

SATURDAY EXTRA

Artist George Gittoes at his beloved Werri Beach and, below, one of his paintings.



# ART'S PIED PIPER OF CONFLICT

SYDNEY PEACE PRIZE WINNER GEORGE GITTOES USES PAINT AND FILM TO EXPOSE LIFE IN THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS PLACES, WRITES ELIZABETH FORTESCUE

**A**rtist George Gittoes raised the roof at the Sydney Town Hall this week when Lord Mayor Clover Moore presented him with the prestigious Sydney Peace Prize before an audience of hundreds.

The Sydney Peace Prize function was a fully fledged Gittoes extravaganza complete with giant, dancing angels of peace and war, and a muezzin-like Pashto song delivered by his partner and collaborator Hellen Rose on behalf of the Afghani women of the Yellow House in Jalalabad.

If your head is now swimming, welcome to the world of George Gittoes who has not paused for breath since his birth in Rockdale 66 years ago.



If you're in Gittoes' life, says his artist sister Pamela Griffith, hold on tight.

There is no other artist quite like Gittoes. Compassionate and non-judgmental, with a perfect belief in promoting peace through art, Gittoes enters war zones with little more than a cinecamera and a battered visual art diary.

Embedding himself in the local scene, he becomes a magnet for people carrying stories that would be unbelievable if they weren't factual accounts of the suffering and survival that is everyday reality in conflict zones from Somalia to Cambodia, the West Bank and Pakistan.

Gittoes witnessed the Kibeho massacre of innocents in Rwanda in 1995, when he drew a fatally injured girl as her life "flickered on and off like a neon light", as he told the Sydney Peace Prize audience.

Just before she died, the girl told Gittoes to keep drawing her face, horrifically hacked with a machete.

"I want the world to see this," she told Gittoes.

In 2011, Gittoes set up the Yellow House in Jalalabad, Afghanistan's second biggest city, where a riotous community of kids, adults,

dogs and monkeys now revolves around the artist and Hellen Rose, the Sydney performance artist who shares the wild ride with Gittoes.

Jalalabad is truly a home for Gittoes and Rose, who feel responsible for the Yellow House and its troupe of actors, artists and filmmakers. For all these people, Gittoes is a colourful Pied Piper. In fact, he is known at the Yellow House as "Baba".

This week, as well as receiving the Sydney Peace Prize, Gittoes was the star of the Sydney premiere of his latest film, *Snow Monkey*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

*Snow Monkey* traces the lives of a dozen Jalalabad street kids — some as young as five years old — as they survive in one of the world's most dangerous cities by dint of chutzpah, a winning brand of cheeky cunning, occasional violence and enormous bravery.

There are the three ice cream boys — known locally as "snow monkeys" because they roam all over Jalalabad with their trolleys full of ice — who Gittoes recruits to make and star in their own film.

One of the boys, Zabi, who is perhaps 13 years old, was kidnapped by Islamic State but miraculously escaped and returned to the Yellow House. Gittoes says IS uses children to carry weaponry, making them targets instead of the adult fighters.

Zabi, a natural cinematographer, showed extraordinary courage to keep his camera rolling in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of the Kabul Bank in Jalalabad in April. The attack killed dozens of people, and the carnage — as filmed by Zabi — is the grisliest episode in *Snow Monkey*.

Another of the street kids is the pint-sized but terrifying Steel, whose gang is widely feared although he only looks about 12 years old.

Steel's beautiful little girlfriend Shahzia, about the same age, hopes to reform him. They walk together by the river, and dream of the future as they peer at rich houses they cannot enter.

Never stopping, Gittoes is now talking about creating another Yellow House to nurture creativity in desperate NSW indigenous communities.

With all this going on, even Gittoes needs an oasis. And now he has got one. It's a

"peace prize" of a completely different sort — a beach house two hours' drive south of Sydney in a place called Werri Beach. For him, Werri Beach is paradise. He surfed here with his mates in the 1960s and early '70s. When his children Harley and Naomi were kids, they would launch their seaside adventures from a cabin in the Werri caravan park.

"All the happiest days of my life have been here," Gittoes says. Memories of halcyon days at Werri have always helped sustain Gittoes after he saw that his destiny lay in earth's most desperate places. He is thrilled that a little piece of Werri is now his, and it will always be waiting for him no matter where he goes.

Hellen Rose adores the kitchen in the Werri house, being more used to the primitive conditions of Jalalabad. When Saturday Extra visits, Gittoes has one of Rose's cakes in the oven, serving it with slabs of butter.

"Are you using the good china?" Rose asks, ringing Gittoes from Sydney where she is

rehearsing her Sydney Peace Prize performance.

Needless to say, the good china is still in the cupboard. Gittoes is happiest with simplicity. Every morning when he's at Werri, Gittoes crosses the road to the beach and watches the sun rise with a cup of tea in his hand.

But thoughts of his friends in Jalalabad, Cambodia and other volatile places around the world are always in his mind, even during the peace of a rising sun at Werri Beach.

**“Just before she died, the girl told Gittoes to keep drawing her face.”**



**Snow Monkey star Zabi, and, left, a sculpture at Gittoes' beach house.**

