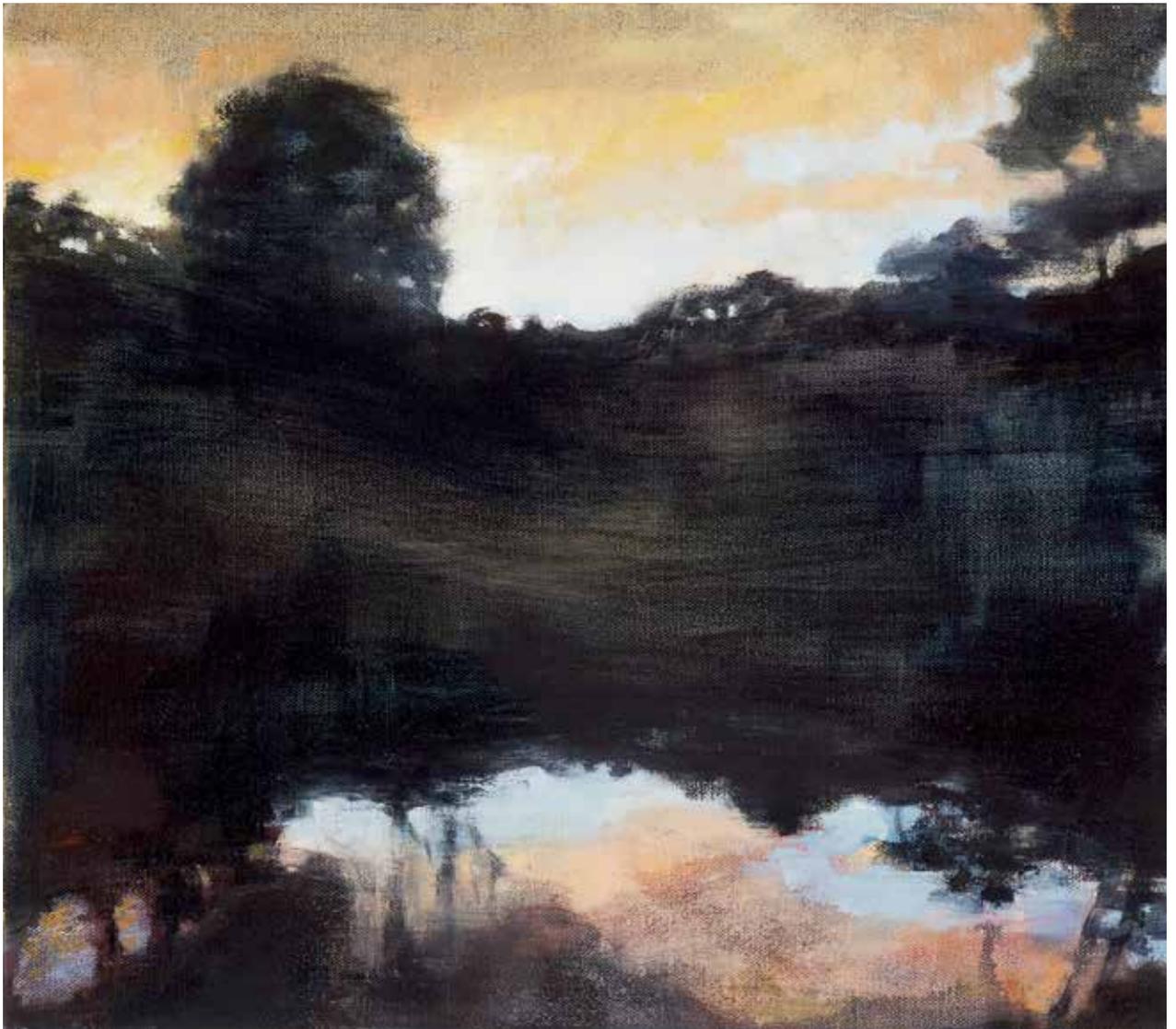


BRAG
bathurst regional art gallery

SUSAN BAIRD: BEING IN LANDSCAPE
22 MARCH – 12 MAY 2013



Susan Baird *Moonlight Gully* 2012, oil on linen, 56 x 56 cm. Photo: Michel Brouet.

