SYDNEY COUNTRY

FOR 40 YEARS GRAHAME SYDNEY HAS DEPICTED AND DEFENDED NEW ZEALAND'S LANDSCAPE. HIS WORKS ARE SELLING FOR RECORD PRICES, HE'S BEEN FETED AND HONOURED, AND A NEW BOOK ABOUT HIS CAREER IS BEING PUBLISHED. BUT DESPITE THIS, MIKE WHITE DISCOVERS AN ARTIST STILL DOGGED BY SELF-DOUBT AND DESPAIRING OF THE FUTURE.

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Grahame Sydney walking his dog, Milo, with Mt St Bathans in the background.

Road West, Ida Valley. A quintessential Sydney work with the blues and golds of Central Otago in summer.

SO ENTWINED IN THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION ARE THE LANDSCAPES OF CENTRAL OTAGO AND SYDNEY'S PORTRAYAL OF THEM THAT HIS NAME HAS BEEN APPROPRIATED FOR THE HARSH HEARTLAND BETWEEN ALEXANDRA AND RANFURLY.

What's that poem by Baxter? The one that goes, "Yet see the red-gold cirrus, over snow-mountain shine." It could be here, could be what artist Grahame Sydney is watching from a gravel road high in Central Otago, the dying sun tinting and retouching the Hawkdun Range, which still wears winter's snow.

They call Central "big sky country", though exactly why is hard to say. It's just something you reach for when flailing for descriptions. Maybe it's because so often there are no clouds diminishing the blue. Maybe it's because the ridgelines hang low, barely transgressing the horizon. Maybe it's because you feel so far from cityscapes and the buildings that blight your view there.

The other name they give it is "Sydney Country". So entwined in the public imagination are the landscapes of Central Otago and Sydney's portrayal of them that his name has been appropriated for the harsh heartland between Alexandra and Ranfurly. They've made him almost a patron, his work a totem of Central.

It's calm up here. Just skylarks trilling somewhere over the fenceline and an echoey bark of a dog shifting sheep down in the valley. It's somewhere Sydney has come time and again, to mountainbike, to smooth his emotions, sometimes to paint.

The Sydney Country sobriquet is tempting flattery, but he realises it says less about him than the country.

"They don't love my art, they love Central Otago. I think my Central Otago symbolises the New Zealand they want to think of, want to remember. It's almost an idealised, nostalgic New Zealand. I think even Aucklanders often think of New Zealand in terms of, not the heart of Waikato, but some extreme season in Central Otago.

"There's something about its raw bones, the thinness of the vegetation, the semi-arid skeletal nature of the place that seeps deeper into the bones than other places do."

Blues and golds are the patina of Central in summer, but its midwinter sunsets are more measured. It's that wash of pink and mauve, that eventually cools to indigo as the relief of the Hawkduns turns to silhouette. Sydney watches it for a while, then turns away, lifts the dogs into the ute, and heads home to light the fire.

They're there each day when he opens the curtains. That bevelled ridgeline of the Hawkduns, snow to their base, stretching across his view like the blade of a filleting knife slipped between sky and skin of the land. He shifted here to the Cambrian Valley, near St Bathans, in 2003. Built his house on a terrace, with a studio to one side, aligning them so he could track the sun and the changes it wrought on the mountains.

The studio is full to cluttered. There are piles of past drawings, photos of artistic heroes, rolls of linen canvas, jars of brushes and vials of pigment. In the morning a small woodburner warms the space. In the afternoon he'll take a break and slip into a leather armchair, read whatever art autobiography he has on the go, and let himself take a nap.

He's 66. Been a full-time artist 40 years now. Turned a childhood obsession into a lauded career and lifestyle. When he was a kid, his parents would give up afternoons and drive Sydney to some Dunedin lookout where he would sketch while looking out the car's window. His mother, Bet, would knit; his father, Jack, an accountant, would doze. Neither would ever complain or hustle Sydney to finish up.

He took Saturday morning art lessons, drew Disney characters in sketchbooks given to him by cousins for Christmas, and sold a watercolour of the crucifixion to his English teacher for four guineas. His first oil was on a canvas he cut from an old brown bedroom blind.

