

Guy Warren: portrait of a painter

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Kerry Stewart



IMAGE: GUY WARREN IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S OLDEST PRACTISING AND EXHIBITING ARTISTS. (ABC RN/FIONA PEPPER)

He's won the Archibald, his drawings have featured on Australian currency and he's taught some of our most notable artists and architects. At 95, Guy Warren is one of Australia's oldest practising and exhibiting artists, writes **Kerry Stewart**.

If you haven't heard of Guy Warren, it comes as no big surprise to John McDonald, the art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald.

McDonald says Warren is sometimes overlooked, as an artist who doesn't fit into the antipodean tradition of his contemporaries Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Albert Tucker.

Warren doesn't paint explorers and Ned Kelly, and he's not exactly an abstract artist either. He's somebody who veers between the two.

He's not an easy artist to categorise. In some ways that's why Guy has been overlooked from time to time, because they can't put him in a box.

JOHN MCDONALD, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

'What you find is a hybrid form, where he will have basic human shape in a landscape, but that will be abstracted and used with non-naturalistic colours and become something with its own internal energy source,' McDonald says.

'So he's not an easy artist to categorise. In some ways that's why Guy has been overlooked from time to time, because they can't put him in a box.'



IMAGE: THE ACCIDENTAL MEETING, 2001, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. (SUPPLIED)

Inside Guy Warren's studio

I spent a couple of enjoyable mornings talking to Guy Warren in his home studio.

The house, designed by an architect friend, is built in the so-called 'Sydney nuts and berries' style. It sits organically on a suburban block, nestled in

amongst huge native trees.

The studio faces an internal green courtyard which lets soft light in through glass doors. His work tables are covered with sketch books, and large paintings lean against the walls.

Warren has been described as an adventurous painter and a great colourist. Both his spirit and sensitivity to light and colour was apparent from a very early age.

Like many young people in the 1930s, he occupied himself by walking and camping in the bush.

One memorable trip, he recalls, was canoeing down the Shoalhaven River with his brother and teenage friends, and encountering many physical challenges along the way.



IMAGE: INSIDE GUY WARREN'S STUDIO (ABC RN/FIONA PEPPER)

He clearly remembers paddling past a sandstone cliff that rose like a wall from the water, and describes the colour of the sun on the sandstone as a 'glowing world of orange'.

This early experience of being enveloped by nature continues to be at the heart of his art works.

'Rainforest makes you feel like you belong because when you're walking through it you're part of it, you're standing in it, not standing on a hill and

looking at it—you're just another object in a heavy forest,' Warren says. The rainforest that features in many of his paintings emerged from his time spent in New Guinea during the Second World War. That deep, thick, dark forest is a place he says he feels like he belongs.

'The more I painted, the more I realised what a wonderful metaphor it was for actually belonging to the landscape—not owning the landscape but being part of the landscape,' he says.

'Europeans have always painted the landscape as something separate from themselves, something to look at be admired, be analysed. It's almost as if we own the land. Well, we don't.'



IMAGE: GUY WARREN INSIDE HIS STUDIO. (ABC RN/FIONA PEPPER)

Developing his style

Warren developed his paintings' theme of the figure in the landscape through wartime in Papua New Guinea, in London as new creative shoots started to emerge from rubble, and then on his return to Sydney.

Barry Pearce, curator of the artist's latest exhibition, thinks of Warren as a philosopher-artist who uses landscape and the human figure as a device to pose a question.

'Guy's painterly language of figure against the ground—the mystery of the figure in the jungle hovering there—is a metaphor about our future on

planet Earth,' Pearce says.
Warren's autobiography is called *Searching for Gaia*. I ask if the scientist James Lovelock, who coined the idea, has been an influence.

'I'm no scientist, but he's saying what I've stumbled along to believe as well,' Warren says.

'Interdependence is the word. We are not separate ... we belong to the land, and it belongs to us.'

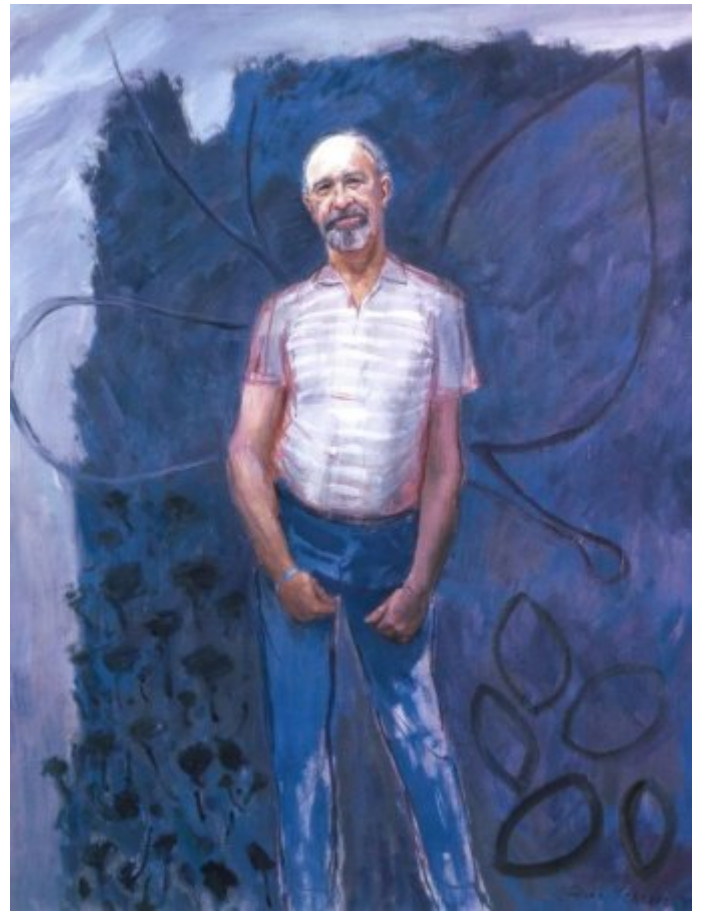


IMAGE: FLUGELMAN WITH WINGMAN, ARCHIBALD PORTRAIT PRIZE, 1985. (SUPPLIED)

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Michele McKenzie :

25 Jun 2016 2:53:07pm

Thank you for this great doco. Terrific to hear someone of 95 so young, so thoughtful. It made me feel life was still full of possibility. RN does this to me everyday but this was particularly special. I can't wait to hear the rest. Guy has seen and experienced so much but not tired or cynical, he has retained his innocence throughout.