

GRAHAME SYDNEY

Paintings & Drawings

ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY : CHRISTCHURCH NOVEMBER 17 1976 to JANUARY 5, 1977

GRAHAME SYDNEY

Grahame Sydney has been described recently as "a widely known" and "a leading young New Zealand Realist Painter" who came rapidly to prominence after the success of his first Auckland Exhibition, early in 1975.

At the time he was living and working in Dunedin with the help of an award from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council. Immediately before he had spent seventeen months travelling in Europe, and since then has continued to live, and work, in Otago. Born in Dunedin in 1948, he attended King's High School and completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and Geography in 1969 at the University of Otago. After that he spent a year training at the Christchurch Teachers' College, and then taught at the Secondary School in Cromwell for two years before he went to Europe. In May 1974 he returned to live in Dunedin for two more years, before moving to Mount Pisa Station, near Cromwell, where he is now living. His first exhibition was held in the Moray Gallery in Dunedin in December, 1972, and since then he has had one-man shows at the Lee Cramp Gallery, Auckland, in March 1975, and at the Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland, in April, 1976. The beginnings of his work go back to his early teens when he attended private classes held by H. V. Miller in Dunedin for instruction in the use of watercolour. "I guess I just kept painting when other kids stopped", he said of his development. "I wanted to be a professional painter but just couldn't see a way then." Apart from his study with Miller, and his study particularly of the Italian masters while he was in Europe, he continued painting as an enthusiastic amateur, until he left teaching and became a full-time artist.

For some time he had been fascinated with the etcher's craft, and in 1975 he began to study the processes of etching with Barry Cleavin. However, the greater part of his work so far has been in the use of the Tempera Medium.

As a painter who has been born, and so far, worked mainly in New Zealand he has been compared with two other New Zealand painters, Rita Angus (1908-1970) and his contemporary Brent Wong, although Ross Fraser writing in Newsletter 2 of the Peter Webb Galleries says "Briefly, one could say that his work does not (overtly at any rate) have Wong's metaphysical and psychological overtones, his associations with surrealism. Neither does it exhibit the preoccupation with abstracting from the visual material a potent and simplified image that is characteristic of Angus", and he goes on (as Sydney does) to acknowledge the influence, or at least the stimulation of a varied group of painters from outside New Zealand, such as Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alex Colville, Christopher Pratt, Andrew Wyeth, and in fact receding in time to Vermeer and the Seventeenth Century Dutch Painters.

Grahame Sydney's use of egg tempera on gesso panel is an old one and was particularly favoured by the early Italian masters. It demands a perfection of craftsmanship which he gives to it with a resulting clarity of image which comes very close to being photographic, but which is saved miraculously from being purely technical facility, and extreme pictorial realism, by his own innate sense of originality, expressed in part by his choice of subject matter, and partly by the mood which he creates within his work and which seems to derive from his own temperament.

There is a coolness as well as a stark, essential clarity, in Grahame Sydney's paintings, without even bordering on the sentimentality to which this vision could easily give rise. Nevertheless, his painting surely falls into the category of Romanticism—not the generally current New Zealand form of romanticism evolving from the natural beauties of the land, but more often the harsher, cruder, often ugly man-made landscape with which we must all be equally familiar.

Grahame Sydney dares to do what few painters of romantic realism in this country have dared to do and that is to face the harsher, less pleasant reality that is all around us, and recreate for us images that strike our sensitivity through his exquisite technical facility, and images that almost transcend reality and reach poetic proportions.

So far Grahame Sydney's painting has been largely influenced by Otago where he has grown up and developed, and portraying the evidence of man's mastery of that environment. His paintings serve to heighten the reality of what he has seen. Ross Fraser comments further: "It is significant that Sydney seems drawn not to the landscape itself but to man-made things in it (though usually things that have been vacated or discarded).

The actual presence of man himself is rare in Sydney's work, but his influence is everywhere to be felt. Sydney's subject matter may be buildings marked by farm-life or by the railways; or it may be abandoned articles of clothing. It is significant that he chooses objects the elements have stripped bare (or nearly so). There is a certain romanticism in this idea of man-made forms reduced to their essentials by the elements. Another clue is that Sydney likes to recall the human associations of a thing—the connection with a particular person or a particular property in a particular part of Otago . . ." It is Sydney's achievement to have evoked such a powerful illusion of actuality, while having intuitively selected and modified the natural material with which he works, that he convinces us of its objective truth'. He goes on to add that the artist is not simply an imitator of reality, or a purveyor of the illusion of actual unedited reality, but a painter with a highly selective eye. Some critics might charge him with being unaffected by contemporary ideas in painting. None the less Grahame Sydney's works must be evaluated within his own terms of reference. We cannot yet be certain in what direction the return of a group of painters to various kinds of realism tends. It seems certain that there will always be a place for realism in painting. Certainly there has always been one in the past'.

