

A black and white photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there are sand dunes with some sparse, dark vegetation. A winding path or track leads from the bottom left towards the center of the image. The background shows more dunes under a pale, overcast sky.

Grahame Sydney: D o w n S o u t h

R e c e n t P a i n t i n g s 2 0 0 1 - 2 0 1 1



Vince's Cross, Antarctica 2006

It gives me great pleasure to welcome this exhibition of Grahame Sydney's paintings to Pataka, at the heart of Porirua's cultural life. Sydney's work captures the sparse and unmistakable beauty of the Central Otago landscape with powerful clarity. His earlier exhibition at Pataka drew many admiring visitors, and I am certain this recent collection of work will attract even greater levels of interest and enthusiasm.

*Nick Legget
Mayor of Porirua*

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Grahame Sydney: D o w n S o u t h

R e c e n t P a i n t i n g s 2 0 0 1 - 2 0 1 1

Grahame Sydney: Down South is a survey of Grahame Sydney's landscape paintings of the past decade. It is his first major exhibition since his mid-career survey, *On the Road*, toured throughout New Zealand, including Pataka, in 2000. Since then, Sydney has visited Antarctica twice, immersed himself in photography and film and successfully campaigned against the proposed wind farm in the Lammermoor ranges in Central Otago. During this time he has also managed to create a significant body of new work. Twenty seven of his recent paintings, not yet shown publicly in New Zealand, have been drawn from private collections throughout the country for this exhibition.

Sydney's focus for over thirty-five years has been on Central Otago where he lives in the Cambrian Valley. His luminous, transcendent paintings capture the silent beauty of the landscape with its vast open spaces, treeless tussock-covered hills, snow covered mountains and endless skies, and eloquently express his lifelong passion for the area. The consistency of his vision affirms his deep sense of connection to the region. 'It's difficult to explain why. I just love it in a deep and compelling way. I really don't need to be anywhere else.' In a sense, he has become the definitive painter of its landscape - you can't see Central Otago now without being reminded of his work.

Sydney's theme is the raw power and grandeur of nature as embodied in the archetypal Central Otago landscape he paints. Typically set in the fading light of dusk, his parched, barren landscapes have a timeless quality and remind us of the passing of time. Bathed in light and shadow, each painting is a meditation on landscape, full of mood and atmosphere.

Sydney paints only those landscapes that have a particular meaning for him - old, weathered, 'muscular' landforms that he knows and understands intimately. The Dunstan Range, Mt St Bathans and the Hawkdun Range, the visual backdrop to his home in the Cambrian Valley, constantly recur

in his paintings. He revisits them over and over again, never tiring of painting them in a seemingly infinite variety of incarnations. 'I like paintings to come out of an absolute emotional connection and that builds up over a long time - years and decades sometimes.'²

Over the last decade Sydney's work has shifted. He has reduced the content of his images, getting rid of almost everything in his paintings except the landscape. Increasingly large in scale, his landscapes are presented as objects of awe. The signs, signals and decaying architecture of the region, so much a feature of his early work, are now largely absent. Certain motifs recur - telegraph poles without wires, for example, crisply silhouetted against an evening sky. Railway crossings and empty roads remain, acting as focal points. And while his early work portrays the land in the blistering heat of summer, much of his recent work explores its nature in the depths of winter.

A thread running through many of these recent paintings is the concealment of landscape. Always attracted to remote, empty places, Sydney found his visits to Antarctica in 2003 and 2006, a catalyst for new approaches. 'I felt absolutely comfortable there aesthetically. For someone like me who likes skeletal things and absences and reductions, it was really beautiful....The silence, the lonely energy appealed to something in me.'³ While he produced a series of paintings of Antarctica itself, the experience led him to look at the Central Otago landscape with fresh eyes. Famous for his stark, compelling images of the region bathed in summer's hard-edged light, he began a series of winter paintings. The familiar landscape is barely discernible - covered in snow or partially hidden by darkness and fog. The result is a new minimalism. Sydney's work has always been pervaded by a sense of silence and solitude: the effect of the snow and fog is to heighten the stillness and isolation.

