



MIKE WHITE/STUFF

Thriving on empty

The man synonymous with the spare, wide open landscapes of Central Otago is fighting to stop them being erased. **by SHARON STEPHENSON**

There are two ways to think about Central Otago's Cambrian Valley – a place you sweep through on the way to somewhere else, or a stunning landscape of vast skies, alpine fields and crumpled mountains dusted with snow.

Sir Grahame Sydney is definitely in the latter camp. One of our greatest living painters, Sydney has called the Cambrian Valley – a tiny dot on a part of the map that's full of tiny dots – home since 1999. "I've lived south of the Waitaki River for 71 of my 74 years," he says proudly.

As Sydney – "Please don't call me Sir Grahame, no one does") – sips coffee and his two dogs sleep at his feet, he points to the view that extends from the Dunstans to Mt St Bathans and the Hawkdun Range, a ruggedly sensual landscape that features in many of his paintings.

"You can't see another house or human being from here. We live in nature, in a place where I feel a palpable sense of belonging. I'm a loner, and am happiest being alone with the silence that comes from this emptiness and raw, skeletal beauty."

But the schist peaks filling Sydney's windows are more than just an inspiration for his art. "They're a constant reminder that we, and our passage through life, are utterly insignificant. These mountains were here before us and they'll be here after we're gone. It's the kind of thing that really humbles a person."

There's as much chance of Sydney leaving this land as there is of him giving up painting. He's seen a fair chunk of the world, but doesn't much

care for cities. "I think they're ugly, noisy and claustrophobic," he says, slipping into what he calls grumpy-old-man syndrome. "But this place is paradise."

Unfortunately, paradise is changing. Sydney gestures towards a neighbouring property and the lush pine trees that fan across the paddock.

"In the late 90s, that used to be tussock with two or three pine trees. Thanks to wilding pine spread, where the wind blows the pine seeds across the ground, that has now turned into an impenetrable forest of exotic imported trees. It's been said that one pine tree can lead to 1000 trees in a decade."

Sydney turned his attention to the fight against wilding pines in 2012, becoming one of the founding members of the Central Otago Wilding Conifer Control Group. The 60-strong group is united in its belief that evergreen pine trees rob the region of its colourful seasonal leaves, use up valuable water resources and increase

the fire risk.

"It's really about how we want the landscape to look and how we want to preserve the region's character. Our landscape is the foundation for our tourism industry down here, so we need to look after it."

In 2016, the government pledged \$16 million over four years for the first phase of a national wilding control programme aimed at tackling wilding conifers in the highest-priority areas. Budget 2020 allocated another \$100 million over four years to expand the programme. But further baseline funding will be scaled back to \$10 million a year from 2023-24.

Sydney believes it isn't enough. "It's great that this money is helping to get rid of wilding pines. But we're still behind the eight ball. We need

"I hate change, especially change that plunders natural resources for profit."

Sir Grahame Sydney: "I want to keep this unique landscape the way it has always been."

more funding and we need to get serious about it.”

Sydney's life hacks are simple: be smart, be generous, but most importantly, be true to yourself. “At heart, I’m a Southern Man who wants to keep this unique landscape the way it has always been. I hate change, especially change that plunders natural resources for profit.”

Sydney's first tilt at environmental activism came in the 70s, when he got involved in protests against the Clyde Dam, one of Rob Muldoon's Think Big projects. At the time, he and his first wife, Ros, were living at Mt Pisa Station, near the Clutha River. “I thought it was ridiculous to desecrate such a beautiful river in order to send power to the North Island. Just ridiculous.”

Sydney lost that fight and admits Central Otago might not have its current wine industry if the dam project had been scuppered. “You have to be realistic, but even today I'd still lean in favour of leaving the river alone.”

He was more successful with his 2012 campaign against Meridian Energy's plan to build 176 wind turbines on the Lammermoor range.

But Sydney isn't the sort to glue himself to a motorway; his brand of activism is quiet and calm, delivered in the sort of well-modulated voice that could have found a home in radio had art not worked out.

Today, Sydney's paintings hang in some of the world's most exclusive post codes. Elton John, for example, owns one. “The story goes that Elton was doing a show in Australia in 1982 and a gallery in Sydney called to say he wanted to buy one of my figure paintings, but that he wanted a discount. It was the week my father died and I didn't have the capacity to deal with anything else, so I told the gallery to go to hell, but they could discount their commission if they wanted to.”

The British singer eventually bought the piece at full price.

Another painting, *Moonrise on the Maniototo*, was gifted to the late Nelson Mandela by then-prime minister Jim Bolger. Other works hang in Te Papa and public galleries

in Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin and Whanganui.

Sydney says he'd be surprised if any of them were currently on display. “I'm doing the grumpy thing again, but landscape paintings, especially by old white males, aren't really flavour of the month.

