

MAINFREIGHT

presents

On the Road

thirty-five paintings by
GRAHAME SYDNEY



Road West, Ida Valley 1999, oil on linen: 710 x 1220 mm, Private Collection, Tauranga.

Southland Museum and Art Gallery, 108 Gala Street, Invercargill 2 February – 10 March 2002

Aigantighe Art Gallery, 49 Wai-iti Road, Timaru 23 March – 28 April 2002

Ashburton Art Gallery, Baring Square East, Ashburton 3 May – 9 June 2002



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DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY



Maniototo 1996, oil on linen: 765 x 1220 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.

*'The great purpose of landscape art is to make us at home in our own country'*¹

At the age of twenty-four, and full of painterly ambition, Grahame Sydney looked upon the urban clutter of London with dimmed artistic will. Had he been wooed by London's 'otherness' we might have been painted out of a visual legacy, much of which has entered the collective consciousness of New Zealanders.

It was not part of Sydney's grand OE plan to discover that all painterly facility would fall redundant before a landscape for which he had no intrinsic feeling. Thoughts of Central Otago's stern beauty, its parched open spaces and minimal human traffic, grew all the more vivid against the artist's London backdrop. A geographical epiphany of sorts, this sharpened his artistic wits and led him, with great certitude, back to the landscape inscribed with his youth.

New Zealand's cultural history is littered with exported talent. The lure of long-established traditions and the stimulus offered by a sense of difference have led many artists and writers away from their New Zealand home. Conversely, Sydney belongs to a lineage that has gathered impetus from the familiar and the home-grown.

We can measure great tracts of New Zealand through the imagery of our artists. Some have distilled the essence of the land with such visual potency that their images begin to coalesce, in the mind, with the 'real thing'. Try viewing the Otago Peninsula from an elevated viewpoint without Colin McCahon's rhythmic, geomorphic forms arising; take a drive through the central North Island without seeing Dick Frizzell in the lush green hills dotted with fledgling pine stubble, the docile cattle and the prosaic petrol stations; experience a Canterbury Nor'wester and see if you're not in the company of Bill Sutton and his ochre tussock. And so on. The challenge of driving through Central Otago without Grahame Sydney at your shoulder is even greater.

While Sydney accepts the 'regionalist' art tag, he does so with a wary eye cast towards the term 'provincial'. Furthermore, it is a label that tends to remove agency from the artist and hand it over to the region that supposedly *engenders* the image, rendering the artist little more than a copyist. Bill Sutton, noted for his contribution to Canterbury imagery, was similarly conscious of the term's implications: 'It is not the nature or location of the material upon which paintings are based that is important, but the use the artist makes of it – a conscious structure based on a distillation'.²

Sydney's work is expressive of far more than the physicality of the region. He reaches towards the imponderables of 'place'.

Artists and writers often articulate a certain ineffable 'something' about our environment that defies ready definition. Poet and fellow Central Otago enthusiast Brian Turner, characterised Sydney's efforts as '...painting out and crafting your responses to light and land, and a whole lot else we haven't got names for.'³ Sam Neill wrote of '...the shock of recognition his paintings bring. Recognition not only of the physicality of the place, its silent beauty. But also recognition of how you *feel* in that place, recognition of oneself.'⁴

Choosing motifs that lie outside the more obvious grandeur of the tourist circuit, Sydney locates his Eden within the parched forms and vernacular structures of Central's hinterland. He takes the seemingly inconsequential elements of our physical environment and ennobles them. Corrugated iron, sun-bleached weathered boards and solitary unspectacular trees, find centre stage on the Sydney landscape. In *Private Bag* (1977), for example, it is nothing more heroic than a mailbox that commands our attention. By forcing an exceedingly low viewpoint upon the viewer, the artist dictates that we experience this unprepossessing object as a monumental structure.

Sydney's devotion to the region has indeed secured him an enthusiastic following in Otago, yet there is something in his

imagery that transcends the local and strikes a national chord. As a relatively young country, we are still engrossed in the search for emblems of our nationhood and identity, and the shaping influence of the land upon our collective psyche is central to this concern. Nurtured on an abundance of sparsely populated country (or for city dwellers, at least the *notion* of it, fed via the media), New Zealanders have an ingrained sense of space. Many of Sydney's landscapes convey something of this with their vast, untrammelled vistas and conspicuous absences. In *Road West, Ida Valley* (1999) and *Maniototo* (1996), low horizon lines and expansive skies are emphasised to this end, offering a compelling breadth of vision.

People and landscapes are rarely mixed in Sydney's work (Te Papa's *Rozzie at Pisa* (1978), being the notable exception). This absence of figures lends intensity to the silence of the land and allows the viewer more narrative space. It captures the sense of the isolation inherent in such places, and evokes something described by Neill as 'the exhilaration of solitude that is inseparable from the terror of loneliness'.⁵

As with his landscapes, when he does turn his gaze to people, they are those with whom he has an abiding connection. While portrait commissions could prove a financially lucrative option for Sydney, he is not sufficiently



The Silent Studio 1987, oil on panel: 510 x 510 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.



