



OLD MAN RIVER

A boyhood canoe journey down the Shoalhaven River made a lasting impression on painter Guy Warren, who is still keen to paddle at almost 95, writes **Scott Bevan**

Guy Warren is adamant. He wants us to paddle a canoe in Sydney's Middle Harbour. We've been talking about it for months. The cautious in me had suggested we hire a boat. After all, he is on the cusp of turning 95. The adventurous in Warren insists on the canoe. He quotes his friend, fellow artist and the subject of his 1985 Archibald Prize-winning portrait, Bert Flugelman: "If in doubt, jump!"

Adventure wins out. It usually does in the life and art of Guy Warren.

Despite having come straight from the doctor's where he had stitches removed from his face, Warren won't just sit back and enjoy the ride in the canoe. No sooner have we set off than he grabs a paddle and digs the blades into the water.

As we glide along the shoreline, Warren points out sandstone sculpted by time and tide, and eucalypts defiantly clinging to bush rocks. "You feel like you're deep in the bush, not a few miles from a major city," he marvels.

The short canoe journey also transports Warren to another time, when he was a teenager.

In early 1939, Warren, his brother and a couple of mates spent the summer holidays paddling down the Shoalhaven River to the sea.

"We are a result of all the experiences we have all our lives, and some of those are visual," says Warren. "That crazy canoe journey was one. I have a clear memory of every second of it. It was like a Boy's Own adventure story."

The group negotiated seething rapids, caught fish and shot rabbits for food, and was trailed by a shark near Nowra, all the while

canoeing through "bloody beautiful" country.

"I can remember paddling all day with sandstone cliffs on either side, the sun shone on them, and they were orange," he says. "We were paddling down a golden tunnel. It was miraculous, bloody miraculous."

Long before the Shoalhaven was a workplace and inspiration for Arthur Boyd and his art, that river journey helped give Warren something to paint. He would spend a life working out on paper and canvas what it means to belong to

somewhere. "It's like what the Aboriginal people say, it's about country," he says. "If you spend enough time in country like that, it becomes part of you."

Not that Warren knew then that he would be a painter.

Warren was born into music. Both his parents were musicians. His father was a professional pianist, accompanying silent films in a cinema in the town of Goulburn, and later in Sydney's suburban picture palaces. But the figures on the screen began speaking for themselves, the Depression hit, and Leonard Warren was out of a job.

For many years, the memory of his father no longer able to earn a living from his art shaped the ambitions of the son.

"It would never have occurred to me, coming from a background with a father who lost his job in the Depression and growing up in the Depression, that it might be possible to be a painter," Warren says. "I always assumed my career would be as a commercial artist."

When he was 14, Guy Warren left school and



was employed as a proofreader's assistant at *The Bulletin* magazine. Initially, he considered becoming a journalist. He did write the occasional piece for *The Bulletin* and a women's magazine, "mostly because they paid me three pence halfpenny a line".

The Australian Woman's Mirror even published a travel feature by Warren based on his canoeing adventure down the Shoalhaven River, only he wrote it in the guise of a young married woman, with pearls of advice: "I recommend it to anyone with an urge to slim. I lost almost six pounds!"

While words earned Warren some money, he saw his future in images. Working at *The Bulletin*, he noticed how well-known artists, including Norman Lindsay, would bring in cartoons to the art editor, and their work would be swapped for a cheque.

"I thought, 'Well, maybe that's not a bad job' — and I liked drawing," says Warren with a chuckle. He bombarded the art editor with cartoons. The exasperated editor dragged the aspiring cartoonist to a nearby art school, with the instruction: "Teach this kid to draw!"

Warren did learn to draw by attending art classes part-time.

The outbreak of the World War II meant he was unable to use those skills as a cartoonist, but they provided him with an antidote to boredom when he was serving in the army.

"Other blokes played cards when they were bored. I was the guy who sat there drawing them playing cards," he recalls.

Warren received jungle warfare training at Canungra in the Gold Coast hinterland and served in New Guinea and Bougainville.

He documented with pencil and ink the places he was sent, the work he was doing, and the faces of soldiers he served with and fought against.