They lived in Kew, with a view over St Clair beach, in a brick house built by Sydney's grandfather as a wedding present to his daughter. Sydney arrived much later, nine years after his brother, five after his sister – an "autumn leaf" as his mother sweetly put it.

Everyone knew everyone along Marewa St – all the other parents were called Aunty this or Uncle that, and the kids roamed between houses till called home for tea. It was a time of stay-home mums, full baking tins and lying in front of the radiogram. Only the spectre of an atomic bomb obliterating the world, and with it South Dunedin, gave his generation much to worry about.

Sydney played guitar, played cricket, ran, rowed, swam for Otago and was a surf lifesaver at St Clair. He toyed with becoming an architect but 32 per cent in School Cert maths largely put paid to that. In his last year at King's High School he was made head prefect.

His art had progressed from depictions of Donald Duck and fighter planes to studies of Dunedin streets and still-lifes of sparrows he collected from gutters and strung from his bedroom wall. The whole upper storey of the family home reeked during his dead sparrow phase.

He did English and geography at university, working in a cement factory over summer and painting in his spare time. He wished he could become an artist but pragmatism saw him shift to Christchurch and teachers' college in 1970.

Two years teaching in Cromwell was enough though, enough for him to realise he still wanted to give his art a chance. And how to do that? Well, go to Europe of course, see the works of the masters from touching distance, be imbued with what succoured and stirred them. And then come back newly forged as a real artist. Or so he imagined.

It was a disaster. Impoverished and uninspired, he found himself in London dreaming New Zealand dreams – Central Otago dreams, vivid recreations of empty, seared landscapes. When Sydney's ever-supportive parents offered him free board for a year to see if he could launch his painting career, he abandoned fantasies of making it abroad, sailing home in defeat and penury.

Sydney in his studio. He works slowly, producing only about six paintings a year.

Back in his boyhood bedroom, Sydney started to sketch once more. He figured on gradually getting exhibitions, gradually making a name for himself beyond the South Island. But if fate had ignored him in England, it was about to make up for that now.

Just weeks after arriving home, a man came knocking on the door at Marewa St. His name was Peter Webb and he'd seen one of Sydney's works several years before in a competition. He was representing a new gallery in Auckland and looking for new talent. Sydney had only one half-completed still-life to show him. Webb said he'd buy everything Sydney produced until they had enough for an exhibition.

"It was an extraordinary act of faith – or foolishness," Sydney recalls. But the exhibition sold out on opening night and, at 26, Sydney had become what he'd always dreamt of – a full-time artist.

Those first paintings sold for $350 to $500, with Sydney worried he was overpricing them. Today, he'll sell a medium-sized oil for 100 times that, a

Boys Boxing. An early pencil sketch drawn by Sydney when he was nine.

Rozzie at Pisa, 1979. One of Sydney's most famous works, of his first wife Ros, who remains a close friend. The egg tempera medium used by Sydney distinguished much of his early work. The painting is now held by Te Papa.

Hinterland II. Sydney's landscapes are often so realistic, they're mistaken for photographs.

large canvas for $80,000. He's never charged more than $100,000, but in July, Sydney's 1994 *Sunset Near Omarama* sold for $170,000, the highest price ever paid at auction for his work.

He paints patiently, meticulously – a gentle Central sky often taking weeks to layer and blend perfectly. That his work is in demand is confirmed by the lever-arch folder in his office, with "Clients/Potential Clients" on its spine, that's full of emails from people wanting a Sydney.

Some will wait years. Some will never receive a piece. Some will be seriously pissed off at being overlooked. Many would pay more than what Sydney asks. But he's very aware he's asking the equivalent of a year's wages for many people, and he holds to one of his father's maxims that you should take some profit, but leave some for someone else too.

When a work is done, he'll invite the person he has in mind for it down to his studio to see if they want it. More correctly, he wants to see if they love it – love it so much they don't want anyone else to have it. Only occasionally do they say no, it's not for them. Sydney never worries if that happens – someday he'll have something that will be right for them.

The well-off and well-known have come calling. Many paintings go overseas to expats wanting a touchstone of home. The government gifted a Sydney to Nelson Mandela. Te Papa holds four of his works. Elton John has one. His work has spawned imitators, artistic imposters who Sydney loathes for their gall and lack of imagination.

