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# Art Almanac

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Once More With Feeling    Uncharted Territory  
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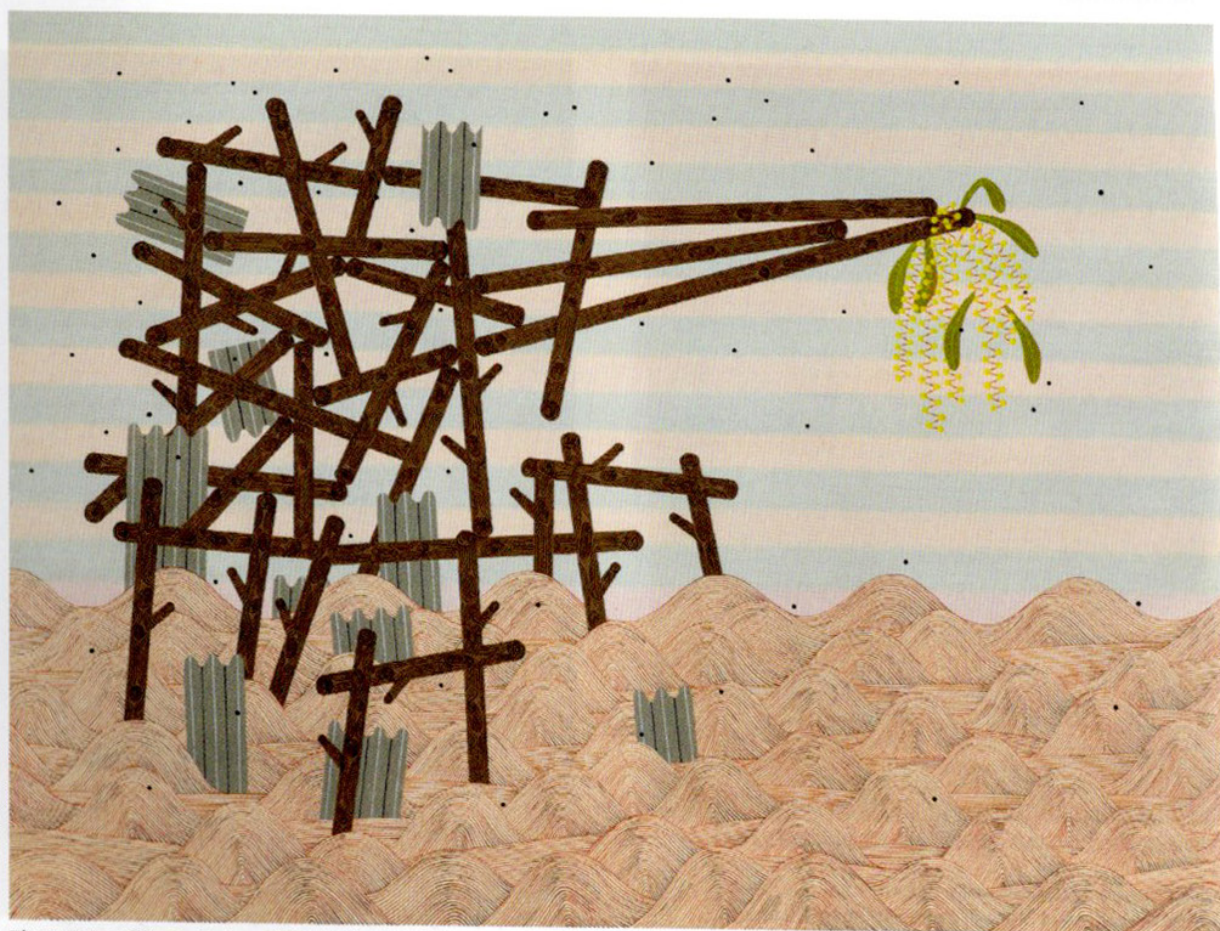
# Authority

By Dr Judith Pugh

## *“Flowers, abstraction, landscape.”*

This essay attempts to articulate why the work of three different artists attracts me. The exercise begins by describing the work, itself also different.

