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PRINTED IN ENGLAND



Ever had one of those days in the office, when it feels like you've never left your desk? Try ten and half hours, without a break. Thomas Wielecki meets a man who puts himself through a sea of pain for his work.

SEA OF PAIN

WORDS AND PICS: THOMAS WIELECKI



The terrible difficulty of being Brett is that he's a victim of his own talents. Inevitably he suffers for it. The burden of accuracy only stokes the already raging fire. And the complication of motorcycles adds to his tortuous existence. Yet on the surface his life is so simple: he lives in a shed in Hervey Bay – a small coastal town in Queensland; he rides only one bike; he only ever uses a 2B pencil.

"What do you do when you've been working on that headlight lens for four weeks and you're so sick of it your brain turns to jelly? You go to sleep and get back into it the next day." When he said that without attaching it to any particular bit of conversation, all I could really respond with was: "Eso do you ride your bike much?" Then it occurred to me that he was referring to a drawing of a headlight. And yes, he does ride his slightly modified 1976 860 GTS Ducati to clear his head.

Five years ago on a humid day in summer, Brett ran into his garage and locked himself in. He put his face in his hands. He had to work out what to do next. The decision he made back then plunged him into his current

Below: Tools of the trade; contrary to what you might think, Brett doesn't have a huge pencil set.

Below right: The terrible difficulty of being Brett is that he's a victim of his own talents. Inevitably he suffers for it.

Bottom middle: Pot Boilers; quick-made artwork designed to satisfy the easily pleased clientele, to sell fast and cheap, and hence to keep the artist's pot boiling.

predicament. Had he chosen the other option, life would've been a real misery.

When I first saw his Laverda drawing up close I couldn't believe I was looking at a study in pencil. What was it that made it so magnetic, so requiring my attention to keep looking, to think about every line?

"When you stare at a photo for seven, eight months, you begin to see things you wouldn't have noticed before: the little patterns on a rusty exhaust, the reflected landscape in a tank, the ground mirrored in a polished muffler. Then you notice that the sand isn't quite dry and that there are little pebbles in it, and if you look even more you see a tyre tread pattern and it looks like a bunch of snakes side by side. And then you see that the snakes have eyes. Then you've got to stop or you'll go mad.

"I've got about 10 more bikes waiting to be drawn." He scatters some snapshots on the table. They are a small collection of uninteresting photos of bikes. Among them is a postcard-sized photograph of the Laverda. It's in colour, and at first glance resembles nothing. But I go back and realise it is the exact same bike in that magnificent drawing of his. "The drawing was done from this photo," Brett reassures my disbelief.


It looks just like that uninteresting photograph. Maybe that is the secret to his drawings, the fact that it is not a drawing of a motorcycle but a drawing of the light playing hide-and-seek, the shadows, the patterns, the reflections. "It's like reading a book, the drawing unfolds before you as you go along, like a story. That's why I don't like perfect bikes, they're so sterile. The beaten up ones have a history."

BLACK SABBATH

The Panhead is a perfect example of a non-motorcycle drawing of a motorcycle. When Brett took the photograph on which to base it, he intended it that way. I won't quote him on it because there's no room in this story. Let's just say that even the tank has an entire landscape reflected in it with a spectacular sky pressing down from above. He called the Harley drawing 'Sunshine on a cloudy day'. The Laverda, entitled 'Clockwork Orange', which incidentally consumed 576 hours of his life over nine months has many more such intricate worlds.

The spark plug cap grabs me. It's an artwork in itself; the way the NGK logo looks three dimensional. The whole thing is about half the size of a match head,





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which makes each letter about one millimetre high. I could only see the detail in its entirety with a loupe.

Nothing escapes Brett's attention. The stitching on the seat, where the thread indents the vinyl and creates small depressions is perfectly reproduced. The coil springs for the rear suspension took him two weeks to reach the point where he was satisfied. "Once I get to the fibres of the paper I have to stop. I can't draw any more detail in between paper fibres."

