

INSIDE STORY

JOANNE HAWKINS



Ken Done

Twice in his life this artist decided to walk away from what he was doing, simply because he “didn’t want to do it anymore”.

The first time was in 1975 when, as a 35-year-old, he quit his job as a creative director of Sydney advertising agency J Walter Thompson to become a full-time artist.

His time in Sydney had followed successful stints at the agency’s offices in New York and London, where he won a prestigious Gold Lion award at Cannes for a Campari advert he created with Bill Oddie and Tim Brooke-Taylor (who would later find fame in 1970s British TV series *The Goodies*).

“It was a good training ground but I wanted to be a painter and to do that you had to give up everything and concentrate on that,” Done recalled.

So, he did. And soon, with the help of his designer wife, Judy, his artworks were adorning swimwear, homewares (including a famous collection of duvet covers with Sheridan) and clothing.

By the late 1980s, they had 15 shops throughout the country and 150 staff.

“It was very successful but once you have 15 shops, the next thing is you have to have 50 shops and you have to have meetings with people and write memos and I really just wanted to paint,” Done said.

So, for the second time in his life, he walked away. And now, there’s just one gallery and shop in The Rocks in Sydney, with the commercial side of his business run by daughter Camilla and son Oscar, leaving Done free to pursue his passion.

But he was happy to collaborate with Sheridan again on a limited-edition series of two quilt covers, two cushion covers and a beach towel to celebrate the company’s 50th birthday this year.

“Out of everything we did in the ’80s, the bed linen with Sheridan seemed to strike a chord because there wasn’t anything else quite like it in those days,” Done said. “And they now have the technical ability to reproduce the artwork digitally so the bed linen looks exactly the same as the painting. It is modern art for the time we live in and the fact that people might choose to sleep under it is wonderful.”

At 77, Done has no plans to put down his brushes. “You always want to get better,” he said.

And he is enjoying life. “It’s not a fairy story: no one escapes the downsides of life,” he said. “I have had prostate cancer and I have lost a lot of money, but I am still here and my bum hasn’t dropped off.”

Typical Saturday morning

I go into my studio at home. It’s important that the first thing I see — apart from the beautiful view from our windows — are the paintings I am working on to see if the fairies have visited during the night to make them better or whether they need immediate attention. Then Judy and I will walk down to the beach below our house, and after we’ve fed the magpies, kookaburras and lorikeets, we’ll go for a swim. After that, I’ll look through the papers, before going back into the studio to paint and listen to jazz. I paint most days.

Emergency snack

We’ve got orange and mandarin trees, so I’ll probably go for a piece of fruit. I also really like dark chocolate.

Signature dish

I am not a cook but I am a very appreciative eater! Judy is a very good cook but around the barbecue I do consider myself the tong master.

On my bedside table

I’m reading *The Secrets She Keeps*, which is the latest book by Sydney writer Michael Robotham. He’s brilliant. I also have a small book of Matisse drawings and a big book of photography by Annie Leibovitz.

Fantasy place to live

It would have to be my home. We are blessed to live in a beautiful house beside Sydney Harbour and even though we travel the world extensively, it is always a great joy to be at home. I first saw the house as a 14-year-old boy and I’ve lived here for a long time, it’s very much the source of my work and our life.



Photos: Hugh Stewart; artworks: Ken Done

My favourite things

DUVET COVER

The painting on this duvet cover, which is part of my latest collaboration with Sheridan (sheridan.com.au), is called *Penguins and People III*. It was inspired by a big trip we did to Antarctica in 2015 that led to a series of paintings. I never imagined when I painted it that it would end up as bed linen but it’s a wonderful use of the image. I find travel very inspirational. Recently, we were in London and Israel.

PAINTS AND BRUSHES

I think all kids can paint and draw. I grew up in a little country town on the Clarence River in northern NSW and when I was seven, I sent in a couple of drawings of boats bobbing on the river to an ABC radio program called *The Argonauts Club*. They sent me back two gold stars and I thought, well, we’re on to something here. At 14, I left school to attend art school in Sydney. It’s a big leap of faith to allow your child to leave at such a young age but my parents were very supportive, for which I am eternally grateful. And at that age, I was thrilled at the prospect of seeing a totally nude woman for the first time, only to discover you don’t have life-drawing class in the first year. You have to do a year’s probation of drawing from statues and plaster casts before they let you loose on the real thing!

KNITTED VEST

I’ve been called a national treasure but if anything is a national treasure, it’s this jumper, not me. My mum was a voracious knitter and made it out of scraps of wool about 25 years ago and I love it. I don’t wear it so often anymore because I’ve got to be in an absolutely special frame of mind to put it on but when I’ve got it on, I know I’m going to do something good. Mum died about 10 years ago, when she was 90, but the clicking sound of her knitting needles was a big part of my childhood. Was Mum proud of me? Let’s just say she would run across Moscow’s Red Square if she saw someone wearing one of my original sweatshirts, screaming, “My son did that!”

PHOTO

This was taken just after the war. It’s my mum and dad, and the little shy dot in the background is me. I hated having my photograph taken when I was a child, but, as my daughter, Camilla, said recently, “How times have changed!” I didn’t know my father until I was five. He went to England as a pilot in 1940 — the year I was born — and didn’t come back for five years. So, as a little boy, there was a photo of a man called Dad on my mum’s bedside table but I didn’t know who he was. But I loved my father and was very close to him, especially as I got older.

SHOES

My daughter, Camilla, gave me these shoes. She knew straight away that I would like them and she was right. They are just the most beautiful ultramarine blue. I don’t want to get paint on them, though, so I don’t wear them in the studio. I think the fact that Camilla and Oscar work alongside Judy and myself in the business is our greatest achievement. There are lots of family businesses and some work and some don’t. One of my greatest joys is going into our gallery and finding my kids in there. Actually, they are not kids anymore but I think you always think of your children as kids, don’t you?

LIQUEUR GLASSES

In the late ’80s, I was invited to go to Sweden to work with Kosta Boda, who are one of the great glass companies in the world. They gave me a team of glass blowers to make whatever I wanted. Obviously, I couldn’t blow the glass myself, but I did drawings of what I wanted and this was the result. At that stage, a lot of Swedish glass was very elegant and simple and classic, so maybe I did something with colour that they hadn’t done before. It was a lovely collaboration and a great honour to be asked to go there.