New Zealand's Greatest Living Artist on his legacy, his inspiration and saying no to Elton John. [Abridged] from the article published in the New Zealand Herald March 2023 by Kurt Bayer, Senior Journalist.

Sir Grahame Sydney is perhaps New Zealand's greatest living artist: his work can command six-figure sums. Kurt Bayer visited Sydney and talked life, art, early inspirations, Elton John, and his legacy.

In a bedside drawer, a lonely little red notebook sits, studiously ignored. Like gravity or time it exists. It's a comfort to know it is there but it has not been opened in half a century.

Between battered covers, wafery pages swarm with scribbles, scratches, sketches, studies. A young artist's musings, searching for his own way, something that couldn't be found in books, classrooms, or lectures, seeking what he would later call "the secret voice".

In the early 1970s, a young, tousle- haired Grahame Sydney set sail for England to become a world-famous painter.

Miserable, melancholic in a cold and mouldy North London bedsit, he hardly produced anything other than intricate envelopes for wistful, homesick letters home.

The penniless artist's only saviour was London's public galleries and art museums — and later, Europe, during an el cheapo Volkswagen Kombi van tour. Admission free, he would purposefully walk into the middle of a high-ceilinged, clean-lit room and stand. Slowly, he would rotate, spinning around the room, glazing over artefacts created by some of the greatest artists of the past seven centuries until one single painting grabbed him. He would stare hard and try and figure out why it had taken his attention. Why was it so good? What was it about this particular one and not the one beside it?

He would sit and think and write it all down in that little red notebook. Somewhere within him, Sydney felt it wasn't going to be all for nothing.

Freckles high to a kitchen table, little Grahame watched in naked awe. Big Uncle George, seemingly all legs to the 4-year-old, had arrived at the family crib at Karitane, north of Dunedin.

In what is probably Sydney's earliest memory, he recalls begging Uncle George to draw for him. Suddenly, this magical thing happens: a pencil transforms a blank piece of paper into something else. Funny faces, angry, sad. Characters running, leaping. All done by Uncle George and his "easy hand" that leapt, danced and pirouetted across the page. "I was absolutely entranced by it," Sydney recalls. "It seemed like magic what George could do at the end of a pencil and literally from that moment, I wanted to be George and do things with a pencil like that. I just thought it was so miraculous. "It triggered me wanting to draw and paint all the time," says Sydney, who shares a passing resemblance to Spanish painter Pablo Picasso.

The lounge in his hilltop home in the Cambrian Valley is filled with his own artworks and nudes of his second wife, Fiona, who brings us tea and snacks. It overlooks a Central Otago landscape that could come straight from one of his famous pictures; the sharp ridgelines of St Bathans Range, light and shade changing by the hour, by the season, sun-blasted yellow swaying tussock.

In another time, Uncle George would likely have become an artist. But, growing up in an English working-class family of 10, he was sent to work early and ended up emigrating to New Zealand to sweat building the Waitaki Dam.

Sydney, however, was the youngest of three from a comfortable middle-class Dunedin family and was given free rein to pursue his artistic dreams. Indulged, spoilt even, the youngster occupied the entire dining room table with all his creations. Saturday mornings, in the mid-1950s, he traipsed down Marewa St to Marge Mearns' house for neighbourhood kids' art classes.

Young Sydney was prolific — paintings, drawings, balsa wood models, plaster casting. He couldn't get enough of it.

"The house was absolutely full of this crap," he says. "It was just a gradual immersion in the magic . . . making things, things appearing on a blank sheet of paper. And the better you got, the more praise you got."

By secondary school, he had been admitted as an artist member of the Otago Art Society. Far from snooty, they took him in, encouraged him, and even let him paint with them. He was oblivious to the pop art or minimalism movements going on elsewhere in the world, or even, really, the Renaissance of da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli and others centuries earlier.

But he was rubbing shoulders with the big names of his day: Tom Esplin, Harry Vye Miller, Shona McFarlane. Some of his paintings even sold at local exhibitions.

