

Portrait of the Barrister as an Artist

By Francois Kunc*

SOME BARRISTERS MAY OCCASIONALLY be heard speaking to art dealers in between taking calls from solicitors. They are usually discussing their next acquisition. When Gary Gregg is on the phone to his dealer, they are talking about his next exhibition. Gary Gregg is a rarity: a successful barrister who is now achieving public success as an artist. In doing so, he happens to exemplify what Spigelman CJ urged on the profession at his swearing in, that 'it is ... important for all lawyers ... to participate in community life beyond the law.' If in his 'day job' he is only as good as his last case, Gregg the painter is only as good as his last canvas.

Most lawyers will usually tell you they wanted to be something else. A number have excelled in other fields, often as writers or directors, less frequently as musicians. Few, if any, have made careers as artists. Cezanne, Degas and Matisse never finished their legal studies. For Gregg, there were no early signs of artistic talent. He had no interest in the topic at school. After finishing his law degree he spent 4 years at Dawson Waldron before coming to the Bar in 1984. He has established a broad based common law practice with a special interest in professional negligence work.

During the 1980s, for reasons he can't explain, Gregg says that painting 'started to draw me in (no pun intended)'. By 1990 painting had become so important to him that 'I wanted to know if I was any good'. Work meant there was no time for art school, so he taught himself by voracious reading and frequent gallery visits. 'If it was worthy of hanging, it was worthy of my attention'. He would deconstruct the paintings he saw, then go away and do a lot of painting, applying and developing what he had seen and read to see where it led him.

Gregg's style emerged through this process. His concerns are colour and movement, although in any one painting the range of colours may be quite limited. The method on canvas is strongly physical and energetic, the method on paper sparer, precise and finely balanced. On canvas he utilises the palette knife as well as the brush, whilst on paper indian ink, collage, pencil, charcoal, acrylic, oil, oil stick, or oil pastel may feature. 'It is disastrous to name ourselves' said the great

abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning. When pushed, Gregg describes himself as an abstract painter, but only because he is not a narrative artist.

The reference to de Kooning is appropriate. His favourite painting is de Kooning's *Excavation*, 1950. In *American Visions* Robert Hughes identifies it as 'the best single picture de Kooning ever painted ... that tangled, not-quite-monochrome, dirty-cream image of - what?'. (The reader will have to consult Hughes' book to find the answer).

Gregg's paintings do not have stories, they explore ideas. 'A painting is a journey, not a problem to be solved. It's a dialogue between you and the surface of the painting.' Above all else he says that he has an affinity with the process, which for him eclipses the end result. His attitude is best summed up by a quote from Kurt Vonnegut's *Bluebeard* that features in Gregg's first solo exhibition catalogue: 'There was general agreement that if we were put into individual capsules with our art materials and fired out into different parts of outer space we would still have everything we loved about painting, which was the opportunity to lay on paint.'

That first solo exhibition was at the Crawford Gallery in 1995. Other solo exhibitions followed there in 1996 and 1997. The paintings sold and now appear in a number of public, corporate and private collections. While he works, his children sometimes watch and suggest titles. Justice Meagher owns a yellow and white canvas which Gregg's teenage daughter christened *Funky Chicken*.

Perhaps the best indicator of Gregg's rise in the Sydney art scene is that he has been taken on by Coventry Gallery in Sutherland Street, Paddington, one of the city's premier galleries. With its long track record of picking and promoting talented artists early in their careers, joining Coventry's stable is a major achievement.

A successful debut at Coventry in February 1998 in the annual group show *Coventry Diary* was followed by a solo show in August/September 1998 - *Gary Gregg: Paintings and Drawings*. That solo show was a virtual sell-out and attracted a great deal of attention and favourable critical response (e.g. Dr Gene Sherman (Sherman Galleries) purchased a work for her private collection).

Gregg paints at night and on weekends as often as

possible. Whilst he painted for years in an old external laundry at his Northwood home, eighteen months ago Gregg went in search of a larger studio. He thought he might have to rent a warehouse at Artarmon. But his plight came to the attention of a friend and near neighbour, the son of the late Lloyd Rees. The next thing he knew was that he had been offered full-time use of the late artist's studio, untouched since Rees' death. According to Gregg, Rees' smock still hangs behind the door and his jars and brushes are on the window sill. A photo of the artist (seen on the cover of *Framed*, the recent book of photos of artists in their studios by Michel Lawrence) is on the wall. I asked Gregg if he was inspired by his surroundings. "Not really, but I'm not intimidated either. I look at Lloyd's photo and think 'I know you're happy that I am working here, your son's happy and I'm happy'".

Does being a lawyer affect him as an artist? No. 'You're a painter. You see things the way a painter sees them. The fact that you do other things doesn't change that'.

Does being an artist affect him as a lawyer? Maybe. 'It encourages creativity. You look at a brief conventionally and then look at it a second time and see what it's really about. I like to think about a brief and be creative. You try to offer a cohesive explanation as to why what happened did happen'. But just as when describing a good painting, simple classifications like 'lawyer' and 'artist' do an injustice to the more complex reality. 'I want to be a good painter, husband, father, barrister. All these give me my identity and other things as well. I need all of them and if you took any of them away I'd feel diminished'.

Gregg is part of the 1999 Coventry Diary show (16 March to 10 April). His next solo exhibition opens at the Coventry Gallery in September 1999. 'It will be fresh but not alienating' says the artist. 'You'll see painting in the modernist tradition. I hope it will strike chords of recognition: space, colour and time. These are elements that all abstract painters are concerned with. It will be my attempt to execute my ideas in a number of works, both on paper and on canvas. A painter must find his own voice and I believe my voice is starting to come through'.

Late last year following a suggestion by Justice Meagher, Gary Gregg donated a framed work on paper to the Bar Association. See *Stop Press* February 1999. It is understood that this work, which at Gregg's suggestion was chosen by Justice Meagher, will be hung in the Common Room.



Gary Gregg with his painting *In the half light* at the opening of the 1999 Wynne Prize Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Just prior to this article going to press, Gary Gregg was selected as a finalist for the 1999 Wynne Prize for his painting *In the half light*. The Wynne Prize (for landscape) is run by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in conjunction with the Archibald, Sulman and Dobell Prizes.

In the half light has a strong sense of landscape, no doubt flowing from his concerns with the use of space, and is a very light and open work in tones of grey, cream, Paynes Grey, and light red oxide. The painting has been beautifully hung in a splendid room next to a strong work by John Peart. Also hung in this room are works by Aida Tomescu (another Coventry painter, and a previous winner of the Wynne Prize), John Firth-Smith and the winner of the 1999 Wynne Prize, Gloria Petyarre for her multi panelled work *Leaves*.

While he hopes his next show at Coventry will be a success (and there is no reason to think otherwise), the result probably won't change much for Gary Gregg. He'll go on being a barrister. 'I love being a barrister. I love running cases and wouldn't give it up'. But he'll also go on painting. 'I paint for myself, not for dealers, shows or anyone else. I'm grateful that I've been given the opportunity to show but, if not, I'd still paint. I have to paint. It's a passion. It's just something I do.'

¹¹ Selborne. One of Francois Kunc's first jobs as a teenager was helping in the stockroom of the Rudy Komon Gallery. His colleagues occasionally entrust him with their money to buy art for the Floor's collection, which includes a work by Gary Gregg.