

Boonwurrung Country
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A CLOSER LOOK AT ... PAINTINGS BY HELEN S. TIERNAN

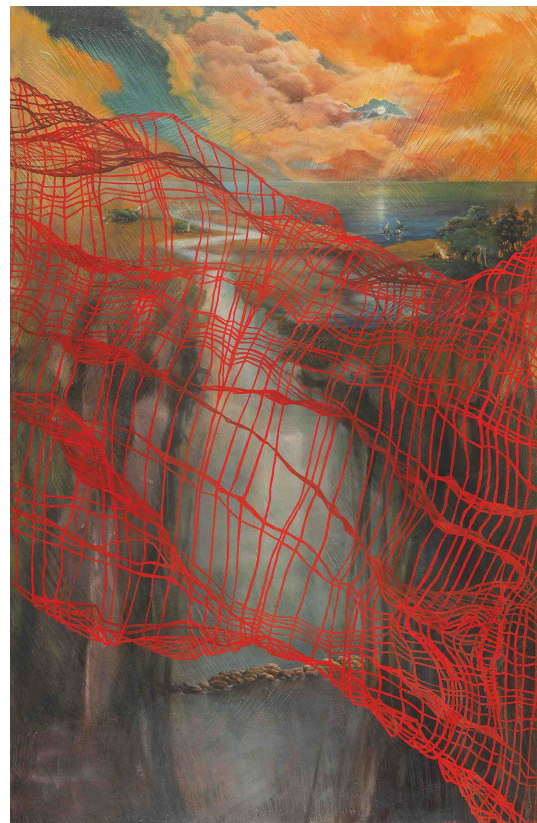
It is certainly worthwhile taking a closer look at Helen S. Tiernan's paintings to discover the many different layers she explores beyond the aesthetic presentation of landscape, whether it be her use of small vignettes within a larger canvas; her use of texture; or discovery of the varied themes she includes from indigenous culture; contact history; environmental concerns and the experience of women. Her paintings also draw on references to Australian history; imagery inspired by numerous Australian artists and researched literary references.

The visual appeal of Helen's painting is enhanced by these complexities which she imbues in her work. Born in Gippsland, Helen draws on her mixed cultural heritage, including Irish and Indigenous ancestry, to explore the many issues she presents through her painting. Her landscapes belie the numerous threads woven together to present a strong message of indigenous survival and connection to land and culture, albeit in a gentle and perhaps subtle framework.

There are several themes we find Helen returns to throughout her oeuvre, including waterways; navigation; the importance of stories and story-telling and aspects of cross-cultural collisions and engagement.



Songlines – Living to Fish 1 2021 170 x 110 cm



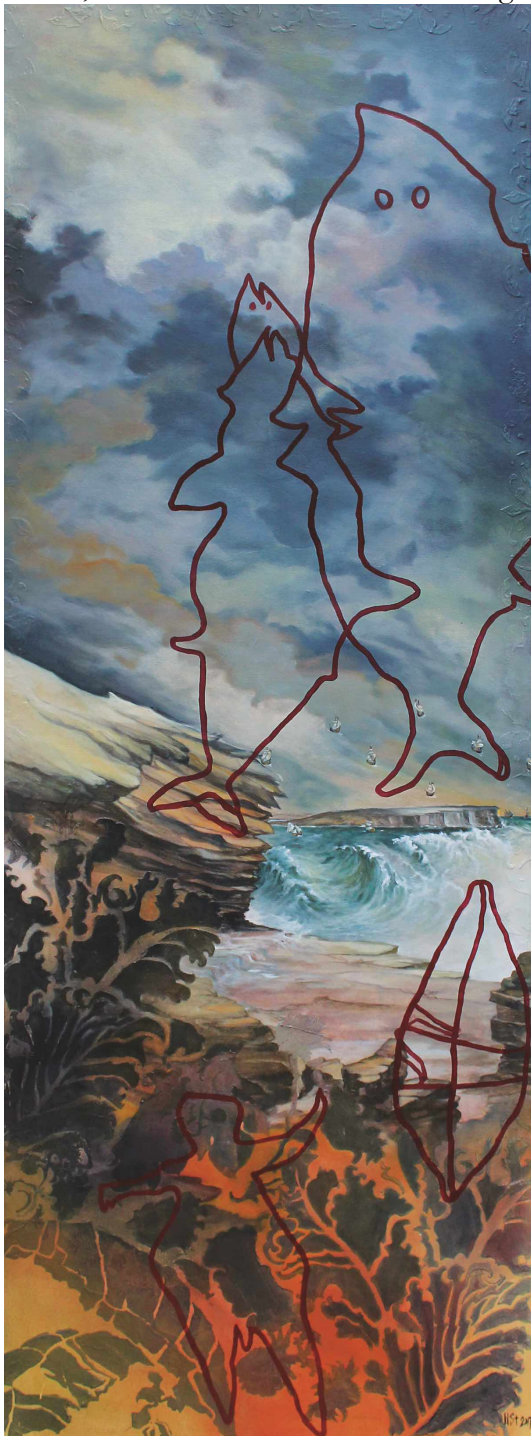
Holding the Land – Fish Net 2021 170 x 110 cm