ARTIST STATEMENT

This exhibition is inspired by the landscape of Hill End and nearby Tambaroora.

Ever since visiting the town in 2009, I felt drawn to return to make work and to 'be' in landscape. I paint *en plein air* so that I can layer time and changes in atmosphere and create surfaces in my paintings that hopefully transport the viewer. It's important for me to convey not only texture but feelings in my work.

The studio paintings take on a different mood, as I need to process and distil the experience away from the environment.

My first residency at Haefligers Cottage in April 2011, had such a profound affect on me personally in that I realised I needed to experience the landscape first hand as an on-going aspect of my practice – being a city dweller, the dark takes a bit of getting used to, but the night has such an incredible power – the sky, the stars and the sounds.

I have been privileged to be Artist in Residence at Haefligers Cottage and at Murrays Cottage which has enabled me to not only understand more about the landscape but to absorb the rich legacy that this place unconditionally gives.

Susan Baird
January 2013

FOREWORD

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (BRAG) is proud to present Susan Baird: Being in Landscape as part of our ongoing commitment to showcasing artists investigating the rich cultural history of the historic gold mining village of Hill End.

Baird describes Hill End as being a muse for her recent work. The paintings in this exhibition have evolved from her participation in the Hill End Artists in Residence Program – initially at Haefligers Cottage in April 2011 and then at Murrays Cottage in November 2012. Working en plein air the artist captures the landscape and light of this unique place.

This exceptionally beautiful body of work developed by Baird over her two residencies represents her personal response to the seductive landscape of Hill End.

I would like to thank Susan Baird for sharing her work and vision with the people of Bathurst.

Richard Perram

Director, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery
March 2013

SUSAN BAIRD: BEING IN LANDSCAPE

At a Sydney exhibition of paintings in 2010, I was struck by the presence of a small-scale work nestling quietly amongst a cluster of outsized, mostly unimaginative offerings. The artist was Susan Baird (b.1964). The painting was titled *Gentle Shift, Hill End* (2010). The subtle, tonal quality of the work evoked an alluring atmosphere, achieved through close observation of landscape. Dusk in the ranges beyond Bathurst is short-lived. The fading light underscores the sense of time passing, suspending for a moment the long night to come.

Susan Baird's passion for plein air painting dates back to the early 1980s when she was encouraged by her mentor, the painter Ted Blackall, to join him on painting expeditions around Sydney Harbour. Earlier, Blackall had studied under the legendary William (Jock) Frater (1890–1974). As one of the early modernists in Melbourne,

Frater encouraged his students to get out of the studio and work directly in the landscape – not to slavishly render vistas, but to carefully absorb atmosphere and respond emotionally to the encounter. Via Ted Blackall's urgings, Baird began her venture in art adhering to Frater's earlier dictum. Throughout the 1980s, the artist forged a successful career exhibiting paintings and prints inspired by the experience of Sydney Harbour, the city and its beaches.

Apart from Ted Blackall's encouragement, Baird was virtually self-taught. Commercial success had its rewards, but as a young artist, she felt something vital was missing. In effect, she felt she had no real connection to her subject. After viewing a survey exhibition of Kevin Connor's paintings at the Art Gallery of New South Wales the young artist made up her mind: it was instant recognition.

For Baird, Connor's work was the 'real deal'. In his expressive handling of paint, she recognised the artist's struggle to capture the immediacy of his sensation along with the veracity of his impressions. Buoyed by her revelation, Baird cast about for an art institution with the reputation to push her formally and intellectually. The artist now had a vocation.