Sydney gives us a created world, not one that is merely recorded. While he still makes preparatory drawings, he does not paint directly from nature. He constructs his images in the studio, carefully editing and framing each view, reinventing, reducing landscape to its bare essence. 'I have moved more towards the essence of Central rather than the truth of Central.'⁴



Hawkdun Winter 2005

My house is built on an elevated terrace overlooking the Cambrian Valley.... to my left, the west, the muscley bulk of the Dunstan Range towers up to over 1800 meters. North, exactly north in fact, is the highest ridge of Mt St Bathans....Mt St Bathans soars with imperious majesty, as a child might draw a mountain, but with weightlifter's shoulders. That range is not what dominates my view. What does – and the reason I built here, so I can live with the daily magnetism of its company stretched along the horizon to the north and east – is the magnificent wall of the Hawkdun Range. It was the uninterrupted view of the Hawkduns that made me choose this site for my studio ten years ago.

Grahame Sydney 2011

Sydney's sparse, tightly structured compositions, with their wide, flat planes of land, low horizons and expansive skies, suggest that the scene extends far beyond the frame. Light, transparent areas contrast with opaque, solid ones: earth contrasts with sky: slanting light and shadows disrupt the verticals and horizontals of his harmonious, balanced compositions. Sometimes he foreshortens and flattens his images, distorting scale and perspective, creating spatial ambiguities. 'The longer I paint, the more I am in control of what's happening within the frame.'⁵ A master of restraint, Sydney uses a limited range of colours in any one painting; pale greys, golden ochres and earth browns are carefully balanced with soft purples and cobalt blues and touches of vivid white.

For Sydney, painting is a long, hard labour requiring intense concentration. He works slowly and meticulously. His paintings are technically superb and take months to complete: 'My approach is slow and my technique is slow. I'm the long stare not the quick glimpse.' His practice spans both oil and egg tempera paintings. Alongside his paintings he has produced a series of etchings and lithographs that complement his work as a painter. He has also issued some of his paintings as a series of prints which have been exhibited throughout New Zealand. His books include the Montana award winning *The Art of Grahame Sydney*. Recently he has been drawn to photography and film, lending his painter's eye to the camera, and has published a book of photographs *White Silence*. A new book of photographs, *Grahame Sydney's Central Otago*, is due for publication in November.

Sydney has developed his own singular aesthetic apart from his contemporaries. Through his books and prints his work has become widely accessible. His images have become icons of national culture. But no matter how familiar and often reproduced his work has become - his canvases remain as fresh and compelling as ever.

Helen Kedgley
Senior Curator Contemporary Art
Pataka
August 2011

Grahame Sydney by Kevin Ireland

The breathtaking technique of a Grahame Sydney painting seems at first sight to make its subject almost palpably actual. Landscapes, buildings, interiors and portraits appear to have been captured with astonishing physical accuracy - just as the time of day or night never seems in question. You can usually guess the hour from the quality and depth of light and shadow. Yet, at a second and closer viewing, the essence of his art lies in the mystery of its paradoxes. Everything may certainly be actual, in the loose sense that each subject may be said to 'exist', yet what we see is seldom exactly what it seems.

Sydney's painterly 'truths' are a kind of fabricated realism. The subjects he depicts are adjusted to fit or imitate not what may be called a photographic representation, but to articulate a vision, a conviction, an interpretation and an artistic self-exploration. The rewards for the viewers of a Sydney study certainly include a display of bravura skills, but these are deployed only incidentally to represent place and time, for his purpose is always to record an inner journey.

The main paradoxes of Sydney's art are, first, that appearances, however precisely detailed, are not to be taken literally. The artist invests and crafts his work with a search for harmonies and implications, in which proportion, position, shape and colour are juggled to fit a pattern and a questing attitude. He takes forms, relationships and hues, and investigates a response to a situation, a view and a mood that involves a particular and profound sense of self.

Secondly, when people talk about the haunting quality of Sydney's paintings I suspect that they are often referring to this personal and private investment of 'selfhood'. His lack of human representation in landscapes is not just to achieve a theatrical sense of heart-stopping emptiness or to avoid the distracting narrative overtones that human figures would suggest, it is to concentrate the viewers on themselves in the act of observation and to join the painting's creator as an interpreter of a location and a moment. The mysterious humanity of Sydney's work lies in their invitation to share a window that does not merely open and transform itself into a decorative framed space, but commits us to questions that probe our own experiences and values. Occasionally he allows himself a wry joke. The cows that substitute for the expected human figures in 'Spies' gaze out at us stolidly, as if to challenge our assumptions and fixations.



September Burn, St Bathans 2003

A third defining paradox has to do with the matter of time and timelessness that almost always confronts us as viewers. 'Timeless' is a term that is often used as a loose and useful poetic trope to represent the sense, especially in his major landscapes, that we are gazing on terrain, plants, constructions and skies that have already existed, and which shall probably continue to exist, far beyond the miniscule bounds of human history. Yet timelessness is a frozen, abstract notion and does not quite articulate the ambiguous continuities or the specific points in time that Sydney more satisfyingly suggests.

