

ETHER

Andrew Kidman



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# Foreword

By Mark Sutherland

In 1996 I was living in the Wollongong area, south of Sydney. Andrew had just spent a year overseas, travelling with Jon Frank, shooting surfing footage. The boys had returned with thirty-odd hours of Hi-8 tape, the raw material from which we planned to produce *Litmus*. With Jon not far away, in Cronulla, and, since Andrew didn't have a car, he decided to rent an apartment nearby, in Wollongong's northern suburbs, that we could use as a place to work.

The first place he found was little more than a cockroach hole in Thirroul, not far from Sandon Point. We sat and watched the twenty-odd tapes, marking each one for usable footage, sometimes frothing at the antics of a Hynd or Joel Fitz; at other times, yawning through endless travelogue out-takes of dandelions in the breeze or some such. Some of the tapes seemed to be full of epic sessions; others contained barely a useable shot. When we couldn't watch any more, we would go and surf wind-blown Headlands, or decamp to the Rex Hotel for a cleansing ale or ten.

Eventually, we had a rough blueprint sketched out, and realised we needed a system to keep track of which sequence was on what tape. We moved the office to a slightly less seedy apartment and bought two exercise books – one for Andrew and one for me. While Jon rolled the tape, I would note the time-code changes for the desired shot while Andrew drew a rough storyboard.

As a trained artist, I initially assumed the storyboarding would be my domain. But Andrew can be almost dyslexic when it comes to book-keeping, and he couldn't seem to concentrate on getting the numbers right. With some shots literally a split second in duration, the numbers were everything. His drawings, though basic in their execution, would help him to visualise how the sequences fit together and, hopefully, to remember which image came next. Selecting each shot and placing it its narrative context proved a laborious and exacting process. There were arguments, tensions, frustrations, as our brains frequently melted and Andrew struggled, at times, to articulate his vision.

At the end of each day, I would return home to my wife and kids, often wondering if the time and money and effort I was putting in would be worth all the hassle. Jon would drive back to his beloved 'Nulla, in his trusty Kingswood to his crazy girlfriend; he was young, too, and in love. Andrew, more or less homeless, would bunk down for the night in the office, with very little food, no furniture to speak of and no girlfriend. No bone, as he kept saying, straight to sleep.

A year spent travelling had altered his perspective on the world. He was twenty-five and, for the first time in his life, unemployed. He'd sworn off women and turned vegetarian; clinging, I began to think, to a naïve idealism fired by his, as yet, unrealised creative vision. He was adamant that *Litmus* contained a real message for surfing: that, while the surf industry and its corporate agenda had hijacked surfing's creative potential for its own cynical ends, the essential creativity of the surfing act remained infinite. Andrew had high hopes that *Litmus* would strike a blow for freedom and self-expression and, hopefully, help to rejuvenate a culture that seemed to have lost its way

After months of editing and arguing, and another six weeks cutting and pasting the sequences together, in a professional telecine suite in Chatswood, *Litmus* was finally finished. As well as the film, we had produced a CD of the soundtrack and a companion magazine and had created, we thought, a viable, intelligent alternative to the offerings of a teen-oriented mass market. When it was released, the reviews from an uncomprehending Australian surf media were savage.

The film was dismissed out of hand as an exercise in self-indulgence. Major distributors didn't want to know about it. None of us knew anything about marketing and, by that stage, we all needed a bit of a break from each other.

The band we had formed to record the original soundtrack, *The Val Dusty Experiment*, just sort of disintegrated, as each of us was forced to rejoin our separate paths: Andrew drifted back to the Northern beaches to regroup, and was crashing on his brother's couch; Jon found himself in heavy demand as a surf photographer for hire and I chalked up (another) one to experience and got on with trying to feed my family.

For Andrew, *Litmus*' hostile reception was a personal kick in the guts, a rejection of everything he stood for. Frustrated, he took the film to America and didn't return for a couple of years. For a while, we lost contact. Occasionally, I would catch a glimpse of him, via some article he'd filed from Alaska or the Outer Hebrides, or some other far-flung surfing outpost, in one of the overseas magazines.

