



The Art of Peter Siddell
by Peter Siddell.
Auckland: Random
House: Godwit (2011).
286 pp. RRP NZ
\$75.00. ISBN:

9781869621872. Reviewed by Cassandra
Fusco.

The Art of Peter Siddell is more than a 'sure to sell' glossy celebration of a leading New Zealand artist and his urban and rural sensibilities. It is a meticulously produced volume of 150 images accompanied by a succinct essay by a man whose understanding of life and whose knowledge of form and painterly skills have influenced many, and who has probably delighted and enriched anyone who has seen his work.

Sir Peter Graham Siddell (b. 1935) KNZM, QSO, a self-taught artist, started his adult working life as an electrician with a sound knowledge of structure. He subsequently trained as a primary school teacher. In the 1970s, in his late thirties, he turned to painting full time and became one of this country's most highly regarded living artists. He lives in Auckland with his wife Sylvia Bartlett Siddell who is also a distinguished painter.

Siddell's work has been described as hyper-realistic records of actual places graced with a subjective slant reminiscent of magic realism.¹ His unpopulated cityscapes have been reported as eerie, uneasy and intriguing, *pittura metafisica*, reminiscent of the strange, oneiric cityscapes of the Surrealist, Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978). All of these critical responses have been applied positively. Yet they pale (often being highly inappropriate) when set beside the narrative of words and images by the artist himself.

Straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, we are quietly told: "As a boy I delivered the *New Zealand Herald*, which is Auckland's morning newspaper. Each morning I rose early and walked empty streets in the pre-dawn light. Our suburb consisted of wooden Victorian houses and these childhood experiences have influenced my adult art. ... Any value realism has as art lies in its disclosures about our familiar world, its realisation of our apparent reality. I suppose that what I'm trying to do in my work is to create a world from my imagination which will be immediately accepted by others as real."

Siddell's works, then, are 'mosaics' from the painter's life *and* imagination. Intricately and seamlessly these *tesserae* coalesce into images of Auckland neighbourhoods, churches and grave yards, well-tended and, therefore, neither oneiric nor eerie. Siddell is Siddell. His trademark may well be a kind of apparent stillness and a paucity of intrusive life-signs. But, for me (a devotee of the abstract), it is his understanding of form and the play of light (glancing towards *verism*) that makes the work compelling.²

In the shortest and most modest of essays, entitled 'In my own words', Siddell implicitly reveals not only an understanding of his trade, art, but also a generous, gifted and sincere nature. His family, and especially his artist wife, are his world.³ His childhood experiences, while not totally conducive to fostering an artist, have, as he indicates, left indelible and heuristic impressions, as have past passions, such as tramping and climbing.⁴

The second essay in the book by scholar Michael Dunne, is, in tone, tenor and reach, an excellent companion piece. Dunne brushes aside accrued polemical fuss and dust and uses the excellent reproductions to affirm Siddell as a remarkable imagist and a modernist of imagination.

An exemplary publication.

- 1 The term 'magic realism' in mid-20th century visual art tends to refer to work which incorporates overtly fantastic elements, somewhat in the manner of its literary counterpart and is highly inappropriate in any discussion of Siddell's work.
- 2 From the Latin *verus* (true), an artistic preference for unadorned, contemporary everyday subject matter (rather than heroic or legendary); a form of realism.
- 3 See also: 'Peter Siddell: keeping it real in the face of death', Finbarr Bunting, *Sunday Star Times*, 2009.
- 4 Siddell has painted New Zealand landscapes, including dramatic panoramas, throughout his career, and did include people in his early works. See: 'Painting North / Pointing South: Peter Siddell's Perspective on the Alps' by Richard Wolfe, *Urban Memory: Paintings by Peter Siddell*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1986 and 'Peter Siddell talks to Art New Zealand', *Art New Zealand* 43, Winter (1987) p. 43.