***About Chris***by Rosslyn Nicholls. October 2013.

*Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.*

*Without her you would never have set out on the road.*

*She has nothing more to give you.*

Chris pinned the poem *Ithaca* by Constantine P. Cavafy near a window in his studio. Many writers informed and inspired the existential insight he sought through his image-making.   Painting for him was a healing journey, intensely private and personal. There were demons to exorcise and childhood traumas to be explored. Our endless discussions can perhaps best be summarized by John Keats' observation that the secret of life involved the ability to embrace what he called 'negative capability' to live 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts and without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.' Chris' receptiveness to the natural world, the mystery of place, the deep, archaic and primordial inspired his imaginal vision.

Although he grew up in isolated country towns and received a practical, technical school education, Chris' mother and sisters read widely and he made up for any academic deficiencies after moving to Melbourne to undertake a Diploma of Painting at the Caulfield Institute of Technology in 1967. Once in Melbourne he was exposed to a much wider variety of literature, poetry, music, films and theatre. He also maintained a deep appreciation of many forms of sport throughout his life, especially Aussie Rules football. He built a bush tennis court and persuaded many visitors to join him in a hit, or for a swim in the large dam, weather and water levels permitting!

Chris and I set up together in a rented farmhouse in the Goulburn Valley. Chris immediately built a darkroom and had the shed wired for his welder. We explored the surrounding countryside on foot, pushbike, motorbike and later four-wheel drive, armed with maps, cameras (still and movie), bird books and binoculars.

Our journeying eventually took us to the Grampians, where both of us felt a deep geological affinity. The rocks, diverse plant, bird and animal life and the proximity to several lakes, the Little Desert and Wyperfeld National Park, led us to purchase a small house in a rural backwater, able to see the sunset behind Mount Zero from our back door.

Previously Chris had taught animation, now he taught photography and painting. But, restless to commit full-time to his artistic journey, he resigned from teaching at the end of 1980 and we purchased the old house opposite, where he worked for the next thirty years.

There were many interruptions, fixing pumps, fences and old buildings, getting wood, helping parents and extended family and eventually fatherhood in 1984. All these life events also found their way into his work.

I provided the regular income through my work as a teacher-librarian and for a short while he supplemented our income by working as a labourer for local farmers. It would take me an hour to get the grass seeds out of his socks at the end of each day.  After a particularly long day on a bone-shaker of a tractor, Chris parked it under a casuarina tree and turned off the engine. The sudden silence and immediate appearance of a willy-wagtail created an epiphany, convincing him to abandon farm labour.

Chris avoided having people visit his studio and showing his work, but was persuaded to exhibit in several regional galleries, sometimes sold work to friends and associates. It was largely through the support of family that he was able to sustain this solitary yet magical journey. He began to avoid looking at contemporary work so as to keep his vision focused.

Getting himself over to the studio in the right frame of mind often involved a circuitous route; selecting a piece of music to start the day, perhaps wandering around outside and lying on his back, gazing at the sky. I often found the special directors chair, that Chris had upholstered with chicken wire, positioned at various places in his studio garden. Watching insects, clouds, birds (especially swallows, white-winged choughs and rainbow birds) provided visual sustenance.

He had speakers set up in his workroom, with a huge supply of cassettes he had recorded of Lucky Oceans' Daily Planet radio program. Chris was unaware that he sang most of the time until he videotaped himself repairing the front verandah.

Once working, Chris hated to be interrupted. If he had been away for an unusually long period of time I would sometimes go over and stand in the garden outside just to make sure I could hear him moving around. He had various mirrors set up and would always check his work in them as it changed. This involved a lot of walking to and fro. Sometimes he rang up to ask me to put the shed light on if he’d forgotten to take a torch. Some moonless nights were pitch black and he got lost on his short journey across the road.

Once in the studio, epic struggles often took place. In my view, part of the problem resided in the fact that Chris was a master of representational draftsmanship, from an early age being tutored by two artistic parents. He was able to create a realistic representation of the human body, natural forms, architecture and machinery. But it was the inner presence, atmosphere or gestalt that he sought to expose, the deep psychology, underlying myth or mystery to be experienced. Each painting had to retain an inner life of its own. He often photographed paintings before he was about to change something, later to regret what had been lost. Once a small aspect of a painting was changed, it often resulted in everything else changing with it, and much was destroyed or painted over. Each painting was a journey in itself, each a physical manifestation of sticking with uncertainty.

Two of Chris' paintings, 'Bogged' and 'The Shed' (page 42 - 43) highlight for me his need to explore the inner, psychological landscape. Like all of us, Chris was informed by the past, both ancestral and personal and often he combined this with a surprising level of humour.

This playful and crazy sense of humour also expressed itself in an endless stream of defaced newspaper articles, cartoons and doodles on anything that came to hand, from Weeties packets to envelopes, mostly created at the kitchen table while talking or listening to the radio.

Chris had an initial reluctance to embrace digital technology but, starting with a good digital camera and then camcorder, he began to make short films again, converting many of his super 8 films to digital format for further reworking. This new technology also enabled him to re-photograph the paintings for his website.

When I retired, we had planned that I would be more able to actively seek a commercial outlet for his accumulated life's work. As it happened, a leading Melbourne gallery director saw one of his paintings at Horsham Regional Art Gallery, visited him at his studio in February 2009 and booked him for an exhibition in 2011. Chris had already completed much of the work for that show, and in 2009 finished another 10 large canvasses. But the unexpected diagnosis of a brain tumour and his death in October 2010 after seven months of treatment, led to cancellation of the exhibition.

However, since then, the ongoing cataloguing, re-housing and promotion of Chris’ work has resulted in a large retrospective exhibition being held at the Art Gallery of Ballarat in September / October 2013.

Researching what I wanted to write about Chris I read through his notebooks, sketchbooks, diaries and the many notes on scraps of paper. I also read books by some of the thinkers he admired, including David Tacey and James Hillman.

In *Edge of the Sacred* Tacey outlines his belief that an archaic spirit of the land can act as a profoundly regenerative force on the psyche of any individual tuned to it. And in *Gods and Diseases*, he suggests that western culture is losing the art of engaging body and soul in achieving transformation. He proposes that only metaphor and symbol can carry us into spiritual thinking.

There was a recurring night theme that Chris explored using many different mediums. One of my saddest tasks after Chris’ death was dismantling the middens he liked to work on top on in his studio. I came across a drawing that he had framed under glass, and at first it just looked completely black - but tilting it revealed some shining highlights in graphite. Within these subtle greys I could see shining stars and a barbed wire fence being held apart by a man for his dog to get through.

Chris would sometimes despair of the future of painting and wonder whether what he was attempting was futile. But together we resolved to persevere, as it was a case of need and personal growth too. As William Blake articulated so beautifully: *Eternity is in love with the productions of time.*

I remember my own feeling of desolation sometimes, walking down barren education department corridors and being silently grateful that artists and writers were out there, at that very moment, attempting the heroic work of lifting us out of the mundane day to day world of western Society.