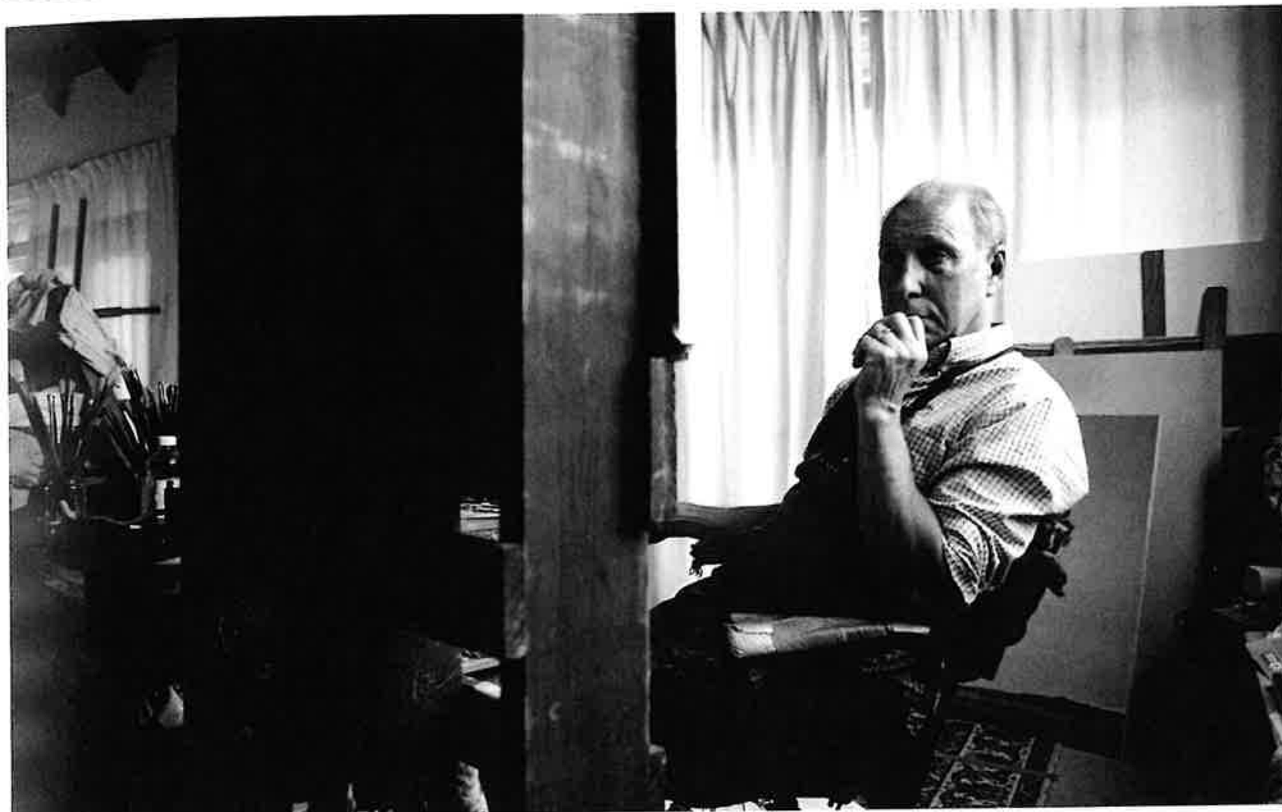
A FEW WORDS WITH

GRAHAME SYDNEY

by Graham Beattie



Grahame Sydney. Photograph by Don Fuchs.

GRAHAM BEATTIE: Your paintings are all known for depicting Otago in one way or another. You obviously have had a lifelong love affair with the province.

GRAHAME SYDNEY: It all started with holidays in Arrowtown with families from our home neighbourhood when I was about 10 years old. The Sydneys had a family crib—"bach" to you northerners—at Karitane, up the coast from Dunedin which was a constant in my life, with boating, seaside fishing from the rocks, the inescapable smell of the ocean, and adventures any kid would cherish but always seemingly under a cloud of grey drizzle or chilly coastal winds. The neighbours returned from their Central holidays so tanned and sun-basted it was as if they'd been to another world, and indeed, it felt like a separate country to me once I began going there myself. I did fall in love with it, totally. It felt hot, dazzlingly sunlit, dry, calm, and silent. It had a marvellously romantic gold history which didn't feel so far away from us—we panned for gold almost every day up the Arrow River—and all of this beneath a sky which, in memory at least, was always blue and cloudless. This was in the late 1950s, early 1960s, when Arrowtown was small and unwanted and long before the rampant commercial expansion of Queenstown. The landscape was natural then. Irrigation and chemical fertilisers hadn't turned the golden grass into a lurid green, the seasons were wonderfully contrasting, and the rivers mostly unaffected by "progress." Dad bought a large section on the then-outskirts of Arrowtown in 1960 when I was 12 years old, and from then on, we drove through the wide, empty interior every chance we got, headed for the crib. Mum was a home-making mother, totally devoted to family needs, and I was a very happy beneficiary of that good fortune. It is a different world—or was then. I loved it and still do.

BEATTIE: You are, of course, famous for your landscapes of Central Otago, which encompass oils, watercolours, egg tempera, lithographs, etchings and now photography. Can you say something about the difference in painting and photography when it comes to capturing landscape?

SYDNEY: I've been a professional painter for nearly forty years now, and I hope to die a painter. But the essence of that painter's life is how I feel about a place and how I see it and how I can turn those emotions and observations into a more permanent, recognisable form. There are other media for that purpose now, like photography and film, not just paint and pencil, so I'm enjoying a wider range of opportunities to put out there the things I love, care about, am fascinated by, can't forget, etc.—those things which fuel my art, I guess you could say.