I ask him about his perseverance, his immeasurable endurance towards the unnoticeable. "I run out of patience all the time. You go insane. Sometimes I feel like smashing my head till it bleeds. You'll spend the entire afternoon drawing something the size of a bean. You get up the next morning and rub it out because it doesn't look right. Then you start again. This sort of thing happens all the time."

A comfortable session lasts 15 minutes at a time before getting up for a coffee or going for a stretch or just plain giving your eyes a rest. Brett's longest single session to date was on the Laverda. It was a marathon ten and a half hours without a single break. "I couldn't even get to my bed. I had to lie on the floor. My back locked, my fingers tingled, blood supply to my optic nerves seemed to stop. It was like looking through

frosted glass. It was stupid. It took me days to recover."

The fact that he'd wedged a rib between two vertebrae in a work related accident 10 years ago makes the sea of pain even deeper. The physical agony is ever present. He often seeks refuge in his garage with a rather odd collection of bikes: his GTS of course, a 73 Bultaco 250 Alpina, a 46 Malvern Star Auto Cycle and a 71 Montesa 124 Cota.

After lunch Brett sits down to do some more on his current project, a 73 Ducati 750SS Imola Greenframe. Brett gently amplifies Black Sabbath to eleven. "I love it, sort of gets me into a trance." It's so loud I can't hear myself think. The shed feels like it'll explode any minute. Yet Brett seems comfortably cocooned in his bubble of light with the drawing in front of him, his glasses on, his two lamps illuminating his work. Nothing can touch him now. It's like the music is a thick impenetrable barrier against the outside.

IN THE ZONE

It's already taken 140 hours and the sketch isn't even finished. "You only reach the bare bones stage when you can't get any more detail in with fine lines." Then it's simply a matter of 'colouring' it all in with various shades of grey. Because he's left-handed, the

Above:
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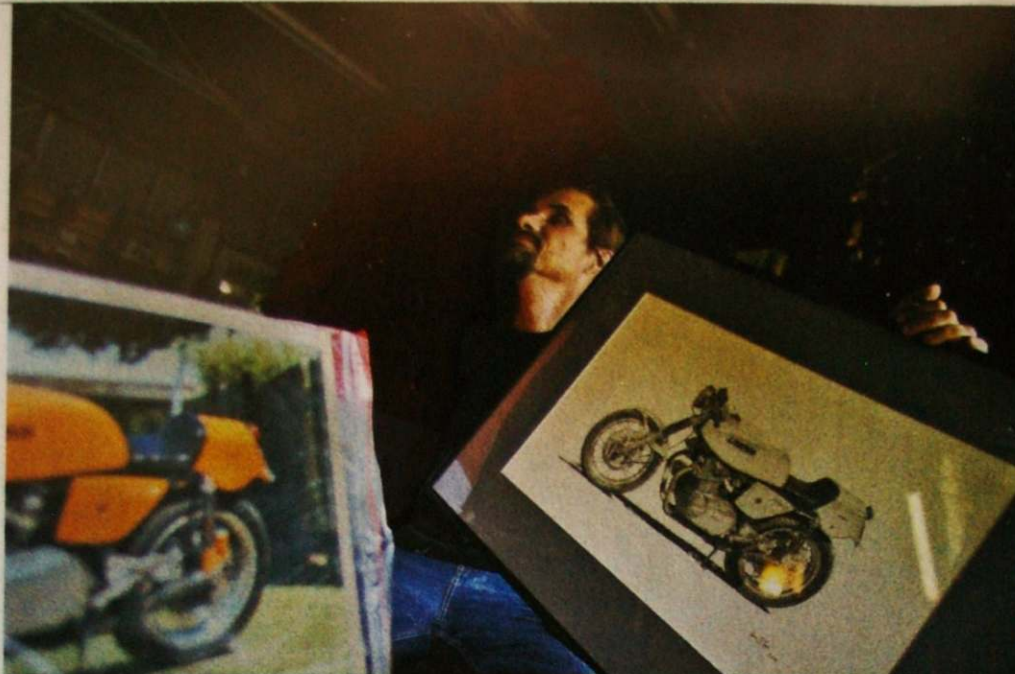
Left:
"With 2B I can get the whole range of greys all the way to black.. The last thing you want to do is muck around with pencils when you're in the zone."

finishing process unveils the drawing from right to left. It just appears on the page as if an invisible curtain drags itself across the paper. "When you have to fix things afterwards, you're really in the hot seat."

