

Sediment Songs 2016, Catalogue Essay by Gavin Wilson

The recent body of work by Emma Walker (b. 1969) is testament to a penetrating imagination. Skilfully exhuming imagery from the memory and experience of liminal zones, Walker has confirmed her standing as an artist of scope and substance. A poetic reverie weaves its way through forms and spaces giving shape to the natural processes the artist seized upon to celebrate a deep felt awareness of the fragile world we inhabit.

In Walker's paintings, there is the impression of a detached, spiritual entity coming to grips with an environment of mystery and potential. To garner insight into the artist's creative process and influences, a short excursion focusing on her formative years may be helpful.

Childhood revolved around life spent between the city and the bush. The wild bush property near Cootamundra in the NSW south-west accommodated an intensive piggery, allowing most of the land to remain in an unfettered state. The tough, dry landscape and the native wildlife would make an indelible mark on a young psyche. Fires, floods and long devastating droughts burnished the ancient land, giving rise to a place of fierce contrasts and subtle variations. This inimical terrain was the nascent artist's nursery and provided the beginnings of a compelling visual language enabling the artist, in time, to translate her emotional response to a shared experience. Back in Sydney, young Emma's horizons were extended by the family's free-wheeling circle of friends that included prominent artists, poets, architects and an Indian Guru. In addition, the family went on extended overseas journeys that would spark an appetite for the exotic and unexpected.

In 1994, as a 25 year-old graduate from the National Art School, the artist was offered and accepted a position in the inaugural Artist in Residence Programme at the Haefliger Cottage, Hill End. Along with established artists such as Wendy Sharpe, Richard Goodwin, Peter Kingston and Tom Spence, Walker stepped into a cultural crucible that had been famously re-discovered by Russell Drysdale and Donald Friend in 1947. The remnants of the old, isolated gold town, with its scarred red earth, scattered ruins and potent sense of time passing, were the elusive elements that fired the imagination of Drysdale and Friend, re-directing the course of landscape painting in Australia. For Walker, the residency at Hill End was an opportunity to immerse herself in an historically-charged landscape that was also a painter's paradise. Providing a contemporary reaction to the site, select works from the Residency Programme, including Walker's, were hung in *The Artists of Hill End* exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in July 1995.

The die was cast: fast forward to the artist in mid-career, grappling with *Sediment Songs*. The inspiration and binding component in this impressive series is the inexorable action of natural forces on the Earth's crust, above and below the waterline. The ingrained memory of specific sites is tapped in the solitude of the studio. Visual equivalents are tested and either rejected or accepted. As the artist pointed out in a recent statement: 'These paintings are not in any way planned out or prescribed. They have grown from one action or process leading to another. They have been plagued by uncertainty and enlivened with the

delights of discovery that experimentation invariably produces. `

Time spent in desert regions along with close observation of her own environment on the coastal fringe of northern New South Wales, has triggered this imposing sequence of work. An immediate contrast is established in the rigorous excavation of these disparate regions with certain patterns or systems detected and seized upon to convey the authority of an artist in tune with nature's interlocking processes. While immersed in the interior, Walker began to perceive a shift in time and space. This epiphany appears to have been a portal to further appreciate the deep spiritual and physical connection indigenous people have to the land.

Water, its presence and absence, is a key ingredient constantly percolating through the artist's imagination. Take for instance, *Sea Garden III*, with the languid flow of pigments; the sensuous interplay of iridescent greens and graphite grey, merging with unexpected hits of sky blue, laid against a sinuous ground etched into with a router - all combine to create a dynamic interplay of forces that harbour a place of mingling and integration - another transitional zone of dynamic vigour.

On the other hand, *Channel Country II*, could be construed as a fragment of a vast desiccated landscape, somewhere in the interior, where monsoonal downpours re-direct the flow of waterways and re-shape landforms. This sense of metamorphosis is echoed in the lengthy physical process undertaken to forge these images. Like the Earth's crust, the tough marine ply format becomes the resilient component in the realisation of the artist's vision.

The works in this series hold a kind of timelessness. To the artist again,

"These paintings have been in a perpetual state of becoming. They seem to be more about process than completion. This is what my eyes and mind are drawn to in the ancient landscapes of sea, rock and sky. The university of time."

Gavin Wilson - Freelance Curator

Sebastian Smee, Art Critic, Boston Globe

"Emma Walker is one of Australia's most convincing and original painters. Her work is as audacious as it is poetic; the one quality leavens the other, so that just as delicate reverie sets in, you're pulled up by a less immediately seductive note, an act of painterly boldness or some other form of tough, enlivening aesthetic decision... these are intelligent paintings - intelligent in their understanding of ambiguities, of space, and of colour."

Finding Form, Thinking About Thinking

"The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays

with the things it loves."

