

# Career story: Being true to yourself

This career story features an Australian contemporary artist who works primarily in video and performance. His career story is a great resource for understanding how to be open for change, figuring out what you like and being true to yourself in your work.

At the back of this resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.



Image 1. Approach to Mundi Mundi, Shaun Gladwell <http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/963872/interview-shaun-gladwell-on-the-royal-academys-australia-show>

## Shaun Gladwell 's story

*“I’m interested in activating landscapes and not regarding them aesthetically.”*

Born in 1972, Shaun Gladwell is an acclaimed Australian contemporary artist who works predominantly in video and performance. He resides in both Sydney and London. Gladwell’s works are shot in natural and urban environments where he focuses his work on exploring the relationship between landscapes and people. Initially studying painting, Gladwell moved on to video and other mediums in his postgraduate work. His work is held in public and private collections nationally and internationally, including the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, Tokyo etc. as well as solo and group exhibitions.

## Figuring out what you like

In [Approach to Mundi Mundi](#), a video work by Gladwell, a motorcycle rider is followed along the white lines of a highway as he descends into the barren Mundi Mundi plains in the Australian outback, New South Wales.

While the movement of bodies through space is a typical concern of Gladwell's video pieces, the works had previously been set in predominantly urban spaces. *Approach to Mundi Mundi* represents an extension of his practice into a consideration of landscape and place.

*“From my own personal experience, new media has taken up the subject matter and many of my favourite examples do not try to explode the landscape tradition but rather extend it with the use of moving image and digital mediums.”*

Gladwell travelled to the Mundi Mundi plains, where he experimented with various concepts to see how effectively they would read on camera. He was fascinated with ideas of balance and proportionality in the human form. His decision to use a motorcycle rider to portray this concept was influenced by the filming of [Mad Max 2](#) in the same area, some 26 years earlier.

He also set out to capture something of the Australian romantic tradition of an individual alone in the wilderness, and drew heavily from Sidney Nolan's series of works depicting the bushranger [Ned Kelly](#).

## Being open to change

The rider's high-speed descent into the Mundi Mundi plains, arms held aloft, with only two tiny touches of rubber connecting him to the road, suggested to Gladwell a feeling of flight. His conception of the work changed: the rider's extended arms became wings and the Australian tyranny of distance became more present in its formulation.

A slow, meditative quality also evolved during production, which was in part a reaction against the high-octane *Mad Max*. But it also gives *Approach to Mundi Mundi* a sense of timelessness, which evokes the sixty thousand years of Aboriginal history in that area.

The interpretation of the work was altered further upon exhibition, where it introduced a selection of Australian landscape art – not at all the context Gladwell had envisioned during filming.

## Staying true to yourself

The message you can take from this career story is not to be afraid to work with material and environments that inspire you and are easily accessible. Gladwell encourages people to stay true to their interpretation of art, without being swayed by other opinions. Although this career story focusses on art, students in all disciplines can view the story with the outlook of creative independence, initiative and acceptance of career evolution.

*“The land is a living spirit and drives a great deal of our self perception as a nation and also our projected image to the world, therefore representations of landscapes must recognise their importance in this process whether they be complicit or critical or both.”*

Within this story the importance of being aware of cultural heritage is emphasised. Gladwell practices using video and performance mediums, aiming to understand the relationships between landscape and people. Simon Forest, Elder-in-Residence at Curtin University, speaks of “being there, being immersed, letting one's self be absorbed into Aboriginal culture and be absorbed into the land,” (referenced in Bartlett, B-L., Bennett, D., Power, A., & Sunderland, N. (2015)).

This is a concept Gladwell explored in his rural pieces throughout Australian landscapes.

## Make it count!

How much do you know about the history, culture and community of the areas in which you live and work?

Find opportunities to learn about and engage with these; consider how such knowledge and experience might create new opportunities for your career. For examples, look at the student stories created by students at Curtin University in Perth or visit the [communityyarns](#)

## References

Bartleet, B-L., Bennett, D., Power, A., & Sunderland, N. (2015). Engaging first peoples in arts-based service learning: Towards respectful and mutually beneficial educational practices. New York: Springer.

Forrest, N. (2013). INTERVIEW: Shaun Gladwell on the Royal Academy's "Australia" Show. Blouinartinfo. Retrieved from: <http://au.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/963872/interview-shaun-gladwell-on-the-royal-academys-australia-show>

## Learning from biographies and career stories

### *What do you see when you meet a professional?*

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
  - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
  - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
  - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
  - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
  - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Dawn Bennett, Kate Farrell and Mili Chongwe.