



ANDREW SAYERS

DEFINING THE ARTIST

2 March – 27 April 2019

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



Wooden Bridge 2010
57 x 76 cm each (diptych)

Andrew Sayers, the artist, came as a surprise to many who were well aware of the achievements of the talented scholar, curator and accomplished director.¹ It had always been Sayers' intention to 'flip sides', to focus on being a professional artist, the practice of which had always been a part of his life, just not in the public sphere until 2014. Whilst Sayers found an element of creativity as a curator and director; painting and drawing were the ultimate creative act and there was "still this thing inside me, to paint."² Sayers, the artist, brought the same level of diligence, discipline and determination as he did to all aspects of his life. This exhibition of gouaches from 2010 – 2015 reveal an artist concerned with capturing a sense of place and range from lushly coloured landscapes to almost abstract impressions. They assert his love of rocks, sea and sky, as expressed in his inaugural exhibition in 2015.³

From the influence of his graphic designer father, to his own 'art gallery corner' at primary school, to dedicated studio spaces wherever he lived, Sayers' artistic practice was an integral, although private, affair. He was rarely without a sketchbook or drawing materials, and this ability, coupled with his own dedicated practice, complemented his innate capacity as a curator, enabling him to really look at artworks, with another level of understanding. Many speak of Sayers' 'eye', his empathetic ability to read an artwork, with the artist's understanding of how it was created, examining brushstrokes, colour, techniques, composition.⁴ As Daniel Thomas notes "what sets collections curators apart is the aptitude to judge works of art on both aesthetic excellence and cultural significance. Wide-ranging curiosity is required, and accumulation of detailed information and knowledge. To be also, albeit secretly, a practicing painter gave him an advantage over more academic temperaments in judging skill and originality."⁵

In an era of concern for work-life balance, Sayers found a fortuitous synergy between his career and his personal passions – vacations were spent visiting art galleries looking at paintings and his interest in geology provided inspiration for painting sojourns.

The gouaches in this exhibition were painted en plein air, statements citing the "challenge of taking a sheet of paper into nature and capturing something of a place and a mood."⁶ They are an expression of Sayers' delight in travel, in capturing the essence of a landscape, especially coastal views, and also expose his passion for geology and depictions of rocky places.

Sayers applied his usual unique dedication to being an artist, finding a rhythm of working daily in the studio and perhaps realising an element of relief. "I felt as though I'd been waiting for this point my whole life. That's not to discount all the other things I did. But as someone who has drawn and painted through those years, my practice was inevitably squeezed into prescribed shapes and sizes."⁷

A fellow artist recalls Sayers enjoying the camaraderie of the studio, discussing their work, following each other's achievements and then breaking for coffee to go and "talk about art."⁸ For Sayers, exhibiting his art came as a personal

reveal, beyond his proficiency with materials and techniques and his encyclopaedic knowledge of art history, with many of his personal traits and interests brought to light. His response to time was particularly poignant post-diagnosis: "I think this obsession I've always had with time is heightened a bit, but it's an obsession with geological time."⁹

The sense of variants of time, of brief moments contrasted with longer time; of geological time; of expressing different times of day, are evoked in these gouaches. "I don't think nature can be painted without some sense of the time embodied in the picture – fleeting time, precise points in time, long and drawn-out time narrative time, cyclical time, time without beginning or end."¹⁰

Sayers favoured the quick drying gouache medium to immediately capture images across a variety of locations. Links to the impressionist movement, with the challenge to depict a specific moment in time, would not have been lost on such a meticulous scholar. Citing him in this



Corunna Point 4 2014
38 x 57 cm



tradition, Sayers was drawn to record colour and light in front of the actual scene; to depict the same area in different conditions and to paint personal landscapes including Wallaga Lake. Sayers was skilled at balancing the need to work quickly with the ability to immerse himself in a landscape, enabling him to evoke a real sense of place and to capture the contrast of space with an intimacy of view.

