



JULIA ROCHE

When our eyes adjust

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Wagga Wagga Art Gallery
23 March – 23 June 2024

Defiance Gallery
27 July – 17 August 2024

Living and working in regional Australia is a joy for many artists, who find themselves without distractions, and surrounded by their subject matter, boundless space and skies. Missing however from the life of the regional artist is the happenstance of proximity: to galleries and museums, the opportunity to engage with peers, to seek and receive critical attention, and to make good on opportunities as they present themselves.

The answer for some is a constant back and forth, travelling between city lights and the bush. For others, the answer is to leave forever, or to seek and find sustenance in place.

In recent years Wagga Wagga Art Gallery in the Eastern Riverina has sought to support artists in place through its Regional Artist Development (RAD) program, involving exhibition opportunities, mentored residencies, master workshops, and talks program. Each year the Gallery also offers the opportunity for one exceptional regional artist to work with a metropolitan based curator over a six-month period. The artist receives structured critical attention as they work to achieve a new body of work to be exhibited in our Margaret Carnegie Gallery. In 2023 this opportunity was offered to painter Julia Roche.

Well known to the Gallery as an active member of the Riverina's creative community, Julia Roche has been practicing as a professional artist for 15 years. Eager to grow in her practice, the Gallery arranged in 2023 for her to participate in peer-to-peer mentoring with West Australian artist Anna Louise Richardson. The mutual benefits of this engagement led to Julia accepting our further invitation to work with Sydney based painter and curator Dr Hayley Megan French. In doing so, Julia also accepted the inherent risk of opening herself and practice to the close attention of another's eye. And so, over the many months, never veering from her subject matter and vocation – to paint the night sky and the land she loves and knows so well, Julia's work has leapt forward; to be now as a poet might write, gestural and loose – it is all place and feeling, warm earth, clouds and swirling galaxies above.

We applaud the risk, we applaud the result.

