The Long Run #1: Gareth Sansom on painting, chance and mortality

art guide AUSTRALIA

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GARETH SANSOM [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]
You create something that upends them. It's not the way they were taught to look at art. And yet they can't walk away. Now, if I can do something in a painting that achieves that, my purpose is satisfied.

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]
Hello, and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode is the first in our three-part series The Long Run, which looks at creating and evolving, where I talk with three artists who've each had careers spanning 60 years.

This first episode is with Gareth Sansom. Based in Melbourne, Gareth has been described as one of Australia's most well-known avant-garde painters. He had his first exhibition in 1959, and since then has gone on to create loved and debated works, that are filled with incredible layers, looking into pop culture, sexual transgression, and the history of painting itself. In a pretty lively conversation, Gareth and I talk about his young talent in drawing, his sense of ambition, the importance of chance, his thoughts on death, and what changes over a 60-year practice and what remains the same.

And before we get started a very big thank you to our sponsor for this series Leonard Joel Auctioneers and Valuers, who are based in Melbourne and Sydney.

TM
Now you grew up in Ascot Vale and in the past you've mentioned how you were good at drawing and sport, but you weren't good at drawing in the academic sense. In what way then did you realise that you were good at drawing?

GS
Well, my father was a journalist for the Melbourne Herald and he was always bringing home pads of white paper that the journalists used, you know, to jot down stuff. But it was actually a good quality paper that you could draw on. And, you know, from an early age, I can remember my father sitting me on his knee and he would draw things and I would copy what he drew. And it seemed to me, and it seemed to him, that I had a natural skill of drawing, but I didn't ever know the term academic drawing, or I just knew that I could draw in a pretty natural way. So at primary school, you know, my pictures were always being selected to go onto the back wall. And then at high school though, it just didn't seem like I was any good anymore because they were setting topics, you know, where you had an hour class. And then he would set a topic and the topic might be an old man asleep against a tree, something like that.

GS
And I wasn't really experienced. And all the drawing I'd done was of drawing the human figure. So it really wasn't till I started studying at RMIT that I really learned to draw the academic way. And by the academic way, the way that RMIT wanted people to draw like. Now I mastered that, but it wasn't very natural drawing you know. It was like exercise drawing to get your qualification and so forth. So when I broke out of RMIT in my own art, I just withdrew to my own interpretation of the human figure or anything else there I was drawing or painting. It's not true I don't think to say that I wasn't any good at academic drawing. I didn't know what academic drawing was. I just had to learn it because I was doing a course, you know, and it was one of the subjects, but I don't think any artist thinks that way. You know, when they're making their art, either abstract or figurative or a bit of both, they let the thing happen the way it's going to happen. They don't put a label on it like, "Oh, this is more academic or less academic." I don't think they're terms artists might use, but let's put it this way: from an early age I could draw naturally. I could copy wonderfully well, anything in a book. And as I got older and started to get more interested in painting, drawing became less of a concern, I suppose, but it's always there. And it crops up in my art: in this show we're doing at STATION we'll be showing some early drawings. Well by early, I mean, probably 1970s or 1980s or whatever.

TM

At the time when you would have been deciding that, you know, you wanted to pursue art seriously in some way, it would have been the late 50s. Had you known anyone growing up who was an artist or had you been exposed to an art world of any kind?

GS

No, not at all. I was from the Western suburbs from Ascot Vale, which is part of Essendon. And I was more interested in sport and all my friends were interested in sport. And I was very good at cricket and I played cricket Essendon first in district cricket. And I never thought of art as an art career whatsoever. My parents put me into the Herald to be a journalist with my father, but I only lasted a week and I just couldn't stand it. And the first paycheck came and without consulting my father or anybody else, I bought a set of paints with it. And I actually started painting in oils, you know, from about 16 and started to really enjoy painting. But there was no money in it. No security. And my parents were worried about, you know, what was I going to do in life?

