



HELEN S. TIERNAN
STORIED COUNTRY

22 October - 18 November 2022

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



Fish Out of Water - Cultural Collisions 2021
oil on canvas 180 x 330 cm (triptych)
signed lower left: Helen S. Tiernan

Helen S. Tiernan is an artist of considerable eloquence, technical virtuosity, humour and academic enquiry. Since leaving Canberra and returning to Kulin Country, the coastal landscapes of her childhood in south-eastern Gippsland, she has entered a new phase in her painting with fresh perspectives that build on her former investigations of the entangled histories of Australian colonialism. With ironic intent she references the satire of Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll and plays with the square cows of John Kelly. These animated animals, inspired by William Dobell and Nolan's riverine scenes, exert a haunting presence.

She is invigorated by the lush greens of Gippsland, the histories and personal memory of earlier times and is relishing in her rediscovery of the work of early modernists, Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington-Smith and painters of the Heidelberg school. Like Lin Onus, she sees herself as a bit of 'cultural mechanic' and a bowerbird picking up bits and pieces from here and there. She also visually responds to the abstract qualities of the work of Rover Thomas, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Sally Gabori. This is underpinned by her extensive personal archive, meticulous historical research, and her own cultural framing.

Tiernan's mixed cultural heritage informs her artwork where she keenly acknowledges her multiple ancestries including Aboriginal, Irish and British, like artists Danie Mellor and Brook Andrew. She simultaneously references Aboriginal culture, contact history and colonial

"Images, lines and symbols are used to encode traditional knowledge and storytelling in abstract and conceptual ways"

histories. The surfaces of her paintings are embossed or scarred using the chevron patterns of ceremonial skin and carved shield designs. Highly sensuous and tactile, they are often layered with the images of European floral wallpapers that were used in settler cottages or colonial mansions.

Iconographical visual references reflect these cross-cultural sources. Many have been recurrent in her artworks from her student years at the Canberra School of Art. Others from her mid-career include references to the colonial art of the Port Jackson Painter to Tupia (James Cook's Polynesian navigator) and artists like Joseph Lycett and Conrad Martens, as well as William Barak and Tommy McRae. The connecting strands that give an informing thread to this complex visual interplay are a rich selection of views expressed in Paul Irish's *Hidden in Plain View*; Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*; Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth how Aborigines made Australia* and Duane Humacher's *The First Astronomers*. More recently there is Lyn Kelly's *Memory Code* and art historian, Ian McLean's *Rattling Spears*.

Tiernan's monumental, panoramic work, titled *Colonial Wallpapers - Mantle of Perceptions* 2014, (180 x 300 cm, oil on canvas, Parliament



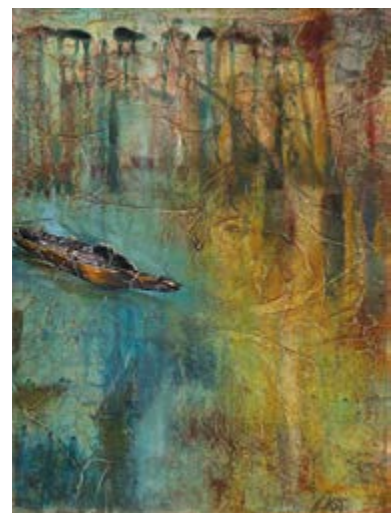
Scar Tree - From the Bank 2021
encaustic on pine board
45 x 30 cm
signed lower right: HST



Songlines - Living to Fish 2 2021
oil on canvas 170 x 110 cm
signed lower right: H S Tiernan