Despite the early success, Sydney never dreamed it could become a full- time career. He just kept painting and learning. Gradually, through books and the library, he became aware of art history and took a particular fancy to the works of the Dutch Masters, especially Johannes Vermeer — the master of light and composition.

A protestant son of an innkeeper, Vermeer barely left his prosperous, trading hometown of Delft, and although he stood apart from his contemporaries by elevating his subjects into art, he has often, sneeringly, been referred to as a "regional painter", something Sydney would, to this day, relate closely to.

"The moment I saw some of those 17th-century Dutch paintings, I just couldn't believe it was possible. It changed me on the spot," he says.

Ambitions to become a leading light in local art society circles were elevated to eloping to Europe, to paint and never return.

Except, his ambitions had to remain a secret. There were no other Kiwis doing it. No market, no interest and few possibilities. So he shut himself inside his bedroom and painted.

When his brother Michael got married and moved out, his bed was dismantled and the bedroom converted into a studio.

Schemes to train as an architect had been abandoned, but on the advice of his father he studied English at university before training as a teacher.

The art world was exploding overseas and booming in new directions. But Sydney knew he wanted to be a realist painter, going against all trends.

While studying in Christchurch, he began mucking around with a little- known, ancient painting process involving egg yolk.

The technique, egg tempera, was perfected in the 16th century and sees the artist produce paint by mixing finely-ground pigment, water and diluted egg yolk. Although labour- intensive and slow, Sydney found it suited his nature while also making his work unique.

“No one in New Zealand was doing it,” he says. “And it seemed sensible to do something that suited my personality and which might also get some attention.”

After teachers’ college, he was posted to Cromwell District High School and painted whenever free. The vast open spaces of Central Otago, treeless tussock-bearded hills, moody skies, and snowy mountains had always attracted him. But now, it had him enraptured, something that has endured for more than 50 years.

A sell-out 1972 debut solo show injected Sydney with the confidence to ditch teaching and embark on England to become a famed artist.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS later though, he had slunk home, despondent, broke and utterly unknown. But he still had his little red notebook. And ever- supportive parents. “They said, ‘Look, come home and give this painting a go. We’ll support you for a year, you can live at home with us, and work in your bedroom, as you have always done. We’ll see what happens”. Determined, he got to work.

During his second week back in Dunedin, there was a knock at the door. A dapper, well-dressed man wanted to see his work. It was Peter Webb, an exhibitions officer from Auckland Art Gallery, about to go out on his own. He had noticed a painting of Sydney’s done in egg tempera called Peninsula Storm, which had been rejected for an earlier exhibition.

“He said he would buy everything I finished,” Sydney says. “All I had to do was finish them. He didn’t say what they had to be, he didn’t make any other demands, just finish them and he’d buy them. And he did.”

It was Sydney's big break. He sold that first one to Webb for $160. Last April, Auckland's International Art Centre sold one of his for $160,000. He's in rarefied air for a contemporary New Zealand artist with his pieces often selling for six figures. They rarely surface again out of private collections.

But back then, he had little clue that success lay ahead of him. Whenever he finished a painting, he would conjure a price, often sitting down with his parents and wondering whether it was worth $300 or so, and fly to Webb's in the City of Sails with the piece tucked under his arm.

The artworks flew out of the door. Suddenly they were hot commodities in the big-money Auckland market, his work coveted by wealthy business families like the Nathans and Friedlanders.

The arrangement lasted several years before Sydney, amicably, ventured out on his own. In 1976, he moved to Mount Pisa Station, towering over the Lowburn Valley and was now fulfilling his dream of becoming a "famous painter"

He had found his "secret voice".

"The miracle of the art world to me, and the endless joy of it, is realising that every new person holding a pencil or a brush, if they're good enough, confident enough, and have enough courage, will trust what comes out of them," Sydney says.

"It still drives me now. You don't have to be deliberate at all about trying to reflect your time because that's going to happen anyway. You can't help that. But you have to be very deliberate in your belief, in your own character and manner.