Dr Lee-Anne Hall
Director, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

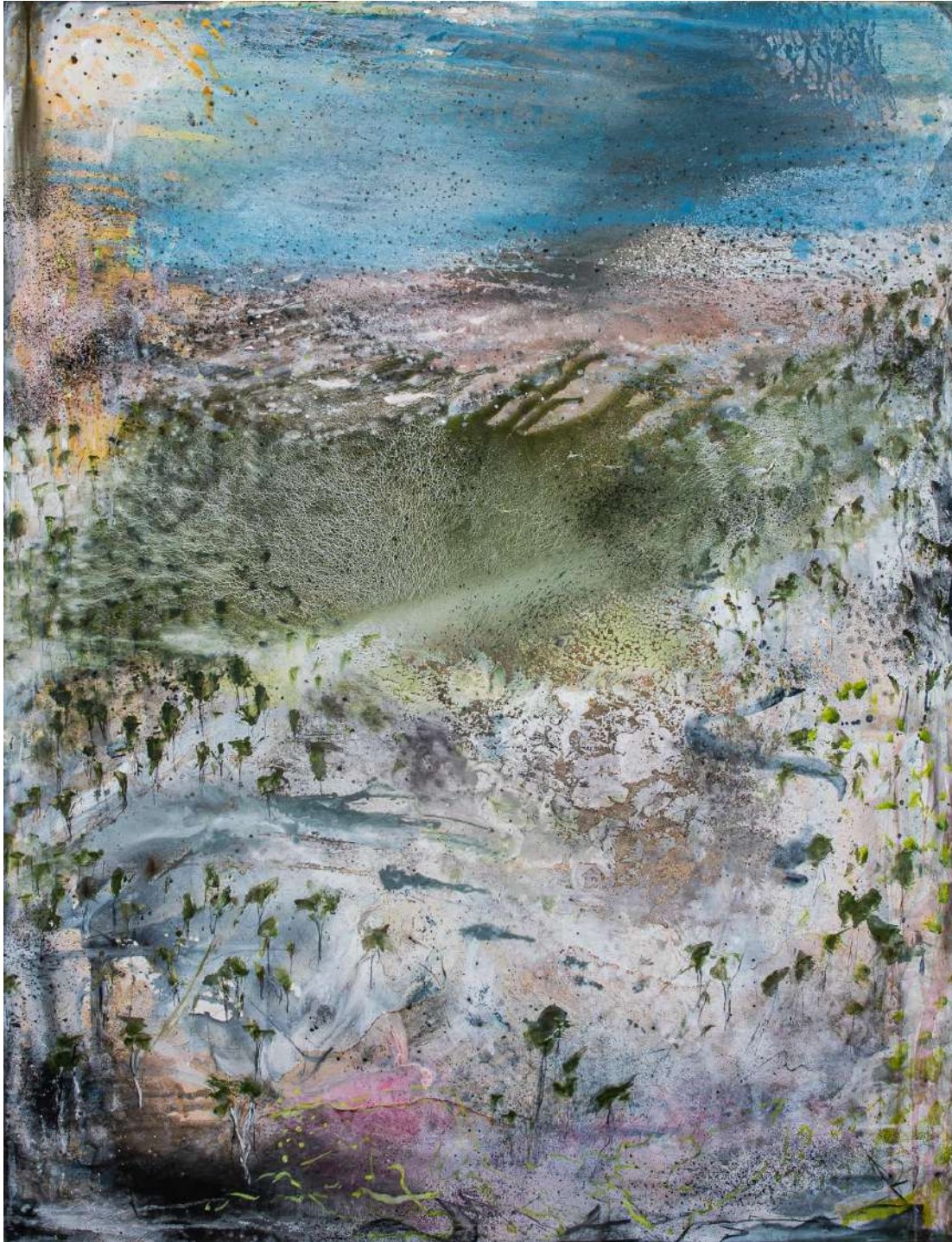
March 2024



A record of the wind

oil & mixed media on canvas

152 x 198 cm



I will follow you into the dark
oil & mixed media on canvas
198 x 152 cm



I will follow you into the dark
oil & mixed media on canvas
198 x 152 cm

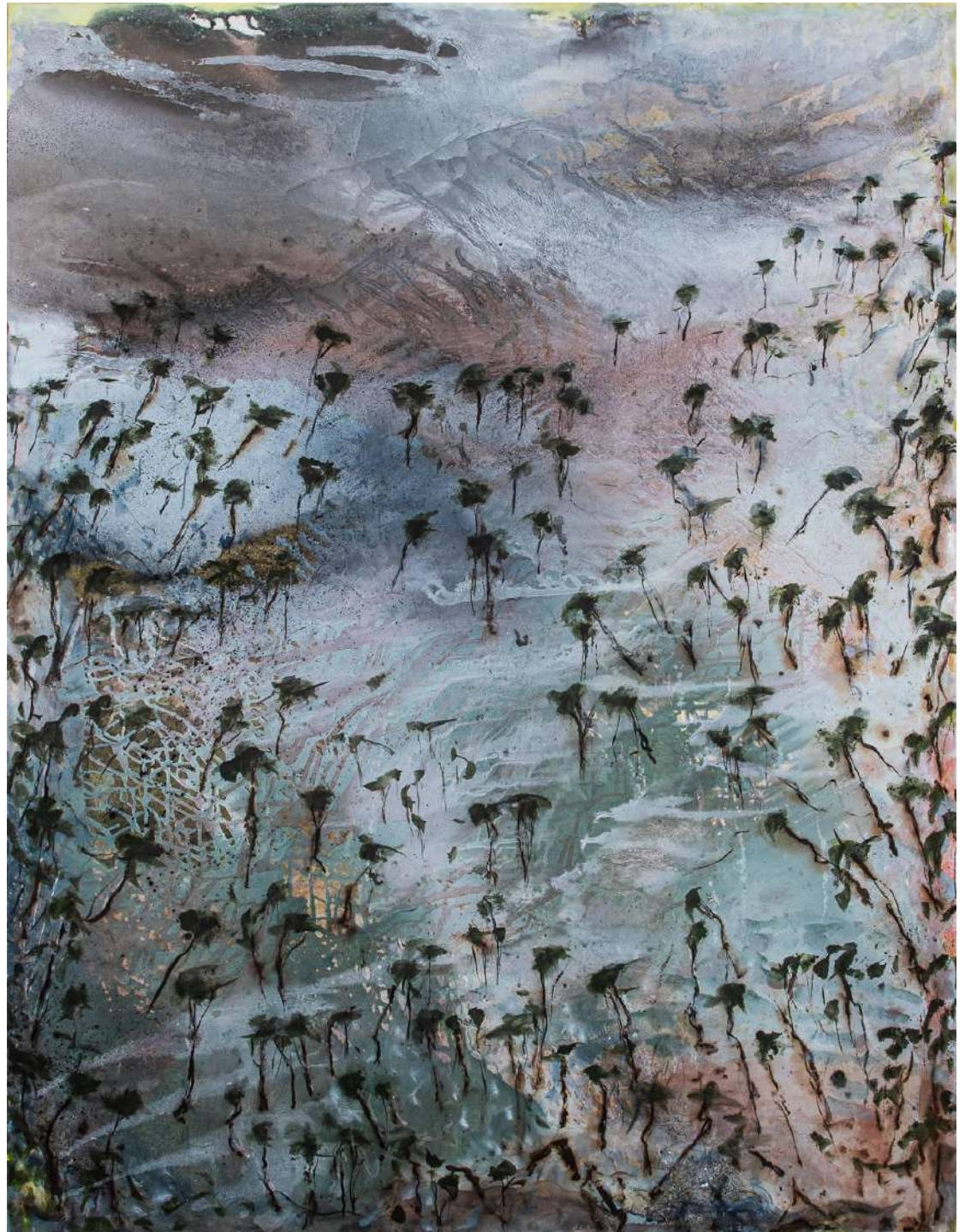
Gin and tonic of the night
oil & mixed media on canvas
198 x 152 cm





