

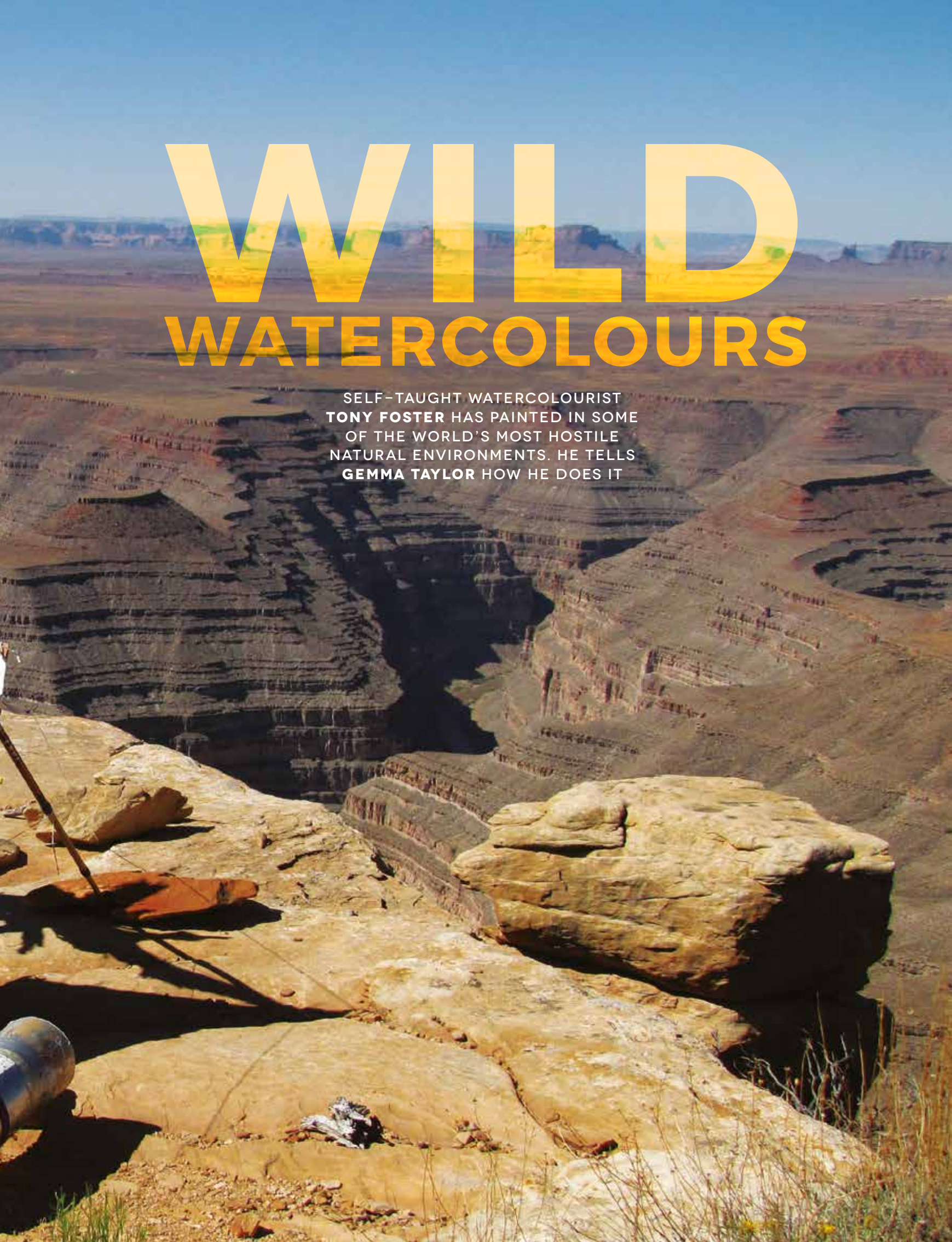


Tony Foster  
painting at Navajo  
Point at the Grand  
Canyon



# WILD WATERCOLOURS

SELF-TAUGHT WATERCOLOURIST  
**TONY FOSTER** HAS PAINTED IN SOME  
OF THE WORLD'S MOST HOSTILE  
NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS. HE TELLS  
**GEMMA TAYLOR** HOW HE DOES IT









**N**ot many living artists can claim to have an art foundation set up in their honour, but that is just what happened to self-taught watercolourist Tony Foster. At 33 years of age, he took the leap and left his job as visual arts officer at South West Arts council to concentrate on developing his painting skills. It is this daring mindset that has seen him go on to paint in some of the world's most dangerous places, from the side of Mount Everest to the arid caverns of the Grand Canyon.