GS

So I started at teacher's college to become a primary school teacher. And while learning that, and then going out and teaching as a primary school teacher, I enrolled in RMIT at night. So they didn't have degrees then, right. They were called diplomas. And it was a four year diploma. But because I was doing it part-time it was actually six years. So there were three things going on: I was going to cricket practice, and I was teaching during the day at a suburb called Dootigala, and I was going to RMIT at night. It was a sort of fairly complicated life for an 18 or 19 year old. But anyway, I got a body of work together and I was starting to get interested in Bohemian life and the people who were a little bit different from the people I grew up with. And I sort of radiated towards that; where they drank, what they did, what they talked about and so forth.

And it seemed to me that some of them were exhibiting their paintings. And although I was only 18 and 19 or whatever, I decided I would try and do the same. So I went to a few galleries that were showing young people. And the one I liked was called the Rickman Gallery in Little Latrobe street. And that person liked my art and he gave me a show, but he said, "You know, the tradition with us is you always get somebody famous to open the show." So he said, "Why don't you ring up Arthur Boyd?" And I thought, "Goodness me, Arthur Boyd? How could I possibly ring up Arthur Boyd?" And he drove all the way, all the way from Eltham in his old car to Ascot Vale to my studio, which was, which was my father's garage. And he liked the work, which were, were all over the place, really: abstract, figurative, still life, landscape, surrealist. I had no idea what I was doing really, but he could see I could paint. And he decided he would open the show. He actually bought one and he gave a speech, and that's how it all started for me. And of course, Arthur Boyd became very, very famous, but, you know, I thought, "God, he's a really old man. He's opening my show." But guess what? He was 38.

TM

It seems old when you're 19 maybe. I know you said the gallery suggested Arthur Boyd, but was there something in, you know, Australian expressionist painting that interested you in any way?

GS

In Arthur Boyd's work you mean?

TM

Yeah, yeah.

GS

Well, Arthur Boyd was probably classified as one of the antipodean, which was the Melbourne figurative school of modern figurative painting. And a lot of it with an expressionist bent. Whereas New South Wales and Sydney was always considered abstract, and they painted very fast so they could get to the surf. But Melbourne, Melbourne was always considered people, you know, suffering through winter. You know, cerebral, anxious paintings. And there was, this figurative, expressionist thing about it. And I suppose I fitted into that pretty easily. And RMIT was very figurative and sort of antipodean in its ideas about the sort of pictures you should paint. So I started out much more figurative, and figuratively, than I'd probably ended up. Because you know what I ended up doing, and I started fairly early on, probably was a kind of fusion with abstract painting and figurative painting. But in those

days they said you had to be one or the other. You couldn't be both. But yes, yes, of course, you know, Arthur Boyd had an exhibition at Australian Galleries, which was the 'Aboriginal Bride' series. And they were the first major paintings I saw by him. And that was well after he'd opened my show. And I was quite taken by them, I have to admit: how bold and brave they were to be painting about Indigenous problems, right back then, when nobody would ever go near Indigenous problems, especially if you're a white person. And you know, I was interested in that, yes.

TM

There was something you said in an interview with John Cattapan, where you said, and this interview was only a few years ago, you said: "My mum had the idea you had to go up a station in life." Is that something that you think has stuck with you? That sense of, I guess, parental ambition.

GS

I've always had ambition. I always wanted to be in inverted commas 'the best'. Or one of the best. So I was always having friendly rivals in the art world. And, you know, friendly, rivals like George Baldessin. We were close friends, but we kind of fell out because of the rivalry between us, and our parallel progression in the art world. But all the time that my art career was developing and, you know, gathering steam and momentum, all that time I had had ambition as a teacher as well. You know, I was a kind of Jekyll and Hyde: at night, I'd let my hair hang out and wear leather jackets, but during the day I slicked my hair down and wore a collar and tie. But, you know, I wanted to get to the top. And so I progressed rapidly through the teaching stages til, you know, I ended up Dean at the VCA school of art after being head of painting at the VCA school of art. And how I had the energy to do that...