A night dance
oil & mixed media on canvas
150 x 150 cm

At peace with disorientation
oil & mixed media on canvas
198 x 152 cm



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 of 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.

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

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

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

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 also tell a more recent history, of thousands of trees 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

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

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

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.





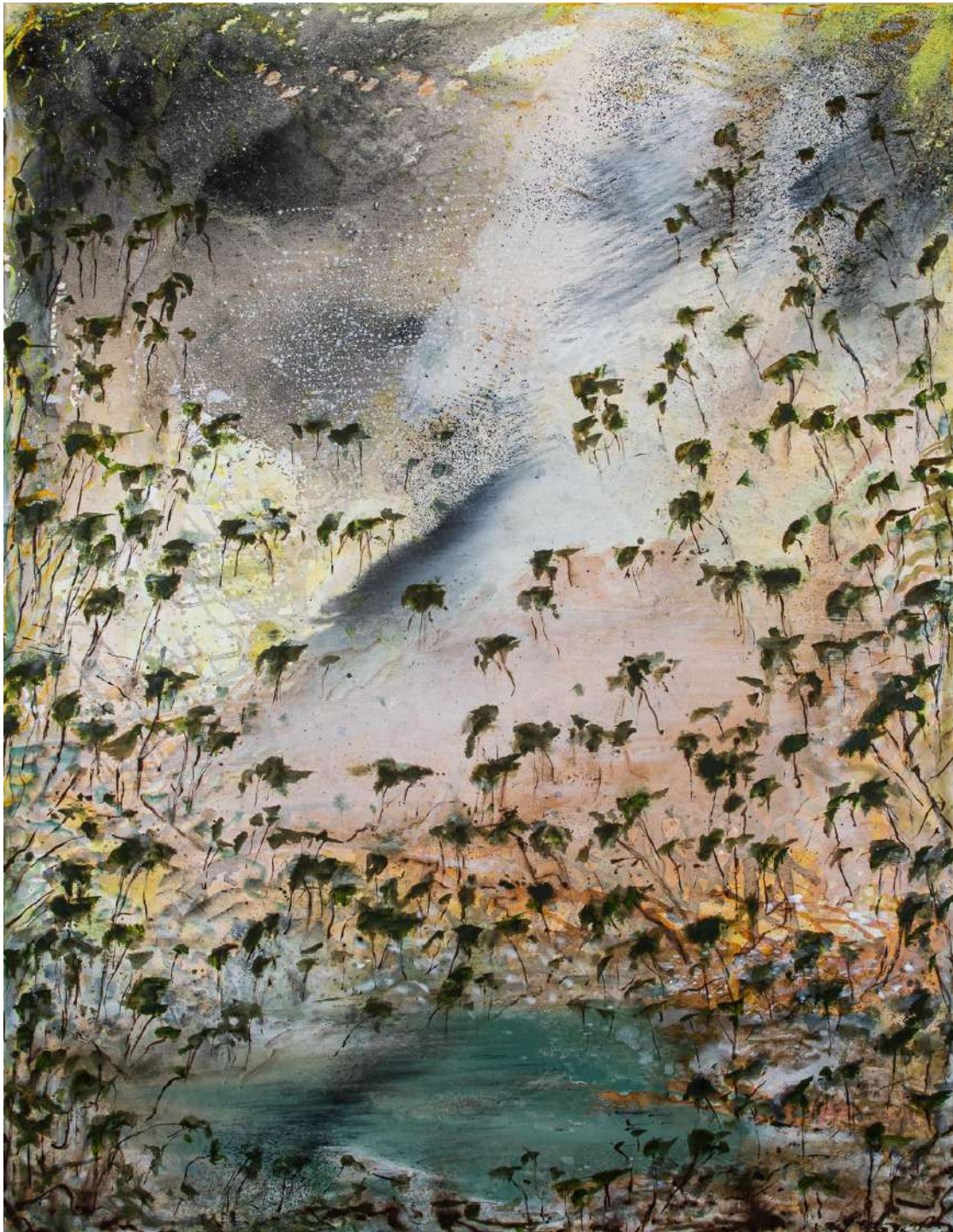
The lightness of the night
oil & mixed media on canvas
152 x 198 cm



