



Helen S. Tiernan
Two Views:
As Above, So Below

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Helen Tiernan's new exhibition presents us with different rhythms of the same song. She is an artist eager to impart key messages through her practice, anchored in both her indigenous and European heritage, the experiences and culture equally from her life and her studies of art history. Her artwork is layered, imbued with a meld of indigenous and western learnings and understandings. At its heart, is story-telling, from Aboriginal songlines to western classics and her message is centrally about land, sea and sky – the totality - and about people, identity and place.

By drawing on different seams and exposing a layering of history and time, Tiernan adds a complexity to her visually appealing oeuvre. Just as we can rub back a surface to see what lies beneath, the original earlier marks are not lost, just built upon. This is Tiernan's approach to her art, continually enhancing her foundation of knowledge towards new developments; and using the personal to explore universal themes. As different concerns and styles emerge, Tiernan is drawn to a particular series built around that focus, however it is always a continuing construction of similar themes.



Clockwise from top left; *Cetaceans #4*, *Cetaceans #3*, *Cetaceans #2*, *Cetaceans #1*
all oil on canvas
90 x 90 cm

In this way, these latest paintings extend from her artworks already so admired and awarded and collected, including in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra; National Maritime Museum, Sydney and Parliament House, Canberra. They continue to present themes of protection of country; black/white contact; marginalised people; the role of women and concern for the environment.

Drawing on her indigenous heritage, Tiernan looked to create her own visual language to incorporate into her paintings. In a series of abstracted works, Tiernan has undertaken an in-depth interrogation of this mark making, stripping things back to pure abstraction. This was a difficult challenge, having to put aside all that she had learnt at art school in Canberra and the way she had worked until now.

“The concentric circle was my starting point, and deconstructing it to create my journey into abstraction, nonobjective non-relational or literal. Which meant I was tormented by breaking all knowledge of my art school and life training to conceptualize and make real.”

Paintings such as *Not Actual* and *White Light* are explorations of shape, colour and composition; these key essentials of art studies here presented as separate elements and in combination with each other. Tiernan looked to artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Sonia Delaunay, and the ideas of Australian modernists particularly Roy de Maistre are evident, along with more contemporary references including Marie Hegarty.



Left
Abstract Vermillion 2024
oil on canvas
90 x 90 cm



Right
Abstract Coeruleum 2024
oil on canvas
90 x 90 cm

Yet she has also been inspired by artists including Emily Kngwarreye and Sally Gabori and the new wave of younger artists painting today, masters of colour, whose paintings may appear to be abstract but are in fact saturated with cultural meaning which can be understood on different levels. Tiernan's *Abstract* series (*Vermillion*, *Coeruleum*, *Viridian*) have an undeniable feel of meaning with three lines slashed across the canvas in strong hues. There is perhaps an echo of ceremonial body paint design.

The intrigue of design piqued Tiernan's curiosity from early in her life, on a personal level through the patterns and fabrics she encountered through her mother's dressmaking. Following her own studies in textile design, this is an ongoing component of her painting and again reveals extensive layering – from personal meaning; to mark-making and patterning, particularly as it relates to Aboriginal culture, especially to women; to the role of women as homemaker; to colonial lacemaking and on a different level, the idea of threads being drawn together to create something new and unique and the richness of Tiernan's painted surface which often features patterning, perhaps through a stencil overlay. This can be seen in the latest whale paintings, where this has been used to great effect, the patterned veil suggestive of kelp.

Despite her examination of an abstract voice, it is difficult to release the importance of story-telling. This aspect of her works comes to the fore in the large 'fantasy realism' paintings. *Land, Sea and Sky* look to recurring themes, again the layering of time and history and culture, here linked with journey. Each of these paintings fluctuates between personal and universal, drawing on moral narratives, combining mythologies from indigenous culture along with western classic literature, Alice in Wonderland; Moby Dick; Gulliver's Travels.

The use of fantasy, imagination and absurdity in such tales is of notable appeal, as Tiernan similarly uses wit and satire, allowing important messages to be approachable.



