



long road home

DANELLE BERGSTROM'S EYE FOR LANDSCAPE AND HER SOUGHT-AFTER PORTRAITS ARE NURTURED BY AN OLD GOLDRUSH TOWN.

WORDS TRACEY PRISK PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL WEE

Danelle works on a new landscape, *Return #3*.
FACING PAGE Long leaved box, brittle gums and cabbage gums near the cottage.

As an artist renowned for expansive Australian landscapes, it makes perfect sense for Danelle Bergstrom to be living in Hill End, the picturesque former goldrush town in NSW's central west that has long inspired painters.

We find her pottering in the garden of the rundown miner's cottage she has called home for the past 18 years.

The charming 1890s house that Danelle shares with her artist husband, John Firth-Smith, sits at the end of a dusty road. Life moves slowly in Hill End. A small mob of kangaroos lazes in the sun on a nearby grassy patch — and Danelle says she and John are in no rush to finish renovating.

Some of the uneven floor is still covered in original lino, and the décor is sparse but authentic, right down to the wrought-iron beds in the front bedrooms. But few miners' cottages would have had art-covered walls like these, enjoyed by city visitors lucky enough to flop into its comfortable lounge chairs and be warmed by one of its two crackling open fires.

Danelle, 58, fell in love with Hill End after spending an Easter with John, a leading abstract artist, in his wattle and daub shack in 1997, when her daughter Alexarndra was 11 and son Shannan was 13. The children stumbled upon the family's future home as they wandered through the village.

"The freedom they experienced was just incredible... and then they came across a house for sale, and came back and said 'Mummy, can we buy this house?'" Danelle says. She immediately tracked down the owner and made an offer over the phone — without having ever ventured inside. "I knew it would be pretty rough," she says with a laugh.

Having renovated a house in Sydney over 15 years, Danelle jumped at the chance to start again in the country. "We had an outside toilet, no showers and a funny little bath that had collapsed under the white ants."

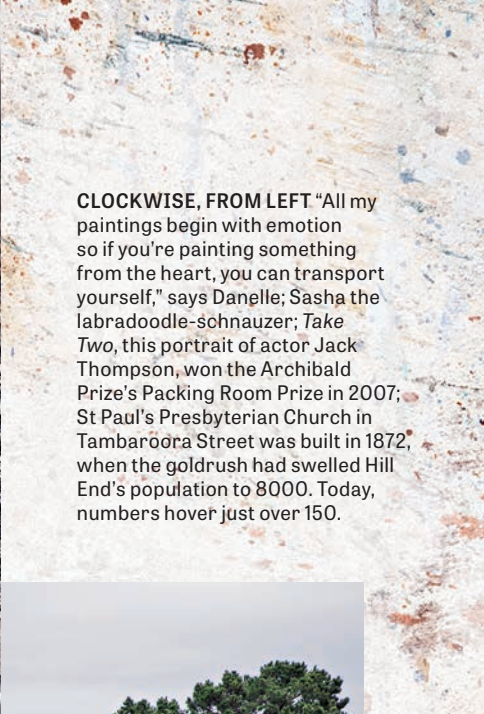
But despite the primitive conditions, Danelle looks back on this time with fondness: "All of the things we valued before had gone, and what we valued more was sitting on the verandah watching the sunset." Determined to embrace country life, she enrolled the children in a Mudgee school, but the 75-kilometre journey proved too arduous and they were forced to return to Sydney. However, the family spent as much time as they could in Hill End and Danelle often thumbs through photos from this magical time.

Sadly, Shannan died when he was 17 years old and it's in Hill End that Danelle feels closest to him. His ashes are scattered on nearby Bald Hill, which can be seen from the house and garden. Alexarndra has since changed her name to Sara, the pet name favoured by her brother. >

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CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Charcoal sketching; Danelle heads out for a walk on Bald Hill; "Return #2 is part of a trilogy that forms a narrative about my journey to Hill End"; the house is called Sarashan after the children's nicknames for each other; the living room, part of the original house, is lined with photographs of relatives and Australian artworks. **FACING PAGE** At the end of the road where Danelle and John live is Kissing Point with this view overlooking Split Rock.



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT “All my paintings begin with emotion so if you’re painting something from the heart, you can transport yourself,” says Danelle; Sasha the labradoodle-schnauzer; *Take Two*, this portrait of actor Jack Thompson, won the Archibald Prize’s Packing Room Prize in 2007; St Paul’s Presbyterian Church in Tambaroora Street was built in 1872, when the goldrush had swelled Hill End’s population to 8000. Today, numbers hover just over 150.

Following her son’s death, Danelle found it difficult to exhibit her work, fearing it was too personal to share. But eventually she came to realise that others didn’t view her art as intimately. “I was baring my heart and standing there naked in the room but they couldn’t see me, and that gave me confidence and strength,” she says.

In recent years, demand for Danelle’s portrait work has seen her spending a lot of time travelling between Hill End and her studio in Sydney, while John stays in the country painting or renovating the house. But she insists that no matter how many trips she makes to her Chippendale “bolthole”, Hill End is home and it’s always on her mind. “There’s something special about this place... People will come up for a short time, and the next thing you know they’ve bought a house here.”

Each of Danelle’s works represents a distinct time in her life and at times letting go of paintings can be hard. But she knows a career artist needs sales.

Danelle has been in many major exhibitions, from the Portia Geach Memorial Prize to the Doug Moran Portrait

Prize. She is an eight-time Archibald Prize finalist and has won its Packing Room Prize twice — in 1995, for her portrait of singer Jon English, and in 2007 for *Take Two*, her portrait of actor Jack Thompson. Yet she’s still insecure about her work.

“The hardest critic is yourself and John is my next hardest critic,” Danelle says. “Sasha is lovely, she never complains — but I don’t trust her judgment.” Sasha, it should be noted, is an 11-year-old labradoodle-schnauzer.

This drive for perfection can push Danelle to paint several versions of a painting. Her entry in the 2003 Archibald Prize, *Conversation with Margaret Olley*, comprised three paintings... and there were another six that the public never saw. Danelle was so determined to try yet another version of the famous artist, she even painted over a portrait of her husband. “Every Valentine’s Day in those days we’d paint each other naked,” she recalls. “So behind one of the paintings of Margaret Olley is a naked John Firth-Smith...” *CB*

Danelle’s next exhibition, *Return*, is at the Arthouse Gallery in Rushcutters Bay, Sydney, October 15–November 7. (02) 9332 1019; arthousegallery.com.au