You know, I taught for over 30 years and I started exhibiting in 1959. So to have the energy, to get through all that and not, not let the other, or either suffer is pretty amazing. But to be, to be frank with you, roundabout turning 50, which I was a visiting artist in Delhi, representing Australia with the Indian Triennale. And something about India affected me, I must say. But I just realised that, you know, I was there for six months making watercolors and things, and I just realised then: I don't, I don't want to go to be an administrator in an art school, which the Dean's job was starting to be, you know. And I got back and I immediately realised I can't stomach this too much longer. And if I do, I'm going to be a very disgruntled ex-Dean whose art career has fallen apart. So I came back and I probably lasted 12 months and then resigned, and have painted full time ever since. And some people didn't resign, you know, they stayed on to the bitter, bitter end to get the best superannuation deal they could probably get. And they retired. A lot of them, sadly, their art's fallen by the wayside and they were a bit bitter about it.

TM

It did surprise me a little actually to read that it was in your early fifties, when you first became an artist full time. Was it just throughout, you know, the 60s, 70s, 80s—was it just simply like a pragmatic reality that making art wasn't going to pay the bills?

GS

Well, not the art I was making. Anyone could look at my NGV retrospective or the book that comes with it, or even Google early work or whatever. It was pretty tough, rough nasty work. I mean, I probably didn't even think it would sell, and fortunately some did sell. But the thing was, you had the security of the job, so you kind of didn't care, but once that security was gone, you did care. And, you know, I had numerous shows that didn't sell anything once I wasn't a Dean anymore. And of course I was, I was worried about it. And I'm going to keep talking to you as I walk to the fridge, leave all this in. It's sort of, it's sort of interesting and I'm going to open the fridge. And as I keep talking to you, I'm going to have a mouth full of liquid, which is sort of like non-alcoholic, and it might stop me coughing and spoiling this.

TM

Take your time. You know, we can, we can edit all this out.

GS

You're going to take all of this out?

TM

Well, I think I'm likely to take this part out.

GS

No, you keep mine natural the way it was, but I'll tell you a quick little story.

TM

Okay go ahead.

GS

And the story is really, why am I sitting here now? Because back in the early 1920s, my father who had been in the first world war and he's actually his right arm was blown off in the war. And he came back to Perth and he didn't know what he was going to do. But somebody knew of him who worked in the Herald in Melbourne. And he was offered a job at the start as a journalist, at the Melbourne Herald in his early twenties. So it has to come over by train and he eventually gets to what was then called Spencer Street station. And he gets off and he's sitting down there with his luggage and he's never been to big city before, like Melbourne. And he's got one arm, you see? And his shoelaces aren't done and you can't do it up with one hand, you know. So he's sitting there. While that's happening another train is coming in, and it's coming in from Swan Hill. And this young girl gets off the train who's like 19 or something. And she sees my father with the shoe, struggling on, bending down, trying to do it. And she comes over and very politely says, "Sir, can I help you with that?" So she did. And they married about two months later.

TM

Wow.

GS

And that was my mother. Now think of it the way I'm telling it to you. If his train had of been earlier or later, or my mother's train had of been earlier or later, they would never met in life ever. Circumstances wouldn't have presented an opportunity for them to meet. And because they met, I was eventually born in 1939 after they had two other brothers who were born earlier. But I, I've never forgotten that story because it's just one of those incredible coincidences of chance, you know? And so many things can happen in life based on chance. You don't necessarily know that at the time, whether that chance is going to end up meaning something really incredible or something awful. But to me, that, that's my start. That's why I'm sitting here now.

TM

But what is it about that sense of chance that interests you? I know chance is something that comes into your painting practice a lot, but is there an anxiety towards that sense of chance?

GS

No, no, no, no. Because the best paintings I've, I've made—and you know, my ratio of good paintings out of the number of paintings I might make is I might have to paint maybe 10 paintings to get two fantastic, incredible paintings. The others are okay, but the really incredible paintings, there's a lot of chance. You know, you've been working late at night, you're really tired and you go to bed and you come back and look at it in the morning and it looks awful and you think you'd give up on it, and you keep going and you keep going and you keep going. And sometimes something happens in the painting that you didn't plan and that's chance. And Francis Bacon, the famous late artist, called that chance, he would always describe that as a happy accident. Now, a sculptor might get a block of wood and he's, and he's going to, he's going to carve into the block of wood. And he wants to make maybe a figure, a human figure or a head or something. And he's chiseling away into the block of wood. And he gets halfway into the block of wood. And there's a giant fault in, in the block of wood, like a knot. You know what a knot is in timber?

