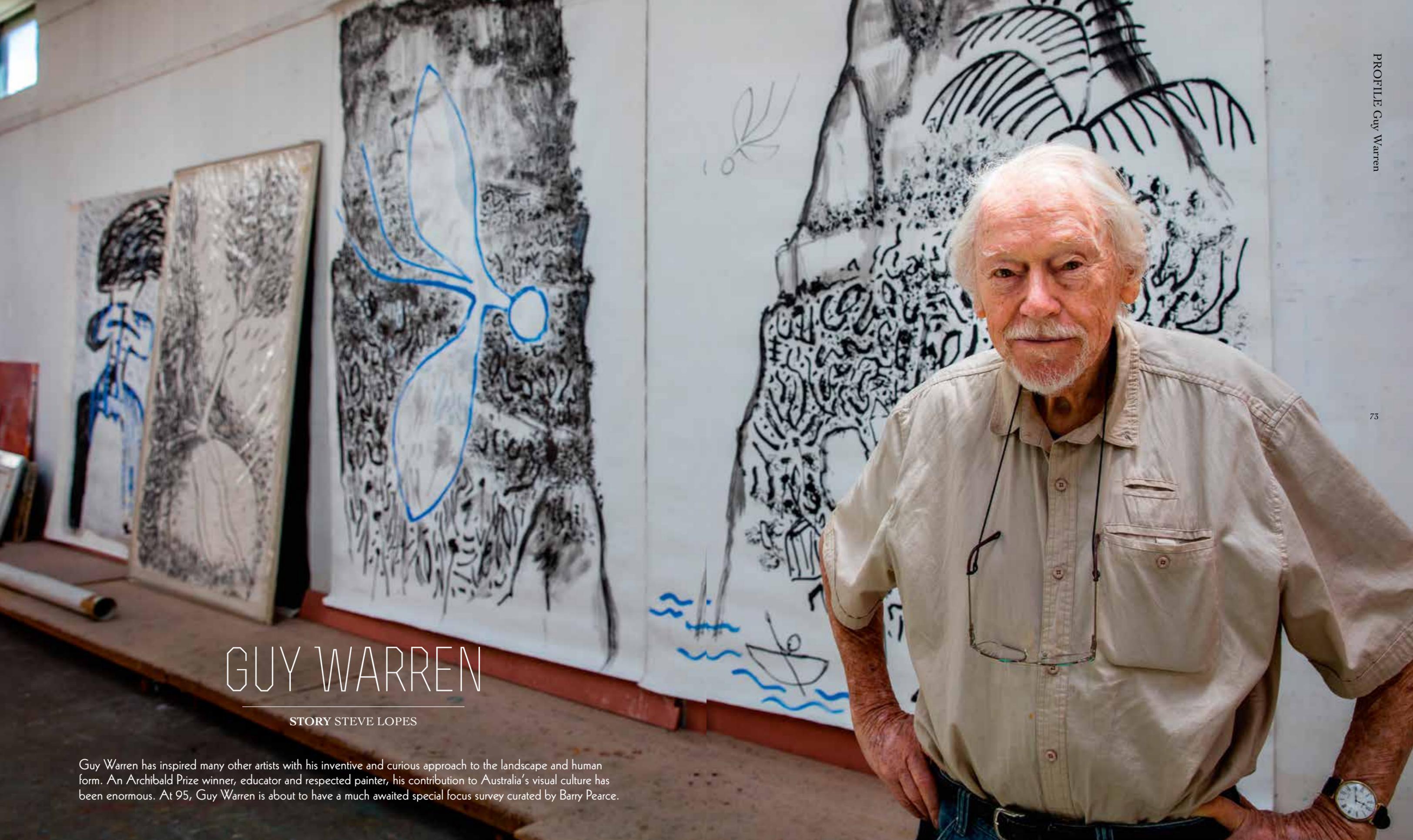


GUY WARREN

STORY STEVE LOPES

Guy Warren has inspired many other artists with his inventive and curious approach to the landscape and human form. An Archibald Prize winner, educator and respected painter, his contribution to Australia's visual culture has been enormous. At 95, Guy Warren is about to have a much awaited special focus survey curated by Barry Pearce.