Tony sees himself as a "slightly quirky person who doesn't actually fit" and has three things, which, he says, sets him apart from other watercolourists: he paints on a massive scale; never works from photos and always finishes his paintings in situ. "People dismiss watercolour as a minor art form or as a means of making a more important thing in oil. Part of the point of [my work] is to show that watercolour can be an ambitious thing; you don't have to confine yourself to a little sketchbook. With very economical means, you can do large-scale, strong images."

Tony's studio is in the heart of the Cornish countryside and is covered in bags of souvenirs, organised chronologically, from his travels. Starting in 1984, these include vials of melted icecaps from Greenland, necklaces from tribes in Borneo and leaves from the Massachusetts River in the fall. These curiosities are framed with Tony's paintings along with hand-written descriptions inspired by Tony's passion for conservation. "I never went to art school and I don't think this work would have been allowed when I was there. It was all abstract expressionism going into minimalism and constructivism and latterly, conceptual work, film and photography," he says.

Starting his creative life as a pop artist, Tony soon realised that "painting hot rods, boxing matches and bunny girls" wasn't working for him. "I was reading David Hockney's autobiography and, apparently, when his work wasn't going right at the Royal College, Ron Kitaj said, 'no wonder your work is crap, you're not painting stuff you care about,' that's when I knew I had to find a way out of being a pop artist. I thought, 'I enjoy hiking, camping and travelling, and care about the environment,' so that's what I did."

To create the work for his latest exhibition, *Exploring Beauty: Watercolour Diaries from the Wild*, Tony invited some of the world's leading scientists, explorers, writers, environmentalists, and mountaineers to nominate the most beautiful wild place they had ever seen. Everyone from David Attenborough to volcanologist professor Stephen Sparks, suggested forests, rivers and mountains that were special to them. "It's nerve-racking. What if you travel all the way to Chile and don't like the volcano they have suggested? Luckily, I managed to find something to inspire me at every location," he says.

Armed with just his tent, modest Winsor & Newton Bijou No.2 paint box, sable brushes, foldable drawing board and >

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Tony painting the Kangia Icefjord, Greenland; artefacts from the artist's travels, work in progress; Kaieteur Falls, Guyana; essential reading; *Looking Out From Deer Cave, Mulu - Six Days*, watercolour on paper



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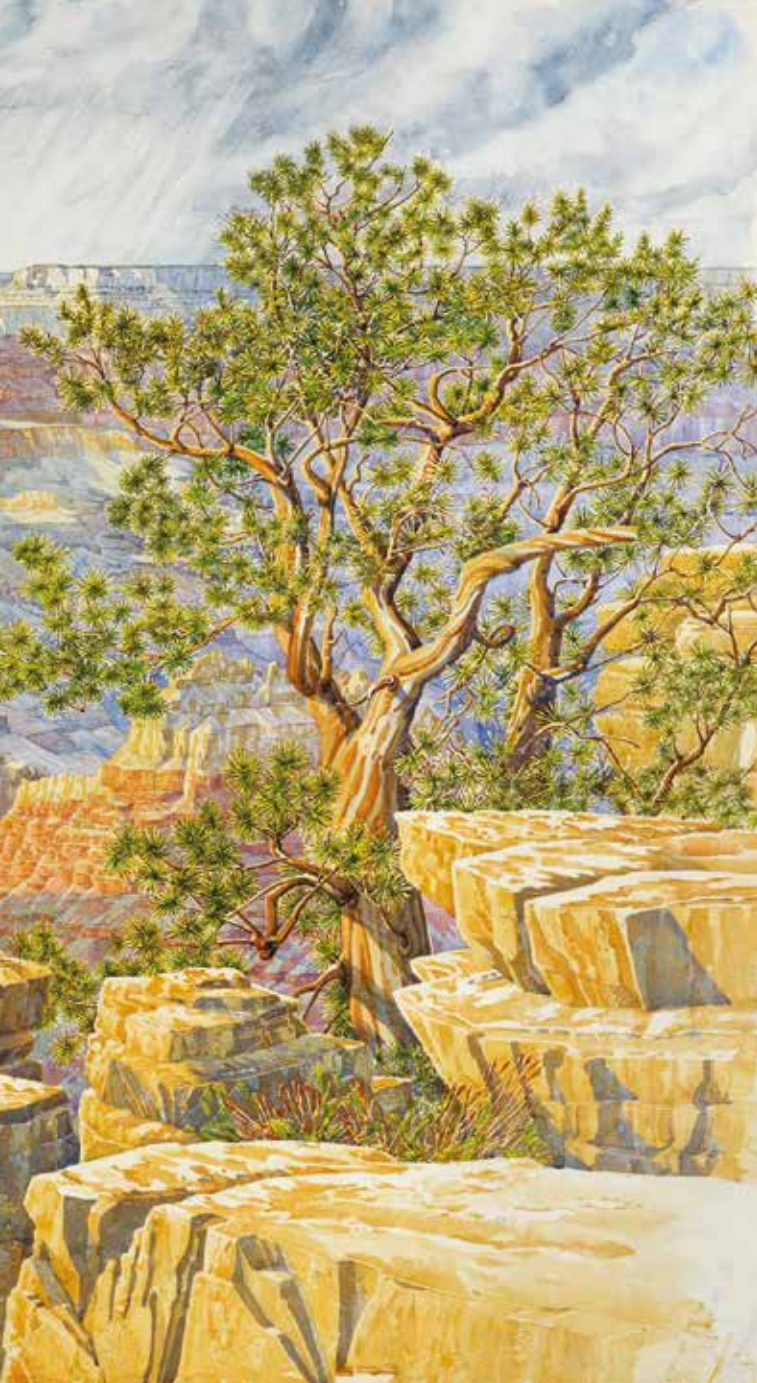