It was on the suggestion of William Wright, director of Sherman Galleries, that Baird applied for a place, and was accepted at the New York Studio School in 1992. The idea of New York had immense appeal. As a youngster, she saw the Woody Allen film, *Annie Hall*, and was smitten by both the film-maker and the city. The rigour at the school would instil in Baird the discipline to best harness her creative talents. The painting and drawing program structured around observations of the figure was an intensive investigation



Susan Baird *All Welcome* 2011, oil on linen, 25 x 30 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Michel Brouet.

of form, colour and tone. It was during the year spent at the New York Studio School that Baird began the vital task of transferring sensation and emotion into a shared experience. Apart from formal studies, there was the rich regime of New York's museum collections and gallery exhibitions. Yet, it was the experience of seeing the work of West Coast-based painter Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993), that would have a lasting impression on the artist. Baird responded to Diebenkorn's ability to reconcile abstraction to the appearance of the natural world evident in the 1967 *Ocean Park* series, inspired by the beachside section at Santa Monica where he lived. Diebenkorn's art was not driven by ideology: it was sustained by a specific environment and its atmospheric shifts. As Robert Hughes pointed out: 'You cannot walk down the Santa Monica Esplanade without recognising elements [of the paintings] in the real landscape.'¹

Back in Sydney in 1993, Baird mounted an exhibition of the New York City-based work at the Mary Place Gallery in Paddington. The critic Elwyn Lynn, who had observed the artist's earlier work responded favourably to the recent offerings:

'Baird constantly empowers, concentrates then disarmingly alleviates. At times traffic canyons are delirious with yellow cabs; areas of lambent intensity can become luminously sour and fleetingly calm. She has momentarily tamed New York's ceaseless, impetuous energy in works where the expressive can dissolve into nuanced lyricism. The works are splendid examples of relevant painterliness, and even in the black and yellow Downtown, a small concise summary of a light post curved over a cab on its desperate journey, there is a mature assurance.'²

Susan Baird's first encounter with

the Hill End site was on a road trip in 2009. The impact was immediate. But Baird realised it would take time to assess the visual and historic stimuli that confronted her in and around Hill End's charged landscape. She was also aware of the Hill End-inspired works of Donald Friend and Russell Drysdale that constituted one of the most significant chapters in the history of Australian landscape painting. The rich legacy continues to resonate today. Nevertheless, it was Lloyd Rees with his sensitive response to light in *Evening Hills near Bathurst*, 1936, that would remain an inspiration. On visits to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Baird would always search out the work.

In 2011, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery awarded the artist a residency at the Haefliger Cottage. It was the month of April, and the autumnal atmosphere would trigger a series of studies that reflected the verdant nature of the



Susan Baird *Dark December* 2011, 25 x 30 cm. Bathurst Regional Art Gallery Permanent Collection. Photo: Michel Brouet.

surrounding paddocks and enclosures. Paintings such as *Field* (2011), *Soft Approach* (2011), and *All Welcome* (2011), were executed directly from aspects in the immediate vicinity of the cottage. Baird's fluency with pigment and skilful handling of form and tone evoke a convincing, yet poetic description of 'being in landscape'. In addition, this suite of deceptively simple, small-scale works capture the quiet dignity of the place. Looking out from the Haefliger's cottage, Baird was inspired by the structures and forms of St Paul's Presbyterian Church and the Police Station. This led to an interesting series of etchings stimulated by the constant shifts in atmosphere and quality of light throughout the day.

In recent correspondence the artist explained her process: 'To make the etchings, I took the plates up to Hill End and worked on them outside – gathering lines and marks from the field

