



**James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series 2016-2017
Gareth Sansom Digital Story**

Interviewee: Gareth Sansom
Interviewer: Steve Cox
Date: 21 December 2016
Legend: Steve Cox (SC)
Gareth Sansom (GS)

SC: Gareth, you were born in 1939, and you had your first exhibition in 1959 as a 20 year old.

GS: Correct.

SC: What were some of the influences that you had for that exhibition? Who were you looking at, what artists?

GS: Strangely, Leonard French, who was very important in the early '60s and late '50s, and the thing that intrigued me about him was he used enamels. I had no money and my father's garage was full of old bits of wood and Masonite and enamels, so most of that first show were enamels on Masonite.

I still use enamel in all sorts of ways particularly, though, as a binder for oil paint because oil paint can be notoriously slow-drying. If you mix it with clear enamel or white enamel or whatever, it might become slightly more pastel and that, mixed with enamel and sometimes pigment, is generally the medium I use.

SC: The exhibition, in '65 I think it was, where you had the painting called "Rosebud", and around that time also, "He Sees Himself" and "The Great Democracy", what were some of the themes that you were developing at that time?

GS: I had seen this movie in the early '60s called "Psycho." There's a scene where the psychiatrist is just coming out, and they said, "He's a transvestite." Anyway, the word "transvestite" I'd never heard before, ever, so a lot of the paintings in that '65 show, "He Sees Himself" and several others, dealt with the idea on the prowl, someone dressing as a woman, looking to pick up men, but never once in that show was there any homosexual subtext.

SC: Was it more about a different identity, assuming another identity for a-

GS: A dangerous identity ...

SC: ... yeah.

GS: ... like maybe the idea of Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde. I was doing something dangerous. I wanted to be dangerous. I didn't want to be polite and just use beige

paint. I wanted to be somewhat sensational. I want to upset people because everything was so polite.

SC: When the photography entered your work, were you thinking of it just as a photograph of the image, or were you thinking of the photography as a part of paintings to put in colour, or was it both?

GS: To get the shots I wanted, sometimes I would be three hours with props and clothes and wigs and makeup, taking maybe 50 shots, 100 shots or whatever. When I got the ones that I thought was startling and interesting, sometimes the photograph went down first on cardboard, dead centre, and I'd build a work around it, that may or may not have had anything to do with the actual narrative idea that the photograph might have suggested to you.

SC: In '84, you won the Hugh Williamson prize.

GS: That's a giant painting. It was called "Friendships Road". You may know that in Central Melbourne there are souvenir shops, and they sell things for tourists. But one of the things that always interested me was part of a tree trunk that's been cut like a little plaque, you can see the bark around the outside and it's all polished timber.

SC: Polished.

GS: They have a gold poem on it of some sort, something very sentimental, and the one that always struck me was "Friendships Road" and this ridiculous poem, so that went down on one of the panels first. Then, a whole lot of stuff went down in the way of collage, photographs of me, my football club medallions, bits of this and bits of that, pretty random, and then, sort of tried to get a structure going.

SC: It has always seemed to me about your work that your process is about finding the image as you're working. It seems that you start with something not really knowing where it's going to go necessarily and, by adding and subtracting and changing things, it becomes the picture that it's going to become.

GS: I couldn't possibly plan a painting, like the artist who draws it first, grids it up, does a water colour version, gouache version, renders it. It's like superb craft. Mine are always blank canvasses. Some of the collages I'll put the photograph down. I've no idea how it's...

SC: It's going to ...

GS: ... going to turn out, so the painting to one side of me here, the big painting up there. That's probably 20 layers of paint and only some of those areas are very beginning things and, usually, it's a whole series of muck ups, and how do I handle the situation? The eureka moment, you're always hoping for that, but you can't contrive for that to happen. Often you think you've got that. You go to bed, go into the studio the next day, it's not there anymore. It's gone, and then, oh, back to square one.

SC: Various of your pictures have had things which are potentially controversial. What's your attitude to the attitude of some of the viewers?

GS: Oh, I was thick-skinned. I was trying to pull the rug out of the viewers' expectations.

There's another triptych, which is the James Sourris one, the Sweeney Agonistes. I did stick down before the middle panel ever started, a little photograph of Sweeney Reed, the son of Joy Hester. I stuck that down, and then, built the picture around that. But in one little part of the picture, I wrote "Last New Year's Eve, I was alone in the house sniffing amyl nitrate," which might or might not have been true, but it certainly caused controversy more than the photograph of Sweeney Reed.

SC: You won the Dobell Prize for drawing

GS: 2012.

SC: ... 2012. It was, I suppose, an unusual drawing in the fact that it was made up of quite a number of drawings.

GS: My wife, Christine, is a doctor, and she had a medical residency in Wadeye. It's an Aboriginal community southwest of Darwin. I walked around taking photographs and enjoying the interesting sights and dangerous things and wild animals, dogs. I pulled the sketchbooks apart and put all the drawings and works on paper. I mixed earth from the town ...

... into my paint with egg tempera, was this dirty red colour. Put them all on this floor in front of us, and then, assembled them into a juxtaposition, and then, thought, "Hmm, I might put this in the Dobell Prize".

SC: Do you have anything you'd like to add before we finish today?

GS: I always go into the studio with the bare canvasses, one waiting for me right now, and I look at it and I know the new adventure is about to begin. There's no fear, but you don't go straight up to the canvas, or I don't. There's this strange metaphysical ... you couldn't explain it to anybody ...

... before the first stuff happens, and it's stream of consciousness. You're trying not to think about how much you know and hoping those marks will go down so freshly that there's somebody that's just dropped off a tram, and you've handed them some paint.

SC: Well, here's to many more adventures. Thank you.

GS: All right. I've appreciated it.

SC: Thank you.

GS: Thank you.

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