

LOOK Magazine:

STUDIO: A Journey

By John McDonald

In 2003 I was contacted by Ian Lloyd, a Canadian-born photographer who had just relocated to Sydney after spending more than twenty years in Singapore. Ian was a contributor to magazines such as *National Geographic* and had published more than thirty books. At that first meeting neither of us realised that over the next three years we would travel 50,000 kilometres together, shoot 60 hours of film, and learn more than we ever imagined possible about the way artists think and work.

The proposal was for a photo-book on artists' studios - a small but respectable sub-genre of art publishing. One thinks of titles such as Alexander Liberman's *The Artist's Studio* (1960); Lord Snowdon's *Private View* (1965), or its Australian counterpart, *In the Making* (1969), with photography by David Moore, words by Craig McGregor and design by Harry Williamson. All three books are minor classics, and it was tempting to believe we could make a useful addition to their ranks.

To find an entry point into that sprawling, amorphous field called 'contemporary Australian art' the plan was to concentrate solely on painters. Part of Ian's meticulous preparation had been to consult six curators at major public galleries, asking them for a list of sixty painters who should be included in the book. The most surprising thing about these lists was how totally different they were. Only one name appeared on all six lists, and that artist would ultimately not appear in the book. The lists were fascinating but highly confidential. I had my own views and took the curators' choices as no more than a source of suggestions. It was curious to see how little consensus existed among the curatorial profession, considering the uniformity of the art in public collections.

In the final mix there are many painters who were not on any of the initial lists. A handful of artists were approached but declined to take part. A considerably larger number volunteered as soon as they heard about the project, but we had geography and demographics as a line of defence. It would have been a simple matter to put together a list of sixty white, middle-aged male painters from Sydney and Melbourne. It was considerably harder deciding which ones to include or exclude if the book were to cover the broadest cross-section of Australian painters. The final selection was always going to be controversial, so regrets were not permissible.

Our first studio visit was to Lucy Culliton's shed in Hartley, on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains. On the way we stopped at a café in Leura and put together a list of eighteen questions, mainly to do with working processes. This list of questions which ranged over topics such as getting started, working hours, choice of medium, artist's block, the role of drawing and other fundamentals, would serve for almost every interview that followed. Ian would use a video camera to film these encounters.

To answer eighteen questions, plus whatever new ones the conversation generated, most artists would speak for between thirty and forty minutes. Some took no more than twenty minutes, a few talked for more than an hour. In a couple of instances the interviews exceeded two hours' duration. Some artists proved to be highly articulate, others were tongue-tied and hesitant, yet almost every one came up with something surprising or insightful.

As I played back the interviews while preparing the artists' profiles, I was drawn into transcribing them with a greater fullness than first intended. The final tally came to almost 100,000 words, and many, many hours of mechanical toil. The occasional attempt to farm out the transcriptions was a failure, as my would-be helpers were not familiar with the range of names and terms that occurred in the course of a typical interview. Each transcription began to feel like a rite of passage for a successful profile.

Ian's challenge was to quickly take stock of each studio and find an angle that would distinguish it from the others we had visited. This could be difficult because many studios tend to be simple white boxes. Sometimes, however, the space was utterly distinctive. Take, for example, Margaret Olley's Paddington terrace with its red walls and monumental clutter; or the gleaming white expanses of Marion Borgelt's inner-city workspace, which resembles a set for a science fiction movie. Ian had been hoping for a studio with a good set of rafters for an overhead shot. His wish was granted at Angus Nivison's place in Walcha, where the ceiling provided the only respite from the all-pervasive mess.

Perhaps the most striking picture is the one that appears on the cover of the book, showing Luke Sciberras in his battered old shed at Hill End. The photo was taken at two AM on a dark and stormy night, by the light of a forty-watt bulb. Sciberras is the youngest artist in the book, and this seemed like another good reason to put him on the cover.

While the pictures are full of information, they convey little of the trials involved in our travels. We drove over six hundred kilometres due west from Alice Springs in order to reach Kintore and photograph Willy Tjungarrayi. We flew in a small plane to the north-west tip of the Northern Territory to visit Regina Wilson at Peppimenarti. We drove and drove – travelling from Brisbane to Sydney on one day, from Adelaide to Wagga Wagga on another. We shared the driving and talked endlessly about the project, about art and photography.

It soon became apparent that instead of merely capturing a snapshot of Australian painting at the turn of a new century, we were engaged in a thoroughgoing exploration of the psychology of creativity. The accumulation of interviews created a mosaic of details, as artists discussed their different tricks and methods, fears and superstitions, moments of elation and depression. We began to recognise that we had an archive of fascinating, unique material. One humid night in Darwin we decided to subtitle the book: *Australian painters on the nature of creativity*.

Does this sound too portentous? I hope not, because we have tried to fashion a highly accessible blend of images and words; while Dean Hastie's expert design has brought the book alive in a way that startled even the authors. As I write, the film footage is being edited into a DVD format. The photographs will be shown in an exhibition starting at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra on 13 July, touring to venues around Australia, including the State Library in Sydney.

For most people, the artist's studio is a deeply mysterious place. We marvel at the art that is produced but have little understanding of the many things that happen as part of the creative process. We tend to underestimate the long hours that the average painter spends in the studio, or the many sources of inspiration upon which he or she may draw. The studio is the very centre of a painter's life. It is the place where discoveries are made about oneself and the world. For three years we were privileged to enter those sacred spaces and record what we found. In *Studio: A Journey*, we aim to take audiences into that place Robert Hughes once called "imagination's cave", and shine a little light on the subject.

(1,218 words)