Margaret Ackland's pictures glow with energy. It is first startling and then obvious that her pictures are watercolour; but these flowers: in glass vases, with silver, subvert both the still-life tradition and the medium. She came to watercolour to meet a deadline: she needed a picture quickly and oil paint dries slowly; she used a newspaper photograph and sent the painting to the show. Then for five years she painted newspaper photographs. There's a group on the wall in her apartment: transitory moments framed, black on white, rendered ironic by the ebullient colours of her current pictures. Painting flowers of course means capturing the transitory, so she takes her own photographs now. Photography is a tool; the light changes, the petals and leaves move and wilt. Her stash of glass and silver objects offer transparent light and reflection as a reward for patience. The size of her vivid exciting images explains my failure first to see that



Fiona Somerville, *Goldmine*, 2015, synthetic polymer on canvas, 120 × 170cm



Ackland is working in watercolour. The medium happens in the moment. Its immediacy readily succeeds on a small scale but requires painstaking commitment in these large works. Mistakes can't be fixed in watercolour. "You get one go," Ackland remarks. These pictures are anchored in drawing, and in persistence, the composition sophisticated and witty. The giant vases of exuberant flowers are surrounded by patterns, as if they stand in front of wallpaper. "I'm interested in patterns."

When Lisa McKimmie returned to Sydney from years abroad, I was in regional New South Wales. I first saw her portraits on Facebook: they displayed a command of drawing, of composition, and all her humour and

humanity. McKimmie first trained as a scientist, and that seems to provide a way of approaching the cultures in which she's lived, the confidence to become involved in environmental action, the detachment to think about ideas while acting in the world. Somehow this is mirrored in the work, going to the studio each day, putting down marks, thinking while acting on the canvas. It was when she began to work through landscape to abstraction, concentrating her science education with her training as an artist, experience of tropical jungles and formal European parks, that her work became really interesting. In her studio she demonstrated the techniques she's developing, using her silver rings to begin chemical reactions, layering the pictures so that the underlying shapes seem to shift through an abstract shimmer.

Fiona Somerville spent years studying drawing. It underpins the perfect balance of her landscapes of Victoria's unsettled Wimmera. I use the word *unsettled* deliberately. The district was colonised during the goldrush: Indigenous peoples and their land management ignored. Substantial towns and villages of brick and stone emphatically altered the delicate ecosystems. Insecure rainfall and delicate soils now support sheep, but the land looks ravaged. Somerville paints buildings and objects of the brief gold years, gradually disintegrating, forlorn, as they



Lisa McKimmie, *Residue*, 2023, zinc, silver, gold and copper metalpoint with cadmium pigment on gessoed panel, 50 × 40cm



float in the encroaching sand. Her training and practise (I use the verb) provide skills to resolve technical problems: she has worked out a way to convey the dry bleaching desert light, and to allow her buildings and mechanisms – the detritus of European dreams – to act out their death in the foreground of her pictures, as if on the stage.

Flowers, abstraction, landscape. The images are not common, but drawing is, and discipline, commitment: authority. None of these women are driven by fashion or ideology. Three disciplined experts who have in common that they haven't become part of the scene where ideology has been corporatised and potential investment underpins success. That place requires clichés for brand recognition, it distorts the idea of art and artist. Each has dealt with restrictions to her life but none resent those, each copes and gets on with her original, sparkling, refreshing work. They are feminists, I suppose, but the only appropriate label is *artist*. I keep thinking of a piece about the great American writer Willa Cather, the critic wanting to describe how in a time when women faced constant restraint, as if they were shut in a room, "Willa Cather opened the door and walked through."



Margaret Ackland, *Spiral*, 2023, watercolour, 140 × 100cm (image), 160 × 120cm (framed)

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All images courtesy the artists