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There have been several books about his art. And two of his photography, which he's spent much more time on in the past decade. In 2004, there was an ONZM for services to painting. He can list politicians, All Blacks, arts luminaries and laureates, and business captains as close friends and clients. Yet beyond notable fans and noble work, you'll easily find a Sydney that's still insecure, who still doubts his place.

He traces it back to his childhood, the geeky kid with glasses that looked like they were carved from pickle jars, who felt an outsider. Contemporaries from that time question this supposed lack of confidence, pointing to his sporting ability, his natural wit and the fact high schools don't choose wallflowers to be head prefect. Sydney says he learnt to disguise it well, and the only time he felt at ease was when painting – the world within the frame, which he was in charge of.

Despite coming of age in the time of the Beatles and Woodstock, hippiedom and psychedelia, he remained unalterably straight, unnoticed by the free spirits and bypassed by free love. "I was scared shitless of it all, paralysed. It was just a serious sense of not belonging and being condemned to my nerdish, bespectacled, pimply, adolescent outer condition."

Read what Sydney writes now, listen to him speak eloquently on anything from art to the environment, and you'd assume life's successes have triumphed over teenage angst. But Sydney insists his public confidence remains a sham.

"I can turn it on. I've learned how to do that. I've learned how to be secure but, privately, very often I'm not. I know I should be," he says. "But I can't shake off the essential self-consciousness and belief that I'm some sort of fraud that's going to be found out.

Melissa at Tunnel Beach. Sydney promised his daughter, Melissa, a painting for her 20th birthday. Unhappy with how it was progressing, he shelved it, before finally making significant changes. His daughter eventually received it when she was 33.

"I hear myself saying things and the secret internal voice says, 'Why don't you just shut up.' That's like a Greek chorus inside me. I generally feel I don't know enough, that I haven't said it effectively or I've been an arrogant shit. I think that's just built into me by my sense of inadequacy and hypersensitivity, especially about looks and a constant wishing I was someone else."

He's glad he's not anyone else now, but is aware how stiff he still is.

"I'm an exceedingly conventional person and I dearly wish I wasn't. I've never been able to let go. Never. I can't dance – I hate dancing – if that tells you anything. I disappoint every woman I've ever held on to. All I see is me making a fool of myself on the floor and making life difficult for them."

Art was always the one place he understood, felt comfortable, felt accepted. But strangely, even here there are chinks in his confidence, dents and doubts that persist.

Despite being one of the country's most acclaimed and successful artists, Sydney isn't everyone's taste. Two reproving tags are often ascribed to him by critics: that he's a mere regionalist, given that his paintings largely feature Central Otago; and a realist – an illustrator, technically competent but producing works devoid of depth, poetry, emotion. To some, Sydney's work is too local, too limited, too literal.

In Sydney's mind, proof of the art snoberati's disdain for him can be seen in how rarely public galleries hold exhibitions of his work. Despite a hugely popular touring show in 2000, he's only been invited to exhibit once since then. He's only once been asked to speak to art school students.

To the charge of being a regionalist, Sydney proudly pleads guilty. "Some of the greatest art through the centuries has been the same affectionate study of people's own backyards. Vermeer only did three paintings outside of his room – it's about as regional as you can get.

"I want people to know my work's from New Zealand. I want to be known as someone who loves being an Otago man, someone from south of the Waitaki. This is where I belong, it's what shapes me. And for anyone to have the audacity to demand you should be different to please some theory or pervading new philosophy, well, no, I don't think so."

As for being a realist: "They think there's no intellect behind it, there's nothing conceptual. They think it's mere depiction – brainless depiction. In the art world, some people think there's a place for me and some people don't, and that's as simple as it is. But it's hard to accept that a lot of people think you're irrelevant. So you just don't let yourself bother with that thought."

So he says. But it clearly does wound him. As long-time friend Roy Colbert notes: "If you've spoken to him at length, you'd have come across the vehemence against many art figures and the very trendy modern movements. The sort of stuff that goes in the Venice Biennale drives him into an apoplexy."

"Grahame would be the last person in the world to be chosen for the Biennale," laughs artist Michael Smither. "And I think he should be pleased about that, really."

