

The quiet achiever

Meet the artist whose work crosses the lines between architecture and nature, painting and photography. *By Sophie Tedmansou*

The organic architecture of Taliesin West, once Frank Lloyd Wright's winter home in Arizona's Sonoran Desert, is a long way from the Central Coast of New South Wales, where artist Paul Davies grew up. But the US southwest, and the meeting of architecture and nature, is the latest inspiration for the LA-based Australian.

"The architecture you're surrounded by is incredible," Davies explains, having just returned from a month-long residency at Taliesin West, now a campus of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. "What struck me about the building when I first got there was that if you look at the roof line of the building and then compare it to the mountain line in the background, they are very, very similar and it's kind of hard to decide what's architecture and what's nature. The building sort of comes in and out of the landscape. So I was responding to that and in a different way to the way I would normally make my paintings."

The artist is rifling through a pile of photographograms in his studio, tucked down a driveway in a leafy street in West Hollywood. They are the results of his Taliesin residency, and will form part of his upcoming exhibitions in London and Melbourne.

"It acted like a visual journal and I was inspired by the early experimental photographograms like 'View through the window at Le Gras' [from 1836; one of the first ever photographs] mixed with the repetitive quality of Andy Warhol's silkscreens and Monet's variations of haystacks painted at different times of day and climate," Davies says. The 24 photographograms – one for each day of his residency – were made by exposing natural light through a handcut stencil onto paper painted with light-sensitive liquid. Unlike the bright colours of his most recent paintings, these are in neutral shades and variously faded. And all are of the same image: the exterior of the Taliesin building, highlighting the seamless blend of the built and natural environments.

It is an aesthetic Davies has perfected throughout his career; he is known for building his work – paintings, stencils, photography, sculptures – from photos of modern architecture, capturing the friction between built and natural environments. His images play on having a nostalgic appearance yet represent the present. Tim Olsen, who has represented Davies since 2006, says the artist hails from the realm of the romantic realists, producing images of modern buildings that have a melancholy sense of dated architecture, with an almost Hitchcockian influence.

In his essay *Limbo Architecture: Painters of Modernism*, for *The Architectural Review* in May 2014, Aaron Betsky, dean of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, wrote of Davies's work: "The neutrality of the architecture, which the photograph reinforces as an object of interest that has been mass produced, turns out to create a vessel the artist can fill with his own memories, dreams and hopes, and thereby evoke our own associations and emotions."



Artist Paul Davies with some of his works in his LA studio.
Above: Forest, Home, Pool (2015).



Paul Davies's *Home Pool* (2015) and, top right: *Forest Pool Flip* (2016). Right: the photographograms that form the basis of Davies's new work.

MATT REED ARTWORKS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OLSEN IRWIN GALLERY



"IT'S HARD TO DECIDE WHAT'S ARCHITECTURE AND WHAT'S NATURE"



Davies's work is devoid of human form, an intentional exclusion. "I paint the houses empty so the viewer can make up their own story. For me, having no people in the picture creates a tension; maybe something just happened or is about to," he says.

He first discovered his passion for art by drawing Asterix cartoons at the age of seven, then absorbing his father's keen interest in black and white photography: "All I wanted to do was paint and draw." A painting by Jeffrey Smart sparked his interest in architecture – "his use of perspective, straight lines, shadows and geometric spaces are still a huge influence" – and spending time with graffiti artists while studying sculpture at Sydney's College of Fine Arts cemented Davies's unique perspective. "Over that time I kind of built up into something on my own," he says. "But it was just trial and error and talking to people and seeing how I could make something that could be my own."

Davies is now one of Australian art's quiet achievers: highly collectable and sought after, he is represented in five countries – including Australia, the US, UK, Hong Kong and India – and regularly sells out exhibitions. Despite his success, he is remarkably humble. He is quietly spoken, yet extremely passionate about his work, which lines the wall of his LA studio, which doubles as the home he shares with his wife, Sarah Noye.

A record player hums quietly in the corner, artistic quotes (and jokes) are pinned to the walls alongside notes about works in progress: a favourite painting from a previous exhibition sits on the floor. He points out which paintings are set for his upcoming solo exhibition at the Art16 Art Fair in London this month, while casually explaining plans for a potential exhibition in Miami. Davies is inspired by travel: he and Sarah have lived in London and Paris, where he spent three months in residence at the Cité Internationale des Arts in 2013, awarded by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Since 2015 Davies has called LA home, and its burgeoning art scene and proximity to the wilderness areas of Joshua Tree and Yosemite National Park and some of the masters of 20th-century modern architecture keep his ideas flowing.

"The inspiration is perfect," he says. "And the climate and our doorstep is right near mountains and you've got the beaches ... we love it, the lifestyle's great. You get in the car and you can just drive an hour and you're in the middle of mountains or up the coast and it's great for the artwork and inspiration."

Paul Davies's upcoming solo shows: Art16 Art Fair, London, May 20–22; Hollywood Stills at the Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne, Oct 25–Nov 12; Art District 13 gallery, New Delhi, Sep 10–Oct 10.