Carl Jung

As a child, at bed time, whilst waiting for sleep to descend, I would entertain myself by watching my thoughts. I would make a note of the starting point then (try to) relax and let my mind wander. After some minutes of this, I would pull the brakes on my train of thought and then work my way backwards to the point of origin. The intention was to figure out how I started with one thought and ended up somewhere else entirely in the space of a few minutes. It was like a contrary form of meditation. Rather than stilling the mind and focussing on the breath, I would instead focus on my thoughts and completely ignore my breathing. Sometimes I would also just see and feel patterns. It is a sensation difficult to describe, a strange confluence of seeing, thinking and feeling. I remember a kind of shaking sensation that was accompanied by a visual of fine, black scribble. Another version was a soft, dense, white, rubbery feeling - like biting into an eraser. At other times I would play a game that involved visualising the colours of numbers and letters.

I have always loved the associational journeys that the brain makes.
I have always loved thinking about thinking.

The processes of making these paintings in a sense mirrored the circuitous routes of my thought pathways and an ever changing emotional landscape. They underwent numerous transformations over a period of some months. Compositions would continually shift, colours would be re-mixed and re-applied until they were exactly the right hue. It was at times a difficult process with no certain outcome. Many of them were initially quite complex, a layered grid of gestural and painterly marks. Gradually these earlier layers would be covered with flat paint and the introduction of more distinct forms and geometric patterns. Seemingly random and indecisive, these actions of layering paint, of revealing and obscuring, echoed a voyage of ideas, memories and dreams.

In a sense these paintings are cerebral self portraits or snap shots of my mind in action. They are about thought processes, decision making, questioning, remembering, day dreaming, freedom, boundaries and the linkage of ideas and sensation. They are about how an idea can form from something that may initially be indistinct and end up as something concrete, how the organic forms of dreaming and reverie relate to the more structured trajectories of rational thought.

The language of abstraction and the use of geometric pattern alongside organic forms have helped me to visually depict these somewhat nebulous processes of the mind.

Pollination - Catalogue essay by Phe Rawnsley

Emma Walker Pollination at Flinders Lane Gallery 9 - 27 November 2010

Creating rich, semi abstracted images, driven by a rigorous practice of observation and complex markmaking, Emma Walker has been ardently recording her experience of nature over the course of her career. From the cellular to the panoramic, organic forms have endured throughout, and reflect the artist's deep felt need to connect with the landscape on both a physical and emotional level.

Pollination continues her ongoing fascination with natural systems. Inspired by the productive quality of the bee colony, these new works present a dualistic vision of nature as a site of external resilience and internal nurturing. Working in both painting and paper assemblage, Walker

employs the motif of the hexagonal cell - a form found both within the bee's eye and within the structure of the hive - along with swift, gestural linework to capture something of the ceaseless generative activity of the bee. Observing their flight, navigation, proclivity to build and instinct to nurture, the artist notes that "the complex working of a bee colony feels like a microcosm that mirrors the busy pursuits and endeavours of humanity."

This sense of 'busy pursuit' is achieved through the physical pulse of Walker's painting gestures. Revealed within her sweeping brush strokes and dense textures, her tension between form and erasure, is a spontaneity and fluidity of image making that spills over from the representational into the abstracted. Elements of landscape - flower, branches and hive painted in both textured and flat surfaces - help construct a series of compositions that relentlessly fill the picture plane, almost to its limits.

Intuitively responding to these systems of organised chaos her work depicts an animated terrain, caught midpoint between instinctual action and poetic lucidity. Colours of sunlight and shade, formed into hexagonal cells of cool blues and warm ambers, operate beside one another to produce an effect of simultaneously looking outside at the world and inward to the safety of the dark hive. A similar imperative to fuse sensory experiences is evident within her assemblages. Furls of leaf form and hexagonal sequences coalesce within the pages of old family books to induce an almost kaleidoscopic 'whole of life' perspective.

These are, in a sense, true primavera paintings, although Walker has inverted the typical allegory of a tamed and plentiful Nature, replacing it with a vast and infinite space in which "all things are completely part of a limitless intrinsic whole. The grids, the honeycomb, the patchwork for me are symbolic of this." Walker is ultimately pointing toward a universal awareness, to a deepseated and intuitive desire to exist. By negotiating the representation of both tangible and metaphysical spaces, Walker's complex images finally hover somewhere in between the human and natural world, to reveal an expression of pure, fleeting experience.

John McDonald, Catalogue note 2009

With these new paintings and works on paper, Emma Walker has said goodbye to the "emerging" label that some artists seem to carry for their entire lives. This does not mean she has ceased experimenting and searching, but there is sense of maturity - a centredness - in this work that reveals a confident creative personality.

The catalyst for these paintings, which are basically landscapes with a strong abstract component, was a journey to Central Australia. In responding to that arid, primeval environment, Walker follows in the footsteps of artists such as Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and John Olsen, who did some of their most original work under its influence. There the resemblance ends, because Walker's pictures are characterized by nuances and fine details, not grand, sweeping statements. Some would call this a feminine approach, but I think it is more a matter of temperament than gender.

The variety of colour and texture in these pictures is seductive, but there is an underlying concern for structure that means they never subside into simple decoration. Although landscape elements are dominant there are allusions to many different schools of modern abstract painting. It is the

mark of a mature artist that Walker is clearly in control of these influences, taking only what is necessary to forge a distinctive visual language of her own.

John McDonald

Art critic, The Sydney Morning Herald