

ANDREW SAYERS AM

1957–2015

HONORARY FELLOW · ELECTED 2013



ANDREW SAYERS 2012 BY MARK MOHELL (B. 1975); GELATIN SILVER PHOTOGRAPH, SELENIUM TONED. COLLECTION: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, CANBERRA. PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY MARILYN DARLING AC 2013.

At the last public lecture I heard Andrew Sayers present he spoke about an artwork that meant the world to him. It is by Tommy McRae and comes from a *Sketchbook of Aboriginal People in Hunting, Fighting and Ceremonial Scenes* (1875–85). Andrew had a copy of it pinned to the wall of his studio in Richmond, Melbourne where he spent the last months of his life painting. Its enduring fascination, as he explained to me after the lecture, came from the way the drawing – the lines on the paper – created such a tantalising space. It is of course a unique pictorial space in which lines and shapes hover on a sketchbook page but it is also a rich narrative space in which Aboriginal men are shown hunting various prey. He chose this spare, rhythmic and wonderful drawing for the back cover of the program for his memorial service held at the National Portrait

Gallery (NPG) two months after his death. The choice was characteristically astute, fitting for Andrew personally because he loved it, and also as a gesture to his public and his legacy. It was his research on Aboriginal artists, culminating in his ground-breaking book *Aboriginal Artists of the 19th Century* (1994), which brought the work of McRae, William Barak, Mickey of Ulladulla and others to public attention. His efforts changed not only the way we think about Aboriginal art of this period but also about Australian art and art history more generally. This book, which received the W. E. H. Stanner Award of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, was only one of the remarkable achievements of Andrew's life.

In his memorial service, which Andrew carefully thought through before his death, he made it clear what had mattered most to him – his family, wife Perry whom he married in 1982, their daughters Ianthe, Hanako and Ella, grandson Asher, and his friends. But the arts were also centrally positioned, with the service structured around the visual as represented in the work of Agnes Martin, Nora Heysen, Tommy McRae, as well as music and poetry. We learned that as a teenager Andrew dreamt of becoming an opera singer and it was through music – the University of Sydney's choir – that he and Perry met. The music he chose embraced the classical, including the works of Bach, Schubert and Mahler, and the contemporary, namely Bob Dylan and Prince. Anecdotes referred to his penchant for Armani suits, commitment to being fit (taking up skateboarding in his early 50s), enjoyment of marathon running and bushwalking, enduring love of nature, his long practice of meditation and his boundless curiosity.

Born in England in 1957, Andrew migrated with his family to Australia in 1964 where they settled in the bushy suburb of Mount Kuring-gai in northern Sydney. Andrew studied art history at the University of Sydney and after completing his BA (Hons) began his professional life at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where he worked in the registration department. In 1980 he became the gallery's registrar of collections. In 1981 he moved to Newcastle to take up an appointment as Assistant Director of the Newcastle Region Art Gallery, remaining there for four years. He joined the Department of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in 1985, initially working under the Senior Curator

of Australian Art, Daniel Thomas, and with colleagues John McPhee, Roger Butler and Mary Eagle. Andrew's specialisation was in the area of Australian drawings which also included watercolours. It was at this point that he began to curate important exhibitions, notably on the work of Australian artists Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan and James Gleeson, and to write in earnest. His book *Drawing in Australia* was published in 1989, growing out of his research for one in a series of major medium-based Bicentennial exhibitions which NGA Director James Mollison initiated. Other publications included *Sidney Nolan: The Ned Kelly Story*, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on the occasion of an exhibition of Nolan's work. During Betty Churcher's directorship Andrew also assumed significant managerial responsibilities when he was appointed Assistant Director (Collections).

The most ambitious exhibition Andrew curated while at the NGA was *New Worlds from Old: Nineteenth Century Australian and American Landscapes*, 1998. It dealt with both the differences and similarities in the landscape traditions of these two settler societies. Typical of Andrew's best curatorial work it was an ideas exhibition – he was a self-confessed 'ideas man' – which was enmeshed with the visual. He was rare this way, ensuring that his exhibitions attended equally to ideas and works of art.

In 1998 Andrew took up the position of inaugural Director of the National Portrait Gallery, the institution with which he is most closely associated and where he remained for twelve years. At the time of his appointment the gallery, the brainchild of the philanthropist the late Gordon Darling, and his wife Marilyn Darling, was located at Old Parliament House, a far from suitable venue. Together they advanced the case for a portrait gallery of international significance, eventually securing the construction of the building that now stands near the National Gallery and High Court. For Andrew this was an all-consuming and hugely satisfying project. It involved substantial research that took him to Europe and the United States to study buildings which he believed achieved a successful relationship between place and people. He was particularly inspired by those which were domestic in scale, such as the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. The NPG, designed by the Sydney-based architectural firm Johnson Pilton Walker, isn't hidebound by staid conventions but is assured, stylish and confident. As Andrew told Sasha Grishin FAHA for the *Canberra Times* in 2008, his aim was to ensure a multilayered dialogue between the portraits, viewer, building and place. The lucidity and transparency of the architecture was therefore crucial, with the strategic placement of windows offering views into the surrounding landscape. It could be argued that this sensitivity to place, to the ways Australia has been inhabited, has run through all his work.

