



James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

Gordon Shepherdson *as interviewed by David Burnett*

David: So Gordon, you often talk about your painting as a kind of a record of your stay on the planet, you know.

Gordon: Yeah, that's right. Just ...

David: Pretty long stay now.

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

David: You've been doing that for about 40 years ...

Gordon: Yeah.

David: ... fifty years?

Gordon: Yeah, would be that, yeah. About 50. That's all it is, just an old man recording his stay on the planet. Nothing more, nothing less.

David: So you paint for yourself?

Gordon: You got it, hands up.

David: Yeah, yeah. So people can either take it or leave it.

Gordon: Audience of one.

David: Yep, yep.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: Yeah. A local bush turkey?

Gordon: Your right, eh?

David: How long's your turkey been building this?

Gordon: About ... they bred in that last year, and they breed again now.

David: It's interesting, the way you store your works in that big box down there. Once works are completed, that's where they go, or they go to an exhibition? Your shows usually do pretty well.

Gordon: Yeah. Which surprises me, I'll tell you.

David: Why does it surprise you?

Gordon: It just does.

David: Yeah. I mean, I know what you mean; you know, I ... I was going to say, sometimes it surprises me too, you know, because your work is ... it's a fairly unique kind of practice. So you've got a lot of people that still collect your work, and ...

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Well, I don't know how it all works.

David: They clearly speak to somebody else as well, though.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: So, yeah.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: So where did you grow up? Did you grow up in Brisbane, or your childhood was spent here in Brisbane?

Gordon: I was born and bred right here.

David: Did you draw as a child?

Gordon: No. No more than anybody else.

David: When was it you think you really decided that you wanted to kind of paint?

Gordon: I was late-going, you know.

David: Late starter?

Gordon: Yeah. But also, too, you know, I don't talk to that side of my family much at all, you know. They all run and claim me now. All the later ones are underneath.

David: The most recent ones? What's really interesting when you go through the box is the way that a lot of motifs kind of come back after a period of time. So you'll do, you know, like those landscapes that you've been working on, and then you're working on those winged figures. And then occasionally the bull image comes back. It's interesting the way those things come back in cycles.

Gordon: It's just me.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: It's just my life, I suppose.

David: Yeah. So the bull image goes back to your time when you were working on the ...

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Goes right back.

David: ... what we now call meat processing plants?

Gordon: On the floor.

David: The abattoir?

Gordon: Yeah, that's right.

David: So you used to actually hunt the ... hunt the carcasses, and ...

Gordon: Yeah. Well, I was 16 years as a meat (2:56), and of course the bullocks all knew. They knew what was coming.

David: And you're aware of the fact that these beasts were aware of their ...

Gordon: Oh, yeah.

David: ... death, that ...

Gordon: Very much so.

David: Yeah?

Gordon: Yeah. They knew all about it.

David: It's a very strong ... strong motif.

Gordon: Well, you could really spend the rest of your life painting that.

David: Well, you could, yeah.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: No trouble.

David: Yeah. I mean, painters sometimes say that they just spend their whole life painting on one painting, just trying to ...

Gordon: Oh, yeah.

David: ... trying to get it better.

Gordon: Yeah. Yeah.

David: This one?

Gordon: No, no. Some of them like that. They're very seductive, those beaches.

David: They are.

Gordon: And I thought, give up ...

David: Something about the sand and water.

Gordon: ... you know, painting them, because they were becoming very addictive.

David: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Gordon: Well, there's another seven down below those ...

David: Yeah, they're nice those little landscapes.

Gordon: They're all recent ones.

David: Yeah, these ones? Yeah.

Gordon: Yeah. The winged images have got to go back up on the wall and get plastered.

David: You're going to rework them?

Gordon: I'll work on it, no worries.

David: You will rework them, rather than hanging them?

Gordon: Yeah, rework them and see what happens. Yeah.

David: It's very much about the process, about using the paint, and letting it tell you in a way.