The deep significance of Sydney's nostalgia, and occasionally his melancholy, are located in personal and measureable aspects of his painterly awareness of the implications of the way all things age. Sydney's view of his subjects is always enigmatically affected by aspects of the feelings and memories that he draws on from his own general experience - and, importantly, from particular phases of his lifetime.

The hawk that occasionally appears in a Sydney sky is a transient observer that cannot help but represent, or at least intimate, a vigilant witness - as well as an essentially solitary and merciless one. Hawks are an emblem of awareness, watchfulness and of the passing of time. The day of the hawk is spent in a pendulum beat as its sweeps regularly to and fro across ridge and valley.

In the same way, the sheds and station buildings that Sydney captures in a process of crumbling slowly before us invoke not merely images of past habitation, but offer a forlorn and precise sign of time and mortality, just as his mailboxes offer a mute and poignant reference to remoteness while also emphasising an almost daily service to communication, including bills that must be paid on time and those inevitable letters that bring news of births and deaths.

Time is everywhere a subtle and secret theme in Sydney's work. We are aware that his lonesome moons must wax and wane monthly. The signals that stand spectrally against a skyline rise and lower and blink to order the passage of trains that toil to meticulously detailed, erratic but always relevant timetables - as well as to the seconds and minutes of our passing. The empty road that loses itself in a far horizon testifies to transient yet repetitious journeys and to endless human intersections. All are testaments not to timelessness, but to time's remorseless and devastating measurability.



Hawk and Moon 2010

And the fourth and final paradox is that Sydney confronts us with monumental landforms and with vast imposing skies that at first glance seem to stand before us with massive, stony or ethereal indifference, yet one of the great pleasures of his vision and technique is to perceive how the land lives and breathes, and how the heavens seem to nourish it. His landscapes may seem still and waterless, but they are seldom arid. There is something of the warm-blooded animal in Sydney's mineral and atmospheric world. Mountainsides or rolling ridges glow with the hide of beasts at rest. Even snow and ice have textures that can suggest the fluid expectancy of restless movement. Stone surfaces can seem as if they enfold massive structures that could be about to stir and draw in air. A cloud depicted in a motionless moment of perfect serenity also promises living change, for clouds shadow us and presage how the skies shall soon be certain to become animated and alter.

Sydney's human studies echo all these features. Where formerly many of Sydney's most accomplished nudes were presented to us headless or faceless, in an act of undressing or turning away, so that our attention was focused on the rich and varied aesthetics of flesh, body language and draping cloth, rather than diverted to, and possibly misled by, facial expression, now the head is likely to be portrayed, so that position and look should convey the intimate drama of a pose and a deeper engagement with person and personality.

These have now become landscapes of the human form, with many of the paradoxical implications that help give Sydney's works their brooding and unsettling mystery. Our attention is drawn to the texture of a sheet that contrasts with flesh, as well as to folds, indentations and the stretch of skin that suggest that all that he depicts has the articulated substance of a skeleton beneath, yet is filled with a life force - which raises the point that below every inch of the surfaces of a Sydney painting there is a sure knowledge that he has built them on a solid framework. Nothing in Sydney is based on unsubstantiated notions or flights of fantasy. His work has unmatched substance. Beneath the appearances of all things existing under the heavens is a living configuration of rock or bone.

Yet all art is both what is there and what isn't, and I feel that this introduction could usefully conclude with a poem I have dedicated to Grahame Sydney:

Kevin Ireland
July 2011



Cloud Stack, Hawkduns 2003

The art of it

Art that is,
is also something
that it's not.

The squirt of ochre
trickling down the cheek
to charm the smile,

the word that arms
the casual phrase
with wily implication,

and the notes
that shimmer
across the scales

are at the same time
there, yet assert
a baffling absence.

All the things that are,
are shadowed by some other,
holding itself back.

Art moves us
both by what it states
and what it might have been.

Art declares
what is by what it does,
and also doesn't.

Kevin Ireland



Winter Willow, Ida Valley 2004

The region has a symbolic quality for so many, a metaphoric – even spiritual – dimension ... my images are intermittent efforts to capture some of that landscape – the parts I know well and love deeply – before so much of it is lost.

