

SALLY STOKES

ETERNAL RETURN

In Australian painting two forces have dominated the landscape for a very long time: the low blunt horizon and an emblematic ribbon of red earth and blue sky. The searchlight of the sun generated a bleached and tonal palette that radiated out of painting into our film, photography and even fiction and poetry. The concept of our desert interior has always been vast. And the use of epic scale summoned vistas and the aerial topography of rivers and mountain ranges have seeded a perception of a land that grows even more remote with distance. In this context the colourists and the 'intimists' of landscape painting stand apart.

Drawing closer to more intricate terrain, compressing large scale scenery into an immersive and frontal composition, the work of Sally Stokes occupies its own realm. Hers is not typical or 'local colour' but a hybrid spectrum of pale mangroves, electric mountains and verdant wildflowers. The energy of each canvas dwells in their unpredictable geometry. Some compositions weave, others undulate, but many cleave into their own core, drawing the eye into a magnetic centre that is often punctuated by an artfully asymmetrical tree trunk or stubby branch. Stokes' vision of country is not arid or obviously archaic. Her early love of Bonnard and Matisse inspired something more unexpected; a mesh of intense chromatic shifts that are ripe and humid, fertile rather than parched. In many ways her paintings re-invent their spirit of place through colour and they achieve this through a relationship with nature that is heartfelt:

"A lot of my paintings are concerned with the intimate—what talks to me with suggestions—the trees, the reflection, the continual changes—to bring a life force into the painting. When you are immersed in the intimate landscape, you rarely see a horizon. Horizontal suggestions can help the image to appear to move, pushing and pulling, back and forth within the frame—giving a sense of life."

Steeped in a traditional art school education, Stokes matured by taking the long road, starting with still lifes and interiors, her focus came to settle on landscape. She describes her work as being built over three stages and the primary stage is simply being in (and of) nature, giving over all her senses to the fleeting details and distinct terrains of Australia. Setting up house in the bush valley atelier originally built in the 70s by the artists Valerie and John Olsen, inspiration is close to hand. Most of the time she is here, walking the steep hill to a studio beneath the trees and sometimes she paints in a boat shed on the Hawkesbury River. Her creative process is both mobile and very still. Roving for months over terrain as diverse as the MacDonnell Ranges, Purnululu, Kakadu and the river inlets of rural NSW, she has filled literally hundreds of black sketchbooks with febrile lines and gouaches. The drawing process is perhaps a little-known underpinning to work that looks so spontaneous. For beneath the adventurous gusto of her brushwork is the architecture of years of charcoal and graphite studies:

"When I draw plein-air, at first I react, get the charcoal moving across the paper, enjoying the sound, until a connection between me and place emerges. I repeat the process many times (maybe 10 drawings in a day) but the results are always different. And then when I get to the studio, a deeper relationship between me, the motifs and the paintings emerge. The

drawings hint at directions of how the relationship may develop. Sometimes a diagonal may emerge, other times they may be layered out of the painting. It's a transformative space beyond words."

Stokes views her drawing as 'the second stage'. The third stage is intensely physical, unpredictable and absorbing process of painting. When she returns to her studio it is a solitary practice. In the Dural studio the works are often created in tandem and two large square canvases are faced by a dense palette and a chair. It's not a large or fanciful space, a shard of light from a strip of high windows affords little view. But inside the austerity is an atmosphere of deep concentration. To resolve a knot of colour within a burgeoning composition, Stokes uses both velocity and thoughtful revisions. Her output is prolific but her method is steeped in the accretion of deep (plein air) notation. And what might appear to be leaps in colour and form have in fact been germinating over a span of decades of painting. Her strongest works have the power to sustain their energy across the entire picture plane. The impact of simultaneous colour creates canvases that pulse. When she talks about colour it becomes clear that a wide and wild palette is her driving force:

"Colour is so many things, but essentially in painting for me it is in relationship—harmonious, clashing, nurturing, calming, vibrating, moving the eye and attention around, and surprising one's perceptions. The viewer needs time to be immersed, and the colour moves the eye around the canvas, and quickens the heart. Colour reaches towards the unknown, and the unexpected in its relationship. The colour among other things is the painting, so it carries the tensions. I continually play with colour; it gives a vibrant life to the painting— as does the line, the way paint is applied, the layers that bring a surprise and a risk of the unexpected— ie Life!"