Smither met Sydney in 1970 when he was the Frances Hodgkins fellow and Sydney would come to his studio to watch and talk. His accomplishments haven't surprised Smither, who says Sydney discovered his own unique voice.

"The criticisms of him are criticisms that come out of jealousy at his success I'd imagine – also because he steadfastly carries on doing what he wants to do, instead of doing what the critics think he should be doing. And the curators aren't going to be showing Grahame's work because it's serene and makes you feel good and it's lovely to look at. That's not the sort of stuff galleries like to show these days – they're in the business of being provocative."

Sydney says the devotion of art's high priests to the avant-garde has left most gallery-goers utterly adrift. "So much is so esoteric, so extreme and so bewildering to so many."

In that sense, he feels almost like an anachronism in an art world with few boundaries, producing work, "somewhat like art used to be. The exhibition officers, the curators, the professional art people speak a totally different language to me and come from a completely different country. But I've always said, your contemporaries can say what they like, history judges best. And I'm quite happy to take my chances with history."

Long-time friend Brian Turner (left) says Sydney's insecurities drive him to excel.

Charles Ninow, a senior fine arts specialist with Webb's auction house, says Sydney will not only be remembered well in the future, his Otago landscapes "will be regarded as national treasures".

"I'd describe Sydney as somewhat of a lone ranger in New Zealand art. He came out of the era that produced other great landscape artists like Don Binney – McCahon produced a lot of great landscapes in the 70s – but he's played to the tune of his own drum. He's essentially New Zealand's greatest modern realist painter. Particularly in the last 12 months, there's been a huge amount of interest in his work. A huge, huge amount."

That was shown by the record auction price *Sunset Near Omarama* achieved in July.

The fact Sydney's work is accessible and popular in no way diminishes his standing, Ninow says.

"You should see the works when they're in the gallery. They're the kind of things that pull people in and they stand in front of them for a long, long time – it evokes a really emotive response. And I see a lot of works and there aren't many that really truly move me – but that Sydney [*Sunset*], from the very time I saw it, I could see it was special."

Ninow says another public exhibition of Sydney's paintings is long overdue, given he produces so few works, sells directly to clients as he completes them, and buyers hold on to them – fewer than 50 Sydney works have ever come to auction.

The only consolation for being snubbed by the art elite, says Michael Smither, is there are thousands of reproductions of Sydney's paintings on walls across the country, in people's homes. "But I think his work should be in every public gallery."

Writer and poet Brian Turner, who's known Sydney for more than 30 years and lives down the road from him, says Sydney might have got a better hearing from the artistic arbiters if he'd been painting overseas.

"I've heard again and again and again, from people in and around the arts, Grahame dismissed as just someone who paints pretty pictures of landscapes. And when I hear that I think of what one of my old hockey coaches would often say: 'You know, with some people it's not their ignorance that astounds you, it's the fucking extent of it.'"

Turner says there are other misconceptions about Sydney. "The main criticism I've heard about Grahame was he was up himself, stand-offish and morally impenitent. I think there's bugger-all truth in what they say about him – it tells me more about the people who are making the observations."

That said, it's not hard to understand why such caricatures arise. Sydney has an undeniable ego and strongly held views on many issues, from art to politics to conservation. His no-holds-barred style affronts some and has seen accusations of Sydney being censorious or conceited. His frequent use of adjectives when speaking and writing, employed almost like flashes of colour in his painting, adds emphasis some deem overbearing.

In a 2009 *North & South* article, writer Steve Braunias described Sydney as "a strange fellow. There was almost something completely humourless about him... He spoke with such intense, dogmatic fervour; he followed a path of moral certainties."

The passage pissed off Sydney – apart from the bit about being dogmatic. "Yep, that was fair. But in my world there's a vast amount of grey between the black and white of certainty. There's always more to any story than you understand. I'm nowhere near as judgmental as I once was – although I'll happily make judgments about politicians to my dying day. But generally if I have a strong opinion, I've reached it carefully. I'm not so arrogant that I'm not prepared to listen to other arguments – usually I'm just not persuaded by them. And if I'm seriously against somebody, they've deserved it."

