



# Margaret Ackland



Margaret Ackland's paintings rarely portray the human figure, though they still tell very personal stories about people, often through the rendering of clothes or discarded objects. While on the tour, Ackland took the opportunity to research both indigenous and non-indigenous people who had lived in and occupied the land surrounding Fowlers Gap. Using both found photos and the oral stories of indigenous elder, Badger Bates, as her inspiration, Ackland has made a suite of paintings that simultaneously depict the character of the landscape and the personal histories of those who have previously lived in the land.

058

**YOU'RE KNOWN** to explore private histories and identities, which you render in meticulously painted items of clothing. Surrounded by a gaggle of landscape painters, how were you feeling heading into the tour?

I had to work at not feeling intimidated in the company of such seriously good landscape painters, but the chance to work uninterrupted by the cares of everyday life was such a gift that I was determined not to waste a minute.

Also, I am extremely urban, most happy in a big city, and I was a little nervous about spending so much time in those wide open spaces and concerned that my lack of empathy for the landscape would somehow show in the work. As it turned out, I felt so completely out of my comfort zone it was actually quite liberating.

**And once settled into the final destination, how did you tackle the landscape? At what did you find yourself looking?**

My plan was to not fret too much about my own performance but to go out every day and address what was in front of me, trusting that something would eventually fall into place. Every morning I walked out into the landscape and simply began to make images from wherever I found myself. In the afternoons I would paint at some tables we set up on the verandah, trying to make some sense of what I had played with earlier.

One morning Idris came ambling along carrying a beautiful, dead owl and for the first time I felt that I had found something that linked with the work I had been doing in my studio. The dead things seemed to symbolise something about the sense of beauty and loss that my work is often about.

At dinner one night I noticed some old framed photographs of a family that had lived in Fowlers Gap in 1900. I started playing with those images when I was having trouble making a drawing of trees one evening. I didn't want to waste a gorgeous piece of paper and so scrubbed the tree drawing back and used the images of the



01



02



03

“ I am extremely urban, most happy in a big city, and I was concerned that my lack of empathy for the landscape would somehow show in the work.

059

people over what became a ghostly landscape. It's those images that have most stayed with me and been my inspiration for the final works I developed in my studio.

**Since returning to your studio, you have made a series of large paintings that hark back to the core of your practice – exploring the private histories of people and Fowlers Gap as a place. Can you tell me about these works and how you got there?**

When I returned I set up a little laboratory in the entrance to my studio, putting up as many of the small works as I could. I continued to work in a sketchbook every day with gouache and watercolour. I developed a few of the landscape sketches into small paintings and was quite happy with them but felt that I needed a lot more time to develop an authentic language for the land.

My feelings about the landscape remained ambivalent. I felt its presence had a kind of dark subconscious and kept thinking back to the figures in the photographs. How dislocated they must have felt in their starched Victorian clothing, how forbidding and harsh that landscape must have been.

I also read a bit on the idea of the Australian Gothic. I read a bit of Patrick White's *Tree of Man*, specifically the first chapter with its almost biblical feel where 'the man' seems to just appear in the landscape and has to learn to live with it.

**The life of an artist is often one of solitude. How did you find the experience of working amongst a group of artists?**

It was wonderful. Such an easy group to like and be with. The group fell into a pattern of working without any difficulty and even more importantly there was lots of laughter and good food shared.

**What challenges did this trip throw at you and your painting?**

The challenge for me is to recapture that few weeks when nothing else mattered but making art. So much can get in the way of good work habits. In some ways it was like being a student again, only with the benefit of many years of experience and someone else cooking your meals.

**And what was the most enjoyable part of the tour?**

Top three. The company, the food, the lack of telecommunications. ■

Margaret Ackland is represented by Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne, and Anthea Polson Art, Gold Coast.

[www.flg.com.au](http://www.flg.com.au)  
[www.antheapolsonart.com.au](http://www.antheapolsonart.com.au)

**EXHIBITION**  
Harrison Galleries, Sydney  
23 Jun to 12 Jul 2012  
[www.harrisongalleries.com.au](http://www.harrisongalleries.com.au)

01 Zebra Finch, 2011, oil on linen, 30 x 30cm  
02 Mementos, 2011, oil on linen, 40 x 45cm  
03 Horizon Line, 2011, oil on linen, 60 x 90cm  
Images courtesy the artist and Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne.