

## HOMESTEAD WITH MT IDA 2004

Catalogue Description for 'Homestead with Mt Ida'. Oil on Canvas. 650 x 1010 mm. 2004. Private Collection. Extract from Webbs Auction Catalogue 2015. Essay by Elizabeth Rankin.



'Homestead with Mt Ida' is an excellent example of Grahame Sydney's landscape art, the genre for which he is best known, although his oeuvre encompasses many other subjects, notably figure studies and portraits. His landscapes are much admired because the subject matter is so readily recognisable and the style so accessible – they are as realistic as good photographs, some would say. But this falls short of the mark. His paintings are not simply straightforward 'copies' of familiar New Zealand scenes. If that were the case, how could we explain why they are immediately identifiable as coming from the hand of Grahame Sydney?

Such a question gives us pause to stop and examine Sydney's approach to landscape paintings more closely. Our attention is first caught by the characteristic high skill that he brings to his canvases. While 'Homestead with Mt Ida' is an oil, not in the distinctive tempera medium he taught himself, he has deployed the same meticulous and painstaking approach. It produces a faultless surface where the mark of the maker is not allowed to intrude, and the subject depicted commands our full concentration.

Sydney's subjects are not arbitrary choices of popular scenic vistas: they depend on his intimate acquaintance with Central Otago where he lives. The intense observation to which he has subjected its vast, austere beauty endows his paintings with a compelling authenticity. No aspect seems too trivial to merit his attention, yet his works are not preoccupied with minutiae. Rather, they offer us a sense of the broad sweep of the land, a quality even stronger in 'Homestead with Mt Ida' because of the unifying blanket of snow.

Like his other landscapes it is empty of human beings, and lacks even traces of their passing, as implied by the road in an earlier painting of this area 'Road West, Ida Valley'. The only sign of human occupation is the small, dark form of a simple homestead with outbuildings. But it denies any narrative, there is no sign of habitation, no pathway to it and no light in the windows. It is as desolate as the abandoned huts of South Pole expeditions that Sydney photographed on visits to Antarctica in 2003 and 2006.

Comparisons with Sydney's photographs highlight the distinctive quality of his paintings. 'Homestead with Mt Ida' shares a reduced palette with the Antarctic photographs because of the covering of snow. But the white mantle in the painting has been carefully orchestrated. The vibrant blue of a near cloudless New Zealand sky resonates in the snow beneath, capturing a muted brilliance. The light also infuses the pure white drifts, lending them a warmer tint, which is echoed in the glow behind the distant mountain range on the right. Any danger that such a harmonious palette might create too uniform a scene is avoided by the careful placement of the brown toned homestead and the long blue shadow it casts, which provides a focal point that anchors the composition.

Sydney's painted landscapes are far more than merely realistic: they rely on a very personal knowledge of particular landscapes, which he makes his own through his masterful control of composition and colour.

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