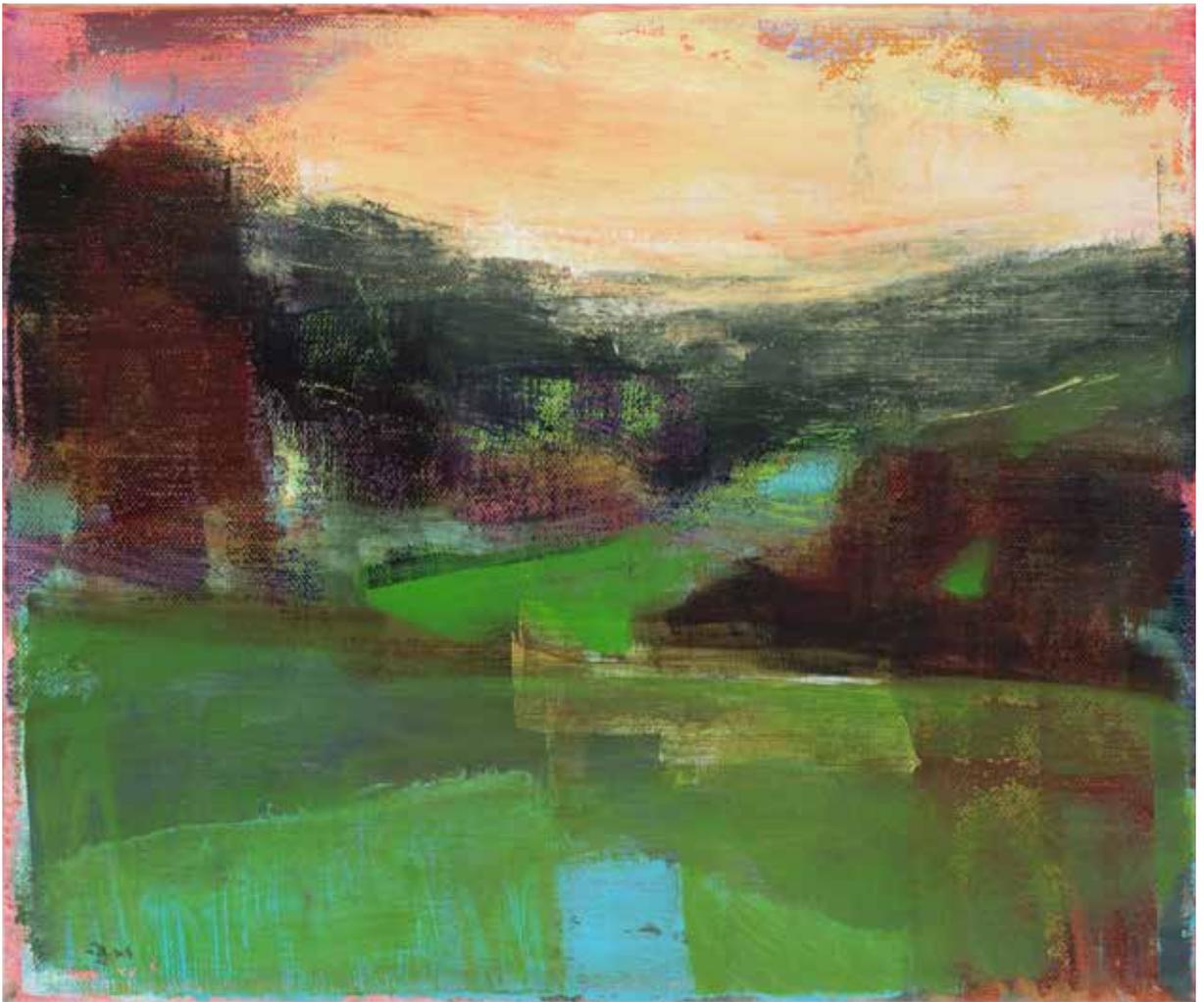
directly to the plate ... to get that sense of immediacy. I chose locations that I became familiar with during my time at Haefligers – looking down over the field towards the police station as in the print titled *Night Watch I* (2011), and the gnarly trees at the back of the cottage near St Paul's Church, understanding the pace of the light is another factor.'³

Baird proofed the key plates back in Sydney, then went out to Hill End with support plates. There she worked directly onto the plates with sugar lift which were aquatinted later on. As the artist pointed out: 'Getting the plates to work together tonally is the most difficult aspect of using colour on a print with multiple plates.'⁴ The result is an engaging suite of prints that tackle the diurnal rhythm of village life.

