

A man wearing a purple cap, a brown jacket over a plaid shirt, and blue jeans is kneeling on a wooden floor. He is holding a long, thin metal rod vertically against a light blue wall. To his right, a large black dog with a white patch on its chest stands looking towards the right. The background is dark and textured.

artist
DAN KYLE

FRAMING

I inherited this piece, a profile of artist Dan Kyle, from another writer. Before I drove up the long, winding road to Kurrajong Heights in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, I'd already seen the photos, read someone else's notes about Dan and his partner Andy Macdonald. When the wide metal gate slid open, I knew I'd see a four-metre-high sculpture of a deep-sea diver, the work of Dan's uncle. I knew that Dan's work captured fire management in delicate paint; that if the wind hadn't changed on 21st December 2019, this quirky space of succulents, art and shade crafted through the decades would have been ash, like the ridges above.

Words Megan Holbeck
Photographs Luke Burgess



I already felt that I'd been here, that this profile was writing itself, but Dan was way ahead of me. He knew which bits were important: not their home's cluttered, art-filled and charming interior, the beautiful new outdoor bath, the coffee and cake (lemony and delicious) – 'the puff-piecy stuff'. Instead, this article was to be about the stress and devastation of living through fire; about how love and understanding of the land informs Dan's art.

That's Dan's list. I'll add: it's about how Dan's status as both resident and outsider allows him to see the bush in its beauty, intricacy and danger and translate it into paintings that help others understand.

I get out of the car and Dan wanders over, fresh-faced and open. He's 31 years old: tall and lanky, he moves with the slight awkwardness of a teenager, of someone who hasn't quite finished inhabiting his body. There's a similar dissonance between his creative self and the practical realities of country life. As he makes coffee in the kitchen (charming, cosy, a cake in a tin on the counter) he describes a recent stay on a sheep farm in the middle of lambing, gifting me a perfect example. The distress of the lambs and the bluntness of receiving a lamb roast was both confronting, for 'sensitive artistic types', and as farm-to-table as you can get.

Boston lopes in, a glossy black Great Dane rescued five years earlier. Following him is Andy, who's been in the studio framing Dan's work. Andy sits outside at the table he's made, on the paving he's laid, under the pergola he's built, the epitome of belonging. His old black T-shirt has 'Rural Fire Service' fading on the front; boot protectors fit over his shoes. Andy is properly local: 17 years ago he bought this property, from where he can almost see the property on which he grew up. He is a stonemason, a garden landscaper; practical in a way you don't get from urban living.

We sit in the sun, patting Boston, eating cake. Dan talks more, but directs traffic to his partner: 'Andy, could you talk about burning?'

When Andy speaks it is with authority. He only joined the RFS two years ago, but is heavily involved, keen to make change. He talks of big changes, decades in the making: of hazard reduction burns being smaller blazes every five years instead of the prescribed 10. Of prioritising the health of bushland with cool, slow burns.

Both men are fascinated by cultural burning: the Indigenous practice of lighting small (knee-high) burns in circular patterns from the inside out. According to their proponents, when done well, these low-intensity blazes not only help prevent bushfires but allow animals to escape, encourage the growth of native vegetation and leave a healthy mosaic of plants. These changes are more than theoretical to the couple: last summer was the most destructive up here in living memory, and their property was loaded with bone-dry 11-year-old fuel.

There was fire on their doorstep for more than three months as the Gaspers Mountain fire burned in the Wollemi National Park. As Dan explains, 'That's a whole community thinking about one thing, talking about one thing—at the local pub, the IGA—for months.' Andy and many others didn't work during the season, instead volunteering for the RFS. On 21st December, Dan was evacuated while Andy spent 24 hours straight fighting fire. It burned to within a kilometre of their property before the wind changed. Then there was the aftermath: intense gratitude mixed with a weird anticlimax and the knowledge that there will always be another summer.

Dan says, 'This is home, this is subject for painting, this is everything for us. It's so out of your control when summer rolls in. If nothing's done about it, you're potentially saying goodbye.'

We walk around the property, past the amazing claw-footed bath with views over the bush, stopping for Andy to dig with strong hands in the soil, showing the city dweller the hummus layer and the moisture beneath. We arrive at the studio—the centrepiece of any artist profile. This light, calm space is made >





from two repurposed shipping containers, big doors opening out on to trees. It is still under construction—it needs lights, a fireplace—but Dan moved in last week, hanging a few paintings on the walls. They're gorgeous, muted pieces, of bush and light, the changing play of fire and weather and smoke and haze, the splodges of paper daisies. What they're not about is harshness, fear, the intense black of destruction or bright green regrowth. Dan's take is that they're devoid of time: they are during, before and after. 'It's sort of like trying to paint the event, but retain the beauty. I feel like I'm painting the bigger picture.'

Dan has always loved the bush, been fascinated by Indigenous histories. He grew up a creative kid in western Sydney, starting at the National Art School in 2008 without a Plan B. He moved in with Andy a year later, only a month after they met. Dan's style developed here as he learned to see the bush, trained his eye to see its history and beauty.

His appreciation and love of the land is obvious as he speaks, walks, looks, paints: the animals, the plants, the land and its light, moods and changes. As he puts it, 'You've got to live it. You've got to see it every day in all of its changes. It's a never-ending subject.' But he's an observer rather than part of it: as he says, he could never join the RFS, but he bakes a cake for every meeting. So instead of belonging, he's interpreting, translating what he sees. So others can see the beauty, the cycles, the preciousness and precariousness. And they can understand and share.

'We're just trying to make the richest life possible. Painting, cooking, bushwalking, gardening: it all creates a world here.'

Dan gives me a tour of the garden, scattered with intricacies: skulls and sculptures, bright South African flowers that look like toucans, or lizards wearing hats. Andy goes back to framing, giving me an apt metaphor on which to end. Because while Dan makes the art, it's Andy and the land that provide the frame. ■