

page: Basscat, the cheerful musically inclined cat,  
is colourful composition exudes cartoon like appeal.

# Painting smiles



Michael Ferner uses an innovative technique to breathe life into pictures that are drawing arty laughs from admirers of all ages and nationalities.

TEXT: **MANISHA HARKINS**

**Formerly working as** a trained nurse in an Austrian hospital, Salzburg-based Michael Ferner left nursing for good in 2002 to become a full-time professional artist. With growing success around the globe for his happy, colourful paintings, Ferner is hoping to make new fans in Dubai when he appears at this month's Ambiente Arabia show.

What is it about Ferner's work that captures the imagination? His paintings are both humorous and warm with an illustrative quality that readily attracts children as well as adults. Many of the paintings bring images of Dr Seuss (of *The Cat in the Hat* fame) to mind, but Ferner's work has its very own appeal – from the subjects he chooses to the highly unusual technique he employs.

Ferner seeks inspiration from many areas. "My topic is life," he explains. "Impressions and being fascinated with the moment is what counts. I can paint about routine life and ordinary days or instruments, clowns, sea animals and aeroplanes. For me, inspiration is in every movement at any moment – whether related to humans, flowers, animals, colours or scents. "This is the reason why I cannot tell where my work will lead me. I strive for painting as close to the human soul as possible, even though I'm only at the very beginning."

This free-spirited and esoteric view of art seems to fit right in with Ferner's painting method: eccentric yet highly innovative. "My painting cannot possibly be assigned to any classical artistic school whatsoever," he says. "In my earlier days Miro was a great influence; in recent years no single personality in art has influenced me. I have developed a technique of my own that adds a trademark to my pictures. I put ink on delicate Milanese water-colour paper and then blow it about with my mouth. I then fill in areas with water-colour.

"The paper is a soil for my thoughts; ink and colours are the seeds," he adds. "So paper, Indian ink, water-colours and pastel crayons are my favourite materials."

Ferner nearly always works on his paintings in a studio. "While travelling, I mainly do sketches and text fragments. However, my technique demands concentration, and I prefer peace and quiet while I paint, which is why I tend to do most of it in the studio. Painting is a very intimate thing, as is writing, with the only difference being visible results that can be immediately seen by surrounding



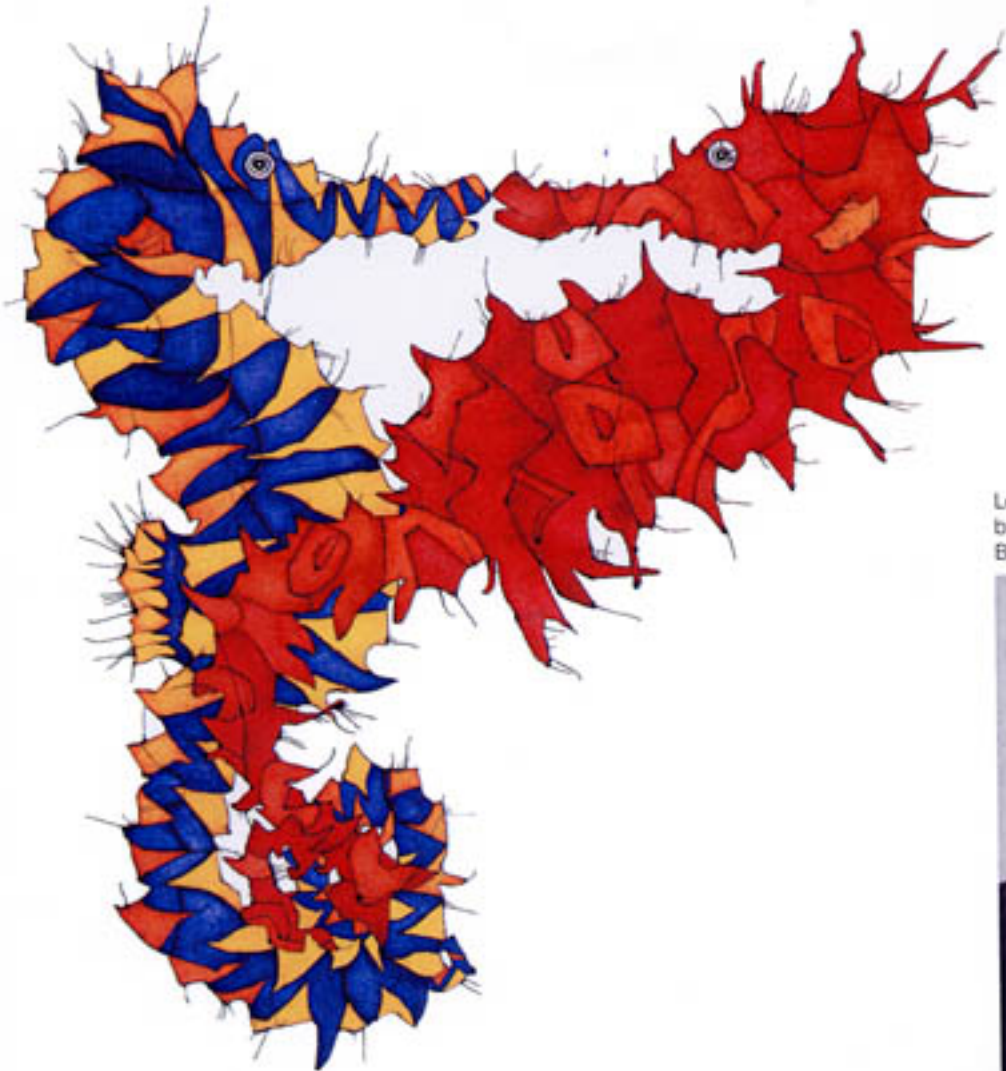
people – including non-perfection. So I prefer not to do this, but sometimes can also be an enrichment and be pleasurable."