The landscapes favoured by Sayers included coastal views, especially the south coast of NSW, a holiday spot for the Sayers family over many years. *Corunna Point*; *Bridgewater Bay*; *Bogola Head* are some of the examples which express the challenge of encapsulating the ever-changing coastal seas and skies - the turbulent sea, the surrounding windswept vegetation, the sand at low tide, and the differing skies - wide and blue; studded with clouds; or grey and threatening.

These works also demonstrate Sayers' manipulation of colour, used as another tool to evoke atmosphere - the sea takes on the dull green of a cloudy day in *Bridge*, *Wallaga Lake*; ominous storm clouds hover over Mt Moorookyle; whilst other works are characterised by white fluffy clouds across bright blue skies; sun drenched rocks against a turquoise sea. The contrast of seas and skies is evident in *Basalt Island I* (*Lady Julia Percy*



Lava Flow, Organ Pipes National Park III 2013
42 x 30 cm



Two Capes, Bridgewater Bay 2015
76 x 57 cm

Island) from bright blue to purple-grey in the sky against the jade and turquoise of the water; the two sets of blues defined by the mid-horizon line and the presence of the island. The broad sweeps of colour across the paper give a sense of expansive distance.

This particular work is a good example of how Sayers employed the white of paper itself, the broken bands of green leading our eye to the horizontal bulk of the central island. It is an indication of the maturity and discipline of an artist who can allow the medium itself to be so integral to the composition and to leave the white paper untouched. Other examples of his sureness of touch and boldness in using this blank space include *Bogola Head* and *Bartons Gap, South Australia*. "The gouaches are intended to create a sense of space that you

could walk around and inhabit so there's a lot of white paper, a lot of things that are imagined rather than stated directly but so long as they have that feel of energy and space and light and life, I'm happy with the result."¹¹

These particular works speak to Sayers' passion for geology, which often provided the inspiration for subject matter, as well as for locations for holidays, which in turn included the opportunity to paint these rocky spaces, such as Lady Julia Percy Island¹²; the lava flow captured at Organ Pipes National Park; the hardy fauna in the rocks and sand of Central Australia; the volcanic hills of Mt Moorookyle and Mt Kooroocheang in Victoria and the deserts of South Australia. Here Sayers was in his element, able to identify rocks and work at painting for the day.

“I love painting in the desert – the sense of space is a fantastic challenge for a painter. I love rocky places, so the desert I like particularly is the gibber plains in South Australia and Sturt’s stony desert. It’s great painting in the desert with gouache, you’ve got to do it before the paint dries on the palette or on the paper and the light changes so rapidly, particularly towards the end of the day – it becomes a real race against time.”¹³

Beyond the rocks, seas and skies he delighted in portraying, Sayers often included elements of human interaction within his landscapes – the sentinels of a windfarm in *Two Capes, Bridgewater Bay*; an aeroplane in *Lava Flow, Organ Pipes National Park III*; sometimes the inclusion of the human form itself, in *Wallaga Lake Bridge II*; and his interest in structure captured in a series of bridges.

Sayers was drawn to the picturesque and historic wooden bridges of the south coast of New South Wales, reminiscent of a pier, with their gentle arches, attractive white wooden peaks and rumble-inducing wooden planks, evocative of a slower pace of life appropriate to a holiday environment. Ranging from a more straightforward depiction, such as *On the Spot Sketch, Wallaga Lake Bridge*; to works reminiscent of Monet’s bridges and the influence of japonisme, seen in *Wallaga Lake Bridge III*; to the almost abstract, where the stark white posts float in the air or *Wooden Bridge, South Coast*. Here, the coastal location is not even alluded to and the composition itself, punctuated by red reflectors, pulls the viewer into the artwork.

