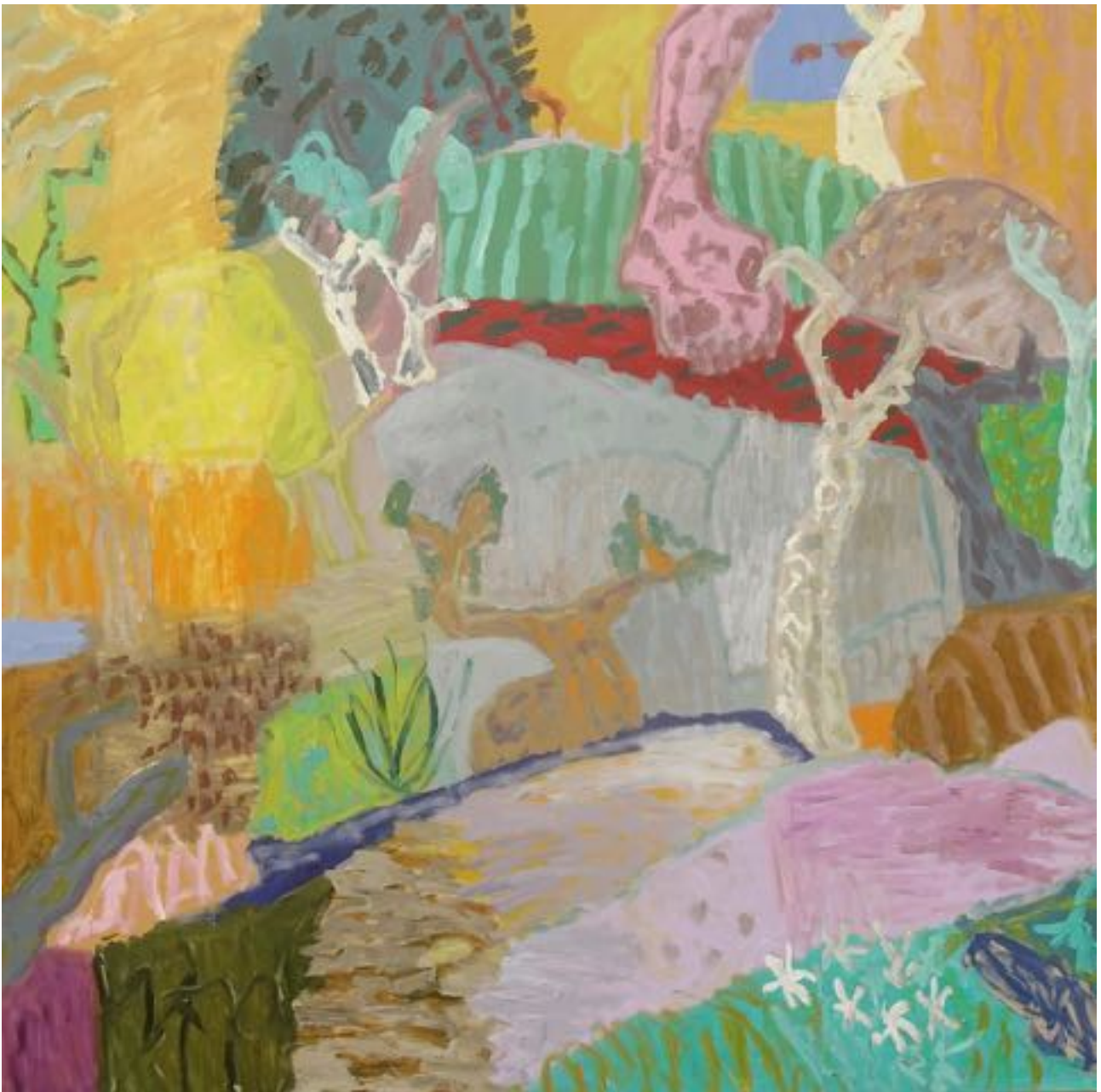


Ruminating on the paintings of Sally Stokes

The paintings of Sally Stokes are primarily about two powerful elements: life-force and connection. These elements give her work an emotive energy that I find lacking in today's image-flooded world. When I look at a painting, I ask myself: does it engage me intellectually and does it make my heart sing? Many paintings are technically competent but they lack that visceral thrill that takes you to another place. There are a handful of painters in Australia that offer me a transformative experience and Sally Stokes is one of them.



