

**One of our greatest living artists on the importance of work, the beauty of the South Island and why he has his ‘foot to the floor’ in driving his legacy. From the article published in the New Zealand Herald’s ‘The Great NZ Road Trip’ by Shayne Currie. 02 November 2023 [Abridged].**

For many years, Grahame Sydney’s careful, precise strokes would unfurl on canvas while, on a floor below, mechanics were tearing apart car engines.

One of our most enduring artists worked in a studio in central Dunedin above a reconditioning workshop for a good two decades.

“It reinforced for me the notion that painters, artists are not special people. They are just people who do something different. And you have to go to work. You have to turn up. Nothing happens unless you do the work” says Sydney, sitting in a window seat of his Cambrians home, soaking in the early morning Central Otago sun with one of his two labradoodles, Teddy, draped across his stomach (“they seem to think I’m a cushion of some variety”).

“I was very happy to see myself as being no different to all the guys down below in the High Street studio, who turned up at 8am every morning and worked on reconditioning engines. That’s something that has been with me all my life”. Society, says the 75 year old tends to talk differently about artists, writers and poets “but I’ve never believed in it myself”.

That’s evident in my first email to request an interview. “None of the Sir stuff please” replied the knighted artist. “We park that one”.

Why are artist and writers treated differently, I enquire. Is it a romantic historic notion?”.

“I think it’s the sort of van Gogh effect – the notion of a tortured genius, the undiscovered talent that struggles and has to fight for survival and recognition and acceptance. There is a wonderful romance to it. It has taken a grip on a widespread imagination and allowed that notion of separateness to grow, being separate to other people, being different to other people, and in some ways more special”.

His experience – and that of his creative colleagues and mates (he counts among his friends Sir Sam Neill, Owen Marshall and Sir Vincent O’Sullivan) – is they don’t consider themselves special at all.

“They just know that they are devoted craftspeople who are obsessed with their own particular fascinations and regard themselves as being fortunate to be able to do it.”

Sydney is only too happy to chat, and host, the NZ Herald on our Great New Zealand Road Trip at his home of 23 years. He lives in one of his own famously crafted landscapes.

“His luminous, transcendent paintings capture the silent beauty of the landscape, with its vast open spaces, treeless tussock covered hills, snow covered mounts and endless skies, and eloquently express his life-long passion for the area” former art gallery director Helen Kedgley once wrote as an introduction. “The consistency of his vision affirms his deep sense of connection to the region”.

Sydney himself has previously said “It’s difficult to explain why. I just love it in a deep and compelling way. I really don’t need to be anywhere else”.

He is a Mainlander through and through. “A South Islander to my core – I’ve spent 72 of my 75 years south of the Waitaki” he tells the Herald.

These days, he strolls 20 paces to work in his studio “a separate world which I shut the door on. The studio is my haven, and I basically plough on with my self indulgent work and do my best to not worry about the state of the world or the country. I find that to be a priceless privilege, really. I can’t see another house from here. We live in the old cliché of splendid isolation”.

He lives with his wife Fiona (Fi) – he has two adult children from a previous marriage – and credits her with having a huge impact on his career. Her management and organisation, he says “has freed me up from all the mundane and daily obligations and enabled me to focus purely on work and that has been invaluable to me”.

He complete about six pieces a year – “I’ve always been ponderously slow: that’s just my nature. I wish I was different to that” – and delivers work for a largely private client base.

He calls himself a regionalist painter but – of course – his work is admired, adored in all corners, far beyond his beloved Central Otago.

In an interview with the Herald in the early 2010s he pondered whether Aucklanders saw any relevance in his work. He doesn’t recall making the comment, but he says it remains an accurate sentiment. “Everything I do is about where I come from and where I belong – where my anchors are most deeply planted” he says today.

“It’s really my total experience. My experience of living in the far south of the South Island goes into the pot, really, and gets blended with everyone else’s experience of where they live, what they value and they want to do with their creative world instincts. And that becomes New Zealand culture, the whole amalgamation of everyone’s different places and experience and history and chemistry. Mine is just an absolute infinitesimally small fraction of that total experience> But I don’t spend any time at all worrying about it. Or thinking of other people’s, because I am just fascinated by mine”.

