

Essay on Grahame Sydney by Kevin Ireland

An essay by New Zealand writer Kevin Ireland, extracted from Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures' exhibition catalogue produced for 'Grahame Sydney: Down South. Recent Paintings 2001 – 2011' (Oct 2011 – Feb 2012).

The breathtaking technique of a Grahame Sydney painting seems at first sight to make its subject almost palpably actual. Landscapes, buildings, interiors and portraits appear to have been captured with astonishing physical accuracy – just as the time of day or night never seems in question. You can usually guess the hour from the quality and depth of light and shadow. Yet, at a second and closer viewing, the essence of his art lies in the mystery of its paradoxes. Everything may certainly be actual, in the loose sense that each subject may be said to 'exist', yet what we see is seldom exactly what it seems.

Sydney's painterly 'truths' are a kind of fabricated realism. The subjects he depicts are adjusted to fit or imitate not what may be called a photographic representation, but to articulate a vision, a conviction, an interpretation and an artistic self-exploration. The rewards for the viewers of a Sydney study certainly include a display of bravura skills, but these are deployed only incidentally to represent place and time, for his purpose is always to record an inner journey.

The main paradoxes of Sydney's art are, first, that appearances, however precisely detailed, are not to be taken literally. The artist invests and crafts his work with a search for harmonies and implications, in which proportion, position, shape and colour are juggled to fit a pattern and a questing attitude. He takes forms, relationships and hues, and investigates a response to a situation, a view and a mood that involves a particular and profound sense of self.

Secondly, when people talk about the haunting quality of Sydney's paintings I suspect that they are often referring to this personal and private investment of 'selfhood'. His lack of human representation in landscapes is not just to achieve a theatrical sense of heart-stopping emptiness or to avoid the distracting narrative overtones that human figures would suggest, it is to concentrate the viewers on themselves in the act of observation and to join the painting's creator as an interpreter of a location and a moment. The mysterious humanity of Sydney's work lies in their invitation to share a window that does not merely open and transform itself into a decorative framed space, but commits us to questions that probe our own experiences and values. Occasionally he allows himself a wry joke. The cows that substitute for the expected human figures in 'Spies' gaze out at us stolidly, as if to challenge our assumptions and fixations.

A third defining paradox has to do with the matter of time and timelessness that almost always confronts us as viewers. 'Timeless' is a term that is often used as a loose and useful poetic trope to represent the sense, especially in his major landscapes, that we are gazing on terrain, plants, constructions and skies that have already existed, and which shall probably continue to exist, far beyond the miniscule bounds of human history. Yet timelessness is a frozen, abstract notion and does not quite articulate the ambiguous continuities or the specific points in time that Sydney more satisfyingly suggests.

The deep significance of Sydney's nostalgia, and occasionally his melancholy, are located in personal and measurable aspects of his painterly awareness of the implications of the way all things age. Sydney's view of his subjects is always enigmatically affected by aspects of the feelings and memories that he draws on from his own general experience – and, importantly, from particular phases of his lifetime.

The hawk that occasionally appears in a Sydney sky is a transient observer that cannot help but represent, or at least intimate, a vigilant witness – as well as an essentially solitary and merciless one. Hawks are an emblem of awareness, watchfulness and of the passing of time. The day of the hawk is spent in a pendulum beat as it sweeps regularly to and fro across ridge and valley.

In the same way, the sheds and station buildings that Sydney captures in a process of crumbling slowly before us invoke not merely images of past habitation, but offer a forlorn and precise sign of time and mortality, just as his mailboxes offer a mute and poignant reference to remoteness while also emphasising an almost daily service to communication, including bills that must be paid on time and those inevitable letters that bring news of births and deaths.

Time is everywhere a subtle and secret theme in Sydney's work. We are aware that his lonesome moons must wax and wane monthly. The signals that stand spectrally against a skyline rise and lower and blink to order the passage of trains that toil to meticulously detailed, erratic but always relevant timetables – as well as to the seconds and minutes of our passing. The empty road that loses itself in a far horizon testifies to transient yet repetitious journeys and to endless human intersections. All are testaments not to timelessness, but to time's remorseless and devastating measurability.

And the fourth and final paradox is that Sydney confronts us with monumental landforms and with vast imposing skies that at first glance seem to stand before us with massive, stony or ethereal indifference, yet one of the great pleasures of his vision and technique is to perceive how the land lives and breathes, and how the heavens seem to nourish it. His landscapes may seem still and waterless, but they are seldom arid. There is something of the warm-blooded animal in Sydney's mineral and atmospheric world. Mountainsides or rolling ridges glow with the hide of beasts at rest. Even snow and ice have textures that can suggest the fluid expectancy of restless movement. Stone surfaces can seem as if they enfold massive structures that could be about to stir and draw in air. A cloud depicted in a motionless moment of perfect serenity also promises living change, for clouds shadow us and presage how the skies shall soon be certain to become animated and alter.

Sydney's human studies echo all these features. Where formerly many of Sydney's most accomplished nudes were presented to us headless or faceless, in an act of undressing or turning away, so that our attention was focused on the rich and varied aesthetics of flesh, body language and draping cloth, rather than diverted to, and possibly misled by, facial expression, now the head is likely to be portrayed, so that position and look should convey the intimate drama of a pose and a deeper engagement with person and personality.

These have now become landscapes of the human form, with many of the paradoxical implications that help give Sydney's works their brooding and unsettling mystery.

Our attention is drawn to the texture of a sheet that contrasts with flesh, as well as to folds, indentations and the stretch of skin that suggest that all that he depicts has the articulated substance of a skeleton beneath, yet is filled with a life force – which raises the point that below every inch of the surfaces of a Sydney painting there is a sure knowledge that he has built them on a solid framework. Nothing in Sydney is based on unsubstantiated notions or flights of fantasy. His work has unmatched substance. Beneath the appearances of all things existing under the heavens is a living configuration of rock or bone.

Yet all art is both what is there and what isn't, and I feel that this introduction could usefully conclude with a poem I have dedicated to Grahame Sydney:

The art of it

Art that is,

is also something

that it's not.

The squirt of ochre

trickling down the cheek

to charm the smile,

the word that arms

the casual phrase

with wily implication,

and the notes

that shimmer

across the scales

are at the same time

there, yet assert

a baffling absence.

All the things that are,

are shadowed by some other,

holding itself back.

Art moves us

both by what it states

and what it might have been.

Art declares

what is by what it does,

and also doesn't.

Kevin Ireland. 2012.