The bridge series represents a particular aesthetic, with the bridge acting as a barrier separating sea and sky, further demonstrating Sayers’ attraction in contrasting different types of time, such as the quickly changing tide against a weathered bridge. Sayers was drawn to “the local phenomenon of the mist-shrouded bridge, interesting to an artist in its function as an observable abstraction; the passage from form to ephemera. This passage is effectively and disquietingly evoked by Andrew in muddied greens, as his Bridges gently disappear into the picture plane.”¹⁴

Whilst some of the landscapes represent a sweeping panorama, such as *Catani Gardens, St Kilda*¹⁵, others hone in to a detailed close up, of rocks on a beach or barnacles on a pier’s pylon in *Bridge Pier, Bermagui*, revealing Sayers’ ability to closely observe and indicative of his curiosity to explore structures and the aesthetics he found. This can allow for an almost abstract representation – the squiggle of a tree in the Mt Moorookyle series (reminiscent of Fred Williams); a smear of purple across a line of blue representing clouds over water; the dark shadow of foliage against a glow of light in the Botanic Gardens; a pattern of clouds. All are intensely and skilfully evocative of mood, atmosphere and place.

Through his public exhibition of paintings, Sayers has left an indelible mark as an artist, defining him beyond his successful and celebrated institutional career.

Ruth Lovell



Mt Moorookyle 2015
26 x 36 cm

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to all those who have shared their memories of Andrew with us and acknowledge their

assistance, in particular his family, especially his wife Perry Sperling; Tim Bonyhady; Matt Chun; Robin Stewart and Daniel Thomas AM.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Andrew Sayers (1957 – 2015) was Curator then Assistant Director (Collections) at the National Gallery of Australia, 1985 – 1998; inaugural Director of the National Portrait Gallery, 1998 – 2010; Director, National Museum of Australia, 2010 – 2013 and author of numerous art historical publications.
2. Sayers quoted in Strickland, ‘Former National Portrait Gallery Director Andrew Sayers moves behind the easel’, *Australian Financial Review*, 26 February 2015.
3. Sayers exhibited *Early-Late Works*, Mister Jones, Bermagui, 2014; Doug Moran National Portrait Prize, 2014; Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2015; *Nature Through the Glass of Time*, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, 2015; *The Trembling Bridge*, Mister Jones, Bermagui, 2015; *A Lens of Clean Air*, Beaver Gallery, Canberra, 2015.
4. Sayers’ many sketchbooks reveal not only real world renditions but his interest in trying to determine how other artists’ sought to resolve questions of composition, materials, techniques, how to obtain certain effects; and how things

- work as a whole and in the larger context of art history. Conversation with Perry Sperling, 2018. His curator’s ‘eye’ was also remarked upon by Robin Stewart in conversation 2019 and recalled by Daniel Thomas AM in conversation 2019.
5. Conversation with Daniel Thomas AM, 2019.
 6. *Andrew Sayers In Conversation*, video, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, 2015.
 7. Sayers quoted in Strickland, AFR, 2015.
 8. Conversation with Robin Stewart, 2019.
 9. Sayers quoted in Strickland, AFR, 2015.
 10. Andrew Sayers, *Artist Statement*, 2015.
 11. *Andrew Sayers In Conversation*, video, 2015.
 12. An off-shore volcano in Bass Strait listed as a monument of significance by The Geological Society of Australia.
 13. *Andrew Sayers In Conversation*, video, 2015.
 14. Correspondence with Matt Chun, 2018.
 15. Among some of the last gouaches to be painted.