TM

I do, but maybe explain it just in case.

GS

Well if you see a strip of timber, you'll see these holes in the timber sometimes. And it's just a natural thing that's happened in the production of that timber at the saw mill. Now in this block of wood, which is a fictional story, I'm making it up to create the metaphor for you—that the sculptor he's, he didn't expect that hole to be in the middle of the wood, which is sort of not perfect. It's destroying his idea or his vision of the figure that it was going to be.

So what does he do? Well, he chucks that little block of timber away and goes to get another block of timber. And he starts cutting into that. And so he makes this perfect figure. Now, another artist, exactly the same situation: he's cutting into the wood with his chisels and chopping and chiseling and cutting and so forth. And he finds the knot, this fault in the middle of the block of wood. What does he do? He doesn't throw it away. He uses the knot to make the figure more interesting that,

you know, the figure that he couldn't have planned for, and that's the happy accident I'm talking about. Now, in my painting, you can't contrive a happy accident because it's not an accident anymore. It's like you're planning for an accident to happen. But when an accident happens in a painting, it can be because you've made a mistake with the brush or you've smudged something or rubbing back, you find something you forgot, you forgot was there.

And, you know, you use that accident to make the painting better. Now my best pictures have that sort of thing happening. Although the viewer can't see that because they haven't seen the progression of the painting, but I always remember those moments. I always remember that those particular things contributed to how the picture was going to work. In other words, it wasn't going to work in a mechanical way, like you'd planned it and just followed it through, A to Z and the picture's finished. I like my pictures when they're on the cliff and they're about to fall over. I can save it some way. But if I can save that picture before it topples over and bring it back to something incredible and a happy accident causes that—well, that's, you know, that's the sort of psychological creative experience I'm talking about that I've been very lucky that way. And my best pictures work better because they've been through almost a crisis sometimes, and you've painted your... you painted your way out of the crisis.

TM

Right, but even with that sense of chance, it does seem that as you went on, and as a painter, there was this hugely intellectual aspect of painting that fell into your practice?

GS

Oh only, only in the sense that I couldn't a hundred percent of the time rely on my intuition because that cupboard might just have been bare. And I still wanted to be painting pictures and make pictures and so forth. So maybe I read something, or maybe I saw a painting I was interested in by somebody else. Or maybe I saw a line in a poem. My paintings couldn't just survive on how brilliantly I painted them. And you know, when you've been painting for, for as long as I have, over 60 years, it's sounds pretty crude to say this, but I know all the tricks. You know, I could paint most styles, but I wouldn't dare and wouldn't want to. But the thing is, if that's all you can do, your work is actually craft, it's facile. There's got no, no cerebral depth to it. So what I've tried to do with my work over maybe the last 10 years is to give it an edge, if you like, where I've inserted things. And I know what those things are, and I know the power of those things, but if you put that thing out of context, from where it's come from, then it's playing a different game with the viewer.

TM

Well maybe you could give us an example. Like what's a reference that has particularly grabbed you, that you've used in one of your paintings?

GS

There's a famous film, 1957 by a Swedish director called Ingmar Bergman. And that film is called The Seventh Seal. And it's a black and white incredible film, where the start of the film is a knight has just returned from the crusades, and he's arrived on the beach. He's finally come home, you know, after 15 years. He sees a cloaked figure at the other end of the beach. And he wonders what that person is doing, sitting up on a rock. So he walks up, the figure turns around and the face is totally white, like a skull, but it's white makeup. It's very powerful. It's very scary. And he says to the Knight, they greet each other, and he says to the knight, "It's your time you're coming with me." And it's a, not a religious figure though. He's death. And you've survived the crusades, but now it's actually your time. And the Knight says, "I'm not ready to go. I've got to go to my village. I've got to see my family. I've got to see what's going on." And they decided to play a game of chess. Do you know this story?

TM

I do. I love this movie and I love Ingmar Bergman, so I do.

GS

Isn't it incredible?

TM

It's great.

