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Culture Art & design Visual art

Australia's oldest artist remains at the canvas, reaching a century

By **John McDonald**

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Australia's oldest working artist, Guy Warren, is getting tired of being asked: "What's the secret of a long life?" His answer is very simple: "You just have to keep living."

When Warren gets down to detail he says it's a matter of "good genes, good luck and a whiskey every night". Beyond that he doesn't know what on earth he did to find himself turning 100. As we go deeper into the subject it's agreed the two golden rules might be: "Don't sit around in pubs" and "Look for the good in everything".

Guy Warren in his studio in March. LOUIE DOUVIS

The centenary is being celebrated with a succession of events: King Street Gallery on William has just shown Warren's new work; the National Art School has an overview of his drawings

(until May 22); Gallery Lane Cove will host a survey from April 29 to May 29; with further shows planned at the University of Wollongong and the Nicholas Thompson Gallery in Melbourne. The Art Gallery of NSW has generously agreed to hang a single picture.

If life were a cricket match Warren would admit he's survived a few chances. He's weathered the Great Depression, the Second World War, and nine years as Head of Painting at Sydney College of the Arts. He's come through a quadruple bypass and prostate cancer. He's seen off everyone else in his generation, reached his century in utterly nerveless fashion and remains not out.

Guy Warren in his studio in London in the late 1950s. MICHAEL WILLIAMS/NICK KOCHER

It's not every day one interviews a centenarian, a task that generates certain expectations. As I arrive at the artist's home on the lower north shore I'm assuming Warren will tire easily so we probably shouldn't talk for more than an hour. As it turns out the conversation lasts for almost four hours and it's me that pulls the plug. I've known Guy Warren since the early 1980s and his affability has never wavered, but at 100 his energy and sharpness of mind are astonishing.

In *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote: "the tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young". This is precisely the case with Warren, who still has a twinkle in his eye but feels frustrated by the physical infirmities that accompany an extended stay on this planet.

His biggest problem is his knees, which have worn out from simple over-use. He needs a new set, but at his age this is not about to happen. Instead he supports himself with a variety of walking sticks. When there is something to fetch from the kitchen his son, Paul, has to try and prevent his old man from leaping into action.

Looking back on his life Warren declares it's been "a fun journey", although he feels as if he's never really been in charge of his destiny. "There are times when I envy those people who have an awareness of their position in life and plan their every move," he says.

“I couldn’t do that. I never have. Now there are teenagers making a fortune from social media. Why didn’t anyone tell me about social media? The only problem is that whenever I sit down at the computer I press the wrong button. I’ve been pushing the wrong bloody button my entire life!”

Guy Warren was born on April 16, 1921, in Goulburn, which he remembers as “cold as buggery in winter, hot as hell in summer”. He had an itinerant life as a child. His father was a piano man at the movies who shifted the family from place to place every couple of years as his contracts expired. Eventually, with the introduction of the talkies and the onset of the Depression, the work dried up. “It seemed like every street corner had an out-of-work muso busking to earn a pittance.”

Warren had no other option but to leave school in 1935, aged 14. He got a job as an assistant proofreader on *The Bulletin*, and watched enviously as the artists arrived on Thursday, bringing their contributions to art editor John Frith. He recalls: “The door would shut, there’d be roars of laughter inside, and when an artist emerged he’d have a bit of paper in his hand. At the front desk he’d swap the paper for a cheque, go down to George Street, and straight to the corner pub. I thought: ‘That’s not a bad way to earn a living!’”

Guy Warren, Dry land with blue figure, 2020 KING STREET GALLERY ON WILLIAM

Warren had always enjoyed drawing so he began bombarding the art editor with his own creations. Eventually Frith became fed up, grabbed the teenager by the arm and marched him down to a building two streets away where he introduced him to an “old bloke” named J.S. Watkins, who was given the instruction: “Teach this kid how to draw!”

Watkins was a well-respected painter: a trustee of the National Art Gallery of NSW who had spent time in Paris, and ran a private art school. Watkins had an aversion to the time-honoured practice of drawing from the plaster cast, getting students to start working immediately from

the life model. Warren attended the school for one night a week, then for two nights, then added Saturday afternoon to his schedule. By the time the war arrived he had a sound grasp of drawing.