In *Sky*, we are projected into a world of mapping, navigation and constellations. The top of the painting depicts Baiame, creator spirit emu and star maps. The three floating islands are a commentary on the 'footprint' of humanity, left on pristine nature, reflecting Tiernan's concerns for the environment. The lower imagery has evolved from her studies of abstraction and the pure relationships between shape and colour and symbol. There is concurrently a link to the circles and lines found in much Aboriginal art, representative of country and stories.

Sky 2024
oil on canvas
180 x 110

In *Land*, we are presented with Alice and the White Rabbit contemplating the topsy-turvy nature of the Antipodes, their checkboard ribboned path akin to Dorothy's Yellow Brick Road, perhaps a road to hope and self-discovery. The stark empty centre represents cleared land, where the predicament of native versus introduced species is embodied through the now extinct thylacine and the square cow (the corpulent colonial cow being another series within Tiernan's oeuvre). Again, an element of abstraction features, especially the concentric circle and lines meandering across the canvas – meaningful or not?



Sea incorporates a layering of time, from rock art depictions of fish to a homage to Micky of Ulladulla (Dhurga, c.1820 – 1891) whose depictions of fishing on the south coast of NSW in the 1880s is recreated in Tiernan's painting, to a majestic timeless whale. The viewer is drawn to the amusing addition of a rubber duck, a commentary on overconsumption and the pollution of plastics in our planet's water systems.



Similarly, *Saving Nemo* depicts the little fish precariously balanced on a whale tail as an unconcerned trawler drains the ocean. These works are tinged with Tiernan's humour, making a statement on the plight of humanity and the planet.

Top
Land 2024
 oil on canvas
 110 x 180 cm

Bottom
Cetacean: Humpback Connecting 2025
 oil on canvas
 90 x 143 cm

Tiernan's return to Gippsland heightened her awareness of whales however it was a Gunditjmara event that really set in motion the latest series from Tiernan's brush. In July 2023 a group of Aboriginal elders gathered in Apollo Bay to talk about the oceans and protection for koontapool, the southern right whale. Sonic blasts from fossil fuel companies disrupt the whales ability to navigate and communicate through underwater sound. The importance of the event solidified for Tiernan as she watched three whales breach to the cultural singing. As ever, Tiernan was impelled towards a new artistic expression through a fascination of these huge mammals that circumnavigate the globe. Her research led her to learn more about these majestic creatures, including through science and nature documentaries from Brian Cox and David Attenborough and authors including Annalisa Berta.

Whales live in the water but are mammals, their need for air a connection to humanity. Their sense of community and the family structure of these marine mammals was also of appeal. As was the enduring mystery of the deep – there is still so much to learn about the depths the oceans hold.

Sea: Saving Nemo
2025
oil on canvas
153 x 102 cm



The whale series are simply titled *Cetaceans*, describing 90 species of whales, dolphins, porpoises, from the Latin *Cetus* (a large sea creature) and Greek *Ketos* (whale or sea monster).

These paintings retain Tiernan's enduring interest in the surface of her paintings, from overlaid patterning to scratching back the surface, reflecting the lasting scarring ships and nets can cause; a visual representation of all the whale has encountered in its personal history. There is a suggestion here too of the use of scarring in indigenous culture; let alone the scars inflicted through black/white contact.

The layering of meaning throughout Tiernan's opus give her paintings a pulsating quality. These recent whale paintings encapsulate her recent environmental concerns, particularly the pollution of sea country, including noise pollution. The bands across these canvases are representative of this sonic sound pollution; but are also echo waves of communication and indigenous songlines of journey – different rhythms of the same song.

White Light 2024
oil on canvas
152.5 x 102 cm

Ruth Lovell
With thanks to Helen Tiernan and to Marie Geissler, particularly for her words, "Different Rhythms of the Same Song"



Cetacean: Mother and Child 2025
oil on canvas
90 x 143 cm

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BACK COVER
Sea 2024
oil on canvas
180 x 110 cm

FRONT COVER
**Cetacean: White Tail with
Sonic Waves** 2025
oil on canvas
143 x 90 cm



Not Actual 2024
oil on canvas
102 x 153 cm

Toy World 2024
oil on canvas
diptych 20 x 50 cm





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Tues – Friday 10 am – 6 pm
other hours by appointment