

In *The Black Honey of Summer, 2020*, painted in and of the Flinders Ranges, Sally Stokes occludes the horizon, pulling into view instead varied fields of colour; fields of earth. Trees with forked limbs stand white and eloquent down the length of the picture, not receding into the 'distance' so much as appearing, rhizomatically, across a flattened picture field. This flat field, with its crushing out of single-point perspective, works ironically to create more expansive space within the frame, into which come rushing continual folds of coloured hills. There is a pervasive feeling of simultaneity in this work, as across much of Stokes's oeuvre: everything, here, seems to be happening at once. The eye travels across the painting to find spurs concurrently rising up and collapsing down into it.

The hum of colour moves over the horizon in this work; we are so absorbed in earth, here, that the sky's presence is felt, but not pictured directly. There is, however, a more open-handed picturing of the sky in Peter Gizzi's poem *Speck*, which is called to mind, for me, in front of Stokes's work:

Single the sky, pulled taut above earth
single the sky, above water. Bound
to bark and leaves. You are solo.

Blended into paint and forced into colour
the song of a man in his bed at dusk
the sparrows lighting outside his window.

What Gizzi's sky and Stokes's skylessness have in common is their singleness — their being 'solo.' Stokes's dense gathering of geologic and organic forms, and Gizzi's poetic binding of bark to leaves, share an interest in what is like, sensorily, to have all the parts of the world before you clamber together as a unity, beneath your brush or your pen. We might set out into Stokes's hills and rivers with these ideas of the single and the solo in mind, asking how she, in Gizzi's words, 'pulls taut' her painterly worlds which are at once *around* and *of* her, as an artist.

In the flatness of Stokes's fields, we might see the influence of Giotto, whose frescoes the artist spent time with on a residency in Assisi in 2011. Though none of the work painted on this residency was used, directly, in Stokes's newest suites of landscapes, Giotto's twin senses of broad, all-encompassing space and deeply moving colour clearly resonate with the work Stokes has long been creating. On sharing space with Giotto's Assisi frescoes, Stokes says that 'they seem to caress you even while they stay on the walls. They speak of another way of being — a oneness within all — so encompassing, an experience of solitude and connection simultaneously. It's the same feeling I hope to paint, after sitting outside [here] in Australia.'

Stokes's paintings are continually interested in mapping out this 'other way of being' that she observed in Giotto. But what is this other way, exactly? Thinking about singleness — or 'oneness,' and 'connection' as she also formulates it — is a good place to start, sure. But then there is this other term: solitude. This notion pops up again and again in Stokes's thinking, just as those silently verbose trees do in her landscapes, but it is also figured in the work itself. Look, for example, at the single avian figure in *Bird on a wing, 2021*, crossing the river and almost completely fading into it, tonally. Look also for the two boats adrift in the expanse of water in *Remember, 2021*, or the flashes of solitary white in *Beginning to breathe slowly, 2019*, and the almost-human slither of pink in *Did you see it?, 2019*.

To my eye, these flashes of deep aloneness within the landscape — whether that aloneness is a plant, animal, or human sensation — work much like the flatness of Stokes's fields. They create a space within the work for something else to rush in. This is a solitude which allows for connection. Again, we might think of Giotto, and TJ Clark's now-famous analysis of his Padua frescoes, which argues that the paintings offer us new ways of envisioning our selves and our world: ways of seeing which do not need to be crowded out by words, and which would indeed be undermined by verbal explanation, or by too much commentary crowding out the room.

Stokes has also been doing this work of wordless envisioning, for many decades now. Travelling around the country to paint her experiences of its landscapes, she has found in the Tweed Valley,

Flinders Ranges, and on the Finke and Hawkesbury Rivers, a sort of 'silence that connects.' In these moments of silence, she says, 'birds fly over, moments oscillate, light vibrates and changes continually. The life force is present...by being in the landscape a deeper essential force can sometimes emerge.' For Stokes, then, it is in moments of aloneness, and silence, that the greatest transcendental intersubjectivity and intertwining are experienced.

All of this thinking resists binaries – which is perhaps the closest that verbal explanation can get us to the 'other way of being' that Stokes experiences, and brings about, in her art. Elsewhere, she calls this other way the 'third place' – that spot 'between me and the landscape, between me and the painting and eventually between the painting and the viewer.' In anthropology, the third place is the church, the park, the library: that space of social and communal activity that sits between the two loci of domestic and productive life, the home and the workplace. For Stokes, the Australian landscape is at once both of these things, and something quite other. It is a place where, in moments of solitude, forms and expressive colours come together to sing in some silent, extra-linguistic harmony.

It might be of interest, as a closing thought, to hold in your mind the image of Stokes pushing out onto the Hawkesbury in her canoe to work drawings and gouaches, which inform her larger paintings. Remember that Gizzi's sky is pulled tight above the water, too, as well as the earth. The water beneath the boat moves Stokes – both her heart and her hand – and participates in the art making process. In these moments, Stokes feels herself to be within 'a cathedral with its entry of silence...canoeing up the river, herons and kingfishers join us.' Everything, and everyone, is there along the flat, endless space of Stokes's world and her work, together and alone, singing in colour.