Painting, for me, has always been a slow process of building, constructing an image, deliberately and thoughtfully taking from nature those elements I want to use, leaving others out, re-composing, re-ordering, using only what I think the painting needs to be effective. It's a continual process of refining, shifting about, eliminating, changing—trying to intensify within the world of the frame, trying to get to some sort of essence. It all represents departures from truth, lurches away from the reality of what might have triggered the idea in the first place. The "realism" of my paintings is utterly misleading and always has been. You live with the label, but it's wrong.

Photography, on the other hand, does a different job for me: It's about the decisive

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moment, about the instinct at work in the split second, about framing, composing on the spot—speed, confidence, knowing ... and about the truth. Photographs are the far greater reality for me—the real evidence of being there at that particular moment. Still noticing, knowing, observing, doing all the things I do as a studio painter, but instantly. I dislike the Photoshop interventions and alterations; that's for others, not me. I don't need to play with my photographic images because I have painting if I want to play those games. Photoshop allows photographers to pretend they're painters and to do all the things I do as a painter. But I like my photographs to stand as testament to that magic moment, that instant.

BEATTIE: I guess being an artist you can really live anywhere. What was it that took you to live in the isolated Cambrian Valley, surely one of the coldest occupied places in New Zealand? How much adjustment did it take after city living?

SYDNEY: It was a dream of mine to build a place of my own and work with an architect mate on the project. (Had I had my wish, I'd have been an architect, and my family tree is laden with builders.) But, when it was all done and I came to actually shift here permanently, I was scared, lonely and certain I'd made a colossal blunder. It took weeks, months probably, for me to start feeling comfortable and in any way "at home." But it did happen, and now I don't want to be anywhere else.

I came to the Cambrian Valley first in the early 1990s, though I had visited St Bathans and the Vulcan Hotel on occasion much earlier. A local farmer phoned me sometime in the early 1990s to ask if I'd help him and his group design a triathlon course for St Bathans (I was reasonably well known then as a multi-sporter), so I came through from Dunedin to help them and thought it a pretty attractive, rather secret, little corner of Central Otago. The family came for a couple of holidays after that. We bought a mud-brick cottage in the Ida Valley, and I eventually purchased a block of land in Cambrian Valley from that same farmer looking across the valley towards Mount St Bathans and the Hawkdun Range, which I'd always found immensely appealing.

The farmer in question was Donald Harley, whose portrait is in the book—very tragically being claimed by motor neurone disease.

BEATTIE: Up until the mid-70s, you were a teacher during the week and an artist on the weekends. How did you make the change to become a full-time artist?

SYDNEY: I taught secondary school English and geography in 1971–72 in Cromwell. All through teaching and before that at university, I'd painted constantly in my bedroom at home, holding onto a futile dream that one day I might be a full-time painter. The only successful full-time painters at the time (mid-1960s) were mountain-and-lakes painters, like Douglas Badcock or Aston Greathead or Peter McIntyre. It was the Kelliher Art Prize era, when the big names of our

art world now were almost all part-time painters. There was no real career path for artists if you didn't want to paint for tourists and few "dealers." There were art societies for all the amateurs like me, art shops - framers with imported prints on the walls--and even the public galleries were still collecting English, Australian or works from cultures other than our own.

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It all began to change in the late 1960s, with the first comprehensive art books on NZ art, a couple of major touring shows of our own workers. I remember a show with McCahon, Rita Angus, Mike Smither, Hotere, Bill Sutton, etc. coming to the Otago Museum foyer while I was at university. The first of the dealers were beginning to emerge about that time, too. Dawson's downstairs gallery in Dunedin, run by Maureen Hitchings was the exciting one locally.

The other significant event for me at that stage was the establishment of the Frances Hodgkins fellowship at Otago University, which brought onto the campus my first real artists from beyond the art society world: Tanya Ashken, Derek Ball, Ralph Hotere, Michael Smither. I was very generously helped by these people--Derek, Ralph and Mike in particular—and it gradually dawned on me that a full-time career might be possible after all, especially if I went to England to prove myself.

So, at the end of 1972 and teaching, I went off to London, to be an artist and never return .... Eighteen months later, having scarcely lifted a pencil in anger, deeply gloomy, homesick and miserable—a thorough failure—I was enticed back home by my parents to give this damned painting a good crack and either succeed or fail once and for all. I returned to my bedroom studio. We decided that I would work Dad's hours and that, if all went well, I might manage to get a show in Auckland after a few years of working up the country--a Dunedin show first, then maybe one in Christchurch, then possibly Wellington.

Almost immediately, my luck changed completely. Ten days after arriving home, met at the Lyttelton ferry by my father, I was working upstairs on my first proper painting since leaving NZ, when a stranger came to the front door, and Mum showed him upstairs to where I was working on a still-life exercise, trying to remember how to paint.

When that stranger left a couple of hours later, he had purchased the unfinished painting and promised to purchase everything I completed from that day on. What's more, he would save them for a one-man show at his Auckland Gallery when enough had been assembled. He did both of these things—bought everything I finished, without direction or interference, and showed them all together at the Lee Cramp Gallery in Auckland in March 1975. The show sold out on the first night, made the front page of the NZ Herald.

That man was Peter Webb. It was pure luck. Had I stayed one more month in London, I would have missed him! Peter kick-started my career, with both generosity and pure professionalism. I am grateful to him to this day.

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