Welcome to my mind: Gareth Sansom, a study of selected works 1964–2005

Melbourne-based artist Gareth Sansom’s oeuvre spans more than five decades. This exhibition provides a view of the development of Sansom’s work over that time, yet it is not a retrospective. *Welcome to my mind* presents a selection of paintings and drawings that focuses on a number of preoccupations and recurrent motifs in this artist’s practice.

Art critic and lecturer Robyn McKenzie commented this year that ‘the Australian art world is still caught up in youth, not this sense of history, nor respect for practice developing over time and the duration of a career’.1 *Welcome to my mind* seeks to develop exactly these interests, focusing on a single artist’s practice over generations of changing artistic models. It reveals in Gareth Sansom’s engagement with art an attitude that is free, paradoxical and experimental, recalling—more than many other Australian artists—the spirit of a painterly avant-garde of years past. Sansom’s practice has consistently offered an internally formulated concept of the new. He presents us with an exemplary model of creative practice that is conceptually and materially dynamic, not determined by or simply reacting to the roller-coaster of changing fashions in art. That is why it is important for us to reconsider it now.

The history of Gareth Sansom’s relationship with the University of Melbourne is long and generative. Gareth Sansom was artist-in-residence at the University of Melbourne twenty years ago, in 1985. The following year, the survey exhibition, *Gareth Sansom: paintings 1956–1986* curated by Frances Lindsay at the University Gallery, included six large-scale paintings made during the residency. Sansom was head of painting at the Victorian College of the Arts, now affiliated with the university, from 1977 to 1985, and dean of the School of Art from 1986 to 1991. The University of Melbourne Art Collection currently includes five paintings by Sansom that are among the highlights of our contemporary holdings.
Gareth Sansom is highly regarded by artists and curators of his own and subsequent generations for his pictures' vigorous sense of agency, his multidirectional use of both new and established media, and iconography that is autobiographical and yet still open in tone and effect. Since the early 1990s, he has produced paintings and drawings as well as experimental photographs, video art and digital images. This current exhibition of paintings and drawings presents an opportunity for viewers to pace a reconsideration of this robust and visually complex art.

Fifty works are displayed in a largely chronological format across three gallery spaces on two levels of the museum. Four major works in this exhibition were included in the previous University Gallery survey exhibition. Of these, we considered that the ambitious paintings *He sees himself* (1964), *The great democracy* (1968) and the four works that form the *Welcome to my mind suite* (1979–80) were essential to any contemporary study of Sansom’s work. Produced before Sansom had reached mid-career, they signal, as Terence Maloon describes in his essay in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, a characteristically demanding attitude—'[the artist's] synthetic intelligence and formal resourcefulness are taxed to the limit'. Many of the other works in the current exhibition have never previously been shown in Melbourne, while a number of paintings and drawings from the 1970s and 1980s had been held in storage by the artist since 1983.
Art critic and lecturer Robyn McKenzie commented this year that ‘the Australian art world is still caught up in youth, not this sense of history, nor respect for practice developing over time and the duration of a career’.1 Welcome to my mind seeks to develop exactly these interests, focusing on a single artist’s practice over generations of changing artistic models. It reveals in Gareth Sansom’s engagement with art an attitude that is free, paradoxical and experimental, recalling—more than many other Australian artists—the spirit of a painterly avant-garde of years past. Sansom’s practice has consistently offered an internally formulated concept of the new. He presents us with an exemplary model of creative practice that is conceptually and materially dynamic, not determined by or simply reacting to the roller-coaster of changing fashions in art. That is why it is important for us to reconsider it now.

Sansom is highly regarded by artists and curators of his own and subsequent generations for his pictures’ vigorous sense of agency, his multidirectional use of both new and established media, and iconography that is autobiographical and yet still open in tone and effect. Since the early 1990s, he has produced paintings and drawings as well as experimental photographs, video art and digital images. This current exhibition of paintings and drawings presents an opportunity for viewers to pace a reconsideration of this robust and visually complex art.

Fifty works are displayed in a largely chronological format across three gallery spaces on two levels of the museum. Four major works in this exhibition were included in the previous University Gallery survey exhibition. Of these, we considered that the ambitious paintings He sees himself (1964), The great democracy (1968) and the four works that form the Welcome to my mind suite (1979–80) were essential to any contemporary study of Sansom’s work. Produced before Sansom had reached mid-career, they signal, as Terence Maloon describes in his essay following, a characteristically demanding attitude—'[the artist’s] synthetic intelligence and formal resourcefulness are taxed to the limit’. Many of the other works in the current exhibition have never previously been shown in Melbourne, while a number of paintings and drawings from the 1970s and 1980s had been held in storage by the artist since 1983.

Coming from a generation most familiar with Sansom’s work in the last ten years, through artworks in thematic group exhibitions, or in solo exhibitions since 2000 (at John Buckley Fine Art in Melbourne), I was especially keen to properly represent the lesser known first decades of his practice. Of this early period, the late 1970s paintings on cardboard are of special interest. These works are notable for their energised surfaces of paint and collaged materials, dense with feeling and motifs, tangled, yet—like all of Sansom’s work—open (sometimes even exposed).

