



James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

Ian Smith

Ian: I'm Ian Smith. I came from Cairns. I started painting when I was a schoolboy, and by the time I was 30, I was lucky enough to be a full time artist. I had gone to school in Cairns, went to Uni in Brisbane; doing architecture in the late 60s. And went off to Art School in Melbourne. After being in Art School for three years, and first working in Channel Nine's sets department in Melbourne, I found myself back in Brisbane lecturing at the art school. I was (0:43) for eight years, all through the 70s, and had this sort of mind blowing affirming trip to the States, and then I quit my job. So by the 80s I was pretty well - foolishly or not - ready to take on being a full time artist in the 80s. I did have a few commissions to start on as I went into the 80s, which maybe gave me the very immediate courage to do it.

But at first I didn't have any mouths to feed except my own, and then by the time I was 35, I had a stable relationship, and my son was born in 1984. But I made money; we made money. Somewhere in the middle there, you realise the longer you stay out there, the easier it becomes to stay out there. Even if it is ... the harder it gets ... or (1:34) or the older you get.

I think if you look at all my work, over all the phases, whether it's about people walking on beaches; picking up stuff off beaches; or billboards in the landscape; or more to the point the negative and blank sides of billboards; things on the back of trucks; or cane toads; or tourists, all those things - I've always started from the idea of rather mundane, normal subjects, which you in turn can find the strange meaning in. Looking at the essence of normal life as a powerful thing in which a lot of answers lay about existence. Step-by-step, picture-by-picture, you're building; you couldn't do it all in one picture, but picture by picture, you build up an attitude, and say ... I layered it up in terms of meanings or references as well as layers (2:32).

When I look around my studio; I mean, we are sitting here today without a whole lot of like new works around me. I think they're still in my head. I've always done a lot of works, and then I will sort of like re-invent myself; do something else. And when you look at other long living artists, they, well like the obvious one; Picasso: if we hadn't all read about a hundred books about Picasso, you would not associate his cubist works with the works he did in the thirties, much less the fifties, as being the same artist at all. We only know it's all Picasso because we *know* it is. That's all him reinventing himself through the whole thing; and not that I would dare to put myself up beside Picasso, but it's the same effect of reinvention; when you live a long life as an artist.

If I'm sort of reinventing it in a way to get down to more essences, as I now become, hopefully, eventually a wiser old man. I'm at the point where I've always basically been a figurative artist, unavoidably as an Australian artist, you stray into landscape; it's pretty obvious in Australia why landscape is a big issue. But when you look at the whole history of

art, the main theme is about us. And when you look back at the whole thing, from the Lascaux caves and Egyptian art, ancient art; it's pretty much about us.

And as I hit 64 this month - and you know, you calculate how much longer you've got to go - and I think I'm really at the point where having done a lot of subject, like not only figurative art, but a lot of subject matter art; I'm back to the point where I'm coming back to the essence of ... essences like man, woman, food, drink. And in our society: car, house, all these things, not necessarily in this order by the way; man is not at the top, it just, that's the starting point, I'm a man.

But I've just been fiddling around with a lot of little portraits these days, of different people I see, and so in a way I think the next lot of paintings will be rather simple, straightforward paintings about very unsimple, unstraightforward things. Not necessary less layered, but more simple in a sense about a man or a woman. Not - in a way - not situational. Whereas a lot of my paintings, even though they're not exactly narrative; they're not storytelling - they are often situational. I might come back to a more essential use of a figure, or like I said somehow something about food, drink, a car, a house, a couple, or even appropriation of an art work from an earlier time.