

Cover:

*The holding down of the monk* 2004, graphite, collage, coloured inks and scraping out on matt board. Private collection, Stanthorpe. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

4. *A field of young lettuce* 2005, graphite, scraping out, pen and green ink on matt board. Collection of the artist. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

5. *The last feed of the sun* 1993, graphite, scraping out and synthetic polymer paint on matt board. Private collection, Stanthorpe. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

6. *The farmer's trust* 2005, graphite, scraping out and red ink on matt board. Collection: Southern Downs Regional Art Collection, Stanthorpe. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

7. *The blue boy of Katoomba* 2002, graphite, glitter, collage, synthetic polymer paint and scraping out on matt board. Collection of the artist. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

8. *Horses* 2008, graphite, scraping out and synthetic polymer paint on matt board. Private collection, Stanthorpe. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

Images courtesy of the artist.



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**Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland**  
Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets,  
Cleveland Q 4163

Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm  
Sunday 9am – 2pm  
Admission free

Tel: (07) 3829 8899 or  
email: gallery@redland.qld.gov.au  
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Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of  
Redland City Council, dedicated to  
the late Eddie Santagiuliana

**Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery**  
Weeroona Park, Lock Street,  
Stanthorpe Q 4380

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Saturday to Sunday 11am – 4pm  
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# Thomas SPENCE

35 years of expressing  
the inexpressible



**Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland**  
18 April – 30 May 2010

**Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery**  
23 April – 30 May 2010

A Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery exhibition  
presented in partnership with Redland Art Gallery

# Thomas SPENCE

35 years of expressing the inexpressible

My first encounter with the work of Thomas (Tom) Spence occurred at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1994. James Fairfax had just awarded Tom the Dobell Prize for drawing. *The roofs of Oxford Street, Taylor Square* 1993 was certainly the stand-out work of the exhibition. Tom had secured access from the owner of a block of flats in Flinders Street, Sydney, to draw the work from the building's rooftop, capturing an angelic perspective on the street below. The arresting atmosphere of Tom's urban night-scape is reminiscent of the poetic whimsy and intrigue of Wim Wenders' 1987 film *Wings of Desire*.

Shortly after meeting Tom, I invited him to take part in the inaugural Artist in Residence Program at the Haefliger Cottage in Hill End, NSW. Tom spent August 1994 as the resident artist in a pilot program I managed in conjunction with Bathurst Regional Art Gallery. He enjoyed the region's rich association with artists such as Russell Drysdale, Donald Friend, Brett Whiteley and John Olsen. Then, there was the sense of time passing – the intriguing gold rush history of boom, bust, abandonment and renewal echoed in the distinct seasonality of the site. He was further moved by the sense of casual desolation – the pitted landforms, remnant cottages, meandering picket fences, silent ruins and the cold July weather. Secure in the Haefliger cottage, he pursued an almost monastic existence for the month he was there. Completing at least one drawing a day using graphite and gouache, the works he completed reflected his immediate environment – *Full moon, July* 1994 and *The artist's cottage* 1994 for example. One gets the sense that Tom felt at home in this charged landscape where the emotive impact of the place was reflected directly in the quality of his work – from full moon to full moon.

An important influence in Tom's life around this time was Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968), the Trappist monk who wrote extensively on spiritual and monastic life. Based at the monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Merton's vocation explored both Western and Eastern spiritual traditions, particularly Zen Buddhism, where he came into contact with the renowned practitioner, Dr Suzuki. Tom read and was greatly inspired by Merton's *The Asian Journal*. In *The blessed Thomas Merton* 1995, the figure of a monk is praying over a candle in an ordinary suburban room in a densely-populated suburb at night. Tom Spence felt that these monks prayed for the world – holding it together.

Looking at the works on display in this survey, one gets the sense of the artist's delight in the nocturnal, particularly in the urban/suburban context as in *The long yard of Shellharbour* 2005, *Boys arriving from Campbelltown* 1994 and *Until the end of the world* 1991. Trusting his poetic instincts, the artist allows his hand to follow his eye, giving shape and substance to life's small episodes. In these compelling works, the artist has created lasting images imbued with an inner light that reflects his belief that drawing is a meditation, an act of worship.