The distinct seasonal nature of village life high in the hills behind Bathurst becomes apparent in April. The Easter festivities at Hill End usher in

the long winter months that can test one's physical and mental endurance. During the last weeks of autumn, there is a warmth and glow in the air. The effect is enlivened by the red-gold deciduous display of elms, oaks and ash that stretch along Beyers Avenue. With these ancient trees framing remnant structures, Hill End stands as a potent instance of time passing. In a recent statement, Baird describes the encounter: 'Being at Haefliger's in April 2011 allowed me to watch how things unfold in Hill End from morning to night. It was great to be able to drag the easel outside to capture a passing haze or the flicker of a house light – the transitory moments in time.'⁵

In the summer of 2011, Baird returned to Hill End and stayed at Cooke's Cottage. The fine nocturne, *Dark December* (2011), would mark the entry point into a rigorous series of accomplished works. Further



Susan Baird *Field* 2011, oil on linen, 25 x 30 cm. Private Collection. Photo: Michel Brouet.

exploration of the region took the artist north to Tambaroora, with its scrubby stands of eucalypts and shallow waterholes. It was a period of consolidation where Baird confronted the landscape and began processing the raw beauty of the native scrub that had taken hold around scenes of casual desolation and abandonment. In the early 1850s, Tambaroora had been a thriving centre of activity. Alluvial gold was the attraction. The sites around the creeks and gullies were virtually cleared of all vegetation in the search for gold. Thousands of diggers from Britain, Europe, California and China arrived on the scene. A township sprang up to service their needs. Before long, the alluvial gold became scarce. Tambaroora's rich alluvial deposits had been exhausted. The diggers moved south to establish Hill End and unearth the fabulous reef of gold at Hawkins Hill that made the place world-famous.

There is little of Tambaroora left today. Apart from a few die-hard who live in remnant dwellings and relish the isolation, a forlorn atmosphere pervades the site. The melancholic mood of the place is accentuated by the presence of both the Anglican and Catholic cemeteries. Some years ago, a delegation of Chinese came and removed the remains of their ancestors.

A series of shallow depressions are all that's left of the Chinese cemetery. The smooth-trunked eucalypts that have reclaimed the region became the central motif in Susan Baird's most recent works. In *Landscape I*, and *Landscape II* (2012), the artist has sustained the sensation of her first impressions. *Fleeting Gum*, 2012, exudes a spectral presence that seems to have penetrated the artist's psyche. In works such as *Reflection Tambaroora* (2012), Baird has seized upon the mirroring effect of a still body of water to amplify

the sombre beauty of her vision. *Moonlight Gully* (2011), is imbued with a meditative mood attained through a time of silent observation.

The fine tonal modulation and surface quality in Susan Baird's recent works attest to her skill in wresting compelling imagery from a fundamental motif. Once again, Hill End and its surrounds with that elusive ambience have proven to be a well-spring for the creative spirit.

Gavin Wilson
December 2012

¹ Robert Hughes, *American Visions: the Epic History of Art in America*, 1997. Harvill Press, London. pp. 550–551.

² Elwyn Lynn, *Calm amidst the frenzy*, The Australian, April 3–4 1993.

³ Susan Baird, correspondence with the author 15 October 2012.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*



Susan Baird *Landscape I* 2012, oil on linen, 56 x 76 cm. Photo: Michel Brouet.

BIOGRAPHY

ACADEMIC/RESIDENCY

2013 Master of Art, Painting, University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts, [completion June 2013]

2012 Artist in Residence – Murrays Cottage, Hill End [November]

2011 Artist in Residence – Haefligers Cottage, Hill End [April]

1997 National Art School, Sydney

1995 Adelaide Central School of Art, Drawing Marathon

1995 Parsons School of Design, New York, Print Making, summer school

1992 New York Studio School, Painting and Drawing, intensive studio practice

SELECTED FINALIST IN AWARDS

2012 The Jenny Birt Award, UNSW COFA, Highly Commended

2011 Finalist – The Blake Prize

2011 Finalist – Paddington Art Prize

2010 Finalist – Paddington Art Prize [Honourable Mention and Peoples Choice Award]

2010 Finalist – Mosman Art Prize

2010 Finalist – NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize

2010 Tweed River Regional Gallery, Salon des Refuses

2010 Salon des Refuses, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Observatory Hill, Sydney

2009 Finalist – Paddington Art Prize



Susan Baird *Landscape II* 2012, oil on linen, 56 x 76 cm. Photo: Michel Brouet.