The tempera technique which remains virtually unchanged since the Renaissance involves

the blending of pigments with water and egg yolk. The pigments, many of which are now, alas, chemically produced, are imported from Britain. The egg yolk acts as a varnish and an adhesive to the colours.

Grahame Sydney says that this medium gives him more opportunity to develop the atmosphere that he intends to convey in his paintings and which he regards as a most important ingredient. "The air", he says "seems to be built into tempera", although he admits to needing a great deal of patience in the use of this medium. The beginning of any of the artist's paintings are meticulously detailed and handled in initial pencil drawings done in the field. "While I am aware," he says, "that the detail of my work has some appeal, my hope is that viewers might look beyond the technique, see through and past the methods, so that the chosen image itself might evoke in them a response — a memory, an emotion perhaps — as it must have done with me. A photograph is more committed to the whole truth than a painted image; a painter has the means to distill only what he feels is the essence of an image."

Of the actual process of painting he has said: "It's a very tedious process. One painting requires a lot of work. My routine is to make a lot of careful pencil studies first, maybe over a long period of time. While that is being completed you work out what should be eliminated. Only then can you start the actual painting. The painting itself might take three or four weeks before the completed work can be appraised, frequently longer." Grahame Sydney has summed up his own work by a quotation from Flaubert in a letter from Arles in 1887 as quoted by Van Gogh: "Talent is long patience, and originality, an effort of will and intense observation", and Hamish Keith, in the *Auckland Star*, March 11, 1975, reviewing the artist's exhibition at the Cramp Gallery said "There is nothing quite so exciting for Gallery visitors or critics than the sudden revelation of a mature and accomplished painter. Grahame Sydney's first Auckland one-man show at the Lee Cramp Gallery is exactly that." ". . . Sydney is an astonishing realist—a patient, near perfect craftsman who must force us all to re-assess the directions of realist painting in New Zealand".

Referring to a reference in the catalogue on influence from Andrew Wyeth, Hamish Keith continues "The claim is one often made by painters in this style, but in Sydney's case it seems more than justified. More than simply influence, Sydney deserves favourable comparison with Wyeth, all the more so since his work is not yet marred with the sentimentality that so grates on the imagination in Andrew Wyeth's work.

Sydney explores the decaying architecture and landscape of Central Otago. Sometimes his imagery is slightly flawed by odd inconsistencies of perspective or eyeline, but these add to rather than detract from their impact . . . In purely technical control there is hardly another New Zealand painter to touch Sydney . . . His work has none of the coldness obvious in so many super realists. There is no questioning his deep commitment to his subjects. Whole generations peel off the walls he offers us along with the paint, sagging guttering and leprous iron water tanks. There is, however, something slightly lacking in all these works. It is difficult to say what. Perhaps they are too perfect in their execution, too much understood in advance, too calculated in their design.

More likely than that is some lack of time to be. The past is preserved and loved in these works, along with small events of still life or eerie interiors, but there is no real sense that anything more will happen. We are asked mainly to observe rather than participate.

That is, after all, a minor quibble; Sydney is revealing himself to us for the first time. He is a fully mature craftsman and there is plenty of time for other things to assert themselves within this masterly framework".



PHOTO JOHN DALEY



Midwinter at Miss Nyhon's

CATALOGUE

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|----|--|---|
| 1 | 2.40 Mailbag
Tempera July '74 | Dr Desmond Dowse,
225 Ormond Road
Gisborne |
| 2 | Ida Valley Turnoff
Tempera August '74 | Mr Michael B. Moodabe
31 Sanders Avenue
Takapuna
Auckland |
| 3 | Volunteer Hall
Tempera October '74 | Mr J. D. Ray
5 Ardmore Road
Auckland 2 |
| 4 | Turnip Drill
Water colour October '74 | Mr R. D. Fraser
Syndic Street
Cromwell |
| 5 | Fallen Soldiers
Tempera November '74 | Mr Ron Brebner
25 Raumati Road
Auckland 5 |
| 6 | Seal Point Road
Tempera November '74 | Mrs T. L. Barrett
24 Hauraki Road
Takapuna |
| 7 | Charles Anderson
Pencil November '74 | Artist |
| 8 | Windshear
Water colour November '74 | Mrs Horton
44 Victoria Avenue
Remuera
Auckland |
| 9 | Julie's Room
Tempera December '74 | Mr R. J. Bainbridge
8 Marydale Drive
Mt Roskill
Auckland |
| 10 | Primer Coat, Railway House
Tempera December '74 | Pascoe, Robinson, Bainbridge Syndicate
C/- Paul Harrop
Harrop & Co.
P.O. Box 645
Auckland 1 |