Heavy sky resting

oil & mixed media on canvas

150 x 150 cm



The golden hour
oil & mixed media on canvas
198 x 152 cm



Peeping moon spilling light
oil & mixed media on canvas
150 x 150 cm



Remembering the moon
oil & mixed media on canvas
150 x 150 cm

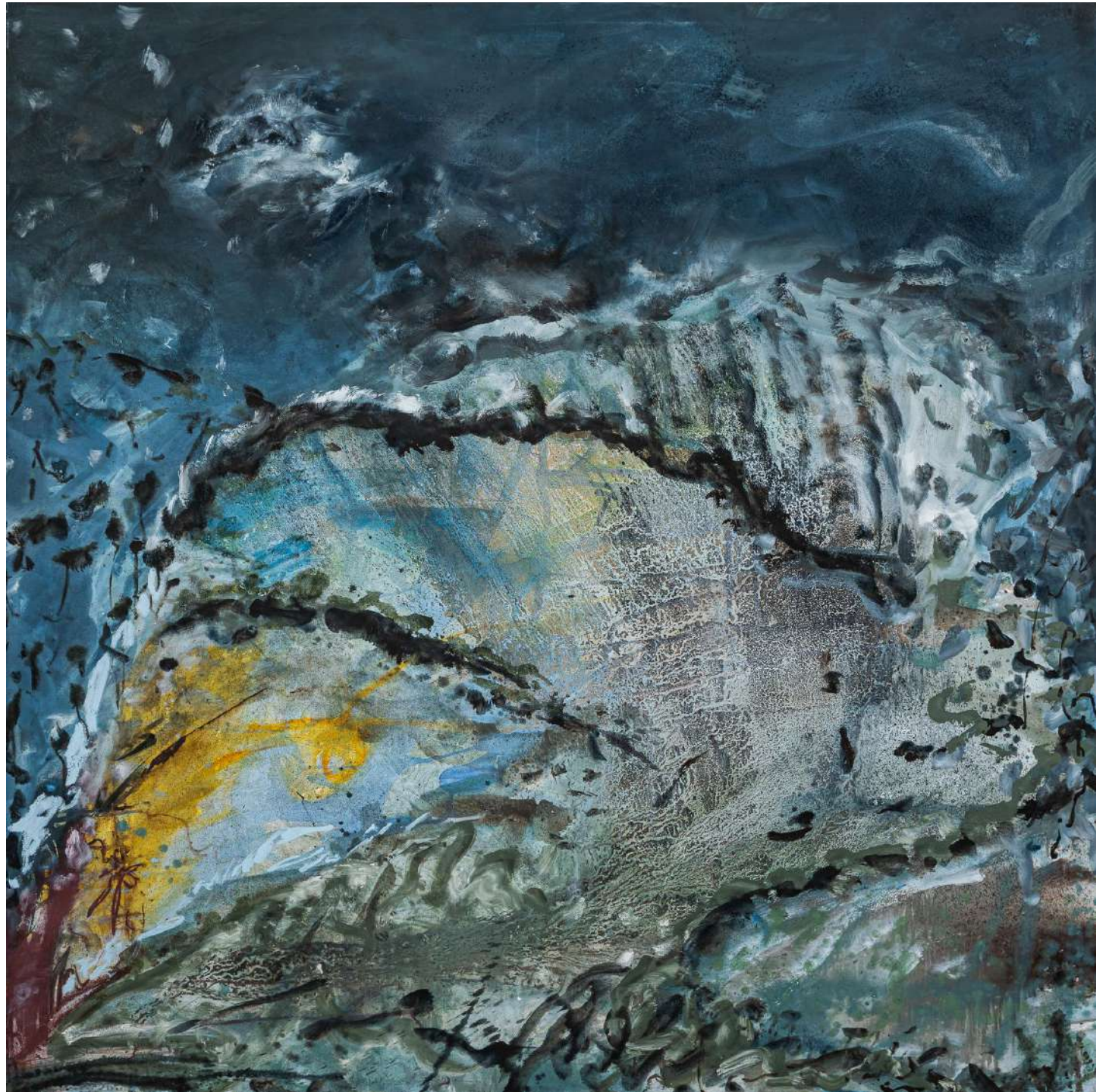
The trees are called by the storm
oil & mixed media on canvas
198 x 152 cm