“Revelations abundant” 170x170cm is a striking example of her ability to conjure a pulsating silence which in turn creates a life-force. The dancing central tree-form provides an entry point and an anchor point for a lively exchange with nature. While colour is a dominant force in her armoury, there are enough subtle colours and tonal shifts to allow colours like yellow to resonate and pulsate. She invites your eye to move around the painting, pulled from the white trunks to the white flannel flowers. For mine, the biggest surprise in this painting is the violet in the bottom left hand corner. It vibrates against the green and pink and grey like an ember that refuses to fade. Utterly sincere, utterly joyful and transformative!



“After looking” 122x122cm is like a warm embrace after the relative coolness of “Revelations abundant”. Just reflecting on these two paintings makes you acutely aware

of how much Sally Stokes has a sense of place. The first painting is based on Hawkesbury sandstone country in Sydney, where she has painted for the past few decades. There is a great sense of intimacy, and the life-force of nature. The second painting is based on the deserts of Central Australia, where she has set up camp for months at a time over the past ten years or so. Her colour palette is much warmer in the desert painting: red, orange, terracotta and yellow vibrate and shimmer in a timeless elegance. What both paintings have in common are the trademarks of her practice: a whimsy and a quirkiness, a joy in colour and a sense of connection to place.



“Among the cheeky hills” 153x153cm is another very strong painting. It works for me because it combines the curves and shuntings of the geological forms with a poetry of deep time. Not to mention some aesthetic mysteries. How does she get those orange and

green candy bar stripes in the top right corner to sit within the serious context of the painting? How does she paint a tree in the bottom left to look like a quirky ghost gum one minute and a ballet dancer with a green scarf pirouetting, the next? Is that a pink creek bed or pink grasslands in the foreground. It doesn't matter because the pink foreground provides a glimmering base for the striated rocks and dotted trees to rise up from. The end result is mesmerising. Just like the desert itself.



“Exactly” 152x152cm takes us from the desert to the High Country near Thredbo. Here, we see Sally Stokes’ fascination with death (the dead trees) and the life-force conveyed by the ravens flying across the landscape and the constant motion of the river. What makes this painting for me are the dark foreboding hills; the sense that amid the blue joy

of the river and the sunlit hills that death is never too far away. This tension between life and death is what makes this painting so engaging.



“The temple of thought” 150x150cm is inspired by Sally Stokes’ many canoe trips among the mangroves at Marramarra on the Hawkesbury River. For me, her mangrove paintings are her most mysterious; this is her private world, her world of cathedral light and hypnotic reflections. A white tree-figure straddles the creek-bed; young mangroves in muted dark tones perform a corroboree in the foreground; the centre is loaded with shimmering yellows and pinks; another mangrove with blue and grey stripes leans across the straddling form. So much to engage the eye; so much diversity and so much life-force.



“Dreaming silence” 153x185cm Now we return to the desert to a place called “The Sphinx” not far from Ross River Resort. There is something monumental about this painting. You really need to see it in the flesh to appreciate the grandeur and the beauty of the paint. It’s a uniquely Sally Stokes’ painting: joy of colour, bold composition, quirky and yet for me it contains so many echoes of art history; the colour harmony of Bonnard; the lone cypress tree on top of the sphinx that becomes a Tapies cross; the slightly menacing sky that reminds me of Munch. Others will see different things; the point is that Stokes’ painting feeds the imagination and enriches the soul. These paintings linger in the imagination for months if not years or a lifetime.



“I continue to arrive” 150x150cm is based on the Hawkesbury River, where Stokes has a boatshed studio on Marramarra Creek. You can see and feel her love of Marramarra; hours and hours of sitting and sketching, culminating in this celebration of river-life when she returns to paint in her principle studio in Dural. The softer, more tonal palette draws you in and holds your gaze, while the magic of the pink and blue and orange mangroves tantalise the senses. Like many of Sally Stokes’ paintings this is a feast; a carnival of colour and shapes that uplifts the spirit. Long may she paint!

Dr Tony Scotland

January, 2024