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| 11 | Three Blind Eyes
Tempera January '75 | Dr A. L. Batt
49 Evelyn Road
Howick
Auckland 4 |
| 12 | Broken Magpie
Water colour January '75 | Mr C. W. Marks
85 Kurahaupo Street
Auckland 5 |
| 13 | Puketeraki Trinity
Oil February '75 | Mr Ron Brebner
25 Raumatī Road
Auckland 5 |
| 14 | McClosky, Gimmerburn
Tempera February '75 | Mr David J. Ross
66 Lucerne Road
Auckland 5 |
| 15 | Perriam's Shoes
Tempera March '75 | Dr A. L. Batt
49 Evelyn Road
Howick
Auckland |
| 16 | Slow Sign
Tempera May '75 | Mr Ron Brebner
25 Raumatī Road
Auckland 5 |
| 17 | Weathered Shoe
Tempera May '75 | Mrs Beverly Huggett
21 Elgin Road
Mornington
Dunedin |
| 18 | In the Woolshed
Tempera June '75 | Mr R. D. Fraser
Syndic Street
Cromwell |
| 19 | Sunday Evening, Portobello
Tempera June '75 | Dr Desmond Dowse
225 Ormond Road
Gisborne |
| 20 | Fog at Stan Cotter's
Tempera July '75 | Mr & Mrs P. Aubin
17 Mac Millan Street
Maori Hill
Dunedin |
| 21 | Railway Red
Tempera August '75 | Mr Alistair Taylor
& Gillian Mc Gregor
Waiura
Box 87
Martinborough |
| 22 | July on the Maniototo
Tempera October '75 | Dr Desmond Dowse
225 Ormond Road
Gisborne |



McClosky, Gimmerburn



Still Life: Childhood Companion

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| 23 | Board & Battens, Nyhon's
Tempera December '75 | Mr Paul Harrop
Harrop & Co.
P.O. Box 645
Auckland |
| 24 | Mantelpiece Study
Tempera January '76 | Mr R. D. Fraser
Syndic Street
Cromwell |
| 25 | Portrait
Tempera February '76 | Mr Robert Narev
6 Stoneyroyd Gardens
Remuera |
| 26 | Kitchen Window
Oil November-March '76 | Mr Robert Narev
6 Stoneyroyd Gardens
Remuera |
| 27 | And On Across Harbourcove
Tempera March '76 | Dr Desmond Dowse
225 Ormond Road
Gisborne |
| 28 | Summer Piece
Tempera May '76 | Mr & Mrs A. E. Taylor
110 Memorial Drive
Fendalton
Christchurch |
| 29 | Study for Mantelpiece
Pencil | Ms Louise Callan
346 Lake Road
Takapuna |
| 30 | Study for Board & Batten
Pencil | Dr & Mrs M. C. Davison
Newman Road
R.D. 3
Silverdale
Auckland |
| 31 | On the Dogtrials
Tempera September '76 | In the possession
of the artist |