During his directorship at the NPG Andrew oversaw the development of the collection through tightly focused acquisitions and portrait commissions; his most significant purchase was a 1782 portrait of Captain James Cook by English artist John Webber that was formerly in the collection of Alan Bond. He curated several one person and thematic exhibitions, of which two warrant particular mention: *The Possibilities of Portraiture* (1999), the new NPG's opening exhibition, and *Open Air: Portraits in the Landscape* (2008). Both shows were exploratory and open-ended in their propositions and underlined Andrew's interest in a wide range of visual material. He also continued to develop his deep research into nineteenth-century art, co-curating *Heads of the People*, 2000, with Tim Bonyhady, which explored the development of portraiture in colonial Australia.

Throughout his time at the NPG Andrew continued to write intensively, completing his book *Australian Art* for the Oxford History of Art series by rising before dawn and writing before he went to work, while his family was still asleep. This book remains a concise and insightful introduction to the field, especially significant for positioning Indigenous art at the centre of the narrative of Australian art. While at the gallery Andrew worked closely with the Australian Academy of the Humanities on an exhibition of portraits of Fellows mounted on the occasion of the Academy's fortieth anniversary in 2009.

In 2010 Andrew was made a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his promotion of Australian portraiture (an earlier accolade was the Centenary Medal awarded for his service to Australian society and the arts). By this stage of his career, however, he was ready for a change and new challenges and reinvented himself once again. His decision to move to the National Museum of Australia (NMA) surprised many in the art world but was in accordance with his commitment to public service and belief in the notion of public good. Andrew's institutional roles were devoted to championing the value of national collections and the necessity of making them available to a broader public in ways that stimulated discussion and provoked new cultural understandings. As further recognition of his leadership in the arts and humanities he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2013.

After serving three years at the NMA Andrew resigned his position to join his wife Perry who had taken up work in Melbourne. It was then he began to pursue another, self-defined, career centring on his own core interests. He began research for a new history of Australian drawing and threw himself into his creative practice as a painter – this was the point, he told *Australian Financial Review Magazine*, that he had waited his entire life to reach. In mid-2014 however Andrew was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer. He responded with calmness,

clarity and purposefulness and in collaboration with Perry drew up a list of the things he most wanted to do in the last months of his life. They revolved around his relationships with his family, friends, the arts, including music and literature, and the natural world. Initially Andrew and Perry travelled extensively, in Europe and in Australia (the trips were planned to take place between medical treatments). In Europe Andrew visited some of his favourite art works – by Poussin, Dirk Bouts, Rogier van der Weyden, and his favourite painter, Jacob Van Ruisdael. Despite his ill-health Perry recalls that Andrew spent ten hours a day looking intensively at pictures, studying how they were painted, and drawing them as a painter, rather than as an art historian. Whenever they could the Sayers family also spent time at their much loved holiday home at Bermagui on the New South Wales coast.

As a painter Andrew's main artistic output was landscapes, especially of coastal areas he enjoyed in New South Wales and Victoria, and in 2015 he held an exhibition at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art in Melbourne. He also ventured into portraiture and self-portraiture with considerable success. He contributed a self-portrait to the 2014 Doug Moran exhibition and painted himself as a scuba diver for the 2015 National Self-portrait Prize held at the University of Queensland Art Museum (he was a keen scuba diver). His portrait of close friend, Tim Bonyhady, a cultural historian and environmental lawyer, was selected as a finalist for the Archibald Prize in 2015 and his last public presentation was as a member of a panel at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, convened to discuss portraiture on the occasion of the Archibald Prize exhibition.

In the last eighteen months of his life Andrew did not retreat from his public, remaining interested in the art world and keen to make a contribution wherever he could. He was prepared to speak publically about his situation,

making it clear that he was focused on living, not dying. When opening his friend John R. Walker's exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra in July 2015 he quoted from the poetry of Clive James FAHA, making a direct link with someone who, although ill, was determined to continue being engaged, creative and productive.

As well as his own scholarship, which has made an invaluable contribution to the fields of art history, curatorship and museology, Andrew was an enabler of others' work, inspiring colleagues at various institutions as well as his numerous collaborators. I had the privilege of working with him as a colleague at the National Gallery and as the guest curator of two exhibitions at the NPG: *Mirror with a Memory: Photographic Portraiture in Australia* (2000) and *Reveries: Photography and Mortality* (2007). In his Director's foreword to the *Reveries* catalogue Andrew posed a question: 'how do we face death?' From the NPG's perspective he suggested that the commemorative role was crucial, writing that 'creating portraits is a strategy by which we hope to cheat death'. He concluded his foreword on a more personal note with a stanza from Joseph Brodsky's poem *Nature Morte*.

Scythe, skull, and skeleton –
An absurd pack of lies.
Rather: 'Death, when it comes,
Will have your own two eyes'

Andrew knew he wanted to die near the sea. To make this possible his family rented an upper level apartment in St Kilda which gave him the views of Port Phillip Bay and the sky that he sought in his final weeks. He died on 11 October 2015 and is buried at Bermagui. He is sorely missed but has left an extraordinarily rich legacy.

HELEN ENNIS FAHA

I thank Andrew's widow Perry Sperling for her generous assistance with this obituary and Mark Mohell for permission to reproduce his portrait of Andrew.