"When you stand in front of the easel, you've got to forget everyone else. This is just about you and all the things you've absorbed contribute but you don't dredge them up deliberately. Things have got to come organically and naturally. That sort of extraordinary volcanic ego drives you to believe that it matters and you're not trying to please anyone else.

"This is not about anyone else. This is about me. And if you trust yourself, and you believe, then the final products, will, hopefully, be of merit to others as well."

Sydney exhibited across the Tasman in 1982 and made a gratifying return to London three years later, attracting some celebrity admirers.

In 1986, when his father had terminal cancer, the Australian gallery approached him and asked if he had any works to sell. By then, Sydney had started exploring the age- old tradition of human figures but nobody wanted to buy them. All anyone was interested in was his distinctive landscapes.

He sent them over and just days before his dad died, the agent phoned. They had someone interested in a nude painting but they wanted a discount. Sydney, with other things on his mind, flatly refused. Even when he was told that it was British pop superstar Elton John, he wouldn't budge.

The agent rang back the next day. The Rocketman would pay full price.

Jim Bolger's Government would later gift a Sydney — Moonrise on the Maniototo — to anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela. "I'm sure it's in some damn cupboard now, which is a pity because it's a good one," Sydney says.

The paintings belong in New Zealand, he believes. Sydney, somewhat sheepishly, sees them as "gifts to the culture". They help build the national sense of identity and place. But he knows that private collectors pay the bills. And allow him to keep painting.

AT 74, the father-of-two shows little sign of slowing down.

Most days he shuts himself inside his studio — a handsome, warm standalone building beside the house that he built in 2000. With the company of his two dogs, Teddy and Tinks, he settles down to work, applying paint thinly with small sable brushes. Every tone of colour has to be separately mixed before being applied and modulated in a cross- hatch technique. For inspiration, he gazes upon a wall covered by dozens of portrait snaps and postcards, listens to podcasts, books, and music, or gazes at those famous southern ochre hills.

As a "treat" for the visiting Weekend Herald, Sydney unwraps a large piece, about 1.5m x 1m, just finished and awaiting a buyer. He tends to finish the paintings before finding them a home. He has an extensive private client list and likes to match paintings with personalities or tastes. And he prefers to get to know people before selling to them. "Ill ask them for an idea of what they might lik. Summer? Winter? Do you like drama? Serenity? And I just get a general guide and if I can get to know them, then that makes a big help. Paintings are your babies really and you try to let them go to a loving family" he says.

Sydney, like his great hero, Vermeer, considers himself a regionalist painter. He doesn't see the term as being derogatory or a slight. When boiled down, some of the greatest artworks in history are essentially regionalist. Visual interpretations of time, place, belonging. "That seems enough to me," says the elite craftsman. He's never painted a perfect picture and is still striving to get better.

"I'm trying to leave a record of what I feel about where I come from and where I belong. I'm terrified now that I'm going to die soon and I don't want to go yet because I'm not good enough yet. I want to be better than this. I still think I can be and I've got the works in mind. I've just got to have time to do them.

He bristles at being called a "realist painter" though. He talks about the space "inside the frame", which is distinct from the real world. Inside the frame is his, free to change, manipulate, invent. "Every painter is God," he says.

Everything in his paintings is there for a reason. He walks over to a large landscape, one of his, hanging on the wall. "That tree there," he points. "That tree wasn't there at all. I'm just making things, it's not reportage. Realism is not honesty. Only I know what is true. "But it shouldn't matter. Why should accuracy matter? Inside the world of the frame, it's my beautiful lies."

When his father was approaching death, they shared intimate and large conversations. One statement his dad made struck him as profoundly moving and upsetting at the time.

He said that he really envied his son. He had been an accountant and was leaving without anything to show for his endeavours. Sydney, however, had spent his entire professional life creating things that would outlast him.

“He said, ‘You’re leaving stepping stones, evidence of your life and when you’re gone, they’re 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.” Eyes misting, Sydney takes a breath.

“The art world gets sorted by time,” he continues.

“History sorts out what matters and what doesn’t. So, you take your chances and it may be that, over time, when I’m long gone, I get forgotten, my work gets forgotten. But . . . at least it’s there.”