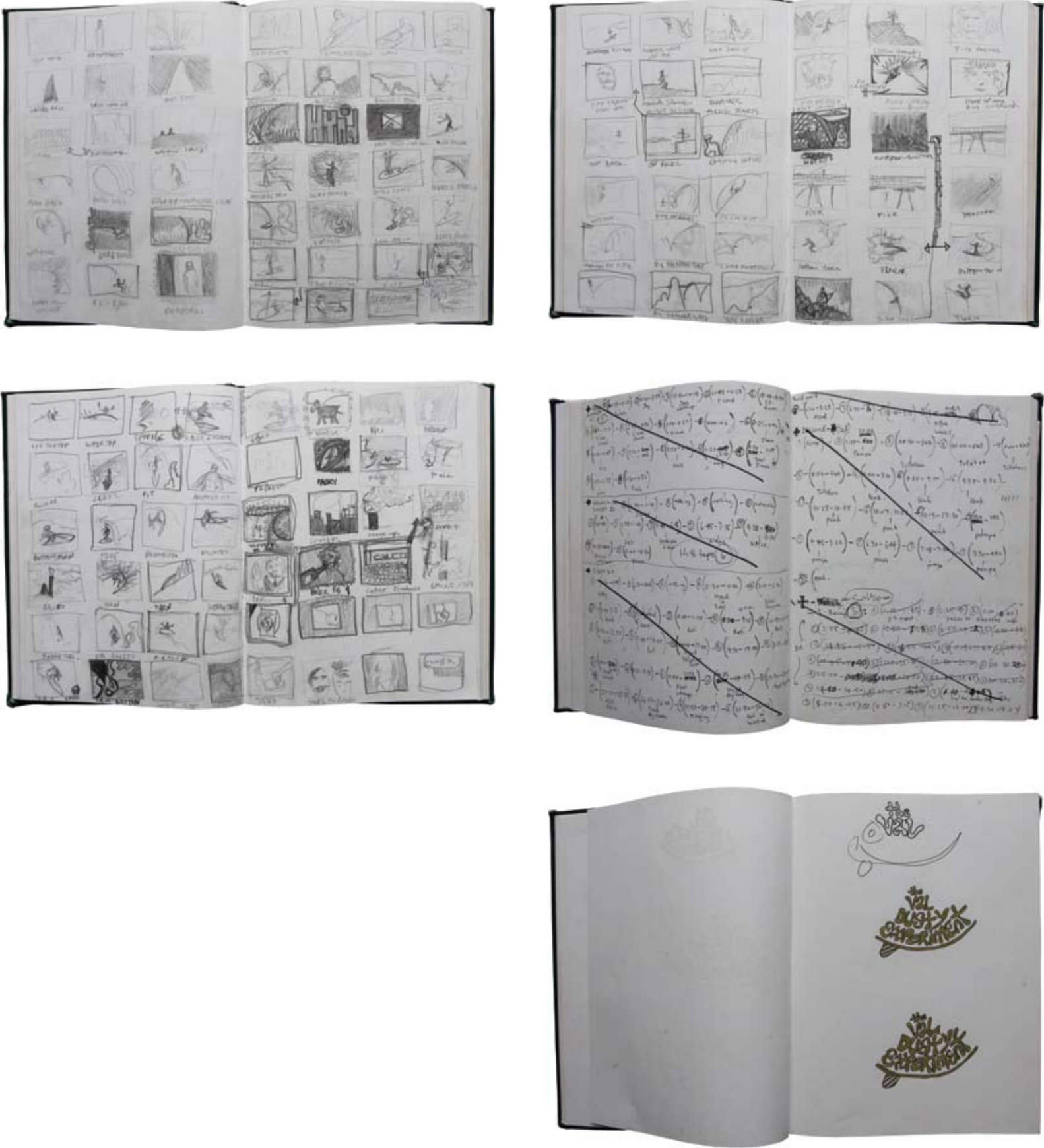
By 2002, I was living on the North Coast. In the intervening period, *Litmus* had found its audience and was gaining belated recognition as something of a watershed in nineties surf film-making. Andrew had met an American girl, Michele. They'd moved back to Australia to live and he was thinking about making another surf movie, to be titled *Glass Love*. One day, he called me and asked if I was willing to produce some animation for it. Making a film was a lot of hard work, as he already knew, and animation especially so, I said. Besides, we'd already done it and it didn't pay that well. Why on earth, I asked, did he want to go through all that again? "Because," he said, "If surfing's not about art, Sutho, it's over."