When he says that he only ever uses 2B office pencils, it's almost an anti climax. You'd expect a large drawing set packed with the whole range from 9H all the way down to 9B. If you really want to know, 'H' stands for Hard and 'B' is for Black. The Hs have more and more wax-to-graphite as they go up in numbers. The Bs are the other way around, making them soft. "With 2B I can get the whole range of greys all the way to black and still manage to get a needle-sharp point for detail work. The last thing you want to do is muck around with pencils when you're in the zone."

At the time of writing his work station is a little old desk. About two feet off the desktop is a small roof made of steel rods and plywood. My first guess is that it's there to shield against stray light. "It's to keep bug shit from hitting the paper," Brett explains. "Anything that touches the paper could potentially ruin the drawing." It's not easy guarding the work in progress from disaster.

"During summer it gets so hot in here you're constantly wiping the sweat off



"You'll spend the entire afternoon drawing something the size of a bean. You get up the next morning and rub it out because it doesn't look right. Then you start again."

your face and worrying a drop will hit the drawing. In winter it's so cold you have to stop drawing because you shiver so hard." He spills some yellowing water stained drawings from way back.

At 10 Brett was disqualified from a school art competition. He was accused of tracing. "They said no one can draw like that at 10." After that he was discouraged from going to any more inter-class art shows. "They gave me full marks and shoved me in a corner to shut up. They told me I was upsetting the other kids." Word travels fast in a small town; he wasn't allowed in any more art competitions.

His school report cards came to the same conclusions: he never paid attention in class. One read: "Brett's future is obviously in art but we wish he'd stop drawing motorcycles". He pulls out an old school photo. Brett's the only one not smiling in the shot. "I was never a team player. I was happy to be left alone. That's how I've been always."

TURMOIL

By the time he was 12 he was doing his first pot boilers [the term refers to quick-made artwork designed to satisfy the easily pleased clientele, to sell fast and cheap, and hence to keep the artist's pot boiling]. His old man used to sell them for him. Unbeknownst to him then, that was the beginning of the road to self-destruction.

"Everybody expects you to do oil paintings of old dilapidated houses with rusty water tanks." Brett shows me one of his pot boilers. It's an oil painting of an old dilapidated house with a rusty water tank, a dead tree and a sunset sky. "That would have taken an hour to do. I'd get a hundred bucks for it on a good day. People love 'em. You can sell 'em till your arse goes blue. But it makes you hate painting; it stops you from doing it at all. If I have to do another one I swear to God I'll plane the top of my head off with an electric planer."



Below left:
A brief moment of relaxation, Brett also rides his 1976 860 GTS Ducati to unwind.

Below:
"You'll spend the entire afternoon drawing something the size of a bean. You get up the next morning and rub it out because it doesn't look right."

Below right:
At ten, Brett was disqualified from a school art competition. He was accused of tracing.

Brett actually came within an inch of a pot boiler production line. "I made all these boards," he shows me inside the wardrobe. There are piles of white-based 'canvasses' of various sizes stacked up. "They've been sitting here for years. They'll never be used. Ever." He's even made a huge easel that could accommodate anything from a row of smaller dilapidated-house-and-rusty-tank pictures to the mother of all pot boilers. Now it serves as a peg board.

For now his 2B pencil, a piece of paper, a photograph of a motorcycle and some Black Sabbath is plenty to drive him into enough turmoil. "I don't know how good I can draw yet. I really want to find out."

You can order limited run prints through Brett's website www.seaofpain.com or by contacting him directly on +612 401 543 327