Dense and layered as her paintings are, at their kernel there is peace. To understand the conditions of silence and wonder that lead to this meditative quality, it is helpful to see the natural world as she does: a place of perpetual bounty. Another way in is to read her favourite poet, Mary Oliver. Oliver's poems have a deceptive modesty. Their grace dwells in a rapture that is engaged in the tiny moments that make up ordinary days. Oliver was known to compose her poems during long walks in the woods and waters near her home. It would be fair to describe Sally Stokes as a kindred contemplative spirit, a nature poet happy to continually re-interpret a subject that is ever in subtle flux. "As I sit and draw' she admits "Life happens."

The organic and interlocking forms within her work echo her pattern of return to familiar yet resonant places. An urban painter might look at an outcrop of trees or a small hillside and find an eternal sameness, but for Stokes the process of continual homage yields wonder. Her paintings shift palette and compositional focus according to their locales. From the desert she admits that her colour grows more intense but in the river country, the space in her works open and her tones cool. The tranquil violets and rich shades of cobalt and ultramarine assume a smoky quality that evokes aqueous depth. Gathered together in this show, the river works also reveal a different side to this painter's gesture, possessing their own markings and symbolic forms:

"The river calls me, with its changing lights, its unpredictable streams of colour across its surface, the weather reflected in its long history in the trees and rocks and the changes they reflect. The mud flats, where the tides show their continuity and the underworld...The

patterns in the water, in the varied shaped hills that line this river, the sky in the trees and rocks within the hills. The textures of angophora, banksia, and rocks and grasses, and the ever-moving clouds all move me inside the experience and then beyond.”

The physical differences between wetlands and desert interiors are obvious, but they also reveal distinct opportunities for a painter to push into different technical directions. The buoyant charm of her work is the fruit of whimsical vertigo and a knowing implosion of scale. Consciously anti-monumental, these are paintings that fly in the face of ‘the big scenery’ of Australian epic landscapes. Instead of iconic locales, Stokes is drawn to ebbing tidelines and the scruffy beauty of in-between spaces. Despite their vivid palette these paintings shatter cliché through understatement. In her hands the mole hill becomes the mountain.

It's also true that these are paintings that dazzle and distract. It takes some deeper observation and time to excavate the subtle themes that dwell beneath quite so much brightness. By a stroke of irony Stokes' loudest paintings come from very quiet places. But the super vivid works are the ones she is best known for. Their giddy optimism is expressed through landforms and vegetation that seem fit to burst the seams of the canvas square, and roll on for miles beyond the perimeter of the frame. In some paintings the natural world appears to draw itself, trees and branches assume the rudimentary short hand of a child's drawing and forms flatten or bulge according to their hue. Like many colourists, Stokes is absorbed in her subject but not obedient to its depiction. The spectrum, in her hands, is not a handmaiden to description but rather a language unto itself.

“Colour is a big part of the mystery for me; apparently everyone perceives it differently— it can't be measured by how you see it— so it becomes a very personal connection. The intensity of perception, the personal quality and its effects. To me colour is such an essential part of the relationships within the painting- I think the eye needs the full spectrum.”

Here is an Australian painter who does not shy from subverting her source materials as she burrows deeper within them. She describes the landscape almost as a physical entreaty, a siren force ‘that draws her on’. One could depict the arc of her creative development like a long panning camera shot that slowly moves closer and closer to its subject, unspooling as the details come into sharper focus. Capable of sophisticated construction, she has chosen a deliberate simplicity of forms. In earlier works from the late 90s and early 2000s, the minimal geometry of Milton Avery seascapes and the sensual density of Gauguin's violet skies left their mark. But all mature artists outgrow their influences, and as Stokes gained prolific momentum her work became bolder, busier and more chromatically ambitious. Over time her palette has diverged further and further away from complimentary shades or values and into a more syncopated use of sharp, almost bouncing, contrasts. Her joy has become her signature.

To stand in a room full of Sally Stokes' paintings is to see the natural world as she does: abundant, restless and endlessly diverse. Threading each image together is a patchwork of warm colour and something else; a tenacity of purpose. These works reflect a solitary soul with a thirsty eye, perhaps never quite quenched when the canvas is full.

Anna Johnson