2008 Hills Grammar School Art Prize,
Highly Commended

2008 The City of Canada Bay Council and
Mirvac Group Public Art Competition,
Winner

2005 Finalist – Art on The Rocks

2004 The Hills Grammar School Art Prize,
Winner

2004 Finalist – Art on The Rocks

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2013 Being in Landscape, Bathurst
Regional Art Gallery

2011 Recent Landscapes, Arthouse
Gallery

2006 Urban Fragments, Axia Modern Art,
Melbourne

2004 Urban Landscapes, Saatchi &
Saatchi Sydney

1995 Bridge St Gallery, Paddington

1993 New Work – New York, Mary Place
Gallery, Sydney

1990 Urban Landscapes, Barry Stern
Galleries, Sydney

1989 Movement Through Water, Barry
Stern Galleries, Sydney

1988 Schubert Gallery, Queensland

1986 Schubert Gallery, Queensland

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012 Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Hill
End 1850 – 2011 from the Permanent
Collection

2010 Tweed River Regional Gallery, Salon
des Refuses

2010 Salon des Refuses, S.H. Ervin
Gallery, Observatory Hill, Sydney

2007 Presence Absence, United Galleries,
Sydney

2007 Unwrapped, United Galleries, Perth,
Inaugural exhibition

2006 Unwrapped, United Galleries, Sydney

2003 Hallelujah, Michael Carr Art Dealer

2003 Artists of Mosman, Mosman Art
Gallery

2002 Artists of Mosman, Mosman Art
Gallery

1996 Art House Gallery, Sydney

1994 Westpac Private Bank, Melbourne



Susan Baird *Night Watch I* 2011, etching and aquatint, 49 x 61 cm. Photo: Michel Brouet.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Catalogue Essay, *Being in Landscape*, December 2012 [Gavin Wilson]

The Canberra Times, *Inside the Archibores*, April 3, 2010 [Sasha Grishin]

The Sydney Morning Herald, *Thankful for small mercies*, April 2–4, 2010 [John McDonald]

Art and Reverse, *An Urban Canvas*, Guiding Light Productions, Sunday Arts ABC 2007

Belle Magazine, *Talent Pool*, April/May, 2006

The Sun-Herald, Arts, *In The Frame*, October 2004 [Tim Benzie]

Art and Australia, Exhibition Commentary, *Émigré* Issue, winter, 1993

The Australian, *Calm Amidst The Frenzy*, April 1993 [Elwyn Lynn]

The Australian, *Balmy Zephyrs from Inland Banish Angst*, June 1990 [Elwyn Lynn]

ARTIST TALKS

2011 S.H. Ervin Gallery, Salon Des Refuses, *Sharing Observations of the Australian Landscape* Sunday May 2, 2010

COLLECTIONS

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

Artbank

J.B.Were & Son, London

Le Meridian, Vanuatu

Hotel Nikko Darling Harbour

Richard & Ruth Shack, Private Collection, former Chairman, Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, Florida, USA

Kevin Roberts, CEO, Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, Private Collection

Magic Works Miami, Florida

Private and corporate collections in Australia, New Zealand, USA

Further information on the artist:

www.susanbaird.com.au



Susan Baird *Reflection Tambaroora* 2012, oil on linen, 121 x 151 cm. Photo: Michel Brouet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cover: Susan Baird *Fleeting Gum* 2012, oil on linen, 121 x 100 cm. Photo: Michel Brouet.
All dimensions in centimetres, height before width. All artworks © Susan Baird.