Sydney is well known for his environmental advocacy, something that goes back to when he lived in Cromwell and protested against the Clyde Dam. Recently he spearheaded opposition to a large windfarm in the Maniototo, along with Turner and former All Black Anton Oliver. That was a bitter one; took him away from painting for a year, split the community, and Sydney tells the story about his enemies pinning his photo to a dartboard.

He protests against the way the landscape he loves is being altered in the name of growth. The evil stepchildren of this supposed progress – the bastard scourge of wilding pines and the seemingly ceaseless march of dairy farms into the Ida Valley near his home – continue to astound and distress him.

"Golden Central Otago is a myth now. It's being watered and fertilised out of existence. We're doing everything against nature's wishes. The dream of our beloved leaders seems to be that New Zealand will be the same carpet of the same green from top to toe.

"And we're being led by the nose, unwillingly, into a homogeneity, an acceptance of everyone else's values and not our own. This isn't just nostalgia. I'm talking about matters of nature and culture.

"We're being pushed around by the behemoths of British and American corporate life. We sell out to them, we sell our land to them and the high points of what made New Zealand separate and brilliant have been planed down to an average low. It's harder and harder to pick what is New Zealand character and value and quality."

Sydney's not a Hotere, not one to protest through his art. And sometimes he wishes he could ignore what was happening around him and just paint. "But I don't want to let myself be part of the careless majority. I worry enormously about what this country is going to be like when my grandchild is my age. I feel responsible for what we leave. And the legacy we're responsible for at the moment is a disgraceful one of degradation and unsustainable change.

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"We have this idiotic view of our dominance over nature – but nature always bats last."

Frost lies brittle in the shadows of St Bathans' cemetery. One of Sydney's dogs sniffs around the graves of early settlers, men born on the other side of the world and lured here by gold and the prospect of a more equitable life. To Sydney, the gently eroding headstones are sad gestures, "an attempt to persuade people you can be remembered. It's this fight against insignificance. We've got to accept we're brief occupants and it comes to nothing."

Not for Sydney a plot and a plaque in some neglected graveyard where macrocarpas stand guard. When he goes, his ashes will be scattered along the top of the Hawkduns.

As a young man, he feared he wouldn't live to 30, and saw his paintings as milestones along this pathway to premature death. "And there's still a need in me to make efforts to defy mortality. One of the joys of being a painter is making things that are going to last 500 years and when I'm gone, I won't be necessarily forgotten. That means a lot to me."

Recent years have been unsettled for Sydney. The breakup of his second marriage resulted in a messy and costly settlement, which he's only just climbing out of financially. Debt has been something of a constant in his life, despite the value of his work. He's never been good with money – never really cared about it. He lived beyond his means, doted on his two kids, and had a bank that let him run up absurd overdrafts.

But calm is coming. In December, he'll marry partner Fiona, who Sydney credits with sorting out his business issues and ensuring he has the space to paint. He gave up the booze three years ago, realising the things he most regretted saying and doing happened when he was drinking. He now has time to read, play ukulele, and pursue dreams of film making. His first grandchild arrived last year and Sydney coos by Skype several times a week.

"Fi and I often laugh that we must be the world's most boring couple. I potter away at work, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. And I look out to Mt St Bathans to the north and the Hawkduns along the skyline and it's really simple. We live with the phenomenal theatre of the days – and I love my days."

That Baxter poem is *High Country Weather*. And there really is something of Sydney and his surroundings in it.

Upon the upland road
Ride easy, stranger.
Surrender to the sky
Your heart of anger.

"The serenity gets into your system," says Sydney of life in Central Otago. "You get so conditioned by the quiet and isolation and the natural drama and cycles, and the absence of a man-made environment. I find it really hard to be anywhere else." +

• Grahame Sydney: Paintings 1974-2014 *will be published on October 20 (Craig Potton Publishing, $99.99). This lushly produced, slip-covered volume is a major retrospective survey from Sydney's 40-year career as an artist – and includes essays by Sydney and New Zealand Poet Laureate Vincent O'Sullivan. We have two copies to give away. Email your name and postal address to north&south@bauermedia.co.nz with "Grahame Sydney Paintings" in the subject line. One entry per person; entries close November 15, 2014.*