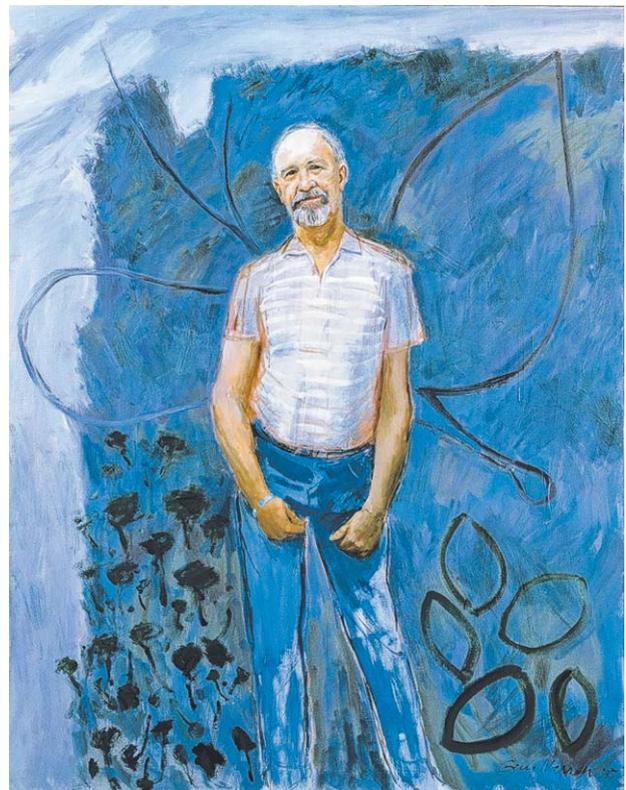
He also drew the local people whenever he could. In Bougainville, he sketched a large, powerfully built man who sat for him. As thanks, Warren gave him a tin of talcum powder. The man immediately tipped the powder into his hands and began smearing it across his body, making decorative marks.

"I thought, 'That's wonderful, these wonderful big white marks,'" Warren recalls. "I didn't think anything of it at the time, but it's one of those memories that click in many years later."

While recording in his sketchbooks his war-time experiences, Warren was also inspired by the environment around him. The jungles and rainforests may have held the enemy, drained a soldier's energy, and kept out much of the light, but in the tangle of vegetation, Guy Warren's eyes were opened.

"The landscape is a wall of interrelated shapes, one over the other over the other, leaf over leaf over leaf, form over form over form, and occasionally between them all you catch a glimpse of a long view. Occasionally, there's a bit of depth, but most of it is in your face. It's a bit like a painting, this balance between something that happens on the surface and the perception of depth. Maybe that's what I like about the rainforest: it's like a painting."

During the 1950s, when he and his ceramist wife Joy were half a world away, living and working in London, Warren returned to the jungle. The idea of being a painter, and what to





paint, came to light. "I found the English landscape very beautiful but like a great park," he says. "It didn't mean anything visually to me. I loved living there, but I didn't know what the hell I wanted to paint."

Desperate for painting ideas, Warren tapped into his memories of New Guinea.

He was especially keen to explore how the people demonstrated their connection to the country, such as the man decorating himself with talcum powder.

"I thought it was a pretty good metaphor for the idea of belonging to the land," he says.

His ideas were nudged along when he saw a BBC documentary featuring dancers in the New Guinea Highlands. Warren contacted the BBC, asking if he could buy photos taken by the film crew. A week later, he received a phone call from a man offering to lend Warren some photos. The helpful young man was David Attenborough. To say thanks, Warren later gave Attenborough a painting, which he was delighted to see in the background during a TV interview with the world's best-known wildlife documentary maker a few years ago.

When Warren returned to Australia with Joy and their two children in 1959, he was determined to be a painter but felt he had wandered into a wasteland.

"I was so bloody appalled at what I saw," he says, "because I thought the art in Sydney was unbelievably dull, not nearly as exciting as it had been in London."

To make ends meet, Warren worked in advertising, taught drawing, and was commissioned to create portraits for reproduction on Australian dollar notes when decimal currency was introduced in 1966.

"I always felt that prints of my work were in great demand," he jokes of the assignment. "Probably more people were trying to own prints of Guy Warren's work than any other artist's in Australia."

Through the years, Warren continued to teach, and in 1985 he was thrust into the spotlight when he won the Archibald Prize with his portrait of Flugelman. Many years earlier, Warren had written a letter to *The Bulletin* bemoaning how older artists kept winning a prize that was intended to be "an inspiration and encouragement to young Australian painters". When he won the Archibald, Warren was 64. "That year," he says, "the trustees who judged the prize for once made a significant and intelligent and perceptive judgment!"