Warren's other seminal experience of those years was a journey by canoe down the Shoalhaven, with his brother, Arthur, in the first days of 1939. It would end in Nowra as a huge bushfire advanced on the town. That trip helped consolidate Warren's passion for the wilderness. He has revisited the story in numerous works of art.

Up until the time he volunteered for the AIF Warren says he never visualised himself as a professional artist. "I thought I might be a commercial artist or a journalist, possibly a musician. I'd never even been to the state gallery."

Guy Warren, Self-portrait aged 18, 1939 NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

Guy Warren, Coffee Line, American airforce unit, Nadzab, New Guinea 1944 NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

It was during the war years that Warren discovered his vocation. “Most people in the army are bored out of their minds,” he remembers. “You spent your time sitting round, or doing jobs like packing up or cleaning latrines.”

Being a compulsive draftsman, freshly equipped with a good set of skills, Warren spent his war years filling sketchbooks with drawings. Unlike many of his colleagues he loved the outdoor life, at first when he undertook jungle warfare training in the rainforests of Canungra on the Qld-NSW border, and later in Bougainville.

In New Guinea he drew the landscape, soldiers at work and play, Japanese prisoners of war, and the local people with their amazing headdresses and body decorations.

He also met Joyce Carney, an English girl working as an officer’s assistant. They would be married in 1950 and have two children, Paul and Joanna.

“Joy” as she was known, would become an important figure in the world of ceramics, and a patient, long-suffering spouse to a man who could never see success in life as having anything to do with money or job security.

After our conversation Guy managed to find the right button and send me an email emphasising how important Joy, who died in 2011, had been to him.

At the end of the war Warren took advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme to enroll at East Sydney Tech (aka The National Art School). Among his fellow students two became friends and mentors: Tony Tuckson and Klaus Friedeberger. Tuckson, who was English, and Friedeberger, a German refugee from the Nazis who had travelled to Australia on the Dunera, already had a wealth of experience. They had visited great art museums and seen works that Warren knew only from books. They had an impressive work ethic and an interest in

Modernism. "What had I seen?" asked Warren, "*The Queen of Sheba* at the Art Gallery of NSW!"

Warren points out that we tend to forget how culturally isolated Australia was in the late 1940s. "At the school there was no discussion about ideas, no information about what was happening in New York or Berlin. Any talk at all on these matters came from the students."

Shortly after graduation Warren married Joy and the couple left for England, where masterpieces were to be experienced at first-hand. Arriving in Naples they left the ship and hitch-hiked across Italy, being astounded by the wealth of art to be found in the churches of the smallest towns.

Guy and Joy Warren out on the town, c 1947-48
NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

Guy Warren, River trip with Joy (Malaysia) 1985 (detail) NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

Settling in London, Guy got a job delivering mail for the post office, and worked for a time for the framer Robert Savage, alongside a young Australian named Fred Williams. He learnt many years later that another employee had been Yves Klein, who would become a legendary figure of the European avant-garde, but Warren has no recollection of him.

Hardly daring to imagine himself pursuing a career in art, Warren was impressed by Williams' dedication. "Unlike me, Fred already saw himself as a professional painter. He also gave me