Grahame Sydney 2011

Biographical Details

Grahame Sydney lives near St Bathans, Central Otago. He was born in Dunedin in 1948, and studied at the University of Otago. After graduating with a BA in 1969 and travelling in the United Kingdom and Europe, he began painting full-time. In 1978 he was the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of Otago.

Sydney rarely exhibits but a major twenty-five year retrospective *Regions of the Heart* was held at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2000 and a touring version *On the Road* toured New Zealand, including Pataka in 2000-2001. Sydney visited Antarctica in 2003 and 2006 as a guest of Antarctica New Zealand. In 2003 he was awarded an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to painting. His works are held in major public collections throughout New Zealand and in private collections worldwide.

Sydney is the author of a number of books. *Timeless Land* (1995), featuring fifty of his finest paintings, is a collaboration with his close friends Owen Marshall and Brian Turner. The book won the Supreme Award for Printing in the NZ Pride in Print Awards, while *The Art of Grahame Sydney* (2000) won the Montana Book of the Year Award in the 2000. Sydney published a book of his photographs *White Silence: Grahame Sydney's Antarctica* in 2008 and his new book of photographs *Grahame Sydney's Central Otago* is due for release in November 2011.



SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011	<i>Grahame Sydney: Down South - Recent Paintings 2001 - 2011</i> , Pataka, Porirua
2008	<i>Grahame Sydney New Photos, Antarctica</i> , Page Blackie Gallery, Wellington
2007	<i>Grahame Sydney: Photographs of Antarctica</i> , Christchurch Art Gallery, Christchurch. Also at Amisfield Gallery, Queenstown, Artis Gallery, Auckland, Salamander Gallery, Christchurch
2005-2006	<i>Grahame Sydney: Etchings and Lithographs</i> , Eastern Southland Art Gallery, Gore. Also at Lakes District Museum, Arrowtown, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch, Ashburton Art Gallery, Ashburton
1999-2002	<i>On the Road: thirty five paintings by Grahame Sydney</i> , Toured by Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin. Also at Pataka, Porirua; Hawkes Bay Exhibition Centre, Hastings; Suter Art Gallery, Nelson; Millennium Public Art Gallery, Blenheim; Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch; Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland; Southland Art Gallery, Invercargill; Aigantighe Art Gallery, Timaru; Ashburton Art Gallery, Ashburton; Rotorua Museum of Art and History, Rotorua; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North
2001	<i>Grahame Sydney: Works on Paper</i> , Tinakori Gallery, Wellington
1999	<i>Regions of the Heart: A Grahame Sydney Retrospective</i> , Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin <i>De Profundis: Prints by Grahame Sydney</i> , Hocken Library Collection, University of Otago, Dunedin <i>The Landscape and the Figure 1975 - 1997</i> , Forrester Gallery, Oamaru
1997	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Paintings</i> , Claybrook Gallery, Auckland
1995	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Paintings</i> , Carnegie Gallery, Dunedin
1992	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Paintings</i> , Carnegie Gallery, Dunedin <i>Grahame Sydney: Paintings and Lithographs</i> , Ritchies Contemporary, Christchurch
1989	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Studies</i> , Janne Land Gallery, Wellington
1988	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Works</i> , Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
1987	<i>Grahame Sydney: Paintings, Drawings and Etchings</i> , Janne Land Gallery, Wellington
1986	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Works</i> , Marshall Seifert Gallery, Dunedin
1982	<i>Grahame Sydney: New Etchings</i> , Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland <i>Grahame Sydney: Paintings and Etchings</i> , Robin Gibson Gallery, Sydney, Australia <i>Grahame Sydney: Drawings into Paintings</i> Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch <i>Grahame Sydney: New Etchings</i> , Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland
1981	<i>Grahame Sydney: Selected Works 1975 - 1980</i> , Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
1978	<i>Grahame Sydney: recent works</i> , Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch. Also at Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt
1977	<i>Grahame Sydney: Paintings & Drawings</i> , Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch <i>Grahame Sydney: Etchings</i> , Brooke-Gifford Gallery, Christchurch
1976	<i>Grahame Sydney, Paintings & Drawings</i> , Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch <i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Paintings</i> , Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland
1975	<i>Grahame Sydney: Paintings of the Otago Landscape</i> , Lee Cramp Gallery, Auckland <i>Grahame Sydney: Paintings</i> , Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland
1972	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Paintings</i> , Moray Gallery, Dunedin
1969	<i>Grahame Sydney: Recent Paintings</i> , Dawson's Downstairs Gallery, Dunedin