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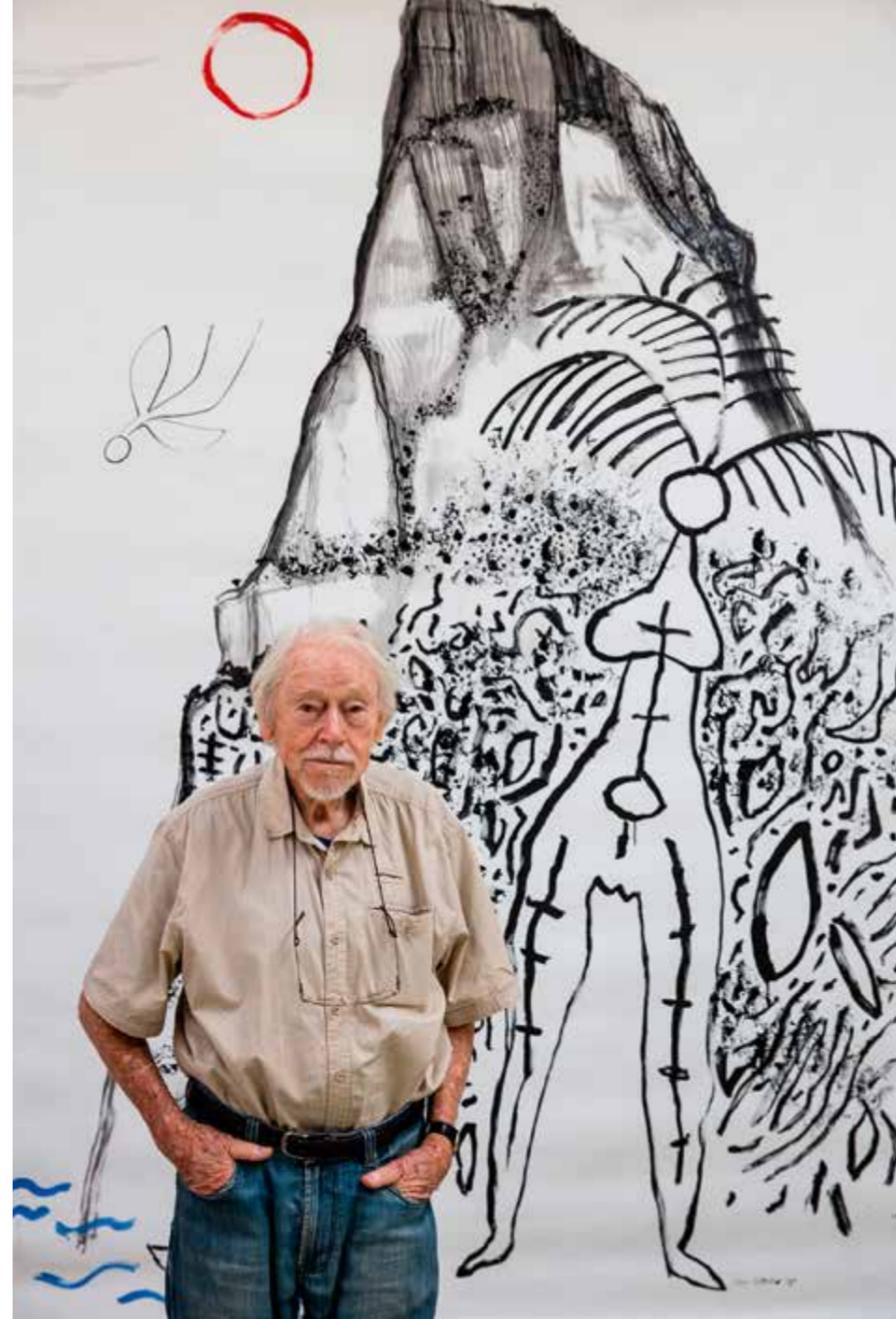
CAN I START OFF WITH THE RAINFOREST, why has it been such a feature of your work over the years? Very simple – it all started off in the 1940s when I was in the army and they sent me up to Canungra which is near the Qld/NSW border. It's thick rainforest country up there and I'd never seen rainforest before. We went for jungle warfare training and it was bloody tough and most people hated it, but I thought the country was absolutely magnificent, thick rainforest, ravines, gullies, rushing streams and wonderful vegetation. All my army mates thought I was nuts but I was young and healthy and could put up with the physical difficulties at the time but it was such beautiful country, particularly visually.