Sydney was in Amsterdam earlier this year with Fi, primarily for a Johannes Vermeer exhibition at the Rijksmuseum. Vermeer is a lifetime hero of Sydney: he attended the collection for five straight days. The trip gave him time to reflect on his homeland, to ask himself an instructive question. What exactly is the attraction of New Zealand for overseas tourists? Sydney argues it’s not our architecture, or history. Our mountains while stunning, are not as majestic or as high as, say, the Alps or the Rockies. Rather he thinks people want to travel back in time. “The answer is, to me, they come for some nostalgic sense of New Zealand still being rather like what they knew once was theirs and that they have now lost. It’s primarily an environmental experience. IT’s to do with the fact that quite a good proportion of New Zealand is still, unbelievable, relatively unmodified, whereas Europe has been modified to the Nth degree by centuries of occupation. “Is that like travelling back in time? I’ve got a feeling that it might be”.

It astounds him then, that the incoming Government plans to cut funding for the Department of Conservation. “Why isn’t DoC the most important ministry of all? It ought to be one of our most significant ministries, and it ought to be admired and loved for that very reason”. He points out that in the space of an afternoon, visitors can drive through scenery, that on continents, is far more spread out.

Of course, a road trip through Central Otago is like breaking into the frame of a Sydney painting. Rugged, stark landscape under big blue skies. He’s been in a battle for that landscape in recent years, outspoken in the fight against Central Otago’s number one weed: wilding pines. He has described them as a “killer cancer” obliterating all other life. “They ruin the distinctive regional character of various landscapes (especially Central Otago and the MacKenzie Basin) by obliterating the natural biosphere and replacing it with an homogenous, banal evergreen blanket no different to anywhere else in the world – a visual concern, certainly, but it also impacts very detrimentally and permanently on soil quality, aquifers, water supply – they are thirsty bastards – and pose a major fire risk”.

The advance of the trees is evident on his own doorstep. Photographs show a marked contrast between 2004 and 2023. “The view north to the Hawkduns and Mt St Bathans was across a golden, grassy, cliched Central Otago dry landscape, with just one or two stand alone pine trees amongst all the grass. Now that view from my place looking towards the Hawkduns is a dense forest – so dense you can’t walk through it -and its simply the result of a farmers neglect” Sydney told RNZ earlier this year. He helped found the Central Otago Wilding Conifer Control Group. Funding for the group is about to be cut back. Politicians, says Sydney, need to think far longer term than the next three years. “Politicians in New Zealand have done immense damage to this nation over the decades that I’ve witnessed by constantly preferring a short term solution to a long-term one. The political courage to think long-term is just absent from this country, it seems, by those in power, and we have suffered accordingly. From sequential short term ‘solutions’ which have never been solutions. Metaphorically speaking, it’s like introducing possums to generate a fur trade without thinking of what the consequences are. We introduce an easy obvious ‘lets go for it solution’ and the consequence, longer term are appalling”. He is also deeply concerned about education standards, appalled by the state of New Zealand healthcare. New Zealand he says, has a population far smaller than cities, say in, China. “We’re not even the size of a city elsewhere. We’re just far away – fortunately far away – forgotten little nation, and because of that we ought to be able to manage ourselves far better than we do”.

Sydney largely eschews social media, apart from the occasional Instagram posts. “I see it as being very poisonous. I don’t like it at all. I think the triviality that it thrives on is something I don’t want anything to do with. I just don’t want anything to do with Facebook. I don’t know how to do these things and I have no interest in it. It just seems to be so pervasive, and it’s become so crucial to lives so quickly that I think it’s ridiculous”.

I ask him a question that I’ll put to most people on the road trip. Their state of mind. “I feel fortunate I’ve had the most unexpected and unimaginable good luck to be able to spend a life doing this”.

In a poignant interview with my colleague Kurt Bayer earlier this year, Sydney revealed an intimate conversation he had with his father as he was approaching death. His father, an accountant, told Sydney that he envied his son for his work in that it would leave an everlasting impression, as opposed to his own career.

“He said ‘You’re leaving stepping stones, evidence of your life, and when you’re gone, they still going to be there and people are going to know that you lived and that this is what you cared about’. And I thought that was really important” Sydney told Bayer.

Today he tells me “That’s getting stronger as I get older. That notion that I have to make the most of what time I have able to work. I really do feel honour bound to myself and to my parents and to my family that I have to leave behind the best I can do. And I haven’t yet done that. I haven’t been the best that I think I can be. I want to be better.