

AIR *All Nations*



*Angus Watt's multi-hued
banners wave the flag
at cultural festivals all over
the world. On the eve of
Adelaide's WOMAD event,
Jane Cornwell sees which
way the wind blows.*

POSITION

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These subtle but spectacular banners have marked out many a temporary magic republic since their debut on a Cyprus shoreline.



CORN FREE
Angus Watt's flags fly high
at Gwithian Towans, coastal
dunelands in Cornwall.



BACK *in* 1993,

on a deserted beach in Cyprus, a set of flags undulated in the wind. Tall, elegant, large-scale flags, colours faded by the sun, their fabric whipped and battered by the elements. Unobserved except by gulls and the occasional beachcomber, they shimmered from long bamboo poles. Anonymous. Unexplained. Quietly artistic.

“I loved the idea of somebody just walking onto that beach and seeing these vast flags,” says their creator, Angus Watt. “The fact that no-one else was around – no camera crews, nothing – gave it added power. It was the antithesis of all the media hype that goes with being a modern artist. The sort of stuff we are doing now.”

The 44-year-old Briton has always valued his anonymity, always tried to let his “flagscapes” speak for themselves. Until recently, they have: arranged in the hundreds – and with no two flags ever the same – these subtle but spectacular banners have marked out many a temporary magical republic since their debut on that Cyprus shoreline. They’ve become synonymous with WOMAD festivals across the world; no mention of this lauded celebration of world music is complete without reference to the WOMAD flags standing sentinel.

They’ve graced the Glastonbury Festival, the Wellington Arts Festival, Sri Lanka’s Festival of Drumming. There have been workshops with the Pitjantjatjara people of South Australia and installations

to celebrate a solar eclipse over England. With popularity, however, has come plagiarism: a surge in copycat flagscapes at unrelated arts events has forced this reluctant self-publicist out from his studio in Southern Spain – to, well, wave the flag for his creations.

“Part of the flags’ power is that they’re unadulterated by the commercial world,” says Watt, a visual arts/sculpture graduate. “For years I worked in a little artistic bubble, but the explosion in festivals and all this imitation – which everyone said was bound to happen – means I’m having to defend myself.”

“The positive side,” he says, “is that what comes to me very naturally hasn’t really worked when other people have tried it. I’d always thought it was just a scale thing – make them big enough, give them enough light and they’ll be interesting. But having seen other people’s flags flapping around I know that just isn’t the case.”


Just why his flags are so distinctive he’s hard-pressed to say. “When they’re right, they’re right,” he shrugs. Growing up in an artistic family (Watt’s mother Ann Verney is a watercolourist, his late father a celebrated painter, and elder sister Shona an artist and sometime collaborator) means he works freely, instinctively.

“Dad was a brilliant colourist. He developed colour theories based on French impressionism; he’d play with subtleties from one colour to another.” The teenage ➤



**TO THE
BANNER BORN**
Angus Watt
between the flags
and opposite, his
handiwork flaps
in the breeze at
the Eden Project,
Cornwall.





Watt's flags cross boundaries, suggest journeys. None has words or obvious graphics; their very aesthetic quality subverts the political, symbolic and nationalistic intent of conventional flags.

Angus helped his father mix the paints on the palettes; he got the Renaissance-style education that comes from watching a master at work. "Dad's low-key approach very much informs what I do now. Because, despite being so large and un-intimate, the flags speak to you. They don't shout."

Watt was in his final year at art college in 1989 when his father died. The grief made him rethink his career and his art; three years later, trucking across South Africa on a Winston Churchill travel bursary, he had what he calls "dreamtime visions of banners and flags." Back in London, he was further inspired by an exhibition of ceremonial Asafo flags from Ghana; in Cyprus the following year he made those flags with fabric he'd cut with a penknife.

Photos of this first flagscape impressed WOMAD, whose multicultural music policy had duly impressed Watt. "It was very different doing the flags in a festival environment, where 30,000 people are shrieking and having a good time. But the flags always come alive once the music starts. Like that [Walter Pater] quote, 'All art aspires to the condition of music', the flags aren't telling you what to feel. Like music, they're powerful but neutral."

And like music, Watt's flags cross boundaries, suggest journeys. None has words or obvious graphics; adorned with geometric shapes, discreet designs or palette-friendly blocks of colour, their very aesthetic quality subverts the political, symbolic and nationalistic intent of conventional flags. With the appearance of silk but the reality of polyester lining fabric made in Japan, they hang from poles fitted with a bamboo arm. Entrancing. Mystifying. Intriguing.

"The flags are very labour-intensive," says Watt, who uses industrial machinists and seamstresses and hires a crew of up to 15 on-site. "I'm constantly working within parameters. The design might be determined by the width the fabric comes in. Restrictions are imposed by festivals: the irrigation pipes under Botanic Park mean that WOMAdelaide, as lovely as it is, only gives me a small strip of land to work on. But they add to the ambience just the same."

Watt creates his flags in the "big old yurt" adjoining his house in rural Andalucia. "I wanted to set myself up somewhere other than Britain. I'd travelled around Spain a lot when I was younger; like Cyprus it offered so much artistic freedom. My yurt is a lovely space, too; it's like an upturned umbrella, with ropes all around it that I can hang fabric over."

Although not shy of flagging big events – for last April's first-ever WOMAD Festival in Abu Dhabi, Watt "got a digger and put them in the sea" – he always looks forward to participating in his local village fiesta, with delicately positioned bunting and the occasional streaming flag. "It's my favourite event of the year," he says. "It's always weird heading off to the Glastonbury Festival in June and putting up 700 of them."

What, then, is all-time favourite flagscape? "One we did for Wellington Arts Festival [2002], in the second windiest city in the world. We put the flags along the bay and they pulsed with this incredible kinetic energy before they got completely shredded. Sitting watching the bamboo bend and the flags come apart was exhilarating. I really felt the passion of what it means to be an artist." Angus Watt flashes a grin. "An artist," he says, "with a small 'a'."

WATT STUFF
Angus Watt's
flags overlook
WOMAdelaide.