Hinterland II 1998, oil on linen: 760 x 1375 mm, Private Collection, Queenstown.

moved to paint unfamiliar faces. On the infrequent occasions when he does stray into portraiture, he chooses from among family and friends whose features and personalities are already deeply impressed upon him. *Roger Hall* (1980), painted of his friend, and *Nicholas at Six* (1987) of his son, form part of an oeuvre that is essentially a pictorial diary of people and places most important to him.

Although his figure studies are more anonymous in nature, they, too, are drawn from people known to the artist. Sydney began painting the nude in the mid-1980s following the slow death of his father in 1986. Having witnessed the decay of the human body in this way, he wanted to immortalise its moments of vitality. He used the female form as a vehicle to respond to the tension between beauty and mortality. This perhaps accounts for a certain coolness, detected by some critics, in his treatment of the nude.

Sydney's fascination with the changing dialogues between light and form is as evident in his figure paintings as in his landscapes. In *The Silent Studio* (1987), the female nude emerges from beneath dark shadows and grey surrounds to create an intensely luminous focal point. Indeed, many of the artists most esteemed by Sydney are those who have shown a facility with the rendering of light and shadow (Vermeer, Sargent, Friedrich and Rembrandt, to name a few).

Whereas the content of his images is governed by a 'less is more' approach – a desire to see how *little* he can get away with, his painting technique is a laboured affair: 'I'm the long stare, not the quick glimpse'.⁶ The control and order with which he applies pigment, permeates the mood of his works

and enhances that distinctive Sydney atmosphere of eerie calm. As an artist ever alert to texture and the sumptuous qualities of paint, a realistic style is well suited to his needs. And yet, 'Realism' is a limiting art term, for it tends to obscure the sensibility that guides the brush. The precision of Sydney's style and the accomplished surface effects, often distract the viewer from the ruse behind the realism.

Sydney's images are born of an intuitive process – of time spent observing and absorbing his environment. Between the preparatory drawings and the finished works, artifice has its play; once back in the studio, much editing, re-arranging and tweaking takes place. Here, the images assume a secondary, more cerebral existence as the interplay of shapes and tones. In an effort to focus on the formal notes of an image, Sydney will often turn the work upside-down on his easel to minimise the distraction of the image and concentrate on tonal and geometrical values.

This interest in patterning can be seen in works like *Hinterland II* (1998), where texture, form and shadow are all played out on a palette of ochre and brown. The result is striking in its simplicity, for the eye has nothing more to assess than the undulating rhythm of hills. A similar accent on formal elements can be seen in *Weatherboards at Cluden* (1979). Consisting of a horizontal sweep of wood, framed by corrugated iron above, and dry grass below, the painting stands as an essay in line, light and shadow.

Sydney occupies a curious position vis-à-vis the art world. Scholarly art historical attention has long been disproportionate to the public acclaim he has received (the recent

publication *The Art of Grahame Sydney* by Longacre Press goes some way towards redressing this). This owes in part to the skewed elitist logic that views 'popular' as a rather dubious accolade and implies that the artist caters to the whims of the public. Not true of Sydney, who has always remained unswerving in his devotion to his own artistic preoccupations. That his work appeals to others is merely happy coincidence, and the popularity of his images: a measure of their ability to affect.

In an art world that courts stylistic innovation and espouses a proliferation of styles and 'isms', Sydney's is a singular voice. Unmoved by prevailing fashions, he has always looked to his environment for artistic renewal:

'...I do believe very, very firmly, that in all creative life – not just in the visual arts, but in literature and film making and music and so on – that the best work has always come out of a creative person's happy acceptance of what is referred to as their "own backyard".'⁷

In an effort to be closer to the land that feeds his imagination, he is having a new studio built in the heart of Central Otago. There, away from the distractions of the city, and in the company of the magnificent Hawkdun Range, he will continue to mine his 'own backyard'.

Claire Finlayson
Hocken Library
March 2000

¹ From the exhibition of Algoma paintings (Group of Seven), Art Museum of Toronto, 1919

² *Contemporary New Zealand Art 2*, Elizabeth Caughey & John Gow, David Bateman, Auckland: 1999, p.92

³ From a poem by Brian Turner called 'Towards the Maniototo' (after paintings by Grahame Sydney), reproduced in *Timeless Land*, Grahame Sydney, Brian Turner, Owen Marshall. Longacre Press, Dunedin: 1995, p.55