A main theme is the use of waterways by Indigenous Australians. Many paintings feature Aboriginal peoples depicted in bush settings as canoeists, fishermen and hunters. She reflects on their navigational and settlement histories, presenting a strong and dignified people that found a place for themselves in the new reality of European occupation. Focusing on Indigenous survival on the waterways against the adverse circumstances they encountered, their cultural practices, including the use of fish traps and dams and the concept of farming without fences, remained largely intact. This can be seen in the smaller canvases and encaustic on pine board paintings as well as larger paintings such as *Songlines – Living to Fish* and *Holding the Land – Fish Net*.

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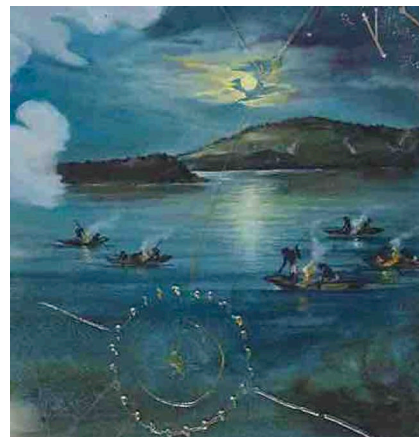
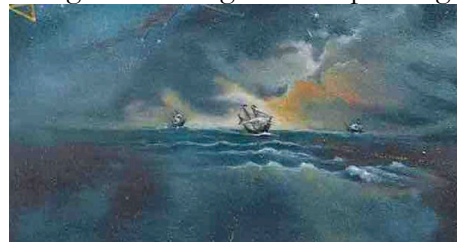
These paintings are typical of Helen's work with their beautiful use of colour and exhibit a real glow. They also employ her use of textured surfaces, like the skin of the painting is scarred, much like the land is scarred with patterns and designs implying an indigenous presence, or relating to body paint or carved designs, as for example on shields. Sometimes, the surface of her work is embossed with navigational elements, appearing to be overlaid with representations of compass points or astronomical elements, or indigenous songlines (which are sometimes given visual representation through the red linear aspects of her work). Other ways Helen uses texture in her work, besides the sensuous application of paint itself and beyond the literal use of painted patterns, include the use of paper to create layering and depth and pattern, and the use of material pressed into paint itself to create a tactile surface. This latter technique makes reference to the experience of women and their sphere of 'the home', the role of seamstresses and indigenous women within a colonial home.



Such elements can be found in *Port Jackson - Deep Time* (2017, 161 x 59.5 cm) which also makes use of Helen's preference for inserting small vignettes into her works.

