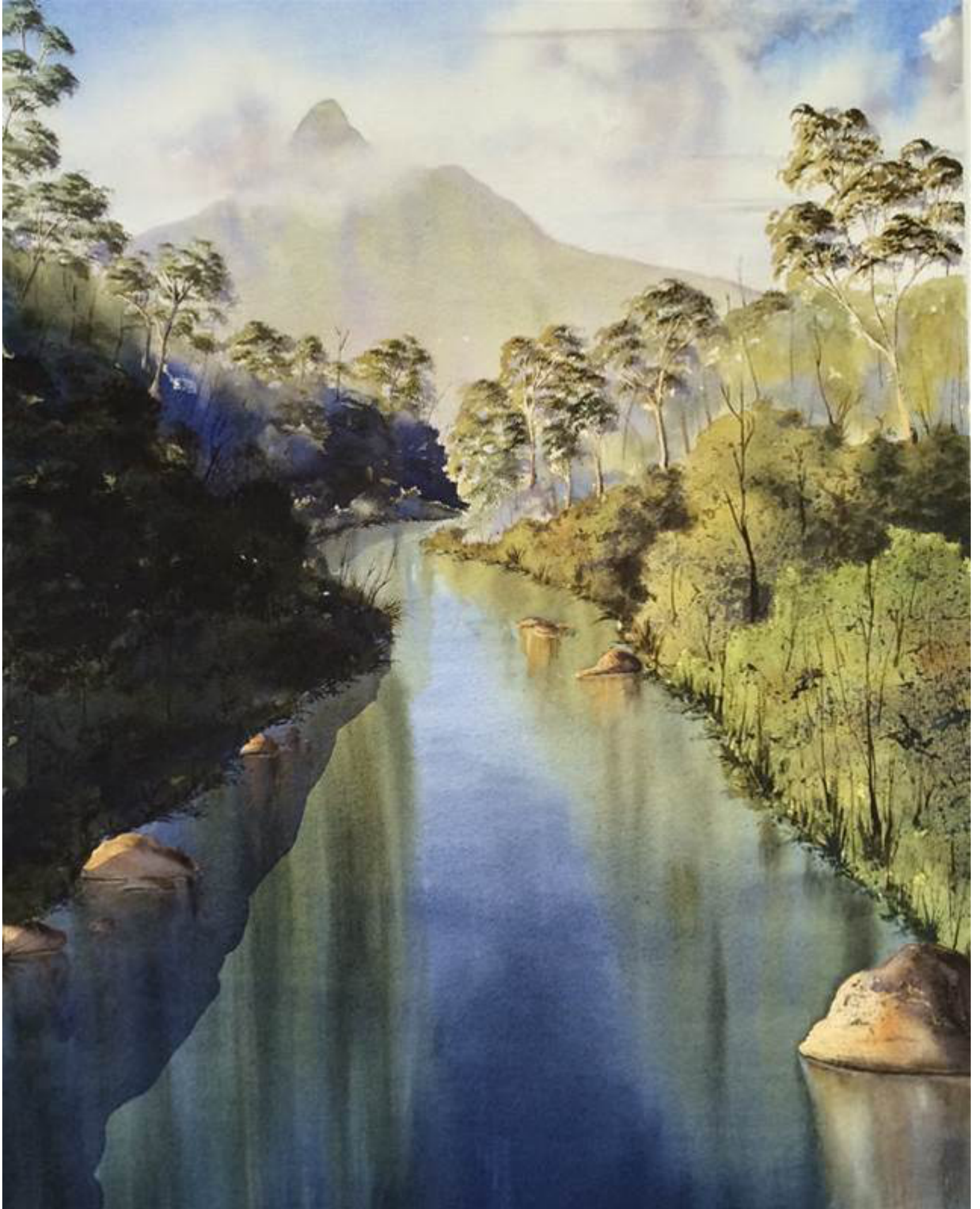


**What gets your juices flowing? What are you trying to capture with the brush?**

The atmosphere, the time of day, the feel of a place. Shadows and sparkling sunlight, mist and atmospheric haze, and trying to distil the essence of a place without too much detail. And I like the pictures to be inviting, to make the viewer want to be there. I want to evoke a sense of almost melancholy realism, not photographic but realistic in that the picture conveys the mojo that makes a place what it is to the observer. It is a sort of impressionism, which can be very satisfying for the viewer since they have to mentally blend the suggestions of things to create the actual scene. Not to the extent of course that some abstract painters ask of the viewer, but just a bit, ha ha! As for waves, I don't really paint surf type subjects as I don't want to be the "surf artist" guy. It can get a bit kitschy and corny, and in any case, it's not what I want to paint.

**And, what, you're there live with an easel getting it all down or do you paint off photos or memory?**

A bit of both. Sitting on a beach or hanging by a river with the gear set up to paint is a joy, but it is very different to painting from photos. Painting onsite ("*en plein air*," as it's known in the art world) requires a much looser, pared back approach. It is easy to fall into the trap of getting caught up with details, and that is fatal to an onsite painting; you'll be there for a week if you start counting pebbles or leaves or grains of sand. I still make that mistake regularly. But as an artist who aspires to an impressionistic approach, it is great training and good discipline to try and get an impression down in an hour or two. In the studio, working from a photo, it's easier to take a bit more time, and it is easier to draw from a photo. But I still have to take care not to let myself get dragged down into tiny details. I still want them to have energy and life. And light. They are never copies of photos, rather they are inspired from photos, and often they are composites of several photos.



**It's another beautiful day in Byron Bay. Surfs cranking. Pros shredding. Perfect light. Do you surf, shoot or paint?**

That old chestnut! Occasionally I've done all three. If I am working for a client I'll shoot photos first. If not I'll surf, then paint; painting can wait, but we all know prime surfing conditions won't. Often I will be on the beach

under a huge umbrella, and will alternate between surfing and painting during the day. I'm looking for certain moods and angles of sunlight for painting, and if that doesn't clash with the best waves then life is grand!

**Tell us about the up-coming exhibition? What can we expect to see?**

There will mainly be landscapes, with a particular emphasis on seascapes. There is a huge variety of stuff though, with juicy wet sand reflections, afternoon beach shadows, lush river valleys and mysterious trails. Some places are painted as they were before Europeans got hold of them and ruined them, and some are painted "en plein air", loosely and quickly. There will be 50 odd works, ranging in size from 50cm x 70cm down to 30cm x 40cm. They are all original paintings, and when a client buys one it is a one off, one of a kind, and hopefully they fall in love with it. Sometimes it can be love at first sight, and the love grows stronger over time; seeing a person get emotionally attached to one of my paintings is one of the greatest joys. Of course, I love all of them, and it still hurts a bit to sell them - but it gives me a good reason to paint more.

**"ILLUMINATION" Sparksey's first solo exhibition of watercolour paintings will be showing at Byron Bay's Lone Goat Gallery from February 3rd to February 15th, 2017. Opening night February 3rd at 6pm.**