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Wallpaper: Works from the permanent collection*, Forrester Gallery, Oamaru
- 2008 *Sinfonia Antarctica*, The New Dowse, Wellington
- 2007 *Picturing the Peninsula; Artists and Banks Peninsula*, Christchurch Art Gallery, Christchurch
- 1998 *Southern Lights: 150 years of Otago Landscape Art*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
- 1994 *Spring Exhibition: Guest artist*, Nelson Suter Art Society, The Suter Gallery, Nelson
- 1993 *Real Vision*, Robert McDougall Gallery, Christchurch
- 1986 *Five: D. Ball, G. Sydney, R. Hotere, P. Nicholls, E. Stevens*, Carnegie Gallery, Dunedin
- New Zealand Drawing Exhibition*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
- 1985 *New Zealand Printmakers*, Bankside Gallery, London
- New Zealand Printmaking*, Portfolio Gallery, Auckland
- 1984 *From the Real World*, Southland Museum and Art Gallery, Invercargill
- 7 New Zealand Artists*, Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland
- 1983 *New Zealand Painting: Two Centuries*, Hocken Library Collection, University of Otago, Dunedin
- 1982 *Etchings, with John Drawbridge*, Galerie Legard, Wellington
- New Zealand Drawing 1982*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin
- 1980 *Portraits*, New Vision Gallery, Auckland
- 1977 *Grahame Sydney*, Otago Art Society, Dunedin
- New Zealand Prints 1977*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland
- 1976 *New Zealand Drawing*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland

COLLECTIONS

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, Christchurch

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Auckland

Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin

Te Manawa Museum of Art Science and History, Palmerston North

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Sydney, G., personal communication 25 October 2010
- ² Sydney, G., 'Grahame Sydney's Antarctic Splendours', *Otago Daily Times*, Dunedin, 7 July 2011
- ³ Sydney, G., personal communication, 25 October 2010
- ⁴ Sydney, G. (2005) cited in *Places of the mind: the art of Edward Hopper and Grahame Sydney* by Witherow, A (MA Thesis) University of Otago, p. 110
- ⁵ Sydney, G. (1977) *The frame is the dictator*, *Art New Zealand* 7, p. 44-45

LIST OF WORKS

Burke's Pass 2009

oil on linen
Private Collection
655 x 750

Clouds at Evening, Manuherikia Valley 2001

oil on linen
Private Collection
1220 x 1220

Cloud Stack, Hawkduns 2003

oil on linen
Private Collection
510 x 510

Cookhouse 2001

oil on linen
Private Collection
760 x 1020

From Hutton Cliffs 2005

oil on linen
Private Collection
650 x 850

Harriers at the Cook House 2010

oil on linen
Private Collection
910 x 1220

Hawk and Moon 2010

oil on linen
Private Collection
1010 x 1360

Hawkdun Winter 2005

oil on linen
Private Collection
655 x 1120

Hinterland III 2001

oil on linen
Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery
660 x 1370

Home Hills Runs Road 2002

oil on linen
Private Collection
505 x 705

Homestead, Maniototo 2004

oil on linen
Private Collection
610 x 1120

Hut Point, Antarctica 2006

oil on linen
Collection of Antarctica New Zealand
910 x 1215

Kane's Pond 2011

oil on linen
Private Collection
760 x 1020

Maniototo Moon 2005

oil on linen
Private Collection
910 x 1215

Ohau Canal 2007

oil on linen
Private Collection
660 x 1010

Past Lives, Wedderburn 2006

oil on linen
Private Collection
760 x 910

Road from Castle Rock 2007

oil on linen
Private Collection
760 x 115

Roll Cage Mary 2007

oil on linen
Private Collection
910 x 710

September Burn, St Bathans 2003

oil on linen
Private Collection
710 x 1020

Spies 2005

oil on linen
Private Collection
455 x 505

St Bathans Downs Road 1 2010

oil on linen
Private Collection
505 x 605

Towards Bottle Rock 2002

oil on linen
Private Collection
920 x 1220

Trough 2003

oil on linen
Private Collection
405 x 405

Up on the Downs 2006

oil on linen
Private Collection
760 x 1220

Vince's Cross, Antarctica 2006

oil on linen
Private Collection
760 x 1370

Winter Water 2006

oil on linen
Private Collection
705 x 910

Winter Willow, Ida Valley 2004

oil on linen
Private Collection
1100 x 1100



Up on the Downs 2006

22 September 2011 - 6 February 2012

PATAKA Museum of Arts & Cultures



Ohau Canal 2007



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