

A portrait of Sophie Cape, a woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a black t-shirt and a necklace. She is sitting on a wooden bench in a rustic, cluttered workshop or studio. The background is filled with wooden beams, tools, and various objects. The lighting is warm and natural, coming from a window on the right. The text 'SOPHIE CAPE' is overlaid in large, white, bold letters, and 'GETTING THE ART FIX' is overlaid in smaller, white, handwritten-style letters below it. A thin white line separates the title from the credits below.

SOPHIE CAPE

GETTING THE ART FIX

STORY OWEN CRAVEN
PHOTOGRAPHER DANIEL SHIPP



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Sophie Cape is a former professional athlete who retired from competitive sport ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics due to injury. She dabbled in art from a young age – inspired by her artist grandmother (Gwenna Thatcher) and mother (Ann Cape) – but it was when her sporting career came to an abrupt end that her art making became the perfect outlet for her restless, athletic energy and her love of being outdoors. Cape immerses herself physically and emotionally into the landscape. It's here that she has discovered and developed her unique visual language, making large-scale, visceral artworks composed predominately outside, on the ground in seclusion.

Would you say your work is intensely personal for you?

Yes, deeply, on the surface I imagine they appear as abstract landscapes. But they are very personal, intimate, cathartic self-portraits every single one of them. The process I have developed is a way of coping with everything.

Tell me about your experience of going to art school.

I went to art school because I had retired from two different professional sports (*downhill skiing and cycling*) because I couldn't compete anymore. I was devastated. At first it wasn't easy. I mean I went there thinking I didn't need to learn anything. But almost immediately I was like "oh my god this is going to take me 20 lifetimes to get anywhere, I don't know anything!" Life drawing was my major at art school, and it's something I have always been very passionate about, and it is still a major part of my art practice.

What I learned at art school is that it is all about that thing of letting go of the unconscious. It's the same thing when you win a race, you don't remember what happens, it's just a complete blank but it was so easy because it was perfect. It's like that Zen moment – it was just perfection, and that's what you can access through art but in a different way. At art school you're training yourself, you're learning the techniques so that you can let go of the techniques. I was getting the same adrenalin rush from art that I got as an athlete. I became addicted to that through the art process, even though it was a completely different beast altogether.

Was that liberating or terrifying?

Whenever you become good at something you reach the top point and think "that is just not enough, I've got to go somewhere else". That is the problem with an athlete, so if you win gold you're suddenly like "shit, I'm not done yet". There is nowhere further to go, whereas in art there is no limit.

I have always looked at your works as being very corporeal and as being a connection with the canvas, the landscape and probably with yourself.

Yes, but instead of trying to paint by literally painting my body, I use my body as a tool instead, by being inside the canvas. Well, the canvas didn't exist really – it was more abstract. Because I have spent so long manipulating my body and competing in the environment against nature I am very tactile – I love books, and I love touching things and smelling things, and textures. I love the mark, I know you're not supposed to say that, but I love the line. I think it is really sexy and I love making it and the feeling of that.

And why are you saying you're not supposed to say that?

Well at art school it is all about the structure and the substance of the form which is very important. But you've got to learn the rules to break the rules so that is all-important too.

I imagine that didn't happen overnight. Who were some of your influences on this journey?

Bill Wright [a teacher at the National Art School] was a massive influence. He was very much a father figure, and he basically said "look, I've got this huge roll of paper that I brought back from London 25 years ago and I want you to take it out to the bush and stand in the middle of it and make a fucking mess". He was very crucial to that transition to what is now the way I work. I keep trying to work small though because I know I need to, physically, because it is really taxing on my body but I just can't, I can't.

Why the bush? What is it about the Australian outback that unlocked this creative muse?

The reason I went out into the bush – I have always had an affinity for nature because it has always been around me. You know, the human body pitted



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against nature – me racing against a mountain – I have always had a very close association with nature. At art school I was in a tiny little shoebox and I couldn't get the space I needed, whereas out in the desert the sky is the limit. So I'd roll out this huge piece of paper or canvas and it would seem tiny. And you can throw anything anywhere, making any sort of mess, you can be vicious and violent and as subtle as you like. No one is judging you and no one is watching you, and you have no walls to confine you and there are no limitations to the canvas. I guess it was sort of a competition, a performance, not to be recorded by anyone or watched by anyone. I guess it was my way of competing in a race.