“So much of my work is about finding beauty in places where others don't see it. I try to give permanent form to what I find beautiful – the ordinary, everyday and mundane. But that doesn't hold much trac-

world, but thanks to the internet, now the world comes to me.”

Just don't hold your breath for a Sydney original: some clients have been on the waiting list for eight years, partly because he is a slow painter – “In a good year, I'd be lucky to do six paintings” – but also because he's choosy about who he sells to.

“I don't do commissions. I paint the things I love and want to paint and then try to find the best home I can for them. It's a bit like adopting out a baby – you want that baby to go to the best parents possible.”

Art came early for Sydney. He was born in Dunedin, the son of an accountant father and a mother who taught swimming. The youngest of three siblings, he became a competitive swimmer who represented Otago. He also played cricket and rugby, but insists he wasn't any good.

He was, however, good at making things with his hands, from drawing to creating balsa wood models in the family's



Space invaders: wilding pines threaten to transform Central Otago's signature empty landscapes.

cellar. Inspiration came from an uncle who drew cartoons on demand.

“Uncle George didn't have the money to attend art school but he was extremely talented. I remember being at the family crib [bach] in Karitane when I was five, seeing him create pure magic on paper. It planted the seed for my career.”

He enrolled in weekend art classes but opted for an English and geography degree thanks to his father's warning that “No one survives as an artist.”

Teachers' college and a few years' teaching at Cromwell District High School followed before he left for England, planning to set himself up as a full-time painter in London. “But that didn't work out because I didn't have enough money. So instead, I taught, moved furniture and was a lifesaver at a pool in Tottenham.”

Weekends were spent visiting art galleries and scribbling observations into a notebook. “I wanted to know why some paintings worked and others didn't. It helped my thinking take some sort of analytical form.”

After a miserable, homesick 18 months, he was enticed back to Dunedin by his

cellar. Inspiration came from an uncle who drew cartoons on demand.

“Uncle George didn't have the money to attend art school but he was extremely talented. I remember being at the family crib [bach] in Karitane when I was five, seeing him create pure magic on paper. It planted the seed for my career.”

He enrolled in weekend art classes but opted for an English and geography degree thanks to his father's warning that “No one survives as an artist.”

Teachers' college and a few years' teaching at Cromwell District High School followed before he left for England, planning to set himself up as a full-time painter in London. “But that didn't work out because I didn't have enough money. So instead, I taught, moved furniture and was a lifesaver at a pool in Tottenham.”

Weekends were spent visiting art galleries and scribbling observations into a notebook. “I wanted to know why some paintings worked and others didn't. It helped my thinking take some sort of analytical form.”

After a miserable, homesick 18 months, he was enticed back to Dunedin by his



parents, who offered him a year's free board while he tried to establish himself as a full-time painter. At the time, he was experimenting with egg tempera, a fast-drying medium that combines egg yolk and water. "No one in New Zealand was using egg tempera and I needed to do something to get people's attention, so I read library books and taught myself how to use it."

Salvation came in the form of Peter Webb, who'd recently set up a gallery in Auckland and offered to buy everything Sydney finished from that day on. It was, he admits, an "extraordinary gift" that kick-started his career.

These days, life with his second wife Fiona (Fee) and their dogs on their 2ha plot follows a comfortable routine. "I spend the morning doing business things like answering emails and having meetings. Then Fee and I walk the dogs for five or six kilometres up the valley. Or we'll get in the ute to drive somewhere where the dogs can have new smells." After lunch, Sydney heads into his studio to paint until 7 or 8pm.

For decades, his outlet from work was sport. "I loved doing triathlons. Only the failure of my knees after years of running on hard surfaces, including twice finishing in the top 25 of the Coast to Coast and 13 half marathons, stopped all of that. Now, I'm more sedate."

"There's so much I still want to do, make and leave behind. I want to do better work, make the most of the time I have left."

That includes being a "voracious reader" of artists' biographies and US politics, as well as the works of his New Zealand writer friends.

"I'm a sadly inadequate guitar and ukulele player and I watch a lot of movies."

He has two children from his first marriage – Melissa, who lives in Melbourne

Grahame Sydney's *Potshots*, 2022, from a private collection in Christchurch.

with her three daughters, and son Nick, a graphic artist and sometime DJ who's based in Queenstown.

While the word retirement isn't in his vocabulary, the 74-year-old worries that he's running out of time. "There's so much I still want to do, make and leave behind. I want to do better work, especially more figure painting because New Zealand is lacking in the tradition of human figure painting. But when you get to my age, people start to fall over. I want to make the most of what time I have left."

Part of that is helping young artists find their groove, from Dunedin artist Simon Richardson to Sasha Alba and Tom Simpson. "I enjoy talking to young painters about their work and suggesting books, TV shows or films they should study. It's important to me to make myself available to these artists, because I was greatly encouraged by older, more experienced painters in my younger days. Plus, I get a lot of pleasure from watching their excitement and progress." ■