



ALICE AND BEYOND

Recent paintings by Janet and Mike Green



17 November - 15 December 2018

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



Spirit of Place

A recent trip to the central Australian desert encouraged Victorian artists Mike and Janet Green to connect their existing perceptions and artistic ideas to the majesty of this ancient land. It was Mike's first visit to Central Australia and Janet's third. Much of their time was spent on foot exploring Uluru, Kata Tjuta and the Eastern and Western MacDonnell Ranges, out from Alice Springs. Along with a sequence of small watercolour, gouache and photographic studies, each artist produced 20 or so studio-based paintings, ceramics, sculptures and works in mixed media over the course of the next year. These fresh in situ and engaging studio works form the nucleus of the current show.

Surveying the Australian desert night sky is instructive and exhilarating. The dome-like cornucopia of stars invokes the breadth of the universe and draws elaborate explanations of how the world was formed. Unbounded space (and time) and the sense of connectedness between all things leaves an indelible impression.

In August 2017 the Greens were invited to spend time at 'Earth Sanctuary', a friend's property near Alice Springs, run by the Falzon family. Over the next seven weeks they learnt about the local ecology, camped under the stars, visited outlying areas and spent ten or more hours a day in the field, covering up to 14 kms a day on foot. It was a unique opportunity to immerse oneself in the

surroundings. The weather was a comfortable 25 degrees during the day and not too cold at night: being self-sufficient with backpacks, food and art materials meant that they could also work at any time they saw fit.

The acrylic paintings of Janet Green combine realistic landscape paintings with still life compositions of fruit, vegetables and found objects. Inspired by Dutch, Flemish and Spanish still life, each of the paintings is painstakingly built, stroke by stroke, using photographs as an *aide-mémoire*. The application of fast-drying pigment appears intuitive yet measured, with the subjects often lit from multiple directions and sources.

Janet's Central Australian landscapes present a sense of stillness and calm and nature's infinite variety. With each of the paintings, the artist posed the conundrum - 'what does the landscape ask of me, what does it dictate?' *Pears and Olives, Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park* shows how she tackled the question. It depicts a dancing row of pears arranged on a coolamon with olives protruding over the side. The dominant colour chord is the cool green of the pears and olives branches and this is counterbalanced against the light brown of the coolamon and the ledge it is sitting upon. Revelling in the contrasts between cool and warm, there is a synchronicity between the rich red desert soil and the bluish-green spinifex that dots the surrounding hills.

JANET GREEN

Still Life with Quinces, Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park
synthetic polymer on canvas
30 x 40 cm

By limiting the sky to a thin band of aqua, the viewer's attention is gently focussed on the correspondence between the fore and background and the recurrent shapes of the rounded hills, pears and curved basket.

Still Life with Quinces, Tjoritja / West MacDonnell National Park continues this idea of using a dominant colour chord inspired by the desert. Bright yellow quinces are the dominant presence in an otherwise still landscape, twisted and turned to create a sense of unity and variety. Janet extends the traditions of Western still life painting by placing exotic fruits in the landscape. Fruit is chosen not because it relates to the area or even because it is in season. Rather, the choice is tied directly to the pictorial requirement of the landscape and the desire to create an engaging composition inspired by the revered traditions of Western still life.

Eucalypts, Yeperenje Park, Jessie Gap is the largest and one of the most complicated of Janet Green's compositions. This is not a still life but an entertaining tableau of twisted and knotted trees. For the artist these trees are extremely beautiful

forms that animate incantations of the spiritual in the everyday. The overall tone of the painting is again cool and slightly washed out, echoing the way light changes in the outback depending upon the time of day. Morning and afternoon ultramarine blue skies are replaced by a more subdued, less piercing light in the middle of the day.

With Uluru, Janet was faced with a visual dilemma: 'You've got this big rock, but you've got to get the sense of space.' The Greens camped near the rock for a week, often varying the distance or perspective each day or evening. 'It was the most amazing colour', Janet said, it demanded the full drama of a dragon fruit in the foreground to do it justice.