Basalt Island I (Lady Julia Percy Island) 2015
38 x 57 cm



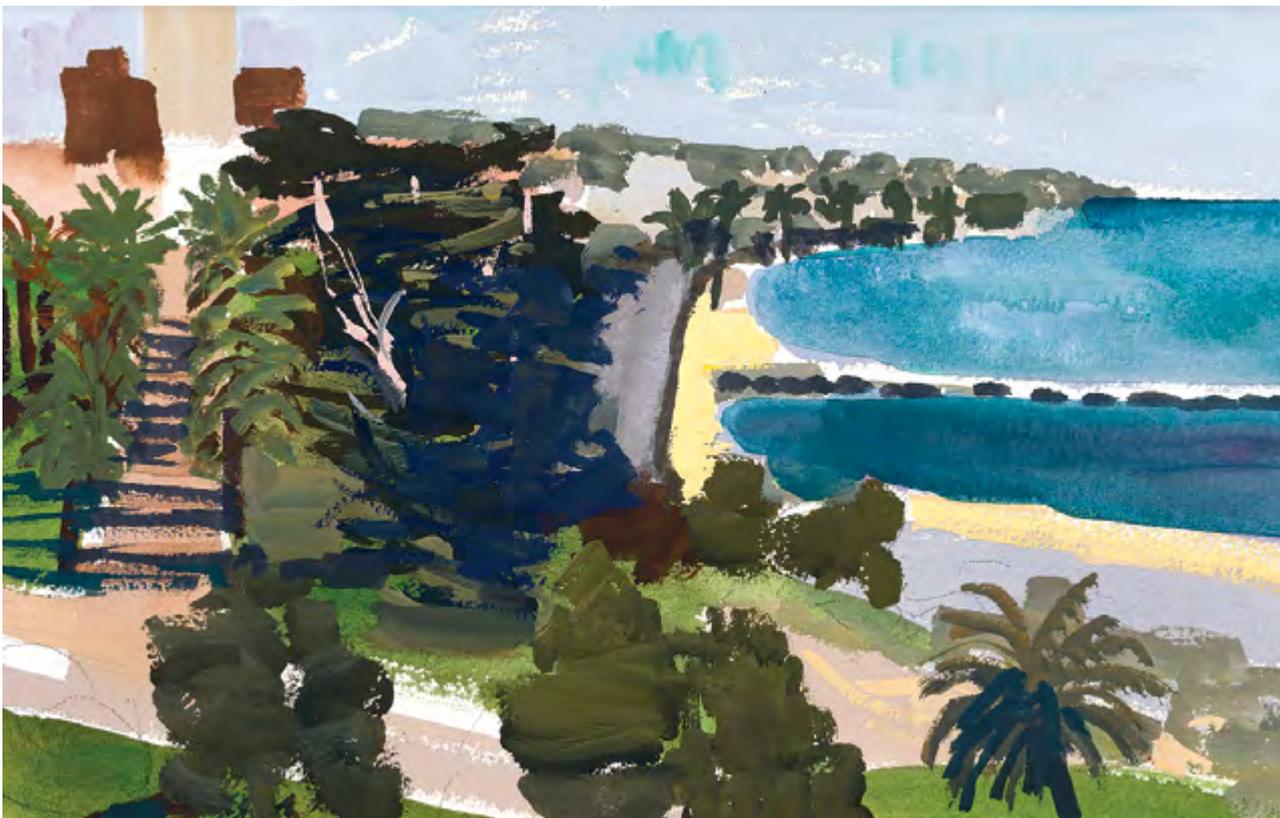
Wallaga Lake Bridge III 2014
42 x 59 cm



On the Spot Sketch, Wallaga Lake Bridge 2014
24 x 32 cm



Corunna Point 2015
56 x 76 cm



Catani Gardens, St Kilda 2015
26 x 36 cm



Bridge, Wallaga Lake 2011
42 x 59 cm



Wallaga Lake Bridge III 2014
42 x 59 cm



Bartons Gap, South Australia 2014
38 x 57 cm



Bogola Head 2015
57 x 76 cm



"I want my pictures to have fresh air and space you can move around in. These passions have led to the landscape paintings in gouache that bring together formations of stone with (relatively short-lived) flora and even more volatile environments of water and atmosphere." **Andrew Sayers, 2015**

COVER
Wooden Bridge, South Coast 2011
42 x 59 cm

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