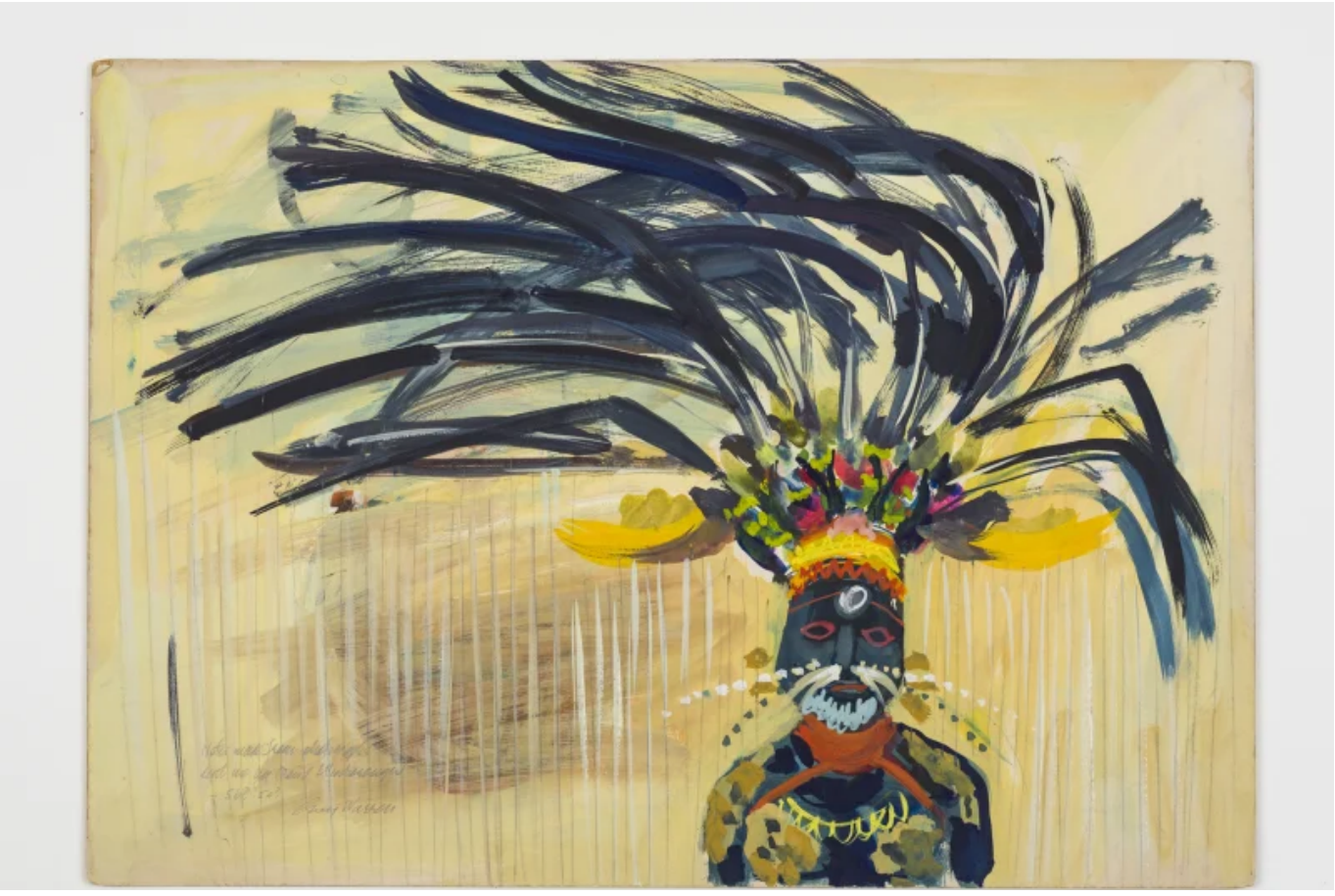
some good advice, telling me not to stay away from Australia for too long. As it happened he went back and I stayed on for a further eight years. When I returned to Australia in 1959 Fred was already well known [as a painter]."

With a new family to support Warren was not able to indulge any fanciful thoughts about being an artist. He secured a good job as art editor of a women's magazine, confining his painting to evenings and weekends.

One day he decided he'd had enough and resigned. This would become a lifelong pattern: taking a full-time job to earn a living for four or five years, then quitting in order to paint for two or three years. Warren still wonders why Joy never made the slightest objection.

It was during the final 18 months of the Warrens' life in London, while Guy was painting full-time, that he watched a documentary about New Guinea on the BBC. The shots of tribesmen echoed the images he was trying to recollect in a series of paintings based on his experiences of that country. He wrote a letter to the BBC asking if he could purchase some still photos from the film and eventually got a call from an executive named David Attenborough, who invited him around for a drink.

Many years later, with Attenborough transmuted into the world's most beloved broadcaster and naturalist, Warren is forever having to tell the story of his meeting with the great man. They would become friends, exchange letters and notes, and catch up years later when Attenborough visited Australia. Watching Andrew Denton interviewing Attenborough on TV one night, Warren was pleased to spy one of his old paintings hanging on his friend's wall.



