



# **JOHN DENT:** Gouaches

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**McLaren Vale S.A.**  
gouache on paper  
56.5 x 72 cm

John Dent is known for his technically demanding prints and his painting career since the early 1970s. His years of years of looking, creating and his extensive knowledge and appreciation of art throughout history is matched with his disciplined work ethic; the essential skill of drawing, considered compositions and most significantly, a harmonious use of colour. Dent's subject matter often explores everyday objects in intriguing still lifes. In his gouaches, Dent continues this investigation, however the majority depict landscapes: waded-filled coastlines; sweeping plains; rolling hills; panoramic vistas; pastoral idylls; serpentine roads and rivers; nocturnal tableaux.

Whilst painting and printmaking are more exacting, there is a freedom in using the gouache medium, evident in this suite of works. Gouache is the technique of using pigment suspended in a water soluble binder. There is a similar immediacy in application to watercolour but with an opaque matte finish, allowing for both broad washes of colour and textured

brushmarks. Gouache allows the artist to employ layers and there is less urgency in making any alterations, providing a greater capacity to build an image. For a colourist such as Dent, there is an innate understanding of how the opaque colour dries lighter than when applied and a consideration of materials, with the quality and choice of paper weighted to allow the pigment to best colour the rag.

Gouache is a medium favoured by artists painting en plein air, with portable sheets of light paper and quick drying paint. Certainly Dent employs this method, with a spontaneity apparent in these gouaches painted in the landscape - from early painting excursions in the 1970s with artists including Ian Armstrong and Fred Williams, both celebrated proponents of gouache; to European travels; to extended travels around northern Australia. His journeys throughout Australia were taken perhaps with a deeper appreciation for this country's landscape after prolonged time living in Europe and facilitated the opportunity to stop when captivated by a vista and spend a few moments

or a few hours to capture the view. The ability to realise the potential in a location is recognised in Dent's appearance as a finalist on three occasions in the Wynne Prize and further understood in this artist statement for a painting title Rapid Bay at Noon:

*"The summer hues of orange, yellow and purple predominate. The colours of emperors, which perhaps symbolised their dominance of the land. Travelling 20 minutes south, the hills of the Fleurieu Peninsula appear. Rounded and well worn. Further - bushlands, grazing country, and after 45 kms, a turn to the right, the traveller is plunged abruptly towards the sea..."*

Certainly, the landscapes are identifiable; Sydney Harbour and the Rocks in New South Wales; Robe, Flinders Ranges and the McLaren Vale in South Australia; Alice Springs and Wallace Rockhole in the Northern Territory; the Kimberley and Kununurra in Western Australia; the Victorian countryside and the ocean coastline of the Mornington Peninsula. Beyond the visual representation, there is a real



**Purple Pub, Normanton**  
gouache on paper  
71 x 55.5 cm



**The Blue Train**  
gouache on paper  
56 x 70 cm



**Natura Morta**  
gouache on paper  
75.5 x 49 cm



**Backbeach Sorrento**  
gouache on paper  
75 x 51.5 cm



**Lighthouse, Robe SA**  
gouache on paper  
57 x 75 cm

*On passing McLaren Vale, the land opens to a huge panorama, reminiscent of Provenance.*

attempt to convey a 'feel' of place. These are not quick 'drive by' sketches but reveal time spent with the motif. They are poetic and soaked with atmosphere; awash with light and subtle or sometimes forceful transitions of colour. Calligraphic squiggles are suggestive of details; roads punctuate the curves of landscapes and sinewy trees draw our eye upwards. The compositions veer towards abstraction where the sensation of colour and shape take priority.

Colour is foremost. Presented all together the gouaches are a celebration of colour -bright, soft, complimentary and contrasting. The colours pulsate against each other.

Many works present a general impression of colour appropriate to the landscape, from the aquamarine of beach scenes, to pastoral green, to the gentle lilac or dry gold of hills and the red earth of central and northern Australia. It is only when we really examine each work that the full the array of colours actually employed is revealed. The images of Sydney at night appear as black, yet they are constructed of browns and



**McLaren Vale S.A.**  
gouache on paper  
5.5 x 76.5 cm

deep dark blues, with touches of pink and bright red and pinpricks of white/yellow lights.

There are instances of bold hues, particularly the sparkle of coastal waters or the deep crimson of the Kimberley or the bright green of Aldinga.