The Strangers 2022
oil on canvas 150 x 60 cm
signed verso



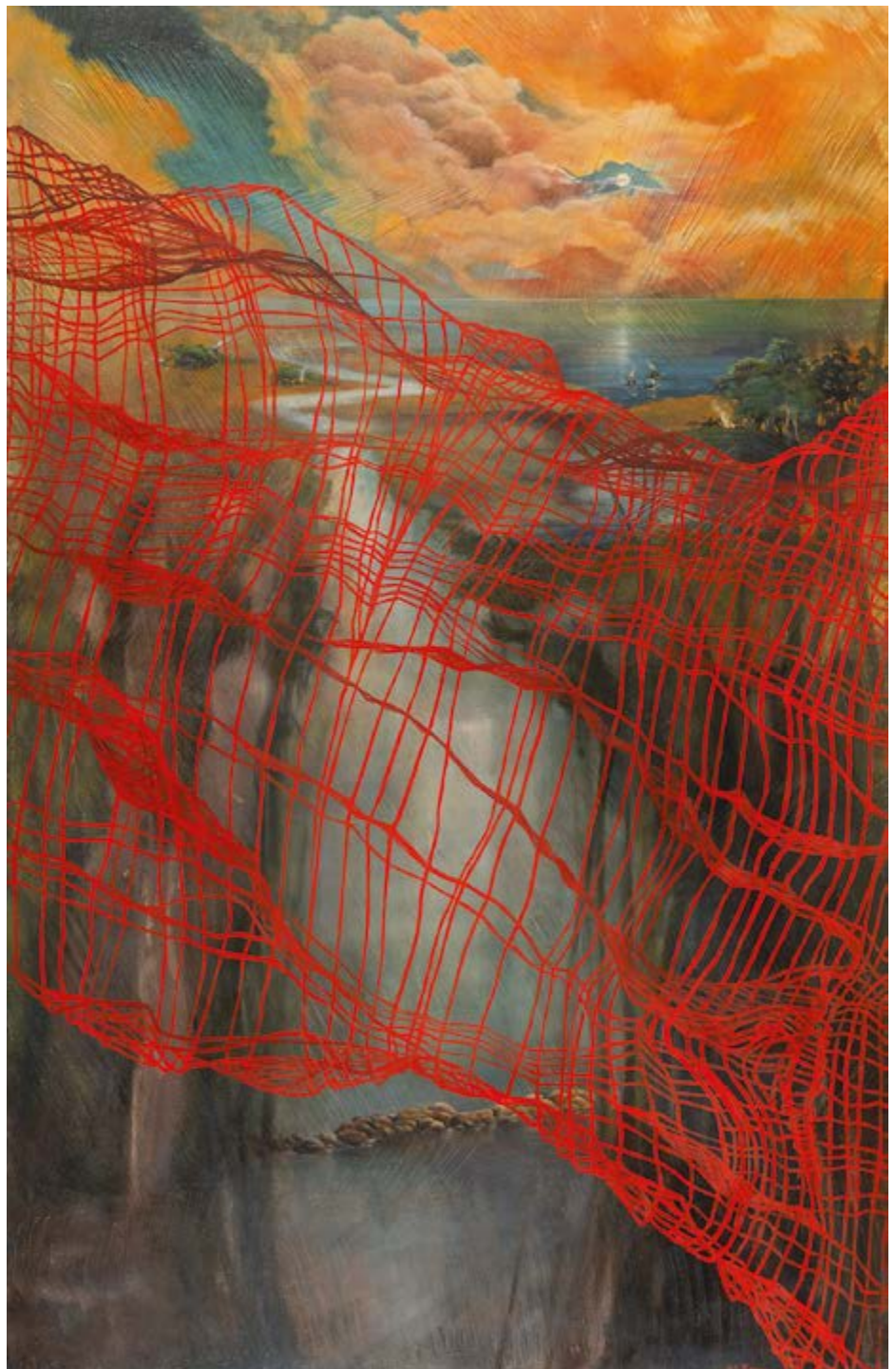
Woi Wurrung Ancient Bark Canoes 2021
oil on canvas 40 x 30 cm
signed lower right: HST



Scar Tree - Journey Lines 2021
 encaustic on pine board 45 x 30 cm
 signed lower right: HST



Wrong Way 2022
 oil on canvas 159 x 59.5 cm
 signed lower right: H S Tiernan



Holding the Land - Fish Net 2021
 oil on canvas 170 x 110 cm
 signed lower right: H S Tiernan

House Collection) spectacularly announced her interest in the narratives of colonial first encounters. At times using aerial view and multiple viewpoints with the format of panelled wall paper to be read like ancient navigational maps she painted the entrances along the eastern seaboard of Australia and its vast continental hinterland, that was claimed by Cook for the British. Like the vastness implied in Fred Williams' landscapes or Nolan's outback views, it takes a Bruegel interpretation of narrative with many tiny figures or vignettes studded all over the mapped surface. Hers was, by contrast, not one of a single moment in time, but many.

In 2017, Helen's exhibition, *Transculturation-Sublime & Surreal Encounters of First Contact in the Antipodes*, expanded her navigational history interrogations. It featured three major works about Cook's adventures in the Pacific, stimulated by Cook's scenic wallpapers (*Sauvages De La Mer Pacifique*). Significantly, it acknowledged the vital inter-cultural and diplomatic role played by his Polynesian navigator, artist, Tupia. All the major works were acquired by the National Maritime Museum in Sydney.

In Tiernan's exhibition of 2021, *Memory Space*, her focus was on the inland histories of colonial



Snakes and Ladders 2021
oil on canvas 180 x 330 cm (triptych)
signed lower right: Tiernan

settlement where success was often of the European's capacity to navigate rivers. Inspired by the ground-breaking international touring exhibition *Songlines - Tracking the Seven Sisters*, very subtle references to Songlines and their all-pervasive *Tjukurrpa* are often in these artworks which refer to landscapes / mindscapes of sea, land and sky Country.

