

Paige Gleeson, Catalogue Essay

The Earth Muzzle, Colville Gallery, 2018

“There is nothing so strange in a strange land, as the stranger who comes to visit it.”

White Australia in the Tasmanian landscape and the art of Jane Giblin

“Death, it smells a bit like garam masala,” Jane says, as she stares at a partially disembowelled sheep in a paddock just outside of Kempton, recalling the time she spent with the corpses of her grandmother and second husband. The connection between seemingly disparate things fuels Jane. She explores potential connections not to make sense of things as separate but related entities, but to entangle them further, materialising and inserting new layers of content and threatening to overwhelm herself with subject matter in the process. Precisely focused thematic concerns, tight visual material and controlled, conceptual painterly technique aren’t of interest to Jane. Looking to painters most influential to her work such as Elizabeth Cummings (b.1934) and Ian Fairweather (1891 – 1974) the origins of Jane’s expressionistic indulgence and abandon becomes more obvious. It is the messiness of life, the metaphors that can be read into the body of a dead and bloated sheep that best express the essence of Jane’s practice, that explain her obsession with the brokenly beautiful landscape of the Tasmanian midlands for over a decade. The entangled thematic preoccupations visited and re-visited throughout Jane’s oeuvre, whether through wet ink markings, horny dogs, sensual furs, nude female figures or raw photography, are familiar to the tradition of settler Australian landscape painting, despite their seeming idiosyncrasy.

That so much of Australian art is concerned with the land is not surprising – the modern history of our nation began with the seizure of occupied land and a proclamation of emptiness through the concept of terra nullius. The national psyche of the settler Australian has never escaped the strangeness of its own presence, the foreign physicality of the land eliciting an undercurrent of tension. The uncertainty felt by strangers in a strange land that runs down through subsequent generations is reflected back at us in artistic and literary depictions of an untouched, isolated, harsh, raw, wild, unfamiliar and dangerous landscape. It is one we can never quite understand. Despite its picturesque allure, a potential threat floats close to the surface in settler Australian imaginations of the place we have come to call home.

Tasmania in the early nineteenth century was to settler eyes and interests a perfect pastoral paradise, recalling for many settlers the rolling, green meadows of Britain, and quite unlike the foreboding and harsh bushlands and desert plains of much of mainland Australia. The landscape of Tasmania that so pleased both pastoralists and artists alike was, however, not an accidental nor natural occurrence as assumed by settlers, but the result of thousands of years

of cultivation through firestick agriculture by Tasmanian Aboriginal peoples.¹ Nor were the flat, grassy plains of what is known as the midlands, the land between Hobart and Launceston and the subject of Jane's work, empty and unutilised as presumed, but land cultivated for the purpose of creating grazing fields for native wild life to ensure easy and plentiful hunting. The Black War, the violent contestation over this land, was only ceased upon the surrender and banishment of the remaining Tasmanian Aboriginal population to the Wybalenna Aboriginal Establishment on Flinders Island in 1832.² From this point onward, the midlands were secured for the running of livestock and the depictions of colonial settlers alone in the seemingly picturesque landscape in the works of eminent landscape painter John Glover (1767-1849) took on a dark new authenticity.

The manner in which much Tasmanian colonial art seamlessly blended an imaginary, bloodless transition between Aboriginal sovereignty and white invasion and dispossession concealed the violent nature of European settlement in Tasmania, necessitated the absence of Aboriginal people in any depiction of the present. Only with the viewers mind cast firmly to the past could Aboriginal people appear on their country. Banished to the annals of history, imperial representations ensured their definitive visual and literal exclusion from the nation and society which were being built upon their soil. This construction of colony, empire and nation was reflected through style as much as content in colonial painting; on the picturesque Auerbach comments, "*Everywhere it was deployed, the picturesque had the effect of concealing hardships, neutralizing racial, ethnic, and class differences, and beautifying the frequently unpleasant surroundings that characterized life both in England and in the imperial zone. It refracted local people and conditions through a single, formulaic lens.*"³ It is within this tradition of Tasmanian landscape painting, from the seemingly political neutral application of the picturesque to the current (arguably) post-colonial moment, from which Jane attempts to engage with the land. The dichotomous tension established through this entangled history of painting and white settlement continues to reverberate through Jane's fixation on the midlands, the heartland of Tasmania's contested, gothic past. The potential of the landscape to convey the history and vast social impact of settler colonialism continues in her hands, as she self-consciously examines this history and its conflicts, chucking in additional observations without concern for the enormity of the task she sets herself.

Much has been made of the Tasmanian gothic in recent years. The resonances of the hurt and damage of our collective past have left reminders, psychic, but also physical, scattered through our landscape and towns. The conditions for the dark shadow cast over Tasmania are

¹ Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, 2011, Sydney.