Guy Warren, Study of tribal person from notes made from photographs lent to me by David Attenborough, 1954-56 NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

Upon returning to Australia, Warren once again took the sensible option of securing work with an advertising agency while painting on evenings and at weekends. He stuck with it for five

years until he began to imagine himself at the bottom of a deep, dark trench. He resigned and was rescued from poverty by Lloyd Rees, who asked him to help teach drawing to architecture students at the University of Sydney.

In 1965 he made a memorable trip to Queensland to visit the artist Ian Fairweather, who was living as a hermit on Bribie Island. Warren had heard that Fairweather was a misanthrope but they bonded so well over a bottle of wine that he was horrified to suddenly realise he had left Joy and the kids sitting on a beach for five hours.

Guy Warren, Mungo Brush, 1966 NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

In 1967 Warren won the Flotta Lauro Art Scholarship, which enabled him to take the family back to London for six months. By this stage he had become interested in art education, and secured a grant from the British Council that allowed him to visit art schools across Britain. He supplemented this with a brief trip to the United States, where he visited several more schools.

Warren arrived back in Australia as an authority on art education, and upon learning that the NSW government intended to open a new art school, offered his services. He found himself on a committee, watching all of his ideas and suggestions being systematically ignored.

Although he would become Head of Painting at the new Sydney College of the Arts in 1976 and stay until 1985, he still feels a lingering sense of frustration at not being able to achieve what he had intended.

From the 1960s to the 1980s Warren experimented with different ideas and techniques. He draped models in canvas and painted over them, he drew spontaneously while bumping around in the passenger seat of a car. “I’ve never wanted to be one of those people who paint the same boring picture for the rest of their lives,” he says. “You can be conscious of the bank balance, or your freedom and your soul. I’ve always asserted the right to do whatever I bloody well want to do.”

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His most adventurous gambit would come in 1994 when he hired a small plane to make a drawing in the sky called *The Fall of Icarus*. In 1985 he enjoyed a brief taste of fame when he won the Archibald Prize with a portrait of his friend, the sculptor Bert Flugelman.

Guy Warren, The Fall of Icarus, 1994 NATIONAL ART SCHOOL

Warren had played on the tanslation of Flugelman's name, which means "Wingman", adding the outline of a winged form that he had used repeatedly in his paintings. This figure may be a secret self-portrait, with Warren portraying himself, with typical self-deprecating humour, as Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and came plummeting back to earth.

No matter how abstract his paintings have occasionally become Warren has always valued that connection with the earth. "As a painter," he says, "I probably know less now than I've ever known in my life, but I want to keep my feet in the real world. Or if not my feet then at least a finger tip."

Today that world is largely the world of his memories, filled with figures from his days in New Guinea or the Shoalhaven.

He wants these figures to be integral parts of the landscape, not superimpositions. He's still dreaming and experimenting, with never a thought of retirement.

"What else would I do for God's sake? I work every day, roughly from 9 to 5. I get critical with myself because I sit in front of a television half the night looking at some stupid program. When I was working at a job I used to come home and paint every evening, and now I feel a bit guilty, as if I should still be at it."