⁴ *Timeless Land*, p.8

⁵ *Timeless Land*, p.8

⁶ *The Art of Grahame Sydney*, Longacre Press, Dunedin: 2000, p.169

⁷ *The Art of Grahame Sydney*, p.164

Biographical Notes

Grahame Sydney was born in Dunedin in 1948. He attended schools and University in the region, graduating with a BA in English and Geography from the University of Otago in 1969. After a year at Secondary Teacher's College in Christchurch in 1970, he taught at Cromwell District High school until 1972. Following his first solo exhibition at the Moray Gallery in 1972, he spent a period overseas in the United Kingdom and Europe before returning to Dunedin in 1974 to begin life as a full-time artist. In 1976 he moved to Mount Pisa Station in Central Otago, where he lived until 1983. During this time he married Roslyn Nairn (1978), began a year of tenure as the Frances Hodgkins Fellow at the University of Otago (1978), and saw the birth of his two children: Melissa (1979) and Nicholas (1981). Throughout, he has continued to paint full-time, and his work is held in public and private collections both here and overseas.

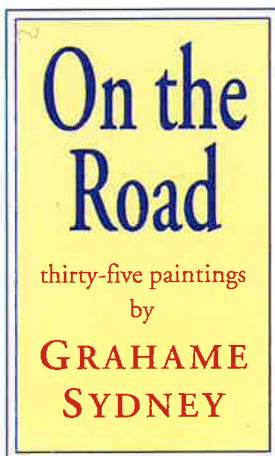
www.grahamesydney.com



July on the Maniototo 1975, egg tempera: 585 x 750 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.



Memorial Hall 1993, oil on linen: 760 x 1520 mm, Private Collection, Rangiora.



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LIST OF WORKS

1. *Julie's Room* 1974, egg tempera: 457 x 609 mm, Private Collection, Auckland.
2. *McCloskey, Gimmerburn* 1975, egg tempera: 460 x 915 mm, Private Collection, Auckland.
3. *Slow Sign* 1975, egg tempera: 558 x 609 mm, Private Collection, Auckland.
4. *Railway Red* 1975, egg tempera: 595 x 835 mm. Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin.
5. *July on the Maniototo* 1975, egg tempera: 585 x 750 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
6. *Weatherboards at Cluden* 1979, egg tempera: 255 x 737 mm, Private Collection, Marlborough.
7. *Pisa Daffodil* 1983, egg tempera: 505 x 715 mm, Private Collection, Wellington.
8. *Killing House* 1983, egg tempera: 600 x 600 mm, Collection of the Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North.
9. *Carrot* 1984, egg tempera: 600 x 600 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
10. *Nightlight on Castle Street* 1984, watercolour: 585 x 760 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
11. *Demolition at Waipiata* 1986, egg tempera: 670 x 1200 mm, Private Collection, Queenstown.
12. *Nicholas at Six* 1987, egg tempera: 503 x 495 mm, Collection of the artist.
13. *Evening in the Studio* 1987, oil on linen: 460 x 410 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.
14. *Standing Nude II* 1987, oil on panel: 508 x 508 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.
15. *The Silent Studio* 1987, oil on panel: 510 x 510 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
16. *Circus* 1988, oil on panel: 570 x 517 mm, Private Collection, Wellington.
17. *Glenavy* 1989, watercolour: 860 x 1020 mm, Collection of the Forrester Gallery, Oamaru.
18. *Sutton* 1990, egg tempera: 505 x 720 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
19. *Albatross at Deborah Bay* 1990, oil on linen: 560 x 760 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.
20. *Kokonga* 1990, watercolour: 530 x 740 mm, Private Collection.
21. *Southern Crossing* 1992, oil on linen: 920 x 1370 mm, Collection of the artist.
22. *Westerly Change* 1993, oil on linen: 920 x 1070 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.
23. *Night House II* 1995, oil on linen: 760 x 1215 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
24. *Evening at the Turnoff* 1996, oil on linen: 840 x 1110 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
25. *Maniototo* 1996, oil on linen: 765 x 1220 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.
26. *Hinterland* 1998, oil on linen: 760 x 1375 mm, Collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery
27. *In the Ida* 1998, oil on linen: 610 x 1020 mm, Private Collection, Alexandra.
28. *Road West, Ida Valley* 1999, oil on linen: 710 x 1220 mm, Private Collection, Tauranga.
29. *Anderson Lane* 1998, oil on linen: 917 x 1375 mm, Private Collection, Christchurch.
30. *Overbridge, Ravensbourne* 1997, oil on linen: 810 x 915 mm, Private Collection, Dunedin.
31. *South Mine* 1981, egg tempera: 455 x 907 mm, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin.
32. *Arthur Batt* 1978, egg tempera: 460 x 540 mm, Private Collection, Auckland.
33. *Nigel Creese* 1988, egg tempera: 810 x 700 mm, Christ's College Collection, Christchurch.
34. *Harbour at St Leonards* 1988, watercolour: 950 x 780 mm, Frances Hodgkins Fellowship Collection, University of Otago, Dunedin.
35. *Shearer's Chair* 1978, watercolour: 310 x 300 mm, Collection of the artist.