GS

They play a game of chess, right through the movie. In almost every scene in the village everywhere else, you always see them over to one side against the tree, but nobody else can see death. Only the Knight can. And only one other person in the

villages and so forth can see death. He survives at the end because he's got a young family. But at the end, of course, the chess game is lost and death takes him. But the final scene, they're going up on top of a cliff in a line, death leading them, and he's carrying a scythe and they're all behind. But the really strange thing, it gave me a strange feeling up my back, I was about 18 when I saw it: they're all dancing. It's like glee. And night's already thought out through all these villages and seeing which has been burnt and everything else, and the plague and the black death. And he's already, already worked out in his own mind that there's no God, so there's no heaven. So he's going with... death's taking him. And he's going happily now because he's sort of come to grips with the idea that the religious experience doesn't exist. And you know, it's a great movie that young people should see, I think. Because it's, it's just poses so many questions about mortality and our own existence. Did you feel that?

TM

I did feel that. I also, I mean, I feel that sense in your work too. And I had wondered if you were anxious about death?

GS

I don't know if anxious is the right word, but you know, when practically all my drinking mates over the last 20 years, with the exception of one or two, are all dead. I've outlived them. And you know, you sort of miss chums, if you like. They're always interesting people to have an hour of drinking with. And, and you miss them terribly, you know, when they've gone and you have to adjust to the idea that, well, if you're going to have a drink, now, the people are younger. And you think are they going to put up with having a drink with somebody 30 years older than them or more? But they do. They do. I suppose, I suppose they recognise my success if you like, my career. And they're trying to glean some ideas about experience. And I'm very, I'm very flattered by that.

I'm very touched by that. But these younger people, they're very talented, but younger to me now means they've just turned 60. So I don't think anyone 30 would want to have a drink with me. But these are the things that come with the territory. You know, you stay alive, you're conscious of being alive. You're conscious of your own mortality and, and you just think to yourself, "Well, what can I do?" You can't do anything about it. And, and my routine is to—not at the moment right now—but my routine is to spend as much time in the studio as I can, because there still might be a surprise waiting for me on the canvas that will still give me that frisson on that I was talking about early on. Something that happens like the knot in the timber. So, you know, I recommend to people listening to this to read a book by somebody called Arthur Koestler and it's called The Act of Creation, and it really explains creativity better than I'm doing today.

And it's a book I use when I was lecturing at tertiary level to get young people to read this because the idea of creativity it's, it's not just in an art form. Koestler talks about the act of creation as when you laugh at a funny joke. Something's happened in the punchline that is so absurd, it's so creative, it floors you, it catches you off guard. But as I said earlier on when I was talking about painting, you can't contrive. But no, no, no... Yes, I'm conscious of mortality. Sometimes I wake at three in the morning and I imagine someone's scraping at the window and it's death with he's scythe tapping. And he wants to play chess with me, you know? So I might go down and have a glass of red wine or put on a movie I like, or whatever, and just not go straight back to bed. But that doesn't happen very often because life is, is what it is. I've spoken at funerals. I've stood beside coffins, you know. I'm well aware of it. And as fearful as the next man or woman, you know?

TM

Yeah. On that sense of the psychological aspect of your work, you've also talked about how there's a self-investigatory aspect of the work as well. I mean, what do you think you're trying to investigate?

GS

Well I don't paint in a way that is a literal translation of what you just said. You know, it's not a literal narrative that we tell a story with a logical conclusion.

TM

No, no. I guess I didn't really mean it as literally as that. I was more thinking of something like when the painter Prudence Flint said to me that she believes that all art comes from a wound and that artists are investigating, that wound, and it's often quite psychological. And you always talk about the psychological aspects of your work, but essentially what you're actually investigating—I've never really heard from you on that.

GS

Well, that's because it's intangible. If I could, if I could plot that for you in a very logical way, I would. But because it's, it's so full of uncertainties that I can't literally translate it for you in, in, in an obvious way. But you've got to go back to the earlier talking about what happens on the canvas or what happens in that block of wood when the sculptor's in the middle of it, and then changes course. And why you change course and what are you trying to achieve when you do change course? Well it's... And if that changing of course actually tells you something about yourself, it does, because it's telling you, you know, if you can be sort of somewhat self-referential, it's telling you that you're really a much more flexible person than you ever thought you were. But no, the question you're trying to needle out of me is something that maybe I would prefer to be more guarded about. My paintings aren't auto-biographical anymore. There was a period where I want to put down stuff about my life and my sport and my loves, and my women, all sorts of sexual ideas and everything else, and actually write those thoughts on, on the paintings and drawings. I don't do that anymore, really. I'd rather get the whole thing to be sorted with paint.