PENCIL STUDIES

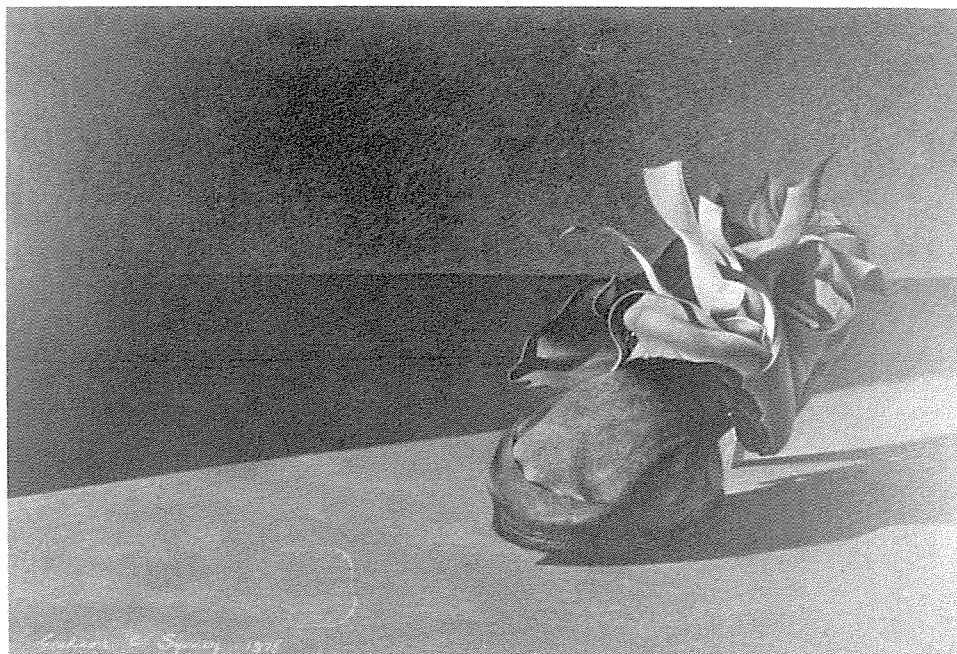
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|----|---|
| 32 | First Study for 'Ida Valley Turnoff'
14 July 1974 |
| 33 | Studies for 'Ida Valley Turnoff'
25 July 1974 |
| 34 | Study for 'Childhood Companion'
9 September 1974 |
| 35 | Study for 'Childhood Companion'
10-12 September 1974 |
| 36 | Study for 'Volunteer Hall'
28 September 1974 |
| 37 | Study for 'Volunteer Hall'
8 October 1974 |
| 38 | Study for 'Fallen Soldiers'
23 October 1974 |



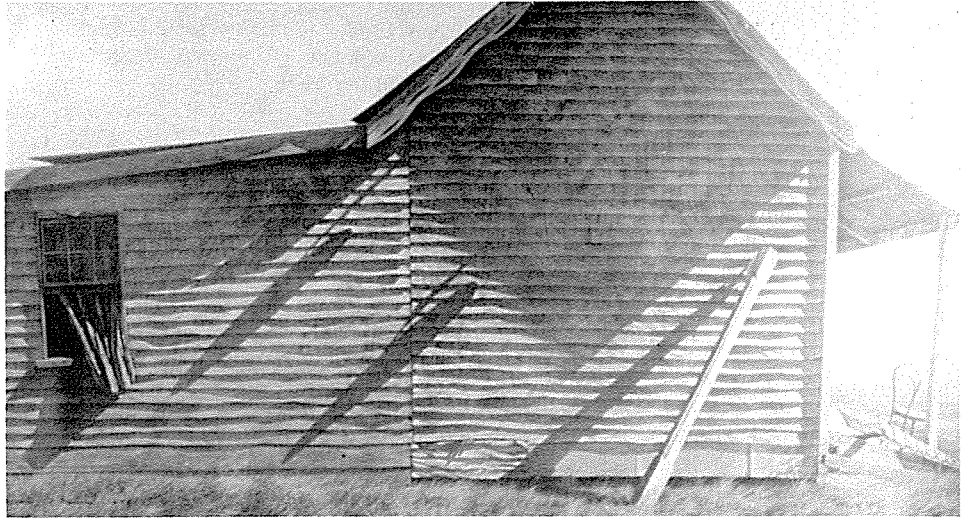
- 39 Study for 'Fallen Soldiers'
1 November 1974
- 40 Study for 'Seal Point Road'
20 November 1974
- 41 Second Study for 'Julie's Room'
23 November 1974
- 42 Study for 'McClosky, Gimmerburn'
22 January 1975
- 43 Study for 'Slow Sign, Wedderburn'
10 April 1975
- 44 Study for 'Slow Sign, Wedderburn'
11 April 1975
- 45 Study for 'Railway Red'
8 July 1975
- 46 Study for 'Summer Piece'
3-4 February 1976

ETCHINGS

- 47 Camellias
18 August 1975
- 48 De Profundis
19 August 1975
- 49 The Meal
17 March 1976
- 50 Pisa Mail
11 July 1976
- 51 Slow Sign
14 July 1976
- 52 On the Dogtrials
16 September 1976



Weathered Shoe



Summer Piece