During the Second World War I served in New Guinea and there was jungle again. Everything seemed bigger and better. Trees were bigger, the flowers brighter, bugs were scarier and from a visual point of view as an artist you see everything in terms of a picture. After the war I went to the National Art School, I got married and even took my wife back to Canungra for our honeymoon. Everybody thought I was crazy, but rainforest meant that much to me and these images were deeply ingrained within. Around 40 years ago I bought a block of land in the rainforest down at Jamberoo, NSW, with sculptor Bert Flugelman buying the adjoining block. I would go down regularly for a week or so at a time and wander through the bush, do a lot of drawing and painting. I simply just liked walking through the bush.

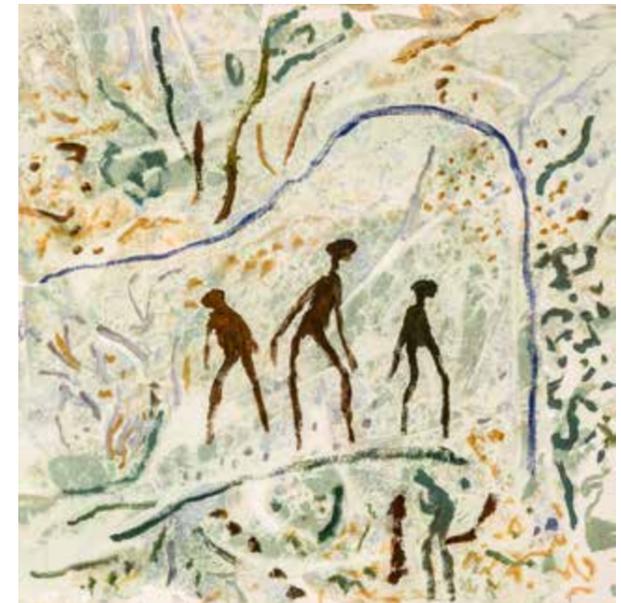
Metaphorically, what does the rainforest represent to you? It's often peopled with figures in your work – does that represent

anything environmentally, or is it loaded with a particular message? I react to this landscape because I like the feeling of being in it. It encompasses you and one becomes a part of it. After I finished art school and got married to Joy, we went to London where I thought we would stay for 18 months. Instead we stayed for eight years and came back with two kids! I had a lot of skill by that time and I could paint pretty well but I didn't know what to paint and I didn't want to paint London. Everybody else had done that and I wasn't a Londoner. I've tried to paint the English landscape which is very beautiful but it's like a bloody big park. It doesn't mean anything to me. So in desperation I started to paint my memories of my time in New Guinea. It was a very peculiar thing to do in the middle of London.

It was the early '50s and we had a little black and white TV set and I saw a documentary by some fellow who had been to the highlands of New Guinea. He made a film about the way the Mount Hagen dancers have a great festival where they dress up in these wonderful clothes, feathers, masks and decorations, and I thought that's the kind of information I could use and remember. I particularly remember drawing the local indigenous people when I was in Bougainville and became intrigued by their decoration. Anything you gave them they would use as decoration. One day I was drawing this big dark-skinned fellow and I had nothing to pay him with for sitting. I used to pay in cigarettes, but the only thing I had to give him after scouring my tent was a tin of talcum powder which we probably were sent to help with skin disease. I gave it to this big local guy and the first thing he did was to empty the talcum powder in his hand and decorate



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himself and make these wonderful great white marks against his black body. These were things I was trying to remember and put down in paint later. I wrote to the BBC after I saw this particular program and asked if I could buy some of the photographer's stills from this doco. A few days later I got a call from some bloke who thought he could help. He said he made the film and his name was David Attenborough! He was young and it was probably one of his first films and he invited me over for a drink and lent me a whole stack of photographs. It was from those images I did many works some of which will be on show at the S.H. Ervin Gallery this year.