In Tiernan's monumental work *Snakes and Ladders* she references Indigenous Law through picking up on the Seven Sisters and Rainbow Serpent Dreamings. The Sisters are visible in the flying fish-tailed woman Spirit figures and the Serpents as writhing snakes sculptured in mulga wood. With a subtle reference to the wholistic vision of the famous quote by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, "*I paint the lot*", is her monumental gridded board game - Snakes and Ladders. For this game of chance, players climbed ladders of 'knowledge' or descended snakes into 'darkness, with 'good' and 'bad' outcomes simply often a matter of chance - confronting life-lessons, not unlike the teachings of the Dreaming to the next generation.

In other works, Tiernan acknowledges that amongst the conflict of cross-cultural encounters there were also instances of cooperative colonial experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. To these she also presents a creative layering of issues of critical contemporary relevance related to environmental degradation and climate change. Capturing these is her brilliant, storied, three-panelled work *Fish Out of Water - Cultural Collisions*. Inspired by Nolan's *Riverbend* 1966, and histories of Victorian waterways like the Murray, Goulburn and the Barwon, the left panel, a symbol of

prosperous colonial European enterprise, frames a distant view of boathouses. Wharves are perched over the river, as a paddle steamer laden with recently felled logs glides slowly by and traditional scar trees refer to the ancient practices of canoe making.

On the far right, the original inhabitants of previous times, live undisturbed on the edge of a seemingly idyllic riverine encampment. Mysteriously hovering above is a mother and child adorned in pure white. It refers to a very famous narrative of the 'Gippsland folklore' explaining the circumstances surrounding the capture of a white woman of Gippsland, by local Aboriginal people.¹

The central panel, by contrast, mediates the contemporary interface. Here a parched landscape, bloodied by bushfire and a tree canopy writhing with the dead spirit-forms of fish, allude to once to the devastating impact of today's climate change and the nation-wide destruction of forests and wildlife by fire. At the same time, it subtly points to the absence today of the highly efficient traditional practices of fire-stick farming for land management in the region. The gilded reflections in the water, remind of the preciousness of water, which, like bullion, is increasingly a scarce resource today.

Tiernan also makes comment on the use of inland waterways and sea by Indigenous Australians in colonial times. Many paintings feature Aboriginal peoples fishing, including structures they built to facilitate food capture. Reinforcing Bruce Pascoe's observation that Aboriginal people were not nomads, but farmers, is the subtle vignette of a dam made of rocks in *Holding the Land - Fish Net*. In

Songlines - Living to Fish, as described by historian Bill Gammage, Aboriginal peoples farm without fences and are depicted in the bush settings as canoeists, fisherman and hunters.

Songlines - Living to Fish describe the everyday reality and ongoing cultural practice of survival and navigation on the waterways of eastern Australia. Using an evocative panoramic landscape format, where images, lines and symbols are used to encode traditional knowledge and storytelling in abstract and conceptual ways, she interweaves charming vignettes of traditional life, paying homage to such practices that were pursued well into the nineteenth century.

Tiernan's work is theatrically-staged and conceptually encoded with a dreamlike- surreal edge. Its irreverent intelligence with its subtle narrative layering, tease out marginalised narratives and point to new imaginings and directions of past injustices and Indigenous dispossession. Critically also, are refreshing counter-narratives that point to hidden histories where the Black/White encounters were accommodating and cooperative.

– Dr Marie Geissler

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FOOTNOTES:

1. See Julie Carr, *The Captive White Woman of Gipps Land: In Pursuit of the Legend*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1997



Songlines - Living to Fish 12021
oil on canvas 170 x 110 cm
signed lower right: H S Tiernan



Tupia's Sketchbook - Rituals 2017
oil on canvas 148 x 74 cm
signed lower right: HST 2017



Rock Engravings - Rock Face 2017
oil on canvas 96 x 45.5 cm
signed lower right: HST 2017



Port Jackson - Deep Time 2017
oil on canvas 161 x 59.5 cm
signed lower right: HST 2017



As Above so Below with Songlines 2021

oil on canvas 150 x 90 cm
signed lower right: H S Tiernan



Eora Family Fishing in Wooden Boats with Catch 2021

oil on canvas 30 x 40.5 cm
signed lower right: H S Tiernan



Scar Tree - Red River Gum 2021

encaustic on pine board
45 x 30 cm
signed lower right: HST

COVER

Fish Out of Water - Cultural Collisions (detail) 2021

oil on canvas 180 x 330 cm (triptych)
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other hours by appointment