

VISUAL ARTS

One of Wales' best-loved artists is holding a major exhibition to coincide with a new book. Karen Price chats to William Wilkins about his long career and discovers why his paintings take so long to produce

WHILE most artists face the pressures of completing a new body of work for their exhibitions, William Wilkins is taking an altogether different approach.

For some of the pieces going on display as part of his major new show remain unfinished.

The artist is renowned not only for his painstaking pointillism technique but also for working "in-situ" which means many of his landscapes and studies of light can take several years to complete.

So as part of his exhibition at Cardiff's Martin Tinney Gallery, there will be some unfinished canvases, which will give visitors the chance to see exactly how he works.

"Some of the paintings are incomplete so that people can actually get a sense of the way I build up a painting," says Wilkins, founder of the £40,000 Artes Mundi Prize, the UK's largest visual arts award.

"I thought I would respond to most people's curiosity.

"Unless they find me in the street or garden painting, most people have absolutely no idea how I work.

"I don't take any photographs or do any drawings. I always paint in-situ so I need to be working in the right place, the right light and the right season."

This means that when he decides on painting a certain view in a certain light - for example, a field on a sunny autumn morning - he only has a short period of time to capture that scene each year so can find himself returning to the same spot over time.

"With landscapes, because I only work in the right light and the right season, an average painting takes three years but there's one painting that took me 13 years."

And taking the pointillism approach, can also add to the timescale.

The technique, which branches from Impressionism and was developed by Georges Seurat and Paul Signac in 1886, sees small, distinct dots of colour applied in patterns to form an image.

Wilkins adopted it 40 years ago and hasn't looked back since.

"In 1968 I decided to take two years out of painting to improve my drawing technique and I ended up spending six years of solidly drawing," says Suffolk-born Wilkins, who grew up in Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, where he now lives with his wife Lynne.

"The technique I used was cross-hatch where you employ diagonal lines crossing each other. I used that technique exclusively because it mixes the capacity to deliver abstract qualities and specific qualities - there's a delicacy of tone.

"I was looking for a painting technique that allow me to replicate that sort of balance between abstract and

reality and I decided that a modification of pointillism was the right way to achieve it."

People will now get the chance to see his work in the new Cardiff exhibition, which is called Work In Progress but is also part-retrospective. It coincides with the publication of a new book, *The Art Of William Wilkins*, which is published by Graffeg and marks the artist's 75th birthday.

"The big day has passed I'm afraid," says Wilkins when we speak. "The book was planned at the time of my 75th birthday, which was in April 2013. Around that time, some friends of mine thought it would be a charming idea for me to produce a book. I spoke to Peter Gill, the publisher at Graffeg, whom I know, and he said we should explore it further."

Written by David Fraser Jenkins and with an essay by David Moore, it covers Wilkins life as an artist.

The great-grandson of the architect of the National Gallery in London, he trained at Swansea College of Art and the Royal College of Art in London and has been a working artist for half a century.

"There are old photos of me drawing and painting before I could stand up," says the father of two. "I've literally drawn and painted all my life."

For 12 years, Wilkins was chairman of the Artes Mundi Prize, which he founded as he wanted Cardiff to have a similar award for artists as there is for singers thanks to the biennial BBC Cardiff Singer of the World.

Artists, working on the theme of human condition, can apply from all over the world and then selectors chose the shortlist who will exhibit their work in Cardiff before the winner is unveiled.

As the sixth exhibition opens, Wilkins believes the prize is in "safe hands" with new chairman Mathew Prichard and director Karen MacKinnon.

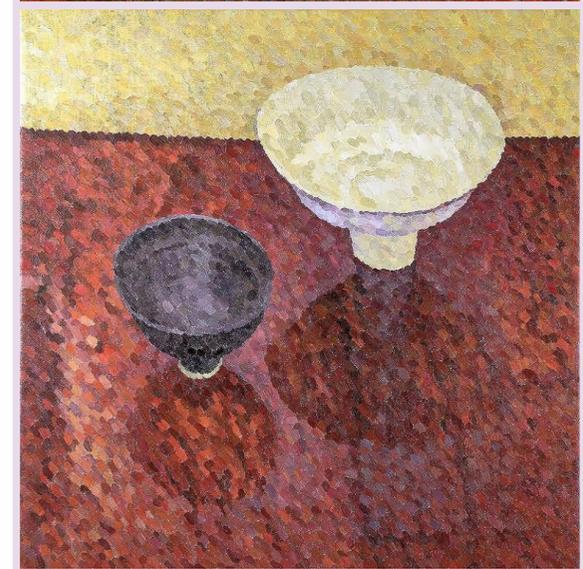
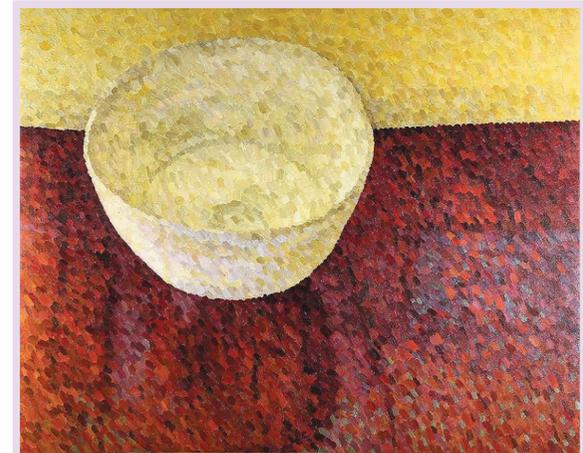
"It was the right time to stand down and I hadn't actually intended to remain in the chair for as long as I did," he says. "Artes Mundi certainly achieved my vision and I think it's developed absolutely marvellously. I hoped it would really enhance the excitement and prestige of Wales as a centre for the visual arts.

"The visual arts in Wales is now really flourishing and the wider world knows it."

As for Wilkins, he says he still paints most days and is about to start a new body of work on landscapes capturing the winter light.

"I want to produce the sunlight in the morning, the sunlight in the afternoon, a grey weather painting and even a snow painting - with a bit of luck, of course."

■ The Art of William Wilkins, priced £35, is published by Graffeg. The exhibition runs at Martin Tinney Gallery, Cardiff until November 25



The point of painting



➤ Above left, *Pool Garden Evening Light*; above right, *Sunlight, Cornus Florida*; left, *Sotoportego del Traghetto Venice*; right, *Ponte Panada, Venice and Orchard Winter Sunlight Evening*

When it comes to his still life paintings, William Wilkins particularly enjoys depicting ceramics.

But he admits that he's never wanted to create sculptures himself.

Now eight canvases by Wilkins portraying ceramic pieces are to go on show in London.

Running at Erskine Hall & Coe in Old Bond Street from December 2 to 5, it coincides with the London launch of his book.

"The gallery specialises in ceramics as well as modern painting and they knew how interested in ceramics I am," says Wilkins.

"They are microcosms of architecture. I love architecture and paint architecture but I don't always have architecture of a suitable quality available to me. I think ceramics are just magic in the relationship between the surface and the skin and the spaces they create. They are like the best of architecture.

"But I've never produced any ceramics myself - I've never wanted to, no more than I wanted to be an architect."