Janet Green's paintings are primarily interested in the formal possibilities of her chosen subject – with light, form and colour, and her ceramics play with experimentation and chance. Mike Green's multiple art forms bring to the fore a different set of ideas and approaches. Though equally concerned with capturing the spirit of place,

MIKE GREEN

Guddea

comprises 64 individual pieces, gouache and mixed media on paper
124 x 102 cm

“Unbounded space (and time) and the sense of connectedness between all things leaves an indelible impression.”

his works draw upon personal history, familial relationships and cross-cultural connections. Substituting the camera and drawing for gouache, Mike initially worked on groups of small-scale studies through which he gradually came to understand and appreciate the landscape. Unlike watercolour, which he mastered many years ago, gouache has more forgiving qualities. It dries relatively quickly and can be mixed to create subtle tones and half-tones. The freshness and opacity of the gouache paintings with their striking abstracted forms provide the basis of the larger acrylic paintings on canvas.

An awareness of time and process comes to the fore in these studio-based paintings. Mike values these qualities as being central to his own world-view. The Australian desert drew out memories, observations and associations with times both past and present. Green talks of being 'alone with yourself and the wind', with having the space and time to connect one place and time with another.

Guddea (white man) is a 64-part gouache and mixed media work on paper that brings each of

these points into sharp relief. A representation of a constructed head, recalling that of the artist's father, is situated against the bleached desert sky. The faceted surface is comprised of separate sheets of overlapping paper that recall the Indigenous cloaks from Green's distant Tongan connection. The text that coats the bones are excerpts from his ancestor's letters about life as immigrants in that new land. As suggested in its title, works such as this function as a sort of white man dreaming: the sculptures are vessels – bones – assisting the artist to 'reinterpret things', and contrasting life's big history with the artist's more minute personal journey.

What Green has described as a 'process of husbanding the past', of responding to new places and experiences by calling upon collective history and memory, can be seen in his larger landscape paintings *Kundju Gorge, Uluru* and the three-panel *Early Morning Ormiston Gorge*. Rendered in rich Indian reds, pale blues and olive greens, the latter painting conveys the vast array of vibrant colours that grow around water holes and spring up after rain. The strongly delineated rock formations and crevices punctuated by vertical tree-forms and floating fields of foliage exude a timeless quality and symbolically allude to the human bones that merge with the land. This idea is extended in *Kundju Gorge* where the land is animated by a life-force far beyond mere surface appearance.

Green was inspired by Indigenous stories and Aboriginal knowledge of country. In *Silent Pool ... many bones down there* from Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem, a bunyip-like animal threateningly lurks in a billabong under the night sky, a warning not to venture too far. *Lovenia Woodsi (Fossils and Paddy Melons)* is an extreme close-up of the desert floor, of interlocking surface patterns, resembling veins, that combine ancient bones with an inedible plant used as traditional medicine for skin infections. Such works provide the multi-layered response that is endemic to his art and ideas. Similarly, the sculptures combine the bones of the landscape covered in concrete poetry-like text. Such works demonstrate how a life-times practice can merge seamlessly with each new experience: the result is not easily come by but is all the sweeter for that.

Mike and Janet Green last exhibited together at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art over fifteen years ago. In 2002, they exhibited works related to a visit to Tonga. In 2003, works commissioned in response to Turtle Island, in Fiji's northern Yasawa Islands, were exhibited under the title 'A Brush with Paradise'. They are well-travelled and grounded in a diverse range of cultures, bringing elements of surprise, joy and understanding to their art. With the works inspired by Central Australia, Mike and Janet Green have brought new insights to fruition, each through very different eyes.

Rodney James
October 2018





JANET GREEN

Eucalypts, Yeperenje Park, Jessie Gap
synthetic polymer on canvas
91 x 91 cm

JANET GREEN

Cloud Shadows Over Northern Territory
wood fired pot
18 x 18 cm



JANET GREEN

Full Moon Over Uluru, Still Life with Blood Oranges
synthetic polymer on canvas
30 x 40 cm



JANET GREEN
Pears and Olives, Tjoritja /
West MacDonnell National Park
synthetic polymer on canvas
30 x 62 cm



JANET GREEN
Still Life with Dragon Fruit, Uluru
synthetic polymer on canvas
30 x 30 cm