While this did not constitute much of a business plan, it neatly distilled his working philosophy in a genre that is, in itself, many things to many people. Andrew has immersed himself in the study of surfing's various creative disciplines, from shaping to photography to everything in between and, somehow, manages to encompass them all within his field of vision.

Part of this vision has involved inspiring other people to come along for the ride, to share in the creative process. Working with Andrew is invariably an invitation to go deeper into the heart of the surfing experience, and I guess, this is one of the reasons that I have so often agreed to do it. Our collaborations over the years, in publishing, music and films, have yielded many original and pleasing results. Among other things, they have helped me maintain my own enthusiasm for getting out into the water and riding a few waves. For that, I thank him.

If surfing exists, for many people, as a sort of gilded cage, a repository for yearnings of the spirit, it has in Andrew something of a golden canary. Though his is unquestionably a surfing life, the tune he sings reverberates across a much broader range of human experience. That the surfing act is indivisible from the social, cultural and creative systems that support it is the one big idea that informs all his writing, his photos, his films and his music. For Kidman, surfing isn't a lifestyle, it's just life.

Over the many years I've known him, Andrew has continued to surf, travel, take photos, make films, shape surfboards, write songs and contribute articles to surfing publications around the world. Along the way, he has earned the appreciation of many dedicated and discerning surfers, inspired by his vision of the surfing life as, essentially, a creative process. To me, what's striking about his work, collected here for the first time, is the beauty of his basic philosophy and the remarkable consistency with which he continues to express it.



Above:  
*Litmus* storyboards, time codes and *The Val Dusty Experiment* graphic 1995



*Opposite:*  
North Narabeen, New South Wales 2000  
5.15 am.



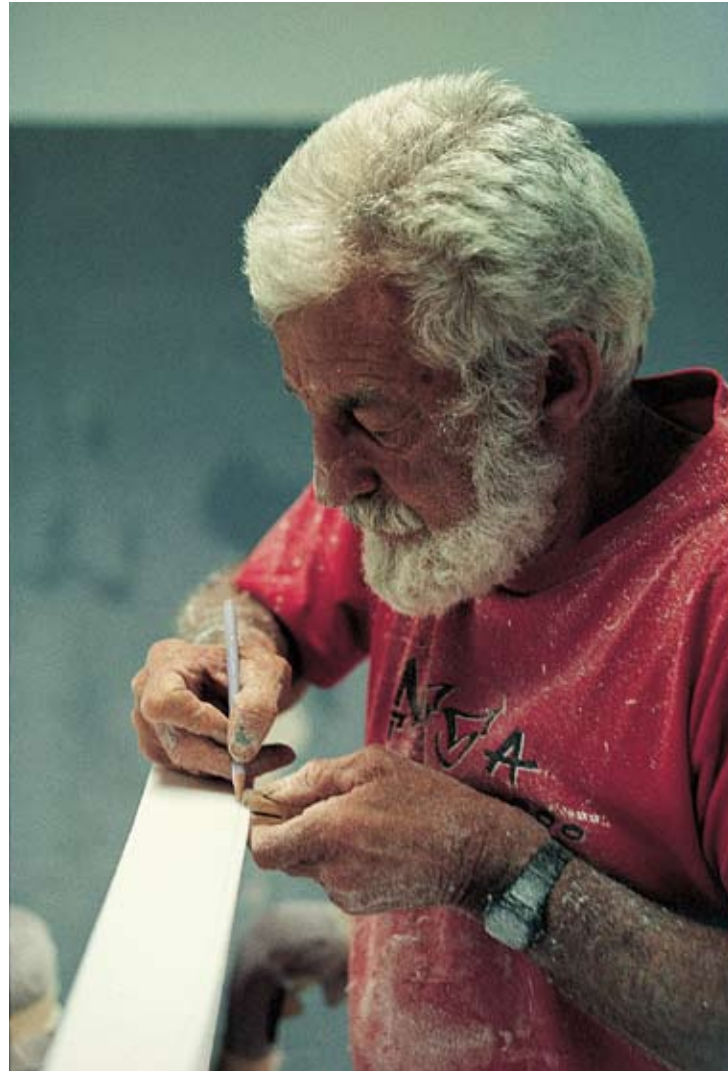


*Opposite:*  
Skip Frye, Outer Hebrides 2001

This is Skip Frye with a twelve-footer, looking back over the ocean in the Hebridean Islands. He'd just ridden a wave about three quarters of a mile, from a windblown takeoff at the back of a point, across a deep, glassy channel where the wave almost petered out. Skip glided on the energy until the wave reformed, then he rode it to the rocky shoreline.