In a way in your work you have responded to the primitive mark. Yes, though it's more than that. I realised as I was doing these works in New Guinea that I was trying to do what Attenborough had done – showing these people in their natural environment almost merging with it with all their decorations. I thought what a great metaphor it is for belonging to the landscape and to the land. One of the problems I've always had with the European way of looking at the landscape – and let's not knock it, some of the greatest artists in the world have

been landscape painters – but they have all sat and painted the landscape over there as though it's something to be admired or analysed or used in some sort of way. Very few have thought of it as being part of them – of them belonging to the landscape. It's like the Aboriginal attitude: they are not separate, you are the land and the land is you. That's why I have always often tried to make a figure in the landscape. It's easy to put a figure in the landscape in a painting but it's bloody difficult to make it look like the figure is part of its environment but also an inevitable part of the painting. A symbiotic connection is not easily won. I don't do it all the time and it isn't always successful to incorporate the figure – it's not a dogma. At times I simply paint the landscape as landscape. I always remind myself of that wonderful phrase of Philip Guston who said, "Art can contain anything you like, except dogma of any kind."

- 01 Mother and Child (Bush Idyll), 2015, acrylic on canvas, 159 x 180cm
- 02 Landscape with Emu, Silverton, 2015, watercolour on paper, 53 x 73cm
- 03 Bush Walk, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60cm



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Do spontaneity and chance play an important part in your work?
 Yes they do. I usually paint on the floor, and inevitably with painting from that perspective a certain element of chance must come into it, you can't control everything. I used to use an acrylic paint which had a runny consistency and you can't paint with it on an easel as it falls off. I had to work on the floor so I've done that for a long time and it's only now that I can no longer bend down on the floor as easily as I used to. I've gone back mainly to working on the easel with oils again. My works are visually rhythmic and chance and spontaneity are important. In a way the rainforest has a certain overlapping and complexity of forms, and this is why a lot of my paintings are shallow in depth. If you stand in the rainforest and look at it you see you've got form over form, leaf over leaf, tree over tree, so there is a density of form compacted. There is no distance, just a shallow depth.

So design or patterning has become a big part of your work?
 Yep, it's like standing in the rainforest and looking at it. It's been an important and integral part of everything I've done since the 1940s. There was a time when I did nothing but totally abstract work and I wanted to get back to the figure. I learnt that it was, for me, all about humanity and nature. Abstract work for me was never quite enough.

Subject matter is very important in art, as well as personal experience. There are certain experiences we all have in our lives which for a

writer, poet, musician or artist have been so moving and vital that they have left with you impressions and feelings that you want to put into your work. Looking back I can identify the ones that meant that much to me, and New Guinea and the rainforest were ones that have never left me. There was a mad hitchhike I did around Australia with a mate of mine which was a memorable experience; that mad canoe trip I did down the Shoalhaven River with my brother when I was 16 was another. We had to drag our canoes through the bushland, had terrible accidents but we basically canoed from inland Goulburn to the sea. I'm better creating in the studio though than out in the landscape, better when I'm not there. When I experience it and then go back to the studio, I don't think about it so much and let those memories take over and do what they do. I prefer to work intuitively later on, than respond on the spot. I'm impressed by those who can get up there and paint immediately.

So the Australian landscape has always been important to you, even as a kid, even though you don't generally like to localise your art?
 It's been enormously important. I'm looking at a global attitude relating to landscape. It's about relating to the world and the environment which I would hope everybody felt the same way. As far as the landscape is concerned I know the Australian landscape and I've slept on every bloody bit of it from rock to sand, under trees, on beaches and every bit of grass, I really have. I don't know any other lands as well. I may have travelled through them but they are not a part of me.

My experience of the Australian landscape is everything that seeps into your consciousness if you have been in it since you were a child.

You don't have to be a native of any country to perceive it insightfully. One of the guys who I thought did it marvellously and interpreted his environment and made the point that I have tried to make was a non-Australian, Ian Fairweather. He managed to make that connection between the figure and the environment work harmoniously.

You met him and made a pilgrimage to Bribie Island, where you left your family on the beach and trekked into the bush to meet him. What was that like?
 He mostly spoke to me about Abstract Expressionism, I can't remember what else he told me! I've always been cross at myself because at the end of his dim little hut was the great work he was doing on the series called *The Drunken Buddha* and I didn't like to say to him at the time that I'd like a close look at it. He probably would have said yes but I was too shy. Instead we drank a bottle of wine and talked about Abstract Expressionism and art generally ... six hours later I forgot I left Joy and the kids on the beach and rushed back!

Was Fairweather an influence on you?
 Oh yes I think so. When I first returned to Australia from London ... London was pretty exciting in the '50s. Everything was exciting there and then I came back and questioned why. Everything here seemed so bloody dull, except for Fairweather, and he had been doing what I was trying to do but a hell of a lot better. He was an inspiration.