Few of these works are held by institutions and consequently are rarely seen publicly. Six are included in this exhibition. Tree of my life (1976–77)—a beautiful, sage-like title for a painting—is indicative of Sansom’s approach around this time. The work includes a number of floating autobiographical elements in the form of collaged photographs and references in cursive script to suburbs and personalities including Coburg, Lee Gordon, the Sound Lounge, the (Essendon District) First XI—some of which are explained by Sansom in his conversation with Robyn McKenzie in the interview following. But for Sansom, meaning is never fixed or finalised prior to the process of making the painting; neither is he so motivated to produce explanations subsequent to completing the work.

Tree of my life combines collaged and painted elements on top of one another in a pictorial space that is structured and compartmentalised; in principle this framework is cold and distanced, isolating the personal references and feelings associated with the assorted motifs from painterly or linear marks. In the approximate centre of the tree’s ‘canopy’, a ground of cleanly applied carmine frames a collaged photograph of the artist as a child. The relatively hard-edged opacity (unusual for Sansom) of the whole carmine shape protects its contents from adjacent scribbles, from images of adult posing and associated questions of masculinity, as well as from the grander, larger ‘face’ of the painting. The discrete white halo effect around the young Sansom’s head further identifies this as the ‘pure’ heart of the painting.

Marriage (1988) is among the sixteen works in the exhibition that date from the 1980s. It is from a group of paintings completed after Sansom had been appointed dean at the Victorian College of
the Arts, in the years immediately following his last survey exhibition at the University Gallery. This was a time when Sansom provided an important influence among the Melbourne community of artists and art students, inspiring a certain confidence in the scene.

While it has long been held that, superficially at least, it is Gareth Sansom himself who is the first subject of his oeuvre, a closer look suggests a more socially discursive art. Marriage bears witness to, in equal measure, a gregarious character and a sophisticated understanding of social relations, their force and the nature of their magnetism. In this significant painting, different speeds (or cycles) are suggested by intersecting painted tracks and motifs (numbers and dislocated, graphically described characters) that operate as landmarks. Two sexless but strongly differentiated (differently troubled) heads float on a kaleidoscopic ground. Dissonance co-exists with the generally cool temperament of the picture, where fluid sweeps of deep aquamarine blue translate amorphous emotional and social sensations.

Flesh to flesh to flesh (1990) is a modestly scaled painting of limited palette that contains a group of schematically drawn male and female figures located in relation to one another as well as to three central yellow emblematic shapes—the work reads as a sort of flag. Like Marriage, Flesh to flesh to flesh combines symbols and the markings of a trail, although here it is more tentative. Sansom today describes this as a ‘sperm trail of unfaithfulness’—intimacy mixed with hindsight—indicating a complex network of social relations, and hinting as well at a pictorial architecture that is typically strict but conceived to stimulate effects of fluidity, shifts and discord that, unlike many contemporary pictures, are not exhausted at first glance.

The magnificent, expansive triptych, Sweeney Agonistes (2005), is the most recent work in Welcome to my mind and was painted for the exhibition. Its very presence serves as a gesture towards the future, but it also gives a sense of circularity to the exhibition. The work begins with the artist’s familiar diaristic self-examination. The title, Sweeney Agonistes, calls to mind the 1968 Francis Bacon triptych, itself named after the unfinished poem by TS Eliot of 1928–29. The painting contains a collaged photograph of Sweeney Reed, with whom Sansom exhibited in the early 1970s, and who also appears in Untitled III (1981). Brief texts are frankly inscribed: ‘BUT IT WAS THERE’ … ‘IT WASN’T THERE’ (the latter is inverted), the year of Sansom’s birth—1939—and floating text phrases including ‘last New Year’s Eve he stayed up’ … ‘alone sniffing amyl’. Amyl nitrate is a relatively cheap drug. Its effects are fast and short-lived, heightening physical sensations dramatically like a brief surge of energy.

There is a sadness here: a new life, a new year?—the end of a year, the end of a life? (Sweeney Reed committed suicide in 1979.) But not entirely so. Pink is hardly a sad colour. Dominated by beautiful (and particularly complex) warm pink hues—perhaps the colour of choice to represent a lifetime’s experience—this work is carefully tempered, but not sad.

What would Gareth Sansom have us think at the end of this study of selected works? What would he have us do? I think he would be pleased if we allowed Sweeney Agonistes to conclude our experience of the exhibition. To give us his visual story—the story of painting—for all painting, and for none. For us as viewers to stand in this moment, alone—if only for the three minutes or so that the effects of amyl last—in one’s own life and experience.

Gareth Sansom is a civic-minded man, intelligent and socially astute. His exemplary self-reliance means he is unwilling to postulate ambitions for art that are false or unattainable. His experience and regard as an artist remain undiminished. It has been a pleasure to work with him to develop this exhibition.


Bala Starr