When our eyes adjust
oil & mixed media on canvas
150 x 150 cm





Highlights and low light
oil & mixed media on canvas
150 x 150 cm



Collective memory in the light of day
oil & mixed media on cold pressed oil paper
130 x 139 cm



Hot, windy and full of butterflies
oil & mixed media on cold pressed oil paper
130 x 139 cm



Break away I, II, III (clockwise from top left)
oil & mixed media on cold pressed oil paper
56 x 76 cm

CV

Education

- 2012 Master of Teaching – Arts, University Of Western Sydney
- 2008 Bachelor of Visual Arts, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney

Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 When Our Eyes Adjust, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery
When Our Eyes Adjust, Defiance Gallery, Sydney
- 2022 From The Sky, Otomys, Melbourne
Natural Relationships, Rosby Gallery, Mudgee
- 2021 Under A Winter Moon, Murray Arts Museum Albury (MAMA), Albury
Stars Run Rampant by the Billions, Otomys, Melbourne
Sit Beneath, 50 flag installation, Arbour Festival, Snowy Valleys
- 2020 Works From A Foggy Year, Cadell Place, Wagga Wagga
Salt Of The Earth, Art Partners Australia, Albury
- 2019 Uneath, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, Wagga Wagga

Group Exhibitions

- 2024 Defiance 2024, Defiance Gallery, Sydney
- 2023 Wollongong Art Gallery Flow National Contemporary Watercolour Prize
The Land Of Wonder, Otomys, Melbourne
Landscape, Defiance Gallery, Sydney
Works On Paper, Defiance Gallery, Sydney
Defiance 2023, Defiance Gallery, Sydney

- 2021 Smalls, Otomys, Melbourne
Regenerative Vision, Brunswick Street Gallery, Melbourne
- 2020 Perception of Landscape, Walcha Gallery Of Art, Walcha
- 2019 Group Exhibition, Art Partners Australia, Albury
- 2017 Group Exhibition, Heaps Decent, Special Group Studios, Sydney
- 2013 8 Artists, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery
- 2009 Installation, Gaffa Gallery, Sydney
- 2008 Sydney College of the Arts Post Graduate Exhibition, Sydney

Awards & Residencies

- 2023 Recipient of the Regional Artist Development Program (RAD), Wagga Wagga Art Gallery
- 2022 Artist in Residence, Geelong Grammar School
Mentorship with Helen Grace and Julie Ewington, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery
- 2021 Artist in Residence on Regenerative Farm Bibbaringa, Bowna in preparation for exhibition at Murray Arts Museum Albury (MAMA)
- 2020 Australian Bushfire Art Auction
- 2019 Guest Speaker at the opening of Sculptures at Erin Earth, Wagga Wagga

Collections

- Geelong Grammar School
- Sydney University, Wesley College, Sydney
- Private collections in Australia, Hong Kong & America

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri people who are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live and work. I pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging of the Wiradjuri Nation and extend that respect to other First Nations people.

May we walk gently on this land.

Thank you to the wonderful exhibition and program team at the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery for your encouraging energy and vision. Thank you to Dr Lee-Anne Hall, Director of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, your belief in my practice, your foresight and generosity in creating opportunities, not just for me, but for many local creatives, does not go unnoticed.

This last six months has allowed for a creative and collaborative exploration of my practice– this opportunity would not be possible without the support of The Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, Create NSW and The Wagga Wagga City Council.

Thank you to Dr Hayley Megan French for the exhibition essay, your direction, gentle words of guidance and friendship over the past year. I feel humbled to be exhibiting my series When Our Eyes Adjust alongside the Wynne Prize, and The Good by Anna Louise Richardson, an artist whom I have a lot of admiration for.

Jacqui Cooper (Jack Of Hearts) – you're incredible to work with and I continue to thrive in your presence. Thank you for the stunning suite of documentation and continued support. And Simon Hewson (Fatografi) for making the trip from Sydney to capture me working through the night. Your video describes the lightness of the night with such rawness and sensitivity.

I am very excited by the reality that this exhibition has two lives; firstly to be hung and viewed in our beautiful Regional Gallery, and then at Defiance Gallery in Sydney, thank you Campbell Robertson-Swann, Director at Defiance Gallery. My appreciation to Saskia Howard, Gallery Manager for the catalogue design, and heartfelt gratitude to General Manager, Dallas Moore, for your confidence in my practice and your interest in bringing regionally based work to the big smoke.

I want to acknowledge the power of Mungo National Park to inspire the direction I have taken in this series.

Finally, thank you to my beautiful friends and family, especially my biggest supporters; Mick, Rosie, Jimmy, Francesca, Mum and Dad.