² For further reading, see Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, 1995, Camberwell, and Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History Since 1803*, 2012, Crows Nest.

³ Jeffrey Auerbach, 'The picturesque and the homogenisation of Empire', *The British Art Journal*, Vol. V, No.1, pp.165/6.

fostered by the shape and nature of the land itself, as well as the memories we have forged within it. Our separation from the rest of Australia by water, the proximity to untouched wilderness, the colonial buildings left standing long after those elsewhere in the country were abandoned and demolished, the extinction and mythology of the thylacine, the flooding of rivers to make dams, the spectres of escaped cannibal convicts, a modern day massacre at Port Arthur, an attempted genocide of the original inhabitants, all run through our interactions with this place, whether consciously or unconsciously.⁴ The weight of these dark elements are alluded to in Jane's paintings, but the most visible, defining characteristics of her art are joy, colour, fucking, and scratching out a love of the land which contradicts the pain of the damage of settler colonialism, a nostalgia for the un-conflicted consciousness of childhood. She presents the lighter side of the Tasmanian gothic, her practice speaking to a longing to absorb the land and be absorbed by it. This yearning, first forged in childhood, was later rendered uncomfortable by a growing understanding of the history that had played out on the hills passed in the family car. There is a disappointment in knowing that something you love and feel so deeply is contested territory, unreconciled. To physically scratch into paper while ruminating on the land in view and within memory, as Jane does, is to symbolically enact the process of coming to consciousness, remembering, peeling away of personal and historical layers, to make visible.

In *The Earth Muzzle* Jane grapples with the presence of people, black and white, past and present, within this contested Tasmanian landscape, our impact and interaction with it, while drawing in themes of environmentalism, the place of women in collective understandings of the human condition, the fine line and connection between woman and animal, or as Jane elusively describes it, "We can't fuck dogs, but we want to." In Jane's more recent work, from 2015 onward, you could be forgiven for thinking the landscape no longer features as centrally in her work, though you would be mistaken. The land unites all else Jane explores, acting as a grounding zone from which she can venture out to stick her fingers in other nodal points and haphazardly try to link them all together with her ink brush and pencil.

Between 2012-2014 Jane engaged with the white relationship to and destruction of land in a more direct fashion, painting sheep shearers, displaying the damage caused by farming chemicals and sheep runs, wild and domesticated dogs, with a great sensitivity and nostalgia for her own childhood. Despite the altered visual nature of her current work, still she returns to the question of white settler belonging in the same much altered landscape. She places her life model within this land, among harsh thistles, fence posts run like broken teeth up and down hillsides, sheep shit, chunks of rock splintered from a hill side quarry that leave a rust

⁴ For an incisive review of the concept of the Tasmanian Gothic, see Greg Lehman, 'Tasmanian Gothic', Griffith Review Edition 39: TASMANIA – The Tipping Point?, 2013, <<https://griffithreview.com/articles/tasmanian-gothic/>>

red wound mirroring those the dead sheep that lay around, victims of wild dogs. The presence of the figures which dominate Jane's work in *The Earth Muzzle* and *Dog's Belly*, 2015 highlight a contradictory struggle between the strange unnaturalness of a white body in a landscape foreign to it, and its simultaneous belonging in and to the place as it moves through it, naked, vulnerable, exposed, and wrapped in fur, the only place the body has ever known. The seeming reduction in subject matter displays a growing confidence, an ability to approach the landscape, its history and significance, through the human and animal figure, allowing them to speak.

In *The Earth Muzzle* paintings there is heaviness, an entanglement, that at times hints at feelings of suffocation. The figures fill and swamp the images in precisely placed chaos. Despite their vibrancy and movement they are dark images, much darker than Jane's previous work that has relied more heavily on a colourful expressionistic naivety. The placement of the figures at precise points within compositions and the subdued brightness of yellow backgrounds, which bring to mind the work of Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), is always hinting at the mood of the surrounding landscape. The connections between Jane's latest work and the impressionists are perhaps derived most strongly not in style, but in method. En plein air painting, the act of painting outdoors, was first taken up by impressionists as they attempted to give their work an immediacy and rawness, the influence of this technique immediately recognisable in the fluidity and movement of Jane's latest paintings. Jane's adoption of this method spans the length of her artistic practice and has allowed for a spontaneity and organic engagement with the physical surroundings she has situated her art within. The fruits of this method are perhaps most visible in the photographic works featuring Jane's life model, Isabella.

