

# Sylvia Siddell

b.1941

Self-taught

When Sylvia Siddell began her artistic career in the 1970s, her art was shaped by the domestic and familiar. She incorporated family life into the process of art-making as a means of balancing her roles as wife and mother with her activity as an artist. Among other women artists of her generation, she elevated the banal and ordinary occurrences of domestic life as an appropriate and challenging subject for art. Yet Siddell's comments on domesticity contained references to her feelings and frustrations about the wider world, and continue to inform her work three decades on.

While her husband, artist Peter Siddell, is renowned for his paintings showing the exterior of houses, Siddell's abiding interest lies in what happens within those walls. Following her attendance at a night school art course, she began producing detailed pencil drawings of her immediate surroundings. Married with two young daughters, Siddell found drawing was compatible with family life as it did not suffer from interruptions, and the materials and space required was minimal. Household activities in the kitchen and laundry formed the basis for her still life compositions, but Siddell's contemplations on life are more manic than still.

Fascinated by the trust and reliance we invest in inanimate objects to perform the most essential of domestic tasks, she presents a nightmarish scenario where household appliances come to life and turn on their user. In *Inferno*, the kitchen stove – the centre of family life for preparing food – appears fat and fleshy and hungry for your next meal. The stove-top elements are transformed as writhing serpents, and the scene is viewed through the haze of heat from great flames expelling from the open oven-door.

The energy of this work is conveyed through Siddell's distinctive drawing style. She has contorted perspective and line to disrupt our perception of the objects portrayed. The flattened pictorial space compacts the scene, creating visual intensity and a sense of high energy. By rendering surfaces and mass in sharp zigzags, she enlivens inanimate objects, adding to the sense of chaos and confusion. The loose treatment of conté crayon on the frying pan plays against the fine pencil work on the fish.

Fish have recurred in Siddell's work. Initially, she examined fish as a source of food – a living thing slaughtered for our sustenance and to satisfy the social ritual of eating. Now the fish carries an ecological message, expressing her concern

for the continued capture and consumption of fish species endangered by over-fishing. This fish, the Orange Roughy, is fished in larger quantities than are spawned and the continued existence of this species is threatened. However, there may be hope. In an earlier version of this theme (*Seethe* (1993), acrylic on canvas, Auckland Art Gallery) the fish lay dead in the pan, yet now it appears to be fighting back with defiant life in its eyes.

But does this scene convey a sense of hope? Through the window lightning breaks across the night sky, and the flames of the inferno – the fires of hell – threaten to consume the fish as he escapes one fire for another. And whose eye lurks in the pot of steam?

## Christine Whybrew

### Artist website:

[www.siddell.co.nz](http://www.siddell.co.nz)

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)

[www.judith-anderson-gallery.co.nz](http://www.judith-anderson-gallery.co.nz)

### Articles:

West-Newman, C, L. (2002). 'Reading Sylvia Siddell'. *Art New Zealand*, 103, Winter, pp. 68–70.

### Books:

Brown, W. (1996). *Another 100 New Zealand Artists*. Godwit Publishing Ltd, Auckland.

Pearson, H. (2004). *Mundane And Marvellous: The Art Of Sylvia Siddell*. Whangaparaoa, Interactive Education Ltd.

### Web search:

Peter Siddell

