

WORDMAKERS

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Andrew Sibley (B. 1933 – D. 2015)

Andrew Sibley is one of Australia's best-known and appreciated 20th century artists with a career spanning six decades. In one way, his style defies description as his art evolved over decades. He was a figurative painter but also produced landscapes and abstract works. He was born at Adisham in Kent, England on 9 July 1933. When his family home was bombed in the London Blitz, Sibley was relocated to Sittingbourne then to Northfleet, both in Kent. In 1944, Sibley was awarded a scholarship to Gravesend School of Art (later the Medway School), where he studied with fellow students including English artist Peter Blake. He spoke of these strong early influencers on his life in an interview with Barbara Blackman recorded in 1984.

The Sibley family migrated to Brisbane, Australia in 1948 and moved again in 1949, to Stanthorpe, Queensland's premier wine and apple-growing area, about 250km southwest of Brisbane. Sibley and his father picked fruit, eventually buying their own orchard. He left the farm in 1951 to undertake National Service Training with the Royal Australian Navy after which he spent a short time working in Port Moresby in PNG before returning to Brisbane.

Though often living an impoverished existence, Sibley began formal training as a painter in Brisbane in the latter 1950s and worked with artists like Charles Blackman, Clifton Pugh, Jon Molvig and Ian Fairweather.

Brisbane of the 1950s and 1960s had seen the emergence of aesthetic modernism in the theories and practice of twentieth century European art movements. Jon Molvig and Roy Churcher became the nuclei of two different art groups that enriched the local art milieu.

Sibley became a key member of the so-called "Brisbane School" together with Molvig, Churcher and Ian Fairweather (Bribie Island). In 1960, he held his first solo exhibition at Rowes Arcade Gallery in Edward Street Brisbane. A key work that year, *The Shire Hall* (1960) is indicative of Sibley's strong emerging style and use of colour. In 1962, Sibley exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and was included in "Australian Painting Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary" at the Tate Gallery, London. Indeed, 1962 was a significant year for both Sibley and Australian art itself; his star suddenly soared when he won Australia's richest art award, the £1000 Transfield Art Prize for his painting *The Bathers*. At the same time, the prominent Sydney gallerist Rudy

Komon signed Sibley and he joined a stable of Australia's best contemporary artists including Melburnians Fred Williams, Clifton Pugh, George Baldessin, John Brack, Leonard French and Jan Senbergs, as well as Jon Molvig, John Olsen, and Robert Dickerson. Sibley's exhibitions received strong attendances and critical acclaim while his work was bought by state galleries and private collectors. In subsequent years, he was regularly hung in the Archibald, Wynne and Blake prizes. It is notable that from 1960 to the end of his life, Sibley had more than 60 solo exhibitions to great commercial success.

He was also noticed outside of Australia. In 1963, Sibley was shortlisted in numerous prizes and was hung in "Australian Painting Today touring Europe", and "Young Painters Biennale", Paris. By the mid 1960s, Sibley's paintings were being included in significant exhibitions in both Japan and the USA in Washington.

After meeting his future wife Irena Sibley (née Pauliukonis) in Brisbane in 1967, Sibley followed her to Sydney, where they were married. The Sibleys later moved to Victoria, making their home in Melbourne. Sibley was also a significant art educator. He was a Senior Lecturer at RMIT University from 1967-1987 and Head of Painting at Monash University from 1990-1999.

A perfectionist, one of Sibley's biographers recounts that he once destroyed about ten years' of work, the artist having described it as "hopeless pictures". Nor did his career always follow an upward trajectory. He eschewed the changing fashions of art and according to David Thomas in *Andrew Sibley: An Epic of the Everyman*, Sibley followed his own "increasingly unpopular figurative path while much of the Sydney art world celebrated the freedom and revitalisation of abstract expressionism."

Nevertheless, Sibley was ultimately recognised both in Australia and internationally. In 1970, he had work included in an exhibition titled "Miniaturen '70 International" in West Germany, and undertook a residency in West Berlin in 1972. Sibley's connection to Germany continued throughout his life with two more shows in the mid-1970s and later in the mid-1980's where he showed on numerous occasions in Cologne; a retrospective of his work was held in Berlin in 2017.

Most significantly artists such as Max Beckman, Paul Klee, Edmund Munch, Francis Bacon directly influenced him; Sibley's affinity with German and European Art was based on more than just his exhibiting there. He explored and followed the work of these major artists of the 20th century - and those that he was a contemporary of. These artistic touch points remained a key part of his work throughout his life and highly successful career.

Sibley liked to draw and paint in series and focus on 'types' in his portraiture. Explaining his motivation, he wrote: "(This) series reminds us of our primal and natural instincts to be a part, or rather, respond to nature - to love, to own our passions."

Interviewed as one of six artists in a film focused on male Australian portrait artists filmed by Tim Burstall in 1965, Sibley says of his approach to portraiture: "I like to paint particular types; the hands, I feel are very important in a portrait." Painting fellow artist Jon Molvig, he said, "I've always considered Jon to have a fiery exterior a mix between Don Quixote and a matador-type figure and so (I used) reds and yellows moving into more delicate whites and greens.

Sibley suffered a fall at the beginning of 2015. In his final months in care, he began to sketch again and some of these works, made with pen on paper, were amongst his last shown during his life. He died in Melbourne on 3 September 2015. Though English-born, he was firmly an Australian artist and leaves both an indelible mark and a proud legacy.

Sibley's work is represented in all the major institutional collections in Australia including National Galleries of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of NSW, Queensland Art Gallery, Art Gallery of SA, Parliament House Canberra, National Portrait Gallery (Australia), Tarrawarra Museum of Art, and regional galleries throughout Australia. His work is also held in significant private collections in Asia, Europe and the United States including the Australian Embassy Collection Washington USA.
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