Gordon: (4:13). Just put it up, make a mark, whatever you're doing. Mark'll tell you what to do.

David: Yeah, yeah. So you really don't work with any preconception, do you?

Gordon: No. No.

David: You kind of just go with ...

Gordon: No, not at all. The only preconception is, I've got to put some paint down.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: I start off, you know, and if it's going well, it goes well. And I don't consciously say, "Well, it's right; get into it now." You have to process it.

David: Yeah. And that decision about when things are working or not working ...

Gordon: Yeah. Oh, yep.

David: ... it's a hard one to pin down. But you kind of know ...

Gordon: You know ...

David: ... you know, when it's ... when it's ... when you're on a run, or ... ?

Gordon: Yeah. You've just been looking at those bloody (4:50) images.

David: That's right, yeah, yeah. That's right, yeah. And so when something doesn't work, you're quite prepared to ...

Gordon: Scrub it.

David: ... go back and continue to work with it? You don't ...

Gordon: Oh, yeah.

David: ... you don't abandon things at all ...

Gordon: No.

David: ... or destroy things, or ... ?

Gordon: Sometimes I scrub them.

David: Yeah, yeah.

Gordon: Yeah, and just paint something else, you know. But those particular winged images, I want to try and work them.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: You know. You know the history of the winged image and me, you know.

David: Well, sort of. But tell me.

Gordon: Yeah. Well, it's a water planter, okay. And since there's been people on the planter, how many of them have perished on the water?

David: Well, that's ... yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Gordon: How many of them have been pulled out? A percentage. I reckon they pulled out 25%, and the other 75%, their souls are still there. So that's what those ... that picture is (5:43). That's what ... see the dark eyes.

David: Yes.

Gordon: Yeah. That's what it's about, you know. And it goes on from there.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: And you still work on paper ...

Gordon: Yeah, yep. Yeah.

David: ... rather than canvas or board? It's your ...

Gordon: It, it prevents ...

David: ... material of choice?

Gordon: Yeah. The French (6:03) paper. And yeah, I find it real good. The immediacy of it, I suppose.

David: It's also the way you work, because you use your fingers a lot, don't you?

Gordon: Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

David: So I guess that's not going to work with a canvas, where you've got no resistance to it; you've got a good, solid surface to work on.

Gordon: Somebody gave me a canvas once. And I burnt that and a palette, and I ... just by the steps.

David: And, and brushes, you've never ... you gave up brushes long ago?

Gordon: Yeah.

David: (6:33).

Gordon: Well, occasionally I use them. But only on the black enamel. But all the ... just the hands.

David: Yeah. Yeah.

Gordon: I'm pleased I've got a hand.

David: Yes, exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's right.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: Your work consists a lot of night landscapes, which is kind of interesting. It's not something that many painters tackle. It's a pretty rare subject, when you ... when you start to look around.

Gordon: It ... can't tell you why, but it's a beautiful subject.

David: It is a beautiful subject.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: And a lot of that comes from going out in the dark, early morning fishing, doesn't it?

Gordon: I'd say.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: Sitting out there under

David: Waiting for a bite.

Gordon: Yeah, and the (7:13).

David: Yep.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: You read a bit? You're a bit of a fan of old Sam Beckett?

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Most of the Beckett plays and stuff are here. I could've had a chat to Beckett.

David: You could have done and I'm sure you would have got on very well with that Sam Beckett. But his ideas about space and silence, being prepared to be silent.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: I wonder sometimes if there's not a, you know, relationship between that silence and that darkness in your paintings, so that the darkness becomes like a container almost for what's in there.

Gordon: Yeah. Well, you know, just the way I've always painted, you know. Always, you know, enjoyed the darks very much. Very much. That's what's wrong with those bloody winged images.

David: Yeah?

Gordon: Yeah.

David: You think so?

Gordon: I know so.

David: Yeah.

Gordon: Yeah.

David: Too much light?

Gordon: You got it. Yeah.