Controlled chance and immediacy is an important aspect in your pictures. How do you go about planning a work – do you sketch up ideas, keep notes or a diary?

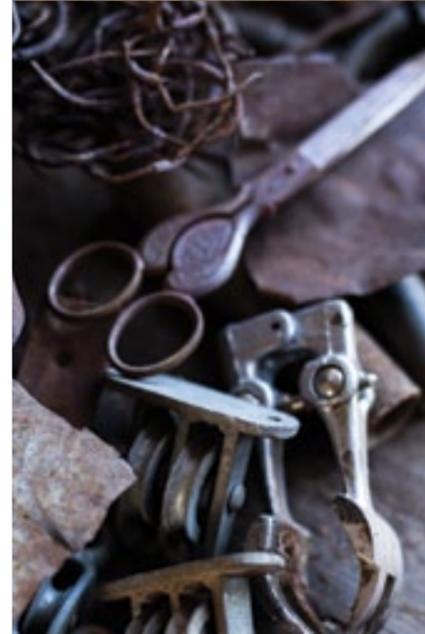
Yes, I have piles and piles of diaries, a diary never leaves my side. Always thoughts, ideas, quotes, because that inspires me as well, and that will feed me. I use a lot of text as well in the works because they are very emotional, personal and psychological. Poetry feeds into it a lot, and music. The diaries are more for when I come back to the studio because I can't work from photographs and just memory. I find photography kills and flattens it. If I work from a photograph there is too much information that gets lost. I'd rather sit down for five minutes and do a sketch of that space and pull out the lines, the colour of the light, the contrast, and then I will use those marks and information in the studio to finish the work off. It is more for finessing the works rather than the other way round.

Does place – the specific place in which you're working – have relevance to your pictures?

Initially, I never thought it did but yes, I had a bunch of residencies throughout Europe and Asia. And I was interested to see how place actually did affect the works. And it truly did, the works I did in the Paris catacombs, in the Berlin streets, on the Austrian ski slopes, they were all completely different. Even though I am making works that are intensely personal, the place does affect it. I need to get into the place and just sit for a while. I use the local environment, I use the earth as pigment, or the snow as fluid, or I



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use all the local trees for brushes. I don't take all my materials there, I like to use what is already there.

Do you think of them as abstract landscapes?

No, because every work I look at I know what story is behind it, or what I was thinking, or what it was about. But I can also look at it and go "I made that at Hill End", or "I made that in Broken Hill" because I can tell by the marks or the materials I used, or the colour of the soil. Or "I made that in Austria" because it is so white and full of salt and snow.

So how long do you spend in a landscape?

Weeks. I will go and live out there. If it is in Australia I will sleep in a swag; if it's overseas I won't, I'll leave the work out there. I like that the work gets rained on all night and I come back and it's a completely different work.

Do you spend much time with other artists in the bush or do you prefer to work alone?

I'd love to be able to work with people watching me, I'd love to work next to another artist but I actually have been painfully shy since I was kid and everything else is just bluff and bluster. So I get really self-conscious and it restrains the work. It is such a personal and emotional journey that I go through I can't have anyone watching or around. I've tried to video the process of me making notes because it is such a performative, intense sort of thing with intense moments of silence, but I can't even do that on my own.

What materials do you use – do you use paintbrushes?

Yes and no, I try not to use brushes because I don't like that conformed shape. I get a stick and grab leaves and whatever is in that environment and bind it together. I like the uncertainty of it and the chaos, and if there is a gust of wind I throw some paint over here and it ends up over there. I love that adrenalin



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rush of not knowing what is happening and being out of control. It is where I try to avoid the studio if I can because it is so controlled. I love having to work and deal with that. Anything that is around ends up getting thrown in, so if there are bones around, or old farming equipment, I'll stitch it in or sew it in.

What do you love about working with paper?