The inclusion now, of what were essentially source photographs in the *Dog's Belly* (2015) and *The Earth Muzzle* exhibitions, alongside the paintings, which they inspired, is quite deliberate. Jane is revealing to the viewer the space from which the painted works have flourished, revealing with an honest modesty a process, more so than a finished product or an end result that can be marked complete, framed and hung on a wall. The photographs resonate strongly as art in their own right and are at times more arresting than the paintings. Offering this mix of media draws the viewer back to the thematic centrality of the landscape despite its weighted absence from the paintings. The photographs aid the design of the paintings, adding supplementary detail and reflections on the sharp and sometimes conflicting dynamics being addressed. But the raw impressions, the feeling of sun on naked skin and the push and pull between comfort felt and the hostility of the landscape toward its visitors in those sprawling midlands paddocks, is captured by neither the paintings nor the photographs alone. It is their juxtaposition within a larger performance that allows the experiential nature of what Jane is trying to grasp, to shine through. In the end, the irreconcilable, unanswerable,

tense questions that Jane has set for herself are the stage upon which she performs, through her models and in and through the landscape. The themes are never resolved, but they are acted out, en plein air, glimpses of them captured through the photographic and painted works, the beauty, damage, power, control, violence and sex that live through the landscape and its history, all fleeting within the images.

The inclusion of the photographic works reveals another central element of Jane's process, which is her relationship with her life model and former student, Isabella. To an outsider, the relationship appears to be many things at once, a connection between friends, women, teacher and student, artist and muse, older woman and young. The role of age in their dynamic is poignant, because it is clear that much represented by the younger woman, in youthful flesh, vibrancy and excitement, recalls Jane's memories of herself as a young woman, a projection of her past and female life through the body of her muse. This is what differentiates Jane's practice and relationship with the female nude so starkly from male figurative painters and photographers who have so often been accused of indulging in an eroticism that turns the recipient of their gaze into an object for consumption. Jane identifies with the female nude as something internal to and reflective of her own embodied experience in the world, the thin vibrations of sex run throughout her work are directed inwards, back inside herself. The use of animal furs within the photographic works hints to this personal exploration of the self and the animalistic, sexed body, as does the constant presence of dogs.

Dogs are a driving symbolic device in Jane's work, the movement of a naked woman mounting a dog lolled back into submission on the grass alluding to ancient Assyrian sculptures which depict dogs joined in the hunt for lions. Jane has gazed upon these ancient carvings at the British Museum on many occasions, photographing and drawing the canines while contemplating our relationships to them over centuries. "Dogs," says Jane, "are our slaves, our tools, our friends, our loves." The connection of dogs to the natural world is direct, contrasting the obscurity of human detachment from nature. The presence of the dogs and references to the natural world of surrounding is signalled via its absence. It is the raw, animalistic, blood beating, fur quivering of human and dog figures in pictorial and metaphorical harmony with each other, blended as one. Our nature as human animals is highlighted through the absorption of both figures in space, becoming one, melting/melding/blending.

Our place in the natural world that we are so often artificially removed from, the sense of separation crafted by brick walls, light bulbs and plastic gum boots, the trappings of human cultures that may temporarily mask our animality are joyfully toyed with by Jane. The thin veneer of civilisation and modernity grows thinner against the elements out in midlands paddocks, the inescapability of death and animal blood and guts and ripping teeth on flesh

and bare bottoms exposed to the wind. The many individual portraits of a personified dog in *The Earth Muzzle* hint at humour and recall the work of William Strutt (1825-1915), the fur draped over the woman, her nakedness, the connection with the dog, the immigrant animal, open a world stripped back and raw. It speaks to the place of the settler in a landscape that we know we can never truly, unselfconsciously inhabit, no matter how good it feels.

Jane's contribution to Tasmanian landscape painting, though at times unusual and difficult to grasp, is none the less significant. How refreshing and bold it is to commit to painting, to paint nature (!), to relish in the materiality of the art object, the layers of paint and the movement of a hand, in an art world saturated with jargonistic post-modern tokenism, obsessed with the nihilistic deconstruction of every supposed Foucauldian signifier imaginable, the endless proliferation in galleries and studios of what Robert Hughes referred to as "short-impact conceptualism trying to be spectacle."⁵ Withstanding the weight of fashion and the intellectual pressures of temporary (and potentially regrettable) cultural turns doesn't alone make lasting art, but it's not a bad place to start. Among the fits, politics and contentions of the history of Tasmanian landscape painting, Jane has carved for herself a space that speaks honestly to the historical reverberations and gothic character of Tasmania, the landscape as her mode of expression.

Jane pauses to sketch and photograph beside the dead sheep, its exposed, blooded ribs encasing a heart that could easily be imagined beating, a winding intestinal trail sprawled alongside splayed hooves. Flies dart in and out of the space between the ribs, and I can imagine Jane's own heart beating faster in response as she squats to peer through the lens of her camera.

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Indigenous histories in Australia and the Pacific, Australian contemporary art, feminist and women's history, study of museums and material cultures.

⁵ Robert Hughes, *Nothing if Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*, 1990, New York, p.16.