DOG CHAMPS AT CHARLIE'S BAR

Essay on 'Dog Champs at Charlie's Bar'. Egg Tempera on Board. 620 x 630mm. 1982 - 2001. Private Collection. Extract from Bowerbank Ninow Auction Catalogue 2016. Essay by Andrew Clark.

It's easy to see why Grahame Sydney's work has such long standing acclaim, both from the general public and from critics and collectors of New Zealand art. His immaculate landscapes in particular immediately command attention, drawing in the eye with their smooth, seamless surfaces and delicately observed details. However, his works are more than a virtuoso performance of painterly technique: what gives Sydney's work their lasting value is the way he composes and frames his landscapes, buildings and figures, and the overwhelming sense of silence and stillness which pervades his images. Sydney pulls off the deft trick of producing works which are inherently grounded in a particular place and time, the arid plains of Central Otago, without any trace of provinciality. His works perfectly capture the sense of atemporal stasis which characterises the experience of being in the New Zealand landscape, particularly the vast expanses of the South Island, where inhuman scale of the endless country and vacant sky leads to an almost complete erasure of the individual ego.

Sydney's landscapes are of course descendants of the Romanticist school of landscape painting in New Zealand, in which the landscape was configured as a representation of the fear-inducing sublime, before which humans are powerless. However, Michael Findlay notes that Sydney's work has more in common with the considered studies of W M Hodgkins than with the lush, frenzied canvasses of Nicholas Chevalier or John Hoyte (1). In fact, Sydney's depiction of wide open spaces are actually constructed in the studio, producing deliberate and technically flawless paintings which seem almost to have been created without the intervention of the artist's hand.

These highly finished objects exist in a kind of uncanny valley, in between the transparent, immediately graspable pseudo reality of the photograph and the opaque physicality of the artist's brush. Like his romanticist forebears, Sydney positions his landscapes as oppositional forces to humanity, testing and challenging us, rebuffing our attempts to modify them, or to extract utility from them. However, they are not reflections of the human condition or metaphors for our own crises and emotions. The dry hills and clear, cloudless skies which make up the horizons of this world have as little to do with human frames of reference as the craters of a distant planet.

This tendency towards the concealment of artistic technique leads to comparisons with photorealism (2), but Sydney in fact has far more in common with the Surrealists, particularly Magritte and De Chirico. Like both of these artists, Sydney imbues his images with a sense of desolate, eerie calm. Even figure paintings such as 'Evening in the Studio' (1987) are not free of this sense of abjection and abandonment; they too seem to be winding down, withdrawing into themselves like the bony hills which might be glimpsed from the windows of their dwellings. Like De Chirico, Sydney employs stark shadows, which lend the objects in his works a richly modelled quality; his works find a commonality between New Zealand's harsh light and the Mediterranean glare of a painting such as 'The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon' (1910). Like De Chirico, in many works Sydney emphasises the absence of the human figure, introducing instead proxies such as the flaccid mailbag in 'Private bag' (1977), or the comical but sinister figure of the shrouded signpost in 'Slow Sign' (1975). The animate and inanimate are confused and conflated in works such as these, in which dilapidated buildings and rural ephemera take on a kind of quiet, sideways vitality, while the figures in paintings such as 'Standing Nude' (1986) are seemingly trapped in the process of becoming inanimate; the half removed t-shirt which obscures the model's face is the visual and conceptual analogue of the hastily tied sack which likewise obscures the 'face' of 'Slow Sign'.

The present work, 'Dog Champs at Charlie's Bar' depicts a collection of buildings which make up the titular "bar," in reality the Lowburn dog trial site, located just outside Cromwell, on the road to Wanaka. This is presumably the same location as is depicted in 'Dogtrials Bar' (1977) as well as in 'Marquee at the Dog Trials' (1982), the titular structure of which also features prominently in this work. The 1982 watercolour 'Dog Water' is also likely to be a representation of the Lowburn site; this converted bathtub, from which the dogs drank, can be seen in the present work just over the crest of the hill, in front of the marquee and to the right of the three dogs. The inscription on the work '1982 – 2001' reflects the period of time between its date of commission and its completion, a gap of almost twenty years. This is indicative of the deliberate nature of Sydney's work, and of the way his practice has visited and revisited the same locations and themes over the years.

Like many of Sydney's landscape works, the sky is in fact the dominant figure in this work. The buildings and animals are dwarfed by the vast emptiness which hangs above them, leavened only slightly by a few wisps of high altitude cloud in the foreground, a corrugated iron dunny stands on a rakish angle, positioned as though a spectator to the activities of the dog trial. However, this comical structure is the most human element of the scene; the three dogs, their wagging tails disappearing over the brow of the hill, are intent on their own business, not deigning to engage with the observer.

The buildings stand silent and apparently empty; in the background, a skeletal frame structure and a single upright post suggest that this place has either been abandoned under construction, or already begun to decay. This is a place "where human presence has been and withdrawn, or where its traces, its relics, unsettlingly persist" (3). Nested on the horizon, a small sliver of icy, snow capped mountain offers a reminder of the biting cold of the high country, and of how isolated and exposed this human intervention in the landscape really is.

Sydney says of his work "each painting is a vault of invested memory" (4). His images are about how the thought of a place, the feeling which being in space engenders, persists through the year, and how these moments also contribute to the construction of our sense of ourselves. In the case of 'Dog Champs at Charlies Bar', this memory remained fresh for the artist for over twenty years; when the work was delivered to the person who commissioned it, it was accompanied by a card reading: "As it says in the Mainland Cheese ad, 'good things take time' so this must be bloody good."

Andrew Clark

1. Sydney, Grahame and Michael Findlay 'The Art of Grahame Sydney' 2000. P47
2. Ibid. P55.
3. Sydney, Grahame and Vincent O'Sullivan 'Grahame Sydney Paintings 1974 – 2014. P7
4. Ibid. P90.