The act of praying is a significant theme in the art of Tom Spence. *A prayer for rain* 2005, is a work directly connected to the artist's early years on the land in south-west Queensland. Growing up on the sheep station *Branga Downs*, long, crippling droughts were a fact of life. The

dignified figures in the drawing impart a quiet sense of desperation. One of Tom's jobs on the station was the killing and butchering of a wether (a castrated male sheep) every week to supply the station with meat. *A prayer over the lamb* 1995, was the artist's way of honouring the creature that provided the family's victuals.

Simple moments of grace have a special appeal for the artist. The story of the truce amidst the bitter trench warfare between the Germans and the Allies on the Western Front inspired one of his memorable works – *Christmas Day 1914 (God's Truce)* 1994, which was awarded the Blake Prize for religious art in that same year. The drawing depicts a brief break in hostilities with soldiers collecting their dead, exchanging gifts and bonhomie, before once again hurling themselves into the carnage and madness of a senseless war.

The work of Martin Sharp (b. 1941), particularly his idiosyncratic graphic style, has been a significant influence on the artist. The freewheeling album covers Sharp produced in the 60s for Eric Clapton and Cream were of particular interest. Peter Kingston (b. 1943) is another artist whose formidable graphic skills and vision Tom has found inspiring. At one point, the two artists planned a collaborative venture (yet to be realised), based on the experience of a train journey. In Kingston's case, the journey was on an ancient steam train out of Ooty in south India. Tom focused his energies on what he called 'the silver worm'. It was in fact the XPT that he travelled on from what was then his home in the Blue Mountains, to Sydney's Central Station.

Perhaps the most significant influence on Tom Spence's development as an artist has been Vincent Van Gogh, particularly his late work of 1889. Van Gogh was no longer in Arles. His friend, the worldly Paul Gauguin, had left him with his severed ear and shattered dream of a community of artists, to fulfil his destiny in the south seas. Alone in the gardens of the asylum in Saint Remy, Van Gogh seized on his lucid moments to produce works of unrivalled brilliance and intensity. *The starry night* 1889 and *Cypresses* 1889 are the kind of works that could have sparked Tom's belief in the artist as a visionary figure, receptive to the magic of the ordinary. As Van Gogh said "Let's not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives."

Tom has always seen himself as a 'bushie'. In the city, he was very much the outsider, peering in through windows to the lives and worlds of others. Much of the artist's reticence, in a social sense, is to do with his extreme shyness and isolation as a child. In the great expanse of south-west Queensland, Tom developed a deep affinity with the land. He was well

aware of the atrocities that took place as settlers displaced Aboriginal tribes. In the mid 1960s, the Spence family moved back to the old family property at Cullonden, where Tom sensed the presence of wandering spirits. His father had found skulls on the property – macabre remnants of an Aboriginal massacre. In this bitterly-contested country Tom sensed the unease, yet recognised the pastoral and agricultural enterprise as part of his inheritance.

There is a deep-meditative authority in works such as *Fieldwork trilogy* 2005 along with the triptych *The blue, the red and the grey (I love every minute of the day)* 2000. These works have a strong visual affinity with the finely-wrought images of Kathleen Petyarre (b. c.1940). A Utopia woman from a region north-west of Alice Springs, Petyarre's work is steeped in a millennia-old Indigenous tradition and land-based spirituality. While Tom is aware that much of the land his family secured has a dubious history, he never-the-less salutes his ancestors' hard-won agricultural endeavours that will need constant adaption to survive in a land of climate change and diminishing water resources.

For the past four decades, Tom Spence has pursued one of the most intriguing and idiosyncratic careers in Australian art. His authentic vision is steeped in the memory of his early years in south-west Queensland with further vivid years of experience in the inner and outer suburbs of Sydney and beyond. To sustain his creative independence, Tom's imagery has remained refreshingly free of artistic ideology and dogma. The current survey is a moment to be savoured by the artist along with his admirers and newcomers to the art of Tom Spence.

Gavin Wilson  
January 2010



1. *The roofs of Oxford Street, Taylor Square* 1993, pencil, charcoal, pen and black ink, pen and green ink, silver glitter and scraping out on paper. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales – Gift of the Trustees of the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation 1994.
2. *Until the end of the world* 1991, graphite, scraping out, collage and synthetic polymer paint on matt board. Private collection, Stanthorpe. Photography by Cory Rossiter.
3. *The blue, the red and the grey (I love every minute of the day)* 2000, graphite, scraping out and coloured pencil on matt board. Collection of the artist. Photography by Cory Rossiter.

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