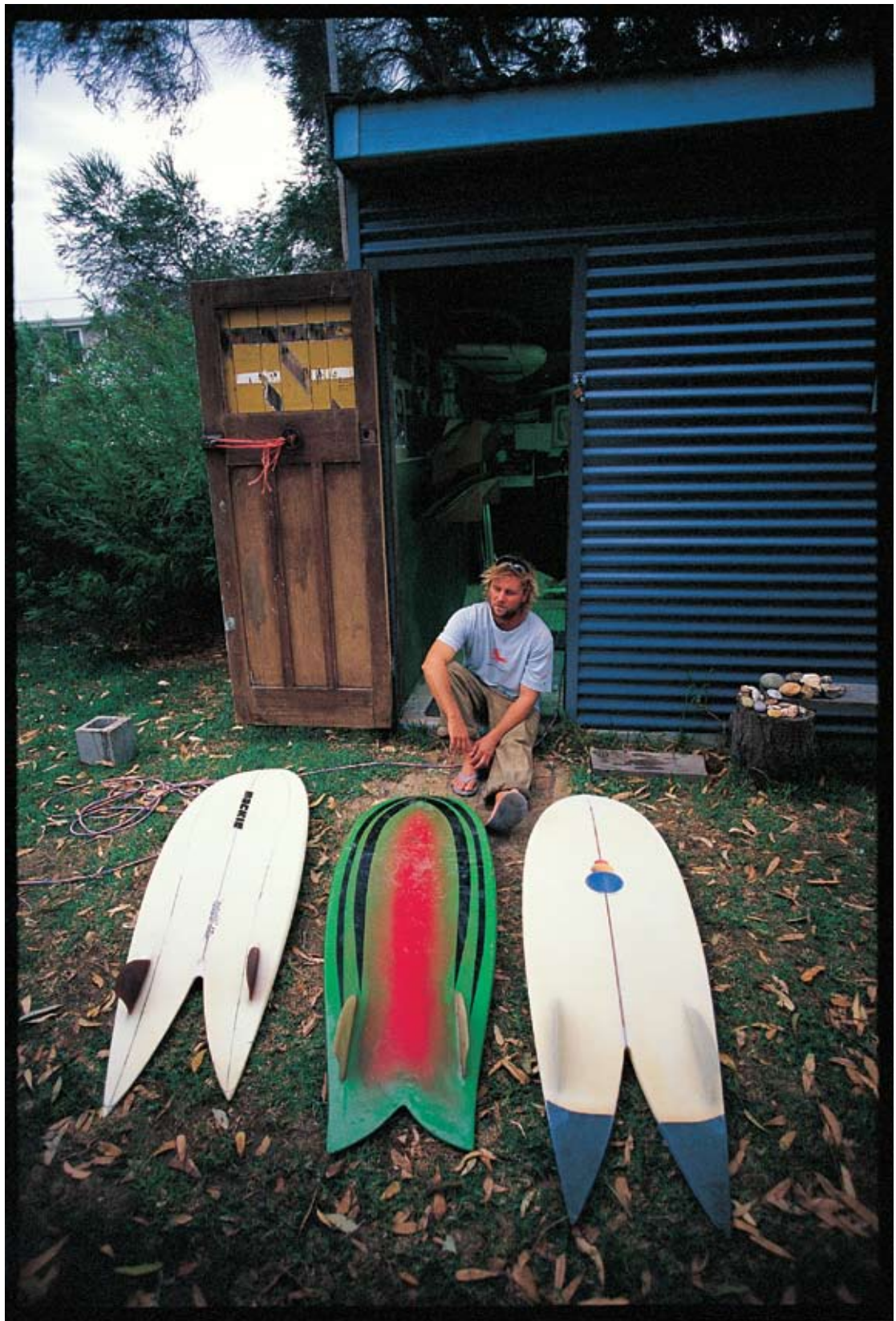




*Opposite, above:*  
Pat Curren, Oceanside, California 2002

Pat, working on Joe's shape with his own, hand-made tools. In the photograph above: Pat placed together two small, square-ended pieces of wood to precisely take off the bottom edge of the rail. He slid them horizontally apart from each other, until they were at the length he wanted to turn the rail, taped them together and then locked in the tool's square to the square edge on the bottom of the board. He then drew a perfect line from nose to tail – he did this all in a matter of minutes.