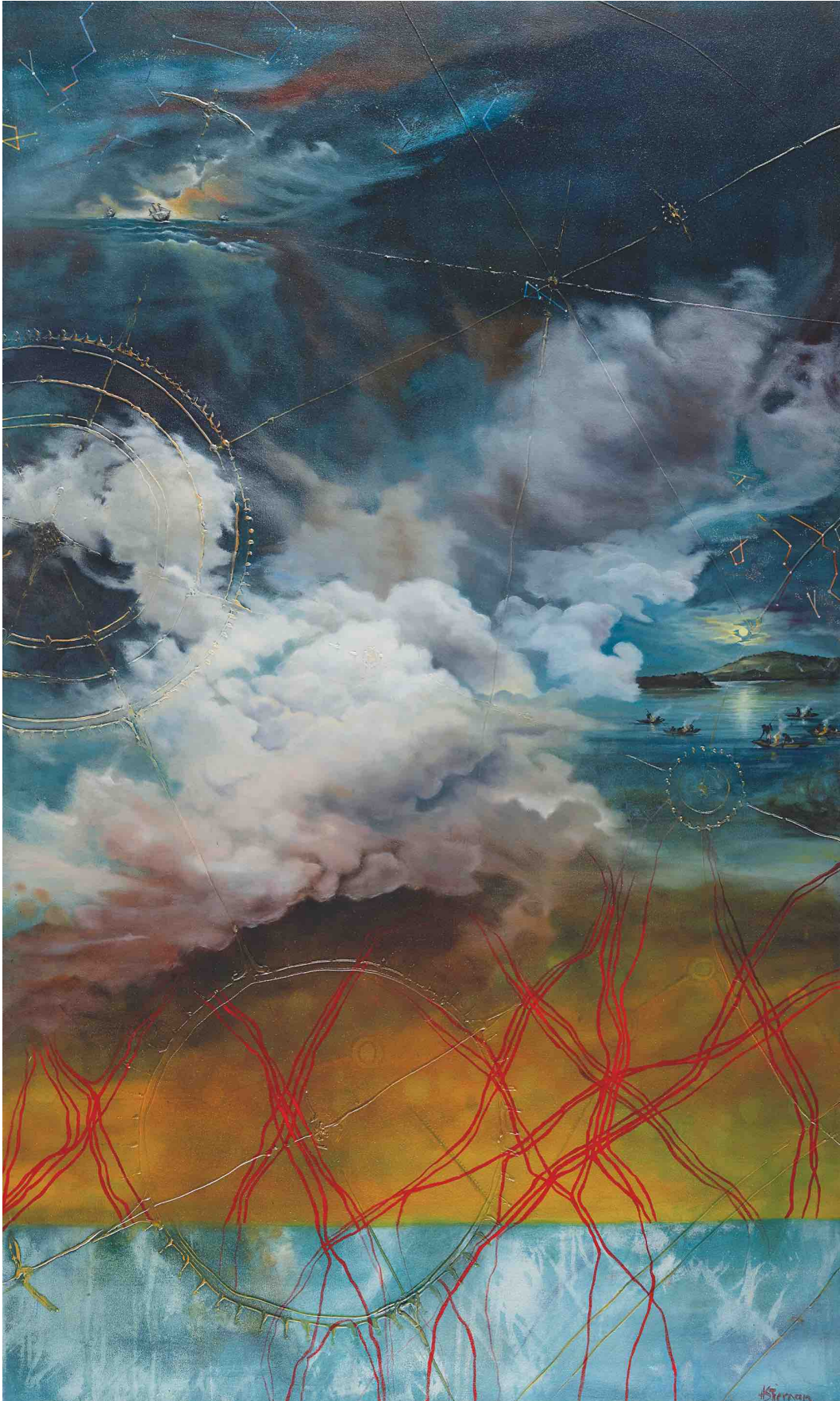
Here, the small white dots, which from a distance appear to be foam thrown up from the wild waves below, are in fact colonial ships of the First Fleet.

The use of small vignettes is characteristic of Helen's work, calling the viewer into a closer engagement with each painting and augmenting the narrative aspects. For example, in *As Above So Below with Songlines* (2021, 150 x 90 cm) the tall masted ships navigating the waves in the top left are balanced against the flotilla of canoes bathed in moonlight on the right of the painting.



