

# Margaret Ackland

*“The closed world of a still life settles and calms me, allowing me to get lost in the tones and colours . . .”*

By Dr Joseph Brennan

“When I was a student in the 70s watercolour was not even mentioned as a possibility, sneeringly considered a hobbyist preoccupation,” Sydney artist Margaret Ackland tells me when asked about a self-described present preoccupation with watercolour.

“I had not used watercolour at all until I was given a Windsor & Newton set in 2011; a few years later I started using them, mainly because I was in danger of missing a deadline. I loved how immediate and easy they were, with the possibility to address both incredibly fine detail and accidental beauty as wet meets wet. I began a daily habit of painting a small response to the daily newspaper every morning. This became *The Watercolour News* and lasted for five years.”



*Lemons and Lines*, 2021, watercolour, 45 × 50cm



*Hearts and Flowers*, 2022, watercolour, 65 × 39cm



Ahead of *Margaret Ackland: Balancing Act*, an exhibition of recent watercolours showing at Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne, from 9 to 27 August 2022, I speak with the artist about watercolours devoted to domestic affairs, how the cataclysm of global events shaped works of a more private-and-precarious subject, and the genesis of new work in the shifting spaces of recent artistic practice.

*For this exhibition you turn your gaze away from the daily news headlines and inward, toward more private moments of interiority, capturing forms and textures of daily life. I suspect that such inward turning (including from news media) will have resonance for many in the present historical moment, but what inspired your own turn inwards and how has such a turn shaped you as an artist, your work and your experience in the studio?*

I've had a long habit of returning to still life when I'm unsure about my direction. The closed world of a still life settles and calms me, allowing me to get lost in the tones and colours before me. During the pandemic what began as a distraction became my main preoccupation as more and more was revealed in the distorted reflections and shadows in front of me. The whole set up often threatened to topple (and often did). It felt like an appropriate response to the crazy world around us.

*The COVID-19 pandemic saw your dining table replace your studio for some months – a condition that suited some of your watercolours that were small enough to occupy that space. Back in your studio now, what have you learnt about the role of space in your practice, and how have these learnings shaped what we'll see in *Balancing Act*?*

I'm very lucky to live within walking distance from my studio. Also lucky that I can spread out my work at home and no one complains. I have been trying to do larger work but am finding that in both the studio and home I'm more and more limited by my inability to lean over my work for too long. I still work at home a couple of days a week and often have "home" projects and "studio" projects on the go at the same time.

*How many works are on show in your forthcoming exhibition, and how did you arrive at the title (*Balancing Act*)? In your view, what does this title say about the works that are on show?*

The title, *Balancing Act*, is taken from one of the works. It reflects the chaotic nature of the past few years as well as the actual balancing act of setting up the objects. During the 2021 lockdown I worked at home and found my subject there as well.



Margaret Ackland in her studio  
Photograph: V. Branson



*Dance*, 2021, watercolour, 71 × 68cm

In some of these works, objects and flowers are stacked together in precarious towers. They also reflect both the backdrop of the little “set” I made, the room I’m working in and sometimes a tiny self-portrait. There will be eighteen works on the gallery walls.

Margaret Ackland is represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne.

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All images courtesy the artist