

## **An Introduction to Grahame Sydney by Helen Kedgley**

This introduction has been extracted from Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures' exhibition catalogue produced for 'Grahame Sydney: Down South. Recent Paintings 2001 – 2011' (Oct 2011 – Feb 2012).

Down South is a survey of Grahame Sydney's landscape paintings of the past decade. It is his first major exhibition since his mid-career survey, *On the Road*, toured throughout New Zealand, including Pataka, in 2000. Since then, Sydney has visited Antarctica twice, immersed himself in photography and film and successfully campaigned against the proposed wind farm in the Lammermoor ranges in Central Otago. During this time he has also managed to create a significant body of new work. Twenty-six of his recent paintings, not yet shown publicly in New Zealand, have been drawn from private collections throughout the country for this exhibition.

Sydney's focus for over thirty-five years has been on Central Otago where he lives in the Cambrian Valley. His luminous, transcendent paintings capture the silent beauty of the landscape with its vast open spaces, treeless tussock-covered hills, snow covered mountains and endless skies, and eloquently express his lifelong passion for the area. The consistency of his vision affirms his deep sense of connection to the region. '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' (1). In a sense, he has become the definitive painter of its landscape – you can't see Central Otago now without being reminded of his work.

Sydney's theme is the raw power and grandeur of nature as embodied in the archetypal Central Otago landscape he paints. Typically set in the fading light of dusk, his parched, barren landscapes have a timeless quality and remind us of the passing of time. Bathed in light and shadow, each painting is a meditation on landscape, full of mood and atmosphere.

Sydney paints only those landscapes that have a particular meaning for him – old, weathered, 'muscular' landforms that he knows and understands intimately. The Dunstan Range, Mt St Bathans and the Hawkdun Range, the visual backdrop to his home in the Cambrian Valley, constantly recur in his paintings. He revisits them over and over again, never tiring of painting them in a seemingly infinite variety of incarnations. 'I like paintings to come out of an absolute emotional connection and that builds up over a long time – years and decades sometimes' (2).

Over the last decade Sydney's work has shifted. He has reduced the content of his images, getting rid of almost everything in his paintings except the landscape. Increasingly large in scale, his landscapes are presented as objects of awe. The signs, signals and decaying architecture of the region, so much a feature of his early work, are now largely absent. Certain motifs recur – telegraph poles without wires, for example, crisply silhouetted against an evening sky. Railway crossings and empty roads remain, acting as focal points. And while his early work portrays the land in the blistering heat of summer, much of his recent work explores its nature in the depths of winter.

A thread running through many of these recent paintings is the concealment of landscape. Always attracted to remote, empty places, Sydney found his visits to Antarctica in 2003 and 2006, as part of the Artists to Antarctica programme, a catalyst for new approaches.

'I felt absolutely comfortable there aesthetically. For someone like me who likes skeletal things and absences and reductions, it was really beautiful...The silence, the lonely energy appealed to something in me.' While he produced a series of paintings of Antarctica itself, the experience led him to look at the Central Otago landscape with fresh eyes. Famous for his stark, compelling images of the region bathed in summer's hard-edged light, he began a series of winter paintings. The familiar landscape is barely discernible – covered in snow or partially hidden by darkness and fog. The result is a new minimalism. Sydney's work has always been pervaded by a sense of silence and solitude: the effect of the snow and fog is to heighten the stillness and isolation.

Sydney gives us a created world, not one that is merely recorded. While he still makes preparatory drawings, he does not paint directly from nature. He constructs his images in the studio, carefully editing and framing each view, reinventing, reducing landscape to its bare essence. 'I have moved more towards the essence of Central rather than the truth of Central.'

Sydney's sparse, tightly structured compositions, with their wide, flat planes of land, low horizons and expansive skies, suggest that the scene extends far beyond the frame. Light, transparent areas contrast with opaque, solid ones: earth contrasts with sky: slanting light and shadows disrupt the verticals and horizontals of his harmonious, balanced compositions. Sometimes he foreshortens and flattens his images, distorting scale and perspective, creating spatial ambiguities. 'The longer I paint, the more I am in control of what's happening within the frame.' A master of restraint, Sydney uses a limited range of colours in any one painting; pale greys, golden ochres and earth browns are carefully balanced with soft purples and cobalt blues and touches of vivid whites.

For Sydney, painting is a long, hard labour requiring intense concentration. He works slowly and meticulously. His paintings are technically superb and take months to complete: 'My approach is slow and my technique is slow. I'm the long stare not the quick glimpse.' His practice spans both oil and egg tempera paintings. Alongside his paintings he has produced a series of etchings and lithographs that complement his work as a painter. He has also issued some of his paintings as a series of limited edition prints which have been exhibited throughout New Zealand. His books include the Montana award winning *The Art of Grahame Sydney*. Recently he has been drawn to photography and film, lending his painter's eye to the camera, and has brought out a book of photographs *White Silence*.

Sydney has developed his own singular aesthetic apart from his contemporaries. Through his books and prints his work has become widely accessible. His images have become icons of national culture. But no matter how familiar and often reproduced his work has become – his canvases remain as fresh and compelling as ever.

Helen Kedgley

Senior Curator Contemporary Art

Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures, New Zealand. 2012

1. Sydney, G. (2005), cited in *Places of the mind: the art of Edward Hopper and Grahame Sydney* by Witherow, A (MA Thesis) University of Otago, p110
2. Sydney, G. (1977) *The frame is the dictator*, *Art New Zealand* 7, p.44-45.