You are quite grounded and tough as nails, yet there's a lightness of touch to your work, almost a spiritual quality in it.
 If other people can see that then that's great, but I'm never sure what people mean by it. If it means an awareness of ourselves in the universe or land, then Lloyd Rees had it. He said to me once something quite

extraordinary, "You know Guy, isn't it amazing that here we are, in the middle of all eternity." What a thought! Most of us worry about our three score years and ten, and you think of eternity which goes backwards and forwards to infinity, and here's Lloyd thinking of himself being a unit, a significant or insignificant part of that infinity. That's about as close as you can get to a feeling of what you might call spirituality.

You have had longevity in the artworld and have been a contemporary of a lot of great artists. Were you aware of your place as a respected artist or your career trajectory?
 That's news to me! Maybe it's just living a long time! As for career, well I wasn't aware of it, and that was a great fault on my part. I should have probably paid more attention to it. I knew people like John Olsen and Fred Williams from way back and the thing I admired about those two guys even as young men was they knew they were going to have a career as an artist. That never occurred to me. I just kept making marks but I assumed I'd end up being a commercial artist. It wasn't until in my 40s that it suddenly occurred to me after painting for quite a while that I could achieve it. I had grown up during the Depression and there was no money anywhere. My old man was broke and the most important thing was to somehow get out there and get a job. That was the imperative. I had been going to art school since I was 15 and always wanted to be a painter, but commercial art was the only option initially.

04 Gaia at Badger's, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 274 x 274cm
 05 Guy Warren and paintings Homebush, 1960, Photo by David Moore for Architecture in Australia



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What do you think of painting now and what changes have you noticed?

I've noticed a lot of changes. The biggest were in the '70s when conceptual art hit Australia for the first time, a few years late. Painting was declared dead and I found that very depressing. There were times when I felt like giving up painting altogether but it's been declared dead at least five times in my lifetime. They said in the 1880s when photography was invented that painting was dead, and have said so several times since then. Now with all these new technologies art is incredibly exciting with new possibilities – but it isn't enough for me. I want to make a mark on a flat surface and I've decided that it's a primal urge, which is why we are all still making marks on walls. There are a lot of exciting things I'd like to get involved with in technology but Geezus – I've got enough problems already in my own art that I'm still dealing with.

Where do you see your art heading now you are almost 95?

Just to keep on working and see where it goes. Many years ago I decided that, unlike some artists I know I wasn't going to paint exactly the same picture all my life. That might be great for the bank balance but it's bad for the soul. When you start copying yourself you die. I still find the whole business of art-making so very strange that I still don't know how to deal with it. The only advice I'd pass on to any painter is to trust your intuition, try to be inventive, don't rely on skills alone. Either that or marry a rich partner or be born into a rich family!

Sounds like it doesn't get any easier as you get older?

No it doesn't – it gets damn harder! You realise the older you get, and the more you do, it only shows up how little you actually know than you initially thought you did. You see other people doing fascinating work and it makes you want to be more inventive. People say art gives you an inner drive, but I don't know. I would say it's more a dumb urge to keep on doing it. It's something you know you've got to do. What I've noticed now is I think we stumble through life, we

take corners intuitively. Some people must plan their lives and their artwork, and bloody good luck to them if they can pull it off, but I stumble along and turn corners or take pathways I didn't expect to find. Some of them are dead ends and some of them aren't but you hope to make some right decisions along the way. Art has brought me richness in a way but it can also highlight your own limitations, but it has never been boring. I'm so grateful I wasn't a bank manager. ■

EXHIBITION

Guy Warren at 95: Genesis of an artist
16 April – 29 May, 2016
S.H. Ervin Gallery
www.shervingallery.com.au

Guy Warren is represented by Olsen Irwin Gallery.
www.olsenirwin.com

- 06 Rainforest Blues, 1989, acrylic, oil and oil stick on linen, 274 x 274cm
- 07 Wingman and Mist (No. 1), 1985, oil on canvas, 89 x 102cm
- 08 Ian Fairweather Bribie Island, 1965, Photograph Guy Warren
- 09 Head over Heels Alice, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150cm

Courtesy the artist and Olsen Irwin Gallery