



## BOOKS

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# Rare show of gifted infancy

Despite winning an Oscar and the world's biggest prize for children's literature, Shaun Tan continues to be nourished by his earliest artistic endeavours. **Mark Naglazas** reports.

**S**haun Tan was a precocious little bugger, it's no surprise to learn. Not long after he could wield a pencil and paintbrush the Perth-born-and-bred author and illustrator revealed a talent for capturing the real world and a striking facility with fantasy that grew with each passing year.

It is equally unsurprising to discover that his parents were his first collectors, archiving his etchings and paintings in the ceiling space of their Hillarys home.

What is a little out of left field is how attached Tan himself is to his beginnings. Tan keeps diving back into his past, pulling out and poring over his earliest efforts.

"I used to be very dismissive of people who are overly assertive of the connection between what I'm doing now and what I did as a child because there really is no direct connection," Tan says.

"But as I grow older and my world becomes more complicated I look back on my childhood as a period of incredible honesty and creativity.

"I wasn't thinking about the audience so I can't help but trust the work I did then.

"Picasso says that he spent a lifetime learning to draw as a child. In childhood there is an unselfconscious directness of expression that you're always trying to get back to but it's difficult because there are all these things that get in the way, like wisdom and experience."

The 38-year-old Tan's attachment to his formative years extends to the work he did in his early 20s, when he transformed his experience of growing up in Perth's northern suburbs into accomplished drawings and paintings that laid the foundation for a brilliant career that culminated (so far) with an Oscar and the \$765,000 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the so-called Nobel Prize for children's literature. That early work, plus the sketches he did while preparing his Oscar-winning short animated story, *The Lost Thing*, is getting a rare showing in an exhibition opening this week at Fremantle Arts Centre that's sure to draw Tan's legion of local fans (he still refers to us as his first and most appreciative audience).

Among the subjects that fired the

young Tan's imagination are the crows he spied on the long walks he took with his brother in the northern suburbs ("It's almost as if they owned the landscape", he quips), little Shaun and his father strolling along a suburban footpath, and his mate Simon and his dog Guinness.

Very few of these works have been publically displayed because Tan regards them less as pieces for show and for sale and something more like a visual diary, works that keep him connected to what gave him the urge to become a professional artist, illustrator, author and filmmaker.

"These works are very personal," Tan tells me over the phone from his home in the inner Melbourne suburb of Brunswick which he shares with his wife, Finnish-born artist and metalsmith Inari Kiuru.

"I don't take a lot of photos of places I've lived in or visited or friends so these paintings are a record of my life. Early on when I was struggling I sold a few pieces and kind of regretted it immediately."

Indeed, Tan is so possessive of these early works that you can



**ATTACHED** Shaun Tan looks on his childhood as a period of incredible honesty and creativity. PICTURE **MARTIN PHILBEY**

almost hear him grinding his teeth down the line at the mention of a large-scale painting owned by the City of Vincent because it was an acquisitive award, that is, he had to hand it over in exchange for winning the prize.

Tan also cherishes these early works, which he started hanging on to as soon as he began to make a living as a commercial artist, because they represent a part of his history that he will never be able to recapture. "When I was reviewing the work with the curator for the exhibition I thought to myself 'I

can't paint like that again even if I tried; my way of thinking has changed and my style has changed'."

These paintings are also a reminder that Tan is not simply one of the world's most celebrated visual storytellers and fantasists but a very fine traditional artist.

"There has been a split stream running through my whole career," Tan explains. "There is the science fiction/fantasy stuff that I'm known for and there are the paintings and drawings that come from the careful observation of everyday life."

Those streams are not quite as separate as Tan would like us to think. Anyone familiar with the Tan oeuvre, which includes the beloved picture books *The Lost Thing* (1999), *The Red Tree* (2001), *The Arrival* (2006) and *Tales From Outer Suburbia* (2008), will see their wellspring in these early paintings and drawings.

For example, the painting titled *North Beach* (1998), in which he reproduces a section of West Coast Highway from a lowish angle, is recycled as the sea wall in the Oscar-winning *The Lost Thing*.





