



Dusk | 2014, 15 x 30 cm, acrylic on wood panel

SILAS AND THE THREE SECATEURS

*For Silas Clifford-Smith gardening,
making art and writing are
one and the same thing*



If I were asked which one of Silas Clifford-Smith's artworks best sums him up it would be his print 'Old Tools'. It is one of his first linocuts and depicts three secateurs from his beloved collection of old garden objects. I see the tall, strongly built Silas the gardener as the middle of the three pruners, holding court with a humorous story about a long forgotten Australian artist he has been writing about. 'He actually was a very good painter of 'pot boilers', Silas would say as his companions break into laughter.

Right: Old Tools 2011, linocut relief print 20 x 15 cms



'I really believe in the dictum of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, that we need to turn our backs on objects made by machines and return to those made by people'



It is no accident that Silas has wonderfully infused a personality into these inanimate implements. For Silas, gardening with his hands, making art with his hands and writing are one and the same thing. The appeal of his artworks is that they are without pretence, depicting things from the natural world and always made with Silas's own earthy hands. It is not surprising then that recently he has had two sell out shows in Sydney of his prints and paintings as well as writing widely on Australian art for several respected publications. This is quite an achievement for a man who is better known as a gardener specializing in the care and restoration of heritage landscapes in and around Sydney.

Silas was born in the 1950s in the famous art community of Great Bardfield in eastern England. His mother Joan Glass (1915-2000) was a carpet designer, abstract painter and ceramicist who had formally trained with the influential painter Graham Sutherland at Chelsea art school in the late 1930s. His father Stanley Clifford-Smith (1906-1968) was a self-taught figurative expressionist painter who died when Silas was a boy. His absence has preoccupied Silas throughout his life and explains why he is currently writing his biography.

After the death of his father, Silas's mother and an older brother established an arts centre in an old timber-framed farmhouse in rural Essex. This family run art centre gained notoriety as a dynamic cultural venue during his youth. 'During these years I was exposed to a wide

range of artistic influences including painting, ceramics and classical music', Silas reflects. After finishing school he studied ceramics and fine art, including a year at the respected Sir John Cass School of Art in London.

After moving to Australia in the 1980s Silas began working as a horticulturist, specializing in the care and restoration of heritage gardens. Despite this green-thumbed occupation, Silas's interest in art continued and he later studied art history at the University of Sydney. He has since developed a keen interest in Australian art of the early to middle 20th century. His first book, *Percy Lindsay: Artist and Bohemian*, was published by Australian Scholarly Publishing in 2011. This monograph was well received and was launched by art critic John McDonald. Since 2007 he has been researching and writing a series of biographies of forgotten artists for the scholarly Design and Art Australia Online website (DAAO).

Most of his historical subjects are unfashionable male artists of the early 20th century who have been largely forgotten due to changes in taste and style. Typically self-deprecating, Silas describes this research interest as his 'Men with Pipes Project'.

Not surprisingly, Silas feels that the study of art history helps an artist with their work. 'You don't need an all-round

Top: Swell 2014, acrylic on wood panel 15 x 30 cms
Next page: Chaos Ends 2013, print 40 x 40 cms



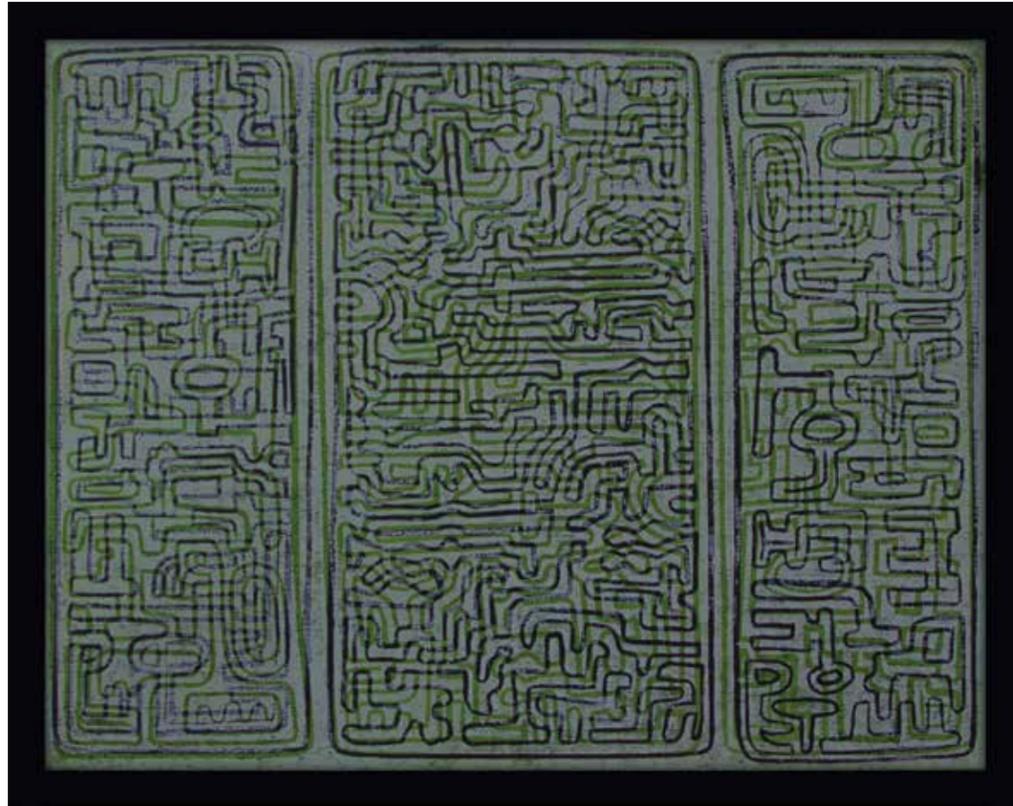
education in art history to be a good artist but it certainly helps. Likewise my own art making has helped me understand the many pressures my subjects also faced as artists.'