Winning Australia's best-known art prize didn't change his life, Warren says, and it didn't prompt him to pursue portraiture, let alone

fame. In paint, he kept doing as he had done for decades, returning to the wilderness, exploring how the figure fits into the landscape.

"Most landscape painters who come from the European culture sit here and look at the landscape over there as something separate from themselves, something to be looked at, admired, categorised, discussed, used, but very few of them have ever seen the land as part of themselves, and as them being part of the land," he explains. "I try to do that. It doesn't always work, but that broadly is the link that goes through it from go to whoa. Although I hope whoa doesn't come yet!"

For someone as unpretentious as Warren, it seems fitting that his studio, in the inner-west Sydney suburb of Leichhardt, is a former engineering workshop. The space is unadorned and has few distractions; it is where Warren knuckles down to paint, which he does almost daily. His brushes are hung like tools on the wall, and paintings are stacked around the studio.

While flicking through those stacks almost two years ago, Barry Pearce saw the makings of an exhibition.

Warren had asked the respected curator and writer to help him go through his works. The painter reasoned that at his age, "I don't want to leave rubbish behind me".

Pearce was stunned by what he found stacked in the corner. They were paintings Warren had done in London and in the early 1960s, after returning to Australia.

"They were quite a revelation to me," Pearce says. "I thought, 'Hang on, these works haven't been appreciated for what they tell us about his evolution as a painter.' It's like his DNA, seeing the early works."

"The fate of nature on this planet and the fate of humanity within the story of nature on this planet, they all seem to have been dealt with by Guy very early on in his work, and it's become his major motif right throughout his life."

Pearce devised a "then and now" exhibition. About half of the works are from the 50s and 60s, and then there is a "leap in time" to later works.

"It's like going into the Tardis then coming out, and there he still is," Pearce says. "Even though the middle period is missing, it doesn't seem to matter; he's been incredibly consistent. It's quite a different way to look at the development of an artist."



Pearce has called the exhibition *Genesis of a Painter: Guy Warren at 95*. As they inspect the paintings selected for the exhibition, Pearce tells Warren he chose “painter” for the title, because “everybody’s an artist. They tell school-kids, ‘You too can be an artist’, but very few become painters. It’s a much more noble term.”

Warren laughs: “Great! Well, I’m happy with that.”

The exhibition opens at the SH Ervin Gallery in Sydney on April 16, Warren’s 95th birthday. “It’s a big birthday bash, it’s a magnificent 95th birthday,” Pearce says. “And some of his [recent] work is as fresh as anything he’s ever made.”

Luke Sciberras, whose own landscape paintings open eyes to how Australians interact with — and have an impact on — this country, describes Warren’s energy as “inspirational and infectious”.

Sciberras was a studio assistant to Warren about 20 years ago. More recently, he has been on a painting trip around Broken Hill with the older artist.

“At Broken Hill,” Sciberras says, “we were quite touched by his incessant instinct to draw, which at nearly 95 doesn’t just take energy, he gives energy. He has a lightness of touch in his mark-making, and in his character.”

“There’s a kind of wonderful, sometimes sensual, sometimes jagged mark that’s a bodily response, but there’s always a poetic layer as well. His entire body of work is very important in the story of Australian painting. When you look at the new frontier of European painting in Australia, there are very few artists who have made an original mark on Australian painting, and Guy is one of them.”

Warren doesn’t feel his age, nor does he act it. Apart from how powerfully he drags a paddle through the water, he is an enthusiastic user of social media and emails. Above all, he wants to celebrate his age, and where he belongs, by continuing to paint and coming up with new ways to see the world for the trees.

“I don’t want to paint the same thing year after year, because you’ve found a market for it,” Warren says. “That might be great for the bank balance, but it’s bad for the soul. Question what you do, question the world, and question the landscape.”

Genesis of a Painter: Guy Warren at 95 is at the SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, from April 16 to May 29.



Clockwise from left, *Estuary in winter*, *Shoalhaven* (1963), *The Dust of Memory* (2015) and *Mother and Child* (1955)

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GUY WARREN



Guy Warren, above, and in Sydney's Middle Harbour with Scott Bevan, top left; his 1985 Archibald Prize-winning portrait *Flugelman with Wingman*, left