TM

No, no. I'm aware my question was a little bit probing, but I guess I just wanted to test the waters a little bit.

GS

That's alright.

TM

I'm aware that I've kept you for a little while now, but I guess I just have two main questions. The first one is part of the reason why I did this series is that I wanted to know when you have a career over 60 years, does an art practice change as time changes or as the decades change, or do some things still just remain fundamental over 50, 60 years?

GS

The approach doesn't necessarily alter, but you know, the more experience you've got, the more things you can try that you might not have had the skills to try when you were very young. So I've got all the skills now to try things in a very complex painting that I wouldn't have had the skill or abilities to maybe have done that when I was 18, 19, 20. And those pictures, when I look at them now, really crude and rough or whatever, people like them though. But here's, here's the problem with artists my age in the history of Australian art, particularly Australian artists who became very famous in the 50s and 60s—as they got older their paintings, got neater and neater and neater. They lost their wild, wild spirits. And not all of them perhaps, but you know, you could see, you could see that their reckless endeavour had drained out of them.

And I know when my art is suffering that way, where I've got the consummate skills and I'm showing off, you know, I'm showing off what I can do now that I couldn't do all those years ago. So if I recognise that and something's become too neat, too craft-like, too facile, I'll wreck it in some way and repaint the area. But again, you can't contrive to do that. You have to try to do it so it seems to be necessary in a way of fixing, rather than saying something about your own frailty as an artist. But I'm aware of artists as they've got older, like Brett Whiteley, a classic example—although he died at 50 or 51 or something—the thing about him was he was so good and his drawing ability was so spectacular that his wrist took over. And by his wrist, I mean, his wrist—drawing buttocks and breasts of women became just overload because his hand was doing it, and his brain had nothing to do with it anymore. So it's a matter of showing all my experiences over 60 years painting, but also still hoping that the best of the late works still shows something new that compensates for some of the neatness that might've crept in.

TM

My second question is that in a lot of reviews of your work, the reviewer always tries to give some key to understanding your work. Like it might be cricket, or it might be your father being in World War I, or it's that you revel in chaos, or alternatively it's the way that you actually revel in unity, or that you try to elude taste and curation altogether. And I wonder, what would you say is the key to understanding a Gareth Sansom artwork?

GS

Well, to ignore all that stuff for a start. Because, now a curator—well, most curators I know—have done fine art at university or whatever, and they're trained to think

and write in a certain way. And they would write in a way they've been trained. But the very best of them will go one step further than that, and look for uniqueness in the work. But the thing with that is it's their uniqueness that their recognising in the work based on their own experience. It's not necessarily a uniqueness that I'm necessarily aware of when I was painted the picture or titled it. The bottom line is if the end of what they write is complimentary. I'll take it every time.

TM

That's an interesting answer, but I feel like it kind of deflects from the question a little bit. And I guess like the crudest way of probably putting my question is: what do you think your works are about?

GS

Well, my works are about painting, about art, about what art can be, painting about how art can work, how it functions, how it creates a dialogue between each and the viewer, if we're talking about a painting, and how I can contribute to that experience. So that it's not just selfish art that I've made for me, a cathartic self-made art, where I'm the only one having that experience. And I won't show my pictures to anybody. I'm selfish, and I'm just going to keep those pictures at home and admire them. But you paint, you paint the pictures to put something in the picture that might not be clear to even yourself, but you hope that it broadens the viewer's experience. Even a viewer who feels well-experienced and well-educated and everything else. You create something that upends them. It's not the way they were taught to look at art and yet they can't walk away. Now, if I can do something in a painting that achieves that, my purpose is satisfied in that aspect of the making of art experience.

TM

And that was Gareth Sanson for the first episode of The Long Run. Stay tuned for episodes two and three. You can subscribe to the Art Guide podcast on iTunes and Spotify or otherwise listen at Art Guide online, where you can also keep up to date with art related features and interviews from across the country.