Many works use a small touch of bright highlight that really stun with the audaciousness of colour; like the touch of hot pink across the roofline in

*Hawker, Flinders Ranges.* Or the electric orange of autumn trees in *The Gully.*

Many of the gouaches are understated and quiet with muted colours. Landscapes depicted in a soft colour palette of greens/purples/ochres, like *Victorian Landscape* or *Hills, N.T.*, where the soft chromatics are echoed in the optics of fluffy trees; or the rosy blush of *McMahons Point, NSW* or *Fred the Lyrebird*, blending with



**Pink River, N.T.**  
gouache on paper  
56 x 72.5 cm

the background like camouflage. Again, closer observation reveals the extent of colours layered and contiguous, singing and zinging.

The view of *Wonboyn, NSW*, is rendered with touches of orange in the sky which reflect the sand below and contrast with the green of the hills and blue of the water. The cross shape of the composition is suggestive of expanse, with the highlights of red and purple providing an anchor and giving solidity to the land.

Although many landscapes have been completed in situ, Dent is willing to compromise reality for a successful composition and lyricism. The poetry of his painting inspired the following description:

*“close-keyed pictures of a gently rural Victoria... full of coloured greys, swooping tracks, odd country corners, and old barns... In a way they are romantic ruins, visual histories that carry a note of nostalgia with its hint of abandonment... They are held together by the sensitive juggling of verticals and horizontal.”*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Millar, John Dent: Life on Four Wheels, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, 2000



**Sydney Harbour**  
gouache on paper  
75.5 x 50 cm



**Wonboyn, NSW**  
gouache on paper  
57 x 72 cm



**Roses**  
gouache on paper  
62 x 43 cm



**The Meeting - Rocks**  
gouache on paper  
55 x 78 cm



**Aldinga S.A.**  
gouache on paper  
57 x 65.5 cm

Narrative is hinted at with elements of humanity quietly included: fence posts; dirt roads; a ferry steaming across the waves; homes nestled amongst hills. In one instance, actual figures enter the picture at the *Purple Pub in Normanton QLD*. Similar to Dent's stimulating combinations of still life elements in his *Natura Morta*, thought-provoking elements frequently appear in these gouache works - perhaps the composition or a strange or unusual object or shape or colour. A streak of vivid blue at the foothills of the mountain range at *Alice Springs*; the twilight colours reflected on skinny white gum trunks, their bars a counterpoint to the vista beyond in *McLaren Vale*; a strip of bright red marking out a track at *Cooper Pedy*; the linear stacking of the rolling waves at *Backbeach Sorrento*; the remarkable converging of roads and red rock at the *Entrance to Alice Springs*; the high horizon line in *Harcourt* and the pink road leading to a dwelling paralleled between the linear fence and train line in *The Blue Train*.

Interestingly, one of the *Natura Morta* subjects stages two separate views. Perhaps in an effort to encourage viewers to 'look twice' Dent presents repeated panoramic views on the same page. This 'strip' style was most famously used in Australia by Fred Williams in his gouache works but is a tradition harking back to Italian roots and then popularised in France centuries ago. The technique was integral for charting coastlines and Dent cites the scientific Baudin expedition of 1801.



**The Gully**  
gouache on paper  
55 x 80.5 cm



**Victor Harbour S.A.**  
gouache on paper  
57.5 x 67 cm



**McMahons Point, Sydney**  
gouache on paper  
55 x 70 cm



**Fred**  
gouache on paper  
55.5 x 40.5 cm

A triptych across one page provides several opportunities. It may enhance narrative; for example in *Sydney Harbour* we can revel in the tourist ferry experience – Look! There's the Opera House and Oh over here is Luna Park! The technique also allows Dent to express different vistas – the split view either extending the panorama we are exposed to or providing a distant and detailed view at once, like in *South Australian Landscape*. Whilst not strictly in the strip format, many of the ocean beach views are broken into the same sense of separate visual blocks through the breaking of the rolling waves.

Dent's gouaches are a celebration of colour and of locale, they capture an atmosphere beyond an observed outlook. They are lyrical with the rhythm of landscape and the gradual emergence of resonating colour. Dent's gouaches are saturated – in colour, in experience and place.

– Ruth Lovell

**Kimberley**  
gouache on paper  
57 x 72 cm



***Entrace to Alice Springs***

gouache on paper  
72.5 x 57 cm

**COVER**

***Victorian Landscape***

gouache on paper  
57 x 65 cm

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