JANET GREEN
Desert Oak
wood fired pot
42 x 6 cm



MIKE GREEN

Early Morning, Ormiston Gorge
synthetic polymer on canvas
76 x 183 cm



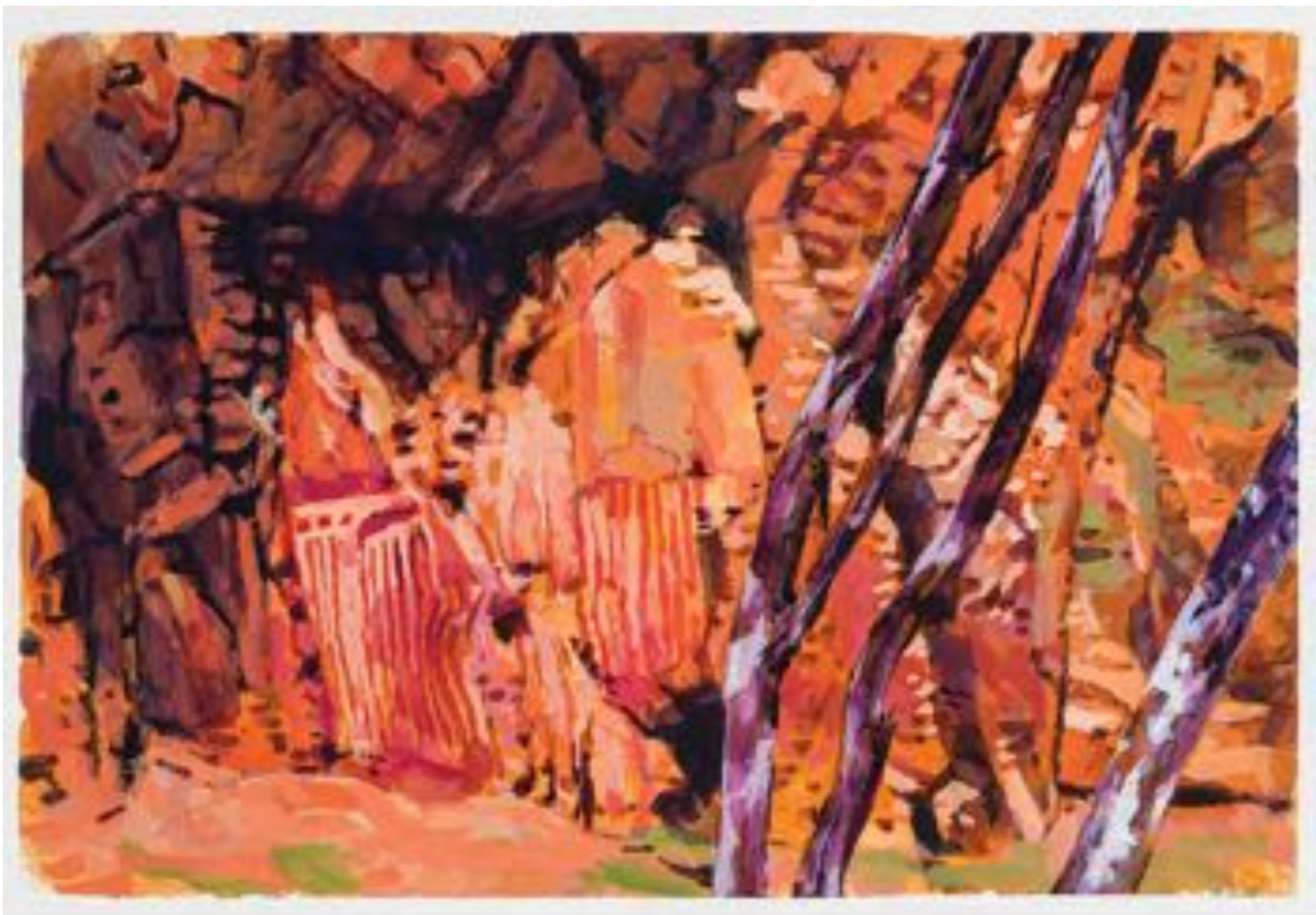
MIKE GREEN

In Silent Pool...many bones down there
from Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem *The Bunyip*
synthetic polymer on canvas
69 x 81 cm



MIKE GREEN

Guddea's Gatherer
steel rod, hard coated hi-density
foam and mixed media
93 x 112 x 54 cm



MIKE GREEN
Emily Gap
gouache on paper
18.5 x 27 cm



MIKE GREEN
Uluru Night, Field of Light
comprises 72 pieces, gouache
and mixed media on paper
122 x 121 cm



MIKE GREEN

Sticks and Bones

synthetic polymer on canvas

103 x 130 cm

COVER

Top: **JANET GREEN**

Kwartatuma, Ormiston Gorge

synthetic polymer on canvas

50 x 60 cm

Bottom: **MIKE GREEN**

Kundju Gorge, Uluru (detail)

synthetic polymer on canvas

112 x 150 cm

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