*Opposite:*  
Michael Mackie, Ulladulla, New South Wales 2005

Michael Mackie with his Demetri Milovich/ winterstick-inspired Fishes. The board on the right has a carbon flex in the pins. The middle board Garth Dickenson rode in *Glass Love*. Mick lives on the South Coast with his wife and kids. They all surf and, if they need a surfboard, Dad can shape them one in his backyard. He's a true backyard shaper, in every sense. Ultimate respect.

*Above:*  
Mick Hughes, Byron Bay, New South Wales 2005

Mick Hughes is one of the most graceful surfers you could ever watch ride. Longboard or shortboard, he makes the most radical of situations or positions look effortless. He's never cared for the commercial exploitation of his art, preferring to keep it for himself; earning his living as a greenkeeper at the local bowling club. Here, Mick holds one of Dain Thomas' shapes.













*Above:*  
Mark Sutherland, Avalon, New South Wales 1998

*Opposite:*  
Mark Sutherland, Warriewood, New South Wales 2000

I first met 'Sutho' when I was editing *Waves* magazine, back in 1989. He was doing some illustrations for *Tracks*, and dropped by the office to see if anybody was interested in seeing his film, *Dream*, that was showing in North Sydney the following night. I went along and was blown away by the animation.

We ended up doing a lot of work together. Many things about Mark are inspirational. I remember, one time, going up to the place he rented in Paddington, in the inner city of Sydney. He was painting and glassing a board he'd just shaped in the garage. He didn't have any templates for the shape, so he'd just drawn it up onto the blank until he thought it looked right. Mark thinks there is nothing he can't do with his hands, including his paintings.

*Dream* consists of five thousand drawings, two and a half thousand paintings and took him two years to complete. When I decided to make *Litmus*, one of my main aims was to give *Dream* a new life within the film. I thought it was an important piece of work, with an important message. I believe it still is today.







*Opposite, above:*  
Tommy Curren, Outer Hebrides 2001

There were rumours Tommy Curren was going to show up for Derek's event, and he did. In his first heat, he surfed against the locals and rode their homemade equipment, as shown. They were so stoked.

This is Tom, cruising around the Hebrides in the luxury of Al's motor home. It was the late afternoon and we were three hours into a homeward drive. At dawn most of us, including Tom, had been squashed into a mini van in search of the best conditions on the island. With surfboards strapped into the roof – swinging to and fro, Hynd-style – we drove for five hours around the winding roads to the bottom of the island.

After a couple of hours, Hynd pulled over at a small petrol station/grocery store for gas. The van emptied and we all went inside to buy our first food for the day.

The headlines of the day's paper were still dealing with the aftermath of September 11. One British tabloid read: "Bush Wants Bin Laden's Head On A Platter." Tom looked at the paper and said: "That's pretty retro."

As we all reluctantly piled back into the van, Tom pulled a can of sardines from his pocket and held them out at me. He was in fine form the entire event. Thankfully, for the drive home, Al offered us the spacious confines of his motor home.





Opposite:  
Garth Dickenson with Mackie Fish from *Glass Love* 1/1 2005  
Ink on watercolour paper  
11 ¾ inches x 16 ½ inches

Above:  
Black Wave from *Glass Love Japan series* 1/1 2005  
Ink on watercolour paper  
22 inches x 30 inches



## Wayne Lynch

In 1995, I interviewed Wayne Lynch for the film, *Litmus*. I sent a transcript of the interview down to Wayne, so he could correct it and make clear his thoughts and ideals. Some weeks later, he faxed the interview back to me, as follows.

### You still live a minute from your parents’ front door and, I notice, your father does a lot of things around the place for you. How important are your parents to you?

I grew up on the edge of a small town, surrounded by mountains and untouched bush on one side and the ocean and a bay on the other. It was an environment that created a close family relationship. My uncles lived next door and all the respective backyards linked up together – the whole hillside was a huge orchard and vegie garden, complete with chooks, etc.