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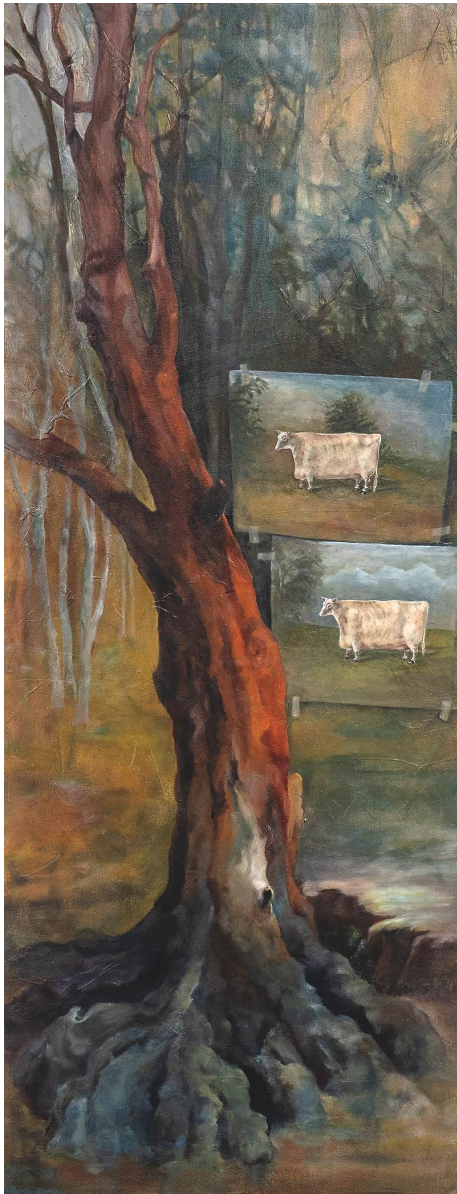


Helen S. Tiernan *As Above So Below With Songlines* 2021 oil on canvas 150 x 90 cm

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Helen's recent return to Victoria has seen a renewed inspiration from the Gippsland area, and a new visual device –quirky, corpulent, square stud bulls and spotted cows. Synonymous with Gippsland today, these cattle are a reminder of colonial settlement and reference such imagery from throughout art history, from colonial artists to William Dobell to John Kelly. They further point to exploitative farming which has seen the destruction of local Indigenous culture, fauna and lands. In *The Strangers*, the cattle are taped onto the canvas, mocking their outsider presence and contrasting with the ancient stately river red gum, asserting a proud indigenous expression and recalling the forest settings of the Australian Impressionists of the Heidelberg School and Sidney Nolan's *Riverbend* series. *Reflecting Heidelberg* is an homage to the European invasion with the cattle now a small army of five populating a manicured green landscape chessboard against the native bush. A deserted canoe sinks into the river – a haunting reminder of a life now fading.



The Strangers 2022 150 x 60 cm



Reflecting Heidelberg 2022 150 x 60 cm

Helen notes, “my paintings are encoded with Indigenous symbols and patters that express meanings that go deep into the unconscious, pointing to understandings related to the sentience, sacredness and power of the land which words can't always capture. It is a way of allowing the viewer to engage more imaginatively with the painting and bring their own experiences and readings of the works.”

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We welcome you to visit Helen's exhibition *Storied Country*
showing at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art until 18 November 2022
which also showcases two triptychs incorporating a culmination of the themes and issues
Helen explores through her painting to date.

Read further about these works online or in the Gallery.



Fish Out of Water – Cultural Collisions 2021 oil on canvas 180 x 330 cm



Snakes and Ladders 2021 oil on canvas 180 x 330 cm

To view the exhibition online and download the illustrated catalogue please [visit our website](#)
where you can also enjoy a video of the exhibition opening by **Steve Dimopoulos MP**
and floortalk by **Dr Marie Geissler**, author of *Dreaming the Land* (2022)
who gives greater insight into Helen's paintings.

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Gallery Hours – Tues – Fri 10am – 6pm or by appointment
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