## **“Watercolour can be an ambitious thing, you don’t have to confine yourself to a sketchbook”**

his paper rolled up in a tin on his back, Tony ventured fearlessly to his destination. “People think it’s just a good excuse to go on an adventure, but I think seeing it as an excuse to go travelling completely underestimates what hard work it is,” he says.

With the patronage of The Foster Art & Wilderness Foundation, set up by Jane Woodward, founder of green energy investment firm MAP, Tony worried about what the lack of incentive to sell his art would do to his work. “When you’re painting on top of a volcano at 15200ft, with howling





wind and thunder storms, freezing temperatures at night, it's a bitter place to be for five days. I realised then that what keeps you going is the desire to paint, not money."

And it is no mean feat. Tony fell ill while painting Mount Everest at 17,600ft altitude in 2005 and was placed in a hyperbaric chamber until he recovered. Undeterred, he returned to complete the project and is the only artist to have painted all three faces of the world's tallest mountain.

His love for the Grand Canyon has also seen him return time and again, but there are places he is happy to visit only once, "Greenland is a harsh place I would not wish to return to. Although, it has these enormous icebergs, which

move and alter relative positions; it's compelling to watch. One collapsed in the night and washed a tidal wave ashore turning over a boat and the remains of flint points, bones, teeth, and Chinese porcelain," he says. It is these finds, which give the oversized canvases a journal entry feel.

So what is the secret to Tony's success? "I don't really have any secrets," he says. "I'm not interested in technique, all I'm trying to do is be honest about what I see. People say, 'is that dry brushwork? Is that wet on wet?' And I say, yes, I suppose it is, but I don't really care about technique and I don't really like falling back on mannerisms." Tony's approach is dictated by the composition. "For the Grand Canyon, I started in the distance where it's lightest because I'm building up the density of the paint, but with a rain forest, where everything is very close, I begin at the front and work back," he says.

Tony paints with a mix of instinct and practice and draws inspiration from great American landscape painters Thomas Moran and Friedrich Church. He believes that not training professionally gave him a certain determination. "Some people have a wonderful talent then go to art college and it drains them of the enthusiasm to do it; it's something to do with being channelled into what's acceptable to tutors and lecturers and I've never had that. I have nothing to break away from," he says.

With each project cycle lasting four years, Tony is coy about releasing details about his next trip, but when he talks about a recent visit to downtown Dallas in the US, he gets a glint in his eye that suggests perhaps an urban adventure could be next.

**Exploring Beauty: Watercolour Diaries from the Wild, Bankside Gallery, London SE1, 8-26 June, 2016, [www.thefoster.org](http://www.thefoster.org). For details on an exclusive Artists & Illustrators reader event in collaboration with the exhibition, visit [www.artistsandillustrators.co.uk/tony-foster](http://www.artistsandillustrators.co.uk/tony-foster)**



### HOW TO SKETCH UNDERWATER

Tony dove 40ft underwater to paint coral reefs in the Maldives and the Cayman Islands in 2007. The artist uses architects' drafting film and water-soluble pencils to sketch while sitting on the ocean floor for as long as his oxygen tank will last – a maximum of 80 minutes. Tony says: "Clip down your paper, don't loosen your grip on your pencils or they will bob to the surface, if you make a mistake, rub it out with your thumb."

**ABOVE** *Twenty-three Days Painting the Canyon – From West of Navajo Point, watercolour, 117x213cm*