All my family, at one time or another, were professional fisherman, and my Dad has been a builder most of his life. So, my parents and broader family are very practical people. They taught me about the Earth and nature and things. By that, I’m referring to some understanding of nature – the seasons and cycles, the plants and animals. It created, for me, a sense of awe and respect, and a love for the bush and a simple, uncluttered life.

It was a wonderful childhood, and it’s something I’m deeply grateful and respectful to them for. There was always that strong family unit, and we have continued that relationship right up to the present day. It’s very important that a person psychologically separates from their parents and makes their own way in the world. It’s critical to a person’s development and, ultimately, to a continued sense of family. The psychological separation shouldn’t necessarily create a breakdown of the family unit; it sometimes does, but it can also enrich it and create an even more open, healthy relationship.

### It’s interesting that you still live near them. I guess, in the city, not too many people do that?

These days, it’s the modern way: that you grow up to a certain age and then move away from your parents. I’ve always respected elder people and their knowledge gained by experience. I’m often asking my parents their opinion about some situation I have to make a decision about. I always eventually come to my own conclusion, but I like to listen to other ideas and opinions, and I consider them before making my own final decision.

As I said, I grew up in a country environment where people had, not only a strong sense of family, but also of community. I feel that some of the major problems we experience in the world today – the chaos and confused set of values – is possibly because we don’t have a fundamental sense of family or community, and consequently we are losing our understanding of responsibility to each other and to the Earth. It’s becoming a deeply cynical view, generally speaking. It’s sort of internalised hopelessness; we need, not only to care for ourselves, but also for other peoples’ well-being and the Earth. Without that sensitivity and compassion, the world becomes a darker, colder place.

*Outside on the property, there’s a shed. It’s kind of hidden away, like there’s something secret in there – a madman’s laboratory. Inside, there’s a shaping machine that Wayne and his father built, in 1972, to put the bottom curves into boards from rocker templates that Wayne created, or borrowed from other shapers.*

### The shaping machine is pretty revolutionary.

Yeah, well, I still haven’t seen one as good in that style. The reason I say ‘good’ is that it’s really adjustable. I can put any type of template on there – deck curve or bottom line curve – with any size or brand of blank and get what I want. Most of the other ones that were built like that were made from wood. After some time, the wood warps, so everything becomes inaccurate. Or just difficult, in some respects, to use.

### It looks incredibly simple, but perfect.

Well, it is simple, but it’s not perfect. It would take a lot of money to build something that is effectively better, but this one is adequate for my requirements.

### Surfboard building is a pretty dangerous industry?

Oh yeah, it’s crazy. People don’t realise how bad it is. Unfortunately, the surfboard industry is fairly unsophisticated; not many people take their health into consideration. It’s kinda like: “Oh well, who cares?” Often, it’s that ‘invincibility of youth’ attitude, mainly because a lot of the people working in the surfboard industry are quite young. Mostly, the older guys who haven’t left appear invincible or crazy, and the young guys don’t seem to listen or care.

It’s quite toxic. Often people working in the industry don’t realise the danger and possible consequences. Even the shaping can be unhealthy. Once all the chemicals that are mixed for the blank interact and go off, who knows what chemical compounds are then created?

### You were saying those original foam guys are dead?

Yes. All the people that invented the foam blowing process are dead: they obviously breathed the vapours as the compounds were going off. Certainly that’s extremely dangerous, and vastly different to handling or shaping the blanks once they are cured.

### What did the foam and resin fumes do to you?

The chemicals broke my immune system down. Even though I always wore a good respirator, it was getting into my system through my sinuses – via the eyes, ears and also through my skin. I virtually had the flu constantly for two years. Every time I was physically active, surfed or shaped a lot – anything physically demanding – I’d get a really strong flu. Every time, without exception. And, of course, as I was recovering I’d go back to work or go surfing and it would get worse again. The frustration was enormous, and I was always tired and had no energy. I really suspected I had some kind of cancer. Eventually, I had some tests done and it turned out to be a chemical allergy from the foam dusts and resins. In a way, I kinda knew, because every time I went back to work I felt more exhausted. This type of problem certainly wouldn’t happen to everyone, and I don’t want to frighten people or exaggerate the possible dangers, but it doesn’t hurt to bring it to people’s notice so they can take the necessary precautions.