Since his technique is so unusual, the artist will actually demonstrate it at Ambiente Arabia. He admits he is not certain why he chose this technique, except for the fact that it works beautifully for him and that it is special.

"Experimenting for years and years and learning about materials has helped mature my technique," he says. "This technique has also opened up a great variety of themes. It sometimes seems to me that it was a gift – perhaps to teach me about the power of one's own breath and being able to include it in my work. I spend hours moving very slowly, hovering only a few centimetres above the paper. This demands very fierce concentration and sharpens your senses to capture the tiniest details. I try to transfer this focus into my daily life

Surprisingly, such focus did not arise from long academic training, but rather from sheer will combined with an early passion. "As long as I can think back, I have always been drawing and painting," he says. "These are the forms I've





Left: through his lively art, Ferner, bridges language barriers.  
Below: Michael Ferner, the artist.



used to articulate myself in my surroundings and in society. I am self-taught so I never went to art college. I did not want to deny my artistic self by following a teacher and his strong influence in art or the latest artistic trends. I try to learn from literature, music and intellectuals and philosophers of all epochs, and in this way, hope to become more mature as a person and in my art."

Thankfully, as displayed in his paintings, not everything about Ferner is serious and intense. He also loves canoeing and rafting, is a keen musician and used to play and write for cabaret. "I also believe that humour and cheerfulness are very good vehicles for all subjects," he says.

**Ferner describes himself** as a painter, sculptor, draughtsman and illustrator and says he has a reason for choosing several titles. "All of these titles should make it easier for people to find their way to my work and me as a person. This is for the people who might wish to commission me for a project. For some, the word artist is still a little barrier – but usually only until we meet up personally. I have also been working as an illustrator for children's books and am working at the present time for a Japanese author whom I had the pleasure to meet during the Salzburg music festival."

Speaking of children, Ferner has a particular affinity for them and naturally, they take to the fun, happy images that he paints. When time permits, he runs workshops with children. "During these sessions, I try to grasp their outlook on life with small and big themes," he says. "I love to see it all come together and learn from their views. One way to express the world they see is

through painting. They enjoy this new freedom of expression." Rather sweetly, young people are buying Ferner's work as gifts for their friends, parents and grandparents, while elderly people are buying his paintings to give to their children and grandchildren.

"I'm lucky that my paintings do not exclude any age group," he says. "Perhaps it is because I don't look at my art in a complicated fashion. People are free to interpret my paintings in many ways. I have been quite fortunate since I have seen no reluctance towards my art in general."

Perhaps buyers also appreciate that the artist's approach to art mirrors the way he embraces life. "My whole passion is life itself – being part of it in all of its manifold shapes and forms. The focus of my passion comes from the ability to live in true freedom. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak an international language through my art – for everyone to share and experience."

Through international publishers like PGM Art World, Vontobe and Wild Apple, Ferner's work has steadily grown in popularity. He has also participated in exhibitions in the United States and Australia, while solo exhibitions have taken place across Europe where his most ardent customers are. However, Ferner explains, "I have many international buyers who visit my gallery in Salzburg. Asians are very much established buyers. While at the Birmingham Spring Fair in the UK, we acquired new customers from China and Japan. The UAE is a new territory for us; yet we have already had the pleasure of obtaining a few customers here."

With the way things are going for the jovial Michael Ferner, the chances are that he'll attract a good deal more during his April visit to Dubai. ■