Guy Warren with his 1985 Archibald Prize-winning painting of his friend, the sculptor Bert Flugelman.
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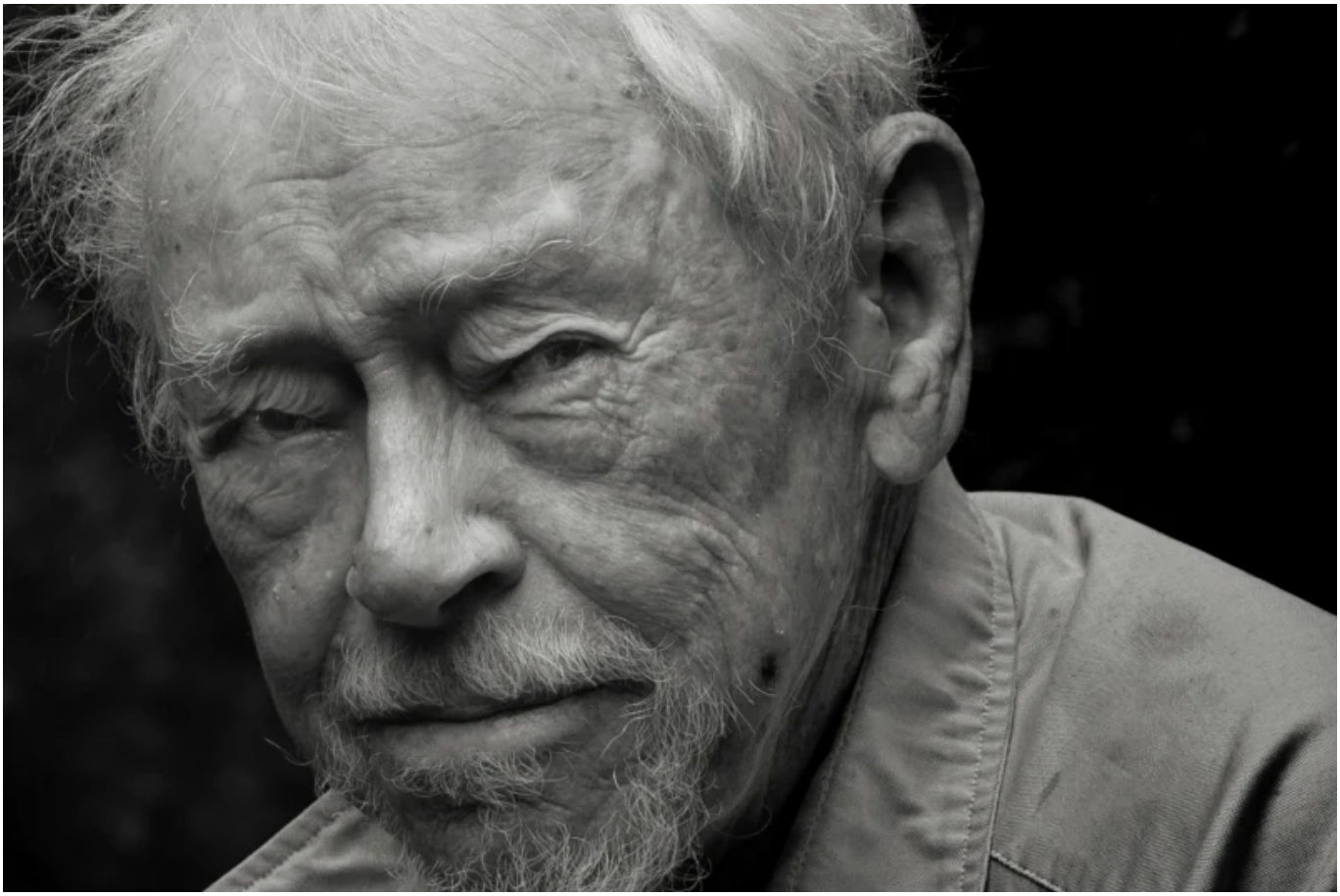

Guy Warren in February. RISTE ANDRIEVSKI

"I suppose I've never had any illusions about my work or my position in the universe, or even in the small world of the Sydney art scene. I don't think it matters at all. I've never thought of myself as Australia's greatest painter or as someone destined to make a fortune out of art. I've never worried about the money because I've always managed to get a job when I needed one. I don't know if this was a matter of self-confidence or ability, I think I was just lucky. To be an artist is such a privilege I can't believe I've been so lucky.

"I still feel like I did when I was 55 or even 35 – there's no difference. People talk about embracing the dignity of old age. F--k the dignity of old age! I don't want to know anything about it. If anyone thinks you should go into an old people's home while you're capable of doing what you've always been doing, you should tell them to go get nicked. Retirement is an absurdity! I've never understood the idea. People see it as the point where they can stop working and do what they've always wanted to do – but then they find it's far too late! Give me another 10 years and I might start thinking about retirement."

***From the Mountain to the Sky: Guy Warren Drawings* is at the National Art School from April 17 to May 22; *Guy Warren: the 100th Year* closes on Saturday at the King Street Gallery on William.**

John McDonald

John McDonald is an art critic and regular columnist with Good Weekend.