

# Paint Job

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"I guess you could say I'm prolific," he said as he ushered me through the beaded curtains into the studio. Paintings – all of them portraits – covered every millimetre of wall space; they were even nailed to the ceiling. "I can knock out three or four each day, got a whole shed full of 'em out the back too."

These were not the works of a master. These were the sort of paintings people picked up at flea markets; the sort of paintings that new owners would gleefully kick the canvas from so that they could reuse the frames. Yet despite the amateurish quality of the brushwork and the deranged sense of colour, the portraits did possess an unnerving, hypnotic quality – it was impossible not to look at them! It was the eyes. Each pair possessed a bewildered look, as if they were trapped – entombed somehow – beneath the varnish.

The big man closed the single window, shutting out the sweet desert air and locking in the heavy scent of oil paint and turpentine. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "I came out here for the solitude, but finding subjects is a problem. Lucky you saw my sign by the highway."

He patted the top of a paint-splattered stool. "Now perch yourself up here and get comfortable."

The painter took up his pallet and chose three brushes from an old coffee tin. He jabbed one behind an ear, clenched one between his teeth, and swirled the third through a moist lump of burnt sienna.

“Just relax my young friend,” he whispered, dabbing the second brush into a splotch of vermillion red, “painting is a journey where anything can happen.”

The man painted very carefully and methodically. He took each stroke with great care, I noticed. I hoped this wouldn't take too long though. I was on my way to a friend's house at Walgett when I noticed a sign by a guy called Oswald Stevenson, offering five dollars to pose for a portrait, an hour out of Dubbo.

The smell of the paint wafted over to me, causing my eyes to water.

“That paint's very strong,” I told Oswald.

“Yeah, I make it myself. Some people think the chemicals I use have terrible side effects, but I don't think so.”

“Like what?” I asked cautiously.

He walked over to me and gave me a ‘hearty’ slap on the back, which caused my eyes to water a bit more.

“Well I'm immune, but other people get temporarily paralysed and mute,” he said loudly whilst spraying me with a few mouthfuls of saliva, “but don't worry, it's normally only for a day or two and I'll look after you!”

It took a few seconds for my brain to process this but when I tried to cover my mouth to stop me inhaling the fumes, I couldn't even move my fingers.

I started to breath quickly and panic. I tried to ask him that he was sure this was normal but all I could say was, “ah”.

“Thanks mate”, then another solid slap. “Won't be long 'till I'm finished then we can have dinner!”

I tried to calm myself thinking that it would only be for a bit longer but the realisation of two days trapped with this guy struck me. I felt trapped, just like all the other posers nailed to the walls. I realised that maybe Oswald, although he was a freak who paralyses his subjects, wasn't such a bad painter. For he had captured the emotion perfectly of people just diagnosed with paralysis, and having to spend a couple of days with himself.

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After about two days of being force fed liver pie, listening to Oswald sing "coom-ba-ya" and play the didjibodhran – which according to Oswald was a cross between a didgeridoo and a bodhran. I started to be able to move my arms again. Then eventually my legs as well. As soon as I regained my voice I collected my five dollars and bolted out the door and to my car.

I turned the key and listened to the whine of the starter motor continue without even a cough from the motor. After a few more seconds I felt all hope of staying sane diminish.

"Don't worry mate," came a call from inside, "I'll look after you!"

A story by Henry Wrench.