*Wayne looks like a toxic waste scientist when he shapes. He is covered from head to toe in a suit with an air-ventilated helmet. The ventilated air is pumped into the helmet by a little backpack unit that buckles around his waist.*

### What is it exactly?

It’s a helmet with a battery-driven motor that pumps air, via a hose, into the helmet. The motor is on a belt that’s worn around the waist, with the motor and filter at the back. It’s filtered air, like a respirator but, because the helmet encloses your head and face, you can’t get dust in your eyes, sinuses or skin. I also have to wear what is known as an asbestos removal suit, to keep the dust completely off my skin. The respirator is something everyone could, and probably should, use.

### They need them, huh?

As I said, earlier, it’s quite a toxic industry and people working in it really need to look after themselves and wear the correct clothing and respirators. I want to make it clear that it’s not the materials manufacturers’ fault – I’m not blaming them or anyone else – it’s the way things are. It’s the nature of the materials and the compounds that are presently available and, really, until we can find safer products, it’s up to those people working in the industry to be conscientious about their health.

### Is there anything you think surfers can do to help the environment?

Give up, ha!

### Give up?

Yeah! Stop surfing, ha! Seriously, it’s hard to answer this. There are so many surfers these days and most of them, naturally, demand the modern product. Which is: lightweight, sensitive and reasonably destructible, so consequently the volume of turnover of boards becomes greater. Certainly, producing boards that are a lot stronger and, consequently, a lot more expensive is an obvious solution. As it is, people don’t like to pay the prices asked now, so it’s hard to say or predict what the response would be to, say, a \$1000 + surfboard. That seems the sensible solution, or part solution. It’s a very complex and difficult situation,

because shapers and manufacturers have to produce a certain amount of volume, just to make a living. No shaper I know ever got rich from shaping. Like Al Merrick, or Rusty, did OK, but they had a large turnover and manufacturing base, with many shapers working for them – quite a considerable infrastructure.

But, for a shaper like myself (who are by far the majority), it’s a struggle and what’s termed a hand-to-mouth situation, especially with a family to support. I suppose it’s a bit disappointing, considering it’s such hard work. It really does take considerable physical and mental effort, not to mention years and years of experience. All this is a little ironic, as surfboards are the true core product – it’s the surfboard that ultimately defines surfing as surfing. It seems that the broader surf industry has little understanding of the difficulties and how little money there really is.

Certainly, the general surfing public have very little understanding of the situation. The ultimate solution is completely different materials, incorporating organic based resins and blanks, which is quite possible and technically available. This would require considerable research and testing, but it’s certainly attainable.

### Shouldn’t the industry get behind that?

Certainly. One day, I really hope it becomes a reality. The problem is that all the people that I know in the industry are overwhelmed with their workload already, and to take on a project of these dimensions seems out of the question. Also, I suppose, unless you have been affected and suffered the problems and allergies and so forth, there’s not going to be much motivation to search for new materials.

### If you took the time to go out and find organic foam you would go broke.

Well, yes – you could go broke, I suppose. But it’s more just a matter of time and intent. By intent, I mean a deep sense of wanting to improve the negative problems of pollution and possible danger to people.

### Or if the surf companies just backed someone to do that.

I doubt if that would happen. It’s certainly potentially possible. I suspect that all the different surf companies see themselves as completely separate entities and, therefore, I’m not so sure that they would pool some resources into a project like this. It would be a unique and very positive development. It would also be an affirmation of what I talked about earlier: a sense of community and responsibility to that community. It would certainly show the world that surfing and the industry had a maturity and purpose, beyond or apart from profits. A whole new set of values and deepening sense of relationship could grow from such an exercise.

### In general, is the surfing industry too greedy?

You’re asking me a very broad and generalised question, one that’s extremely difficult, if not impossible, to answer either accurately or objectively. What you’re really asking has to do with the nature of people motives: their intent, ambitions and so forth.

Basically, the question is about the whole spectrum of human endeavour and whether or not it’s misguided, or to what degree it is so.