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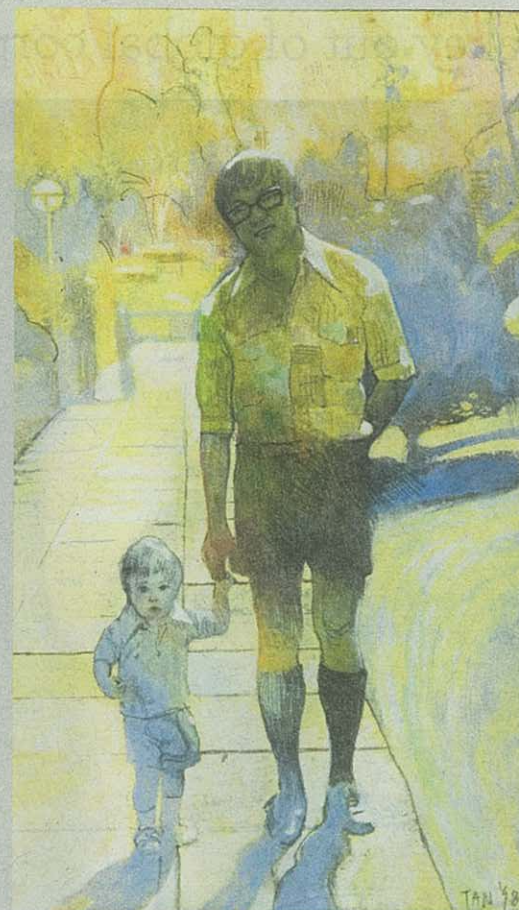
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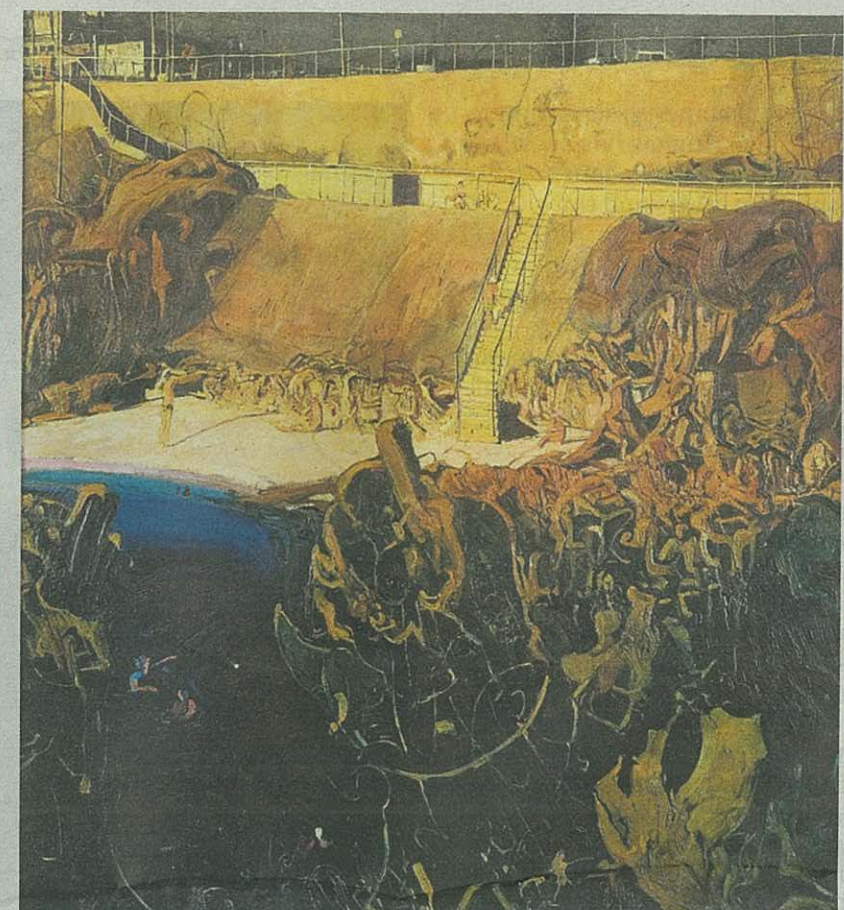
"The paintings that you see in this exhibition are a bit like theoretical physics, non-purposeful artworks that were made entirely for myself, while the illustrations in the books are the applied science in which I communicate with other people. They (the paintings in the FAC exhibition) are the purest work I've done."

It is not just this early work that continues to nourish Tan. His childhood growing up in the 1970s and 80s in a then outer suburb of Perth ("on the frontier between the city, the sea and the bush" writes

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PURE Dad and Me (1998).



RECYCLED North Beach (1998).


arts editor Stephen Bevis) is a subject to which he returns again and again.

"So much of my early life was spent having creative thoughts in that bubble that even now the very act of creativity is attached to that landscape and to that light," Tan says. Even when that world is depicted as a scary place, as it often is in Tan's books (the empty streets, the near-identical suburbs that roll on forever, the lurking crows), he says it has a meditative, almost peaceful quality — a beauty in the banality.

Tan says that whatever hostility he harboured towards Perth suburban life he channelled into the political cartoons he contributed to the short-lived arts magazine *The Western Review* (done about the same era as the works in the coming exhibition).

But that ferocity didn't sit well with Tan, a humanist whose sympathies are always with the outsider and the alone.

"The cynicism about Perth suburban life didn't feel true to me because the suburbs were also a happy place. But I am always

amused that my spiritual homeland is also a place I find very bleak. It's a contradiction you see in these paintings and later in the books." 

**Shaun Tan: Suburban Odyssey** is at Fremantle Arts Centre from Saturday to July 15. **The Lost Thing** screens on Saturday (4.30pm) at the FAC followed by a Q&A with the author. The event is free but places are strictly limited. To book, email [rspv@fremantle.wa.gov.au](mailto:rspv@fremantle.wa.gov.au).