

When our eyes adjust by Hayley Megan French

A place of trees

I was invited to work with Julia Roche through Wagga Wagga Art Gallery's Regional Artist Development program in 2023. This program has provided the unique experience of working one-on-one with an artist over a 6-month period, in the development of new work and the curation of a solo exhibition. I have had the privilege of spending time with Julia on the land she paints, Wiradjuri Country, on the family farm *Wooroola*. I have seen her challenge herself to develop new ways of working, and new ways of seeing. After many years considering the idea of landscape and place in Australia, through my own research, curation and practice as a painter, I was drawn to Julia's depiction of her immediate surroundings - not as description, but as reciprocal relationship. Julia's work is guided by nature and by feeling, encompassing the complex relationships between landscape and identity. The work is not *about* this place, but *of* it. Julia thinks of it as a form of bearing witness.

I live and work on Dharug Land, in the suburbs of Western Sydney. It is a very different kind of landscape to *Wooroola* - I could describe it, endearingly, as a place of roofs. There are significant differences in how we live, how we move about and how we identify in these distinct places, and much is made of the metropolitan and regional divide in the Australian imagination. Despite these differences, Julia and I are asking similar questions of our belonging on the land beneath our feet, we are grasping for ways to educate ourselves of our shared histories, and we are looking for ways of *being here*. I see this reflected in Julia's painting practice - a searching for a deeper relationship to the place she lives. In spending time with Julia, and her works, I have come to know this place, as a place of trees.

The idea of landscape

When our eyes adjust opens alongside two significant exhibitions - *The Good* by Anna Louise Richardson, and the first-time touring Wynne Prize. This pertinent grouping has enabled the gallery to support artist peer mentoring between Anna and Julia, allowing the two artists to share their experiences as regionally based artists, but more specifically the interconnectedness of the works they make and the places they live. Their practices, in conversation, reflect on the slowness of this work, as Julia says, "allowing time and space for the environment to recognise me as much as I recognise it."¹ There is also the joy, and the hope, that comes through in staying with the same place or subject matter over an extended period. New points of connection are found; a sense of belonging is forged.

¹ Julia Roche in conversation with Anna Louise Richardson for *The Good, Mediation Handbook* developed by Museums & Galleries NSW in partnership with Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, The Condensery and UQ Art Museum

The Wynne Prize too gives us a broader view of the evolving idea of landscape, one that is representative of being in Australia today. When we see, discuss, and paint landscape, we intrinsically respond to the Aboriginal cultures of Australia. Through a growing appreciation of Aboriginal art and understanding of the discourse of Country, the idea of landscape in Australian Painting is no longer dominated by a Western view of the world, however, encompasses the shifting between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous understandings of the land and questions of belonging on unceded land.²

This significant shift in the paradigm of landscape sparks a critical and nuanced engagement with our relationship to land, to ourselves and to each other. Landscape now can be understood in terms of the historical, social and political layers of identity, belonging (or non-belonging), and home - an understanding often discussed in terms of *place*. Julia's work exists in this conversation, in this constant shifting and growing of our understanding of the relational nature of landscape.

Julia is building her own sense of place through the act of painting - she paints her connections, her experiences, her histories; and develops and repeats this process. She seeks out opportunities to learn, through residencies and workshops, and through building relationships with other artists. I am reminded of artist Simryn Gill's words, "I came to understand place as a verb rather than a noun, which exists in our doings: walking, talking, living."³

Understory and overstory

Since returning to her childhood home on *Wooroola* in 2018, Julia has developed a distinct visual language and process for painting the landscape. She begins with a series of diluted-oil washes, undertaken *plein-air*, which are left to dry outside. Julia has developed this technique after a workshop with artist John Wolseley - it enables her to create the conditions for the wind, the mist, the insects to leave their marks in the understory or underpainting. This weathered composition then shapes a more descriptive and imaginative landscape overstory.

Understory and overstory are words Julia uses to talk about the layering techniques of her paintings. I had not heard this language of plants and tree canopies to describe painting before - it gives a unique insight into the way she thinks of the reciprocal role of nature in her works and the important signifier of trees.

Trees, like the landscape, speak to us of a long and layered history. They signify a time before us, when this land was likely a thoroughfare for the Wiradjuri travelling to important meeting sites.⁴ They tell also a more recent history, of thousands of trees

² Hayley Megan French, *See Where it Drifts: The Influence of Aboriginal Art on an Australian Ontology of Painting*, published by University of Sydney, 2015

³ Simryn Gill, text from *Full Moon*, 2012

⁴ The artist shared insights from conversations on *Wooroola* with Gamilaroi man Geoff Simpson

planted to create a birdlife corridor; of an old orchard being nurtured back to life; of the shade cast over a daughter's fairy garden.

This language of trees and stories can also connote the imaginative storytelling of Julia's paintings. These are not linear narratives, but a collection of stories that coalesce on the canvas; stories of trees bending to drink from waterholes, trees drifting skyward into stars, trees encircling us both in warning and protection. These are powerful trees.

A swaying between

For this exhibition, Julia set out to paint the night. There are two distinct series of paintings within this body of work, paintings made of the night, and paintings made in the night. There is a tension in this back and forth - between control of the materials, and ceding control to the elements; between the understory and the overstory; between the canvas and the paper; between working in the day and working by the moonlight. Julia swayed between these modes of working, allowing each painting to branch into the next.

The first paintings created at night, were made in one fast-paced sitting, with bold brushwork outlining the glow of the landscape under the moon. This is a significant development in Julia's work, a trusting of her body, a confidence of her mark-making. Julia continued to challenge this process, reintroducing her layering of the understory and the overstory with later night-paintings made across multiple sessions, creating different surface tensions and revealing different stories. Bolder brushwork seeped into the day works, framing the land as the moon does the night.

There is a recurring line in Julia's works made at night, a hill line, or horizon line. It is easy to imagine this is Picnic hill, standing sentinel on *Wooroola*, a place from which she often paints. It is as though, without sight, her body is repeating this line, to ground her in this place. The overstory of trees are not present in these works, yet their presence is still felt, in the repeated depiction of the hill on which they stand.

When our eyes adjust

When we first met, Julia shared a story of a trip a few months earlier to Mungo National Park. Together with her family and Gamilaroi man Geoff Simpson, they spent time learning on Country, crushing ochre, sharing intentions. As they sat with new friends around the campfire, a combination of light and smoke formed a ghostly outline of the trees against the night sky. Julia saw the lightness and depth of the night and she brought this way of seeing home.

This experience marked the beginning of this body of work, characterised by a brighter palette, illuminated by moonlight and memory. Moments like this are important, they teach us to pay attention. They teach us to look at our surroundings with intention. When we engage with the places we call home with this kind of critical

attention, we challenge what we see, what we know. Our eyes continue to adjust. We learn to rely on all our senses to better understand where and who we are.