I love working on paper because I find it really sexy. I like the way paper shifts over time, and that is kind of what my work is about – you know that disintegration of life and the landscape. I like that the paper might yellow over time. I like that on some of the works some of the dirt might fall off but there are still layers and layers of stuff underneath. It doesn't bother me how it is going to shift over time.

How do you know when a work is done?

To be honest, it is basically when nothing in it irritates me anymore. It needs to make sense to me and I've had so many people, even my mother tells me "It's done! Stop! It's fine" and it's not, and what I need to do to it you won't even see or notice the difference. It's a story, it's a depth, it's something else that needs to go into it so I can expunge whatever it is emotionally.

With each work being so emotionally intense – how many works do you have going at once? Do you often have more than one?

If I can help it, it is good to have a few going at one time, but there comes a point where I can only focus on one. But I can't have more than a few going because it is too taxing. My daily routine is constant, it is 24/7. If I am not reading or drawing or sketching I am in the studio. The way I was brought up, and trained as an athlete, it was all or nothing. But it is draining and health-harming, so I don't know how long I will be able to maintain it as an artist; I think I will have to find a healthier alternative. I think I am starting to bear the





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consequences of that now, it is just too much. As an athlete it was always good when I would get injured because that would be a forced time out for a few months. But that doesn't happen as an artist, there is a constant push and you can't sustain that emotionally or creatively as well. You need to have a break.

It sounds like spontaneity is your release, not knowing what is going on for a while.

Totally, and I get a kick out of that, I get inspired and it's an adrenalin rush and I get excited and it feeds everything else. If someone tried to force me into a studio I'd scream.

Perhaps this is a nice segue into portraiture; does painting portraits provide something of a relief?

It is something I've always loved, and I've loved how analytical it is. It doesn't require so much of that anguish, and that sort of torment. What I try to do is bring together that emotional, psychological subconscious of the sitter in combination with their more literal façade.

How did you go about gathering that information from people?

The portrait that I did of Dan [Wyllie, the actor] took two years. It took a while to get to know him and understand his world. I like to do lots of sketches from life, but because I am shy I find that very intimidating. But because Dan is a friend it was a lot easier to do that. I couldn't paint someone that was pretty. I have to paint someone with character in their face and personality, a darkness, a history – he's perfect. (Sophie won the 2014 Portia Geach Memorial Prize for her portrait of Dan Wyllie, entitled 'Romper Stomper', pictured here on page 65).

I have only ever done a few portraits of other people, usually it's myself. So it is a big deal to do a portrait of someone else. Because it is not just about painting that face, ideally I'd like to do a portrait of him that is entirely abstract. And in my mind it's all about him and what's happening inside him, but there is no face at all. At this stage to be selected for portrait prizes there needs to be some

semblance of a face. But I am still trying to fight that line between the two. I enjoy it because it is such a challenge to the other works that I do. Because you are trying to do some kind of likeness, but also the other likeness that I am after as well. There is a constant push and pull between the figurative and the abstract that I find exciting. ■

Sophie Cape is represented by Olsen Irwin Gallery, Sydney.

EXHIBITION

In the heart of the mountain where no words are spoken
Olsen Irwin Gallery
18 February to 8 March, 2015

www.olsenirwin.com

- 01 Shaolin, 2014, ink, charcoal, graphite, soil, blood and bone on Saunders Waterford Paper, 142 x 111cm
- 02 Confronting the precipice, 2014, soil, ink, acrylic, oil and graphite on canvas, 201 x 277cm
- 03 That which is frozen shatters, 2014, bitumen, acrylic, charcoal and pastel on canvas, 149 x 201cm
- 04 Paris sketchbooks
- 05 Romper Stomper, 2014, oil, acrylic, bitumen, charcoal, and soil on canvas, 209 x 203cm
- 06 And light shines in the darkness, 2013, unique state etching, aquatint, drypoint, spitbite, foul-bite, relief, carborundum, chine colle and soil on lana 640gsm paper, 90 x 120cm
- 07 Everything changes, nothing perishes, 2013, charcoal, soil, shellac and bone on canvas, 190 x 279cm

Courtesy the artist and Olsen Irwin Gallery, Sydney



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