Certainly, there are negatives in the surf industry. But, just like all business and personal interactions, there are negative and positive aspects. Consequently, the surf industry can’ be seen as separate, or in any way unique and different, from all the other aspects of business and so called normal life in the material world. Undoubtedly, negatives always have to be acknowledged, understood and worked with in an honest and open way, before any significant and lasting development can eventuate. This is true, both from a personal and at a business level. In many ways, the surf industry is quite conservative but, again, it’s a reflection of our so-called modern society.

We live in an increasingly mechanistic, reductionist world these days, one where impersonalisation is rife. At least, in the surf industry, we have retained, most of the time, that personal human interaction that has always been the core of the surfing industry. Also, I should mention that there have been some particularly profound changes over recent years, changes that I see as very positive.

It’s really heartening, for me, to see that surfers are now being paid reasonable money for their commitment and value to companies. That, alone, has been a major shift in attitude. It’s

something that never used to happen years ago, and it wasn’t entirely because there was less money in the industry back then, but also because of an inappropriate attitude towards surfers. I always found it ironic because it’s the surfers that drive, and have always driven, the whole industry.

Back then, it would cost more to travel and compete in a contest than what you could possibly win from an individual competition, or even earn on the entire pro circuit. Also, if and when surfers were travelling to do promotions work for a particular company, there wasn’t much more than the travel and expenses given. It resulted, in the long term, in being far more beneficial to the company than the surfer. We were used, in varying degrees, then often discarded, the moment it seemed you were of no further benefit or worth.

No matter to what degree a surfer helped the companies, there was very little long-term support or responsibility shown. Sometimes, this was incredibly degrading behaviour, and that attitude really hurt people, including myself. At one time, I became deeply disillusioned and lost all trust in people outside my immediate family and closest friends. For a while, I was resentful and bitter towards the whole surfing industry.

That’s not a particularly pleasant experience, and I can’t express how deeply that affected me and how hard I struggled to resolve it inside myself. Eventually, I came to see those experiences in a different light and, as I say, much has changed, both for me and other surfers since then. It seems to me that, now, most of the companies are more than happy to see their sponsored surfers earn realistic amounts of money. Which is, of course, an acknowledgement of the surfers’ contribution and worth, both to the respective company and to surfing. This allows the surfers to be set up with at least some land, a house and a car after their time is surfing has passed.

I’m talking very much on a material level here, but it’s practical reality these days to have such possessions, especially if one has a family to support and care for. There are many people, apart from surfers, who have, and can, make significant contributions to surfing and the industry.

Hopefully, the attitudes I’m commending here do, and will, apply to those people also. It may sound idealistic or altruistic, but this degree of responsibility will ultimately bear greater fruit, economically and spiritually, in the long term. Until these attitudes manifest between people, there’s no real hope for any genuine relationship and respect to develop towards the environment.

### I just see a lot of the big companies putting money back into contests, and huge contests at that. It’s almost like some of the money could be spent researching more environmentally-friendly products. It all just seems so disposable.

Again, it’s really difficult to answer this question objectively, and perhaps to some degree you’re right, but really the contests aren’t that big at all. The amount of prize money, for instance, is far less than some other sports of comparable size and public interest. If you start reducing the amount of money in these events, you would end up with the scenario I described earlier, in response to another question.

I’m referring now to what it was like, years ago, to compete – even if you did well it cost more than you earned. That would certainly be the end of the pro circuit. It seems to me that the contests are needed at present, and in the foreseeable future, to create a point of reference or… A better way to describe it might be as a tangible focal point in surfing and that, without these pro events, it’s possible that the whole energy, momentum and interest from the public and the surfers’ perspective could just dissipate.

Now, personally, that scenario wouldn’t bother either myself, or a certain percentage of surfers, at all, but I’m not that selfish to want to see either the pro surfers or the young kids, the juniors, not have a chance to become champions or world champion and earning a living in the process. When I was young, I really liked and enjoyed competing but, by the time I was eighteen years old, I was sick of it. That’s just my nature, but I’m not about to negate the efforts a lot of people have put into professional surfing. The surfers on the pro tour genuinely deserve to earn a living from surfing, if they so choose. They work hard at their surfing and they’re very committed. These guys contribute enormously to surfboard design and other products, which eventually benefits every other surfer.

Now, referring back to your question: I think that environmentally-friendly products can be developed and financed, without taking money away from pro contests. It’s extremely difficult