Silas moves easily between figurative and abstract styles. I see the subtle influence of some of his most favoured artists—Ian Fairweather, Stanley Spencer, Gustav Klimt, Paul Klee and Philip Wolfhagen. Perhaps due to his interest in art history Silas frankly acknowledges the

influences of others on his work and finds it amusing that most artists don't do the same.

Silas sums up his approach to art making:

'I really believe in the dictum of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, that we need to turn our backs on objects made by machines and return to those made by people. This doesn't mean we have to only do pre-industrial



art but we should strive to return to our own skills and physical abilities as artists. Put simply, a return to an appreciation of handmade objects.'

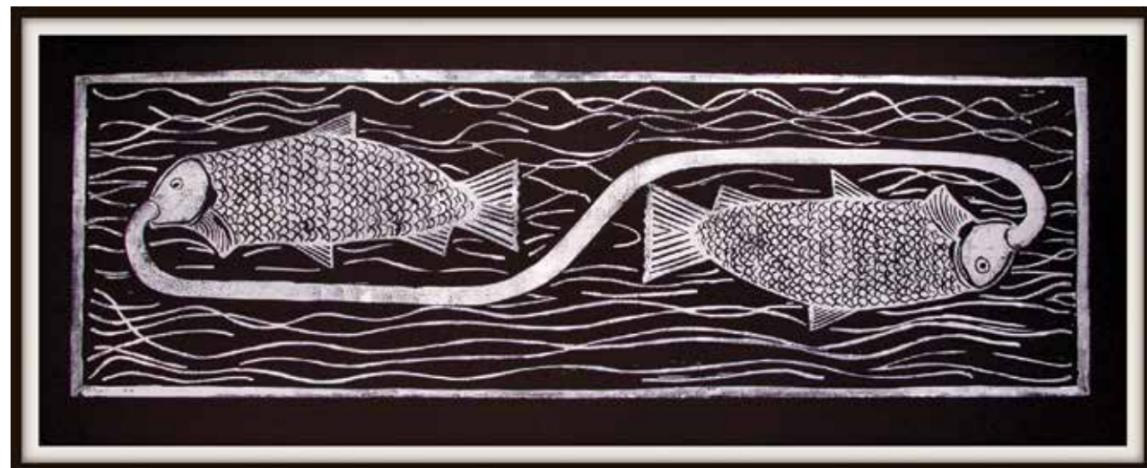
Silas is best known for his relief prints using lino, vinyl and wood. While most printmakers use a press to make an image he prefers the results from printing using just manual hand pressure on the paper to leave an impression. Silas often overprints his work using the same block inked-up with another colour. In *Cogito*

[2013], an image about lingering memory, we see an example of this overprinting technique.

Chaos Ends [2013] is an image that has been overprinted ten times, again without using a press. 'Each application of colour is placed at a different position on the paper. The end result is a ferment of lines which suggest fervent movement.'

Above: *Cogito* 2013, print 24 x 30 cms

Below: *Swimming Together* 2012, print 28 x 85 cms



Transition II 2014, acrylic paint on canvas board

Silas also paints. While a large man, he prefers to work on a small scale. His acrylic paintings include decorative abstracts as well as realist landscapes inspired by the hills near his rural home in Capertee, New South Wales. He is especially drawn to the light and shadows of dusk; works such as *Dusk I* [2014] reflect an understated melancholia not seen in his works on paper.

Silas's idiosyncratic hands-on practice of working from three related fields seems not to be diminishing, as is often the case with artists as they mature, instead intensifying and growing even more grand. We can expect to see from him in future the publication of more stories about artists, and most expectantly about his father, painting more pictures and instigating exciting new creative projects from his country residence at Capertee, and of course, continuing his love of the garden.

Anthony Lennon

www.silasclifford-smith.com

Right: Silas's father Stanley Clifford-Smith

