

# Margaret Olley Art Trust Collection Room Residency

## Artist in Residence Written Reflection

Ainslie McMahon

2024

Reading the insightful written responses from previous recipients of the Rockhampton Museum of Art Artist Residency prompted me to apply for this coveted acceptance. The opportunity to spend 4 weeks working uninterrupted, whilst surrounded by masterpieces from the RMOA collection, felt like a gift to embrace.

The range of artworks from the RMOA collection that were selected for display in the Margaret Olley Art Trust Collection Room are the contemporary landscape genre. These paintings were created by phenomenal artists who claim a place in the grand tradition of Australian landscape painting such as Fred Williams, William Robinson, John Olsen, Gil Jamieson, and Jenny Sages. These artists have always had a major influence in my practice, as their work translates a deep understanding and empathy to the Australian bush through intimate association.

Elizabeth Cummings is another contemporary Australian landscape artist, perhaps lesser known, whose semi-abstract work continues to inspire. Cummings is a master of tonal manipulation, and her use of vigorous brushwork and surface scratching is sublime.

RMOA also kindly loaned me a selection of texts during the residency to conduct further research on my chosen Australian landscape artists. These texts, mainly biographies, enabled deeper insights into their working processes and inspiration, and how each artist's practice evolved over time.

Through studying the artists' work on display, my intention was reinforced to further experiment with calligraphic mark making, vigorously scratching into the surface, to articulate my vision of the distinctive, harsh landscapes of Central Queensland in a personal way, stemming from my pastoralist heritage. Thereby documenting my personal account of this ruggedly beautiful country, and finding a new way to visually describe the familiar.

John McCaughey articulates succinctly Fred Williams's working process in his book "Fred Williams", where he states, "*what Williams did was to work at the motif until he became so familiar with it he possessed it, so intimately that the forms given to him in the landscape became as natural and personal to him as handwriting. The process of his art, its slow period of gestation from initial experience to finished painting, was essentially one of transforming his experience of the landscape into a handwritten code.*"

Responding to John Olsen's work on display during the residency infused my mark making with renewed vigour and courage. Studying the text "John Olsen" by

Deborah Hart, I was reminded again of his mastery of the calligraphic line. As the author states, the “*fusion of sound knowledge of painting and drawing with the inventive, irrational, risk-taking factors that provides the work with its vital dimension*” resonated with me.” The art of Olsen effortlessly captures the essence of the Australian landscape with wit and naivety.

Studying Jenny Sages’ encaustic work evoked a strong response. Encaustic is a process where wax is kept molten on a heated palette and applied to a surface and reheated with a heat gun to fuse the paint into a uniform enamel-like finish. Sages then scratches and gouges into the encaustic wax, using sharp implements, finally applying powdered coloured pigments. The finished tactile surface is simple and powerful in describing a “sense of place”.

My aim for the residency was to experiment with a new medium, cold wax, and fully embrace its potential to produce more visceral, semi- abstract work. Cold wax medium is molten wax combined with a solvent and bottled while in liquid form. The medium remains soft and pliable when applied to a surface, and dries slowly over a period of weeks. The plan was to produce a series of smaller works, which would progressively develop into more abstract motifs of the landscape.

Even though it was my intention to fully explore this new process in my artmaking during this residency, initially using the medium felt like entering uncharted territory. Brushes were useless when applying the medium, and soon replaced by a selection of palette knives and scrapers. However, I soon overcame any reservations and channelled the creative drive, all the while inspired by the processes of the masters.

A total of 14 small works, not all resolved, were completed during my time at RMOA, in a whirlwind of creative energy. My choice of subject matter was the natural environment where I live, responding to the rhythms of the landscape. Working in a series of three iterations of the same subject, using different colour combinations for each work, allowed the works to progress faster without losing their bearings. This process also allowed more random mark making to occur.

Engaging with the community, through an artist talk, open studio sessions and a podcast was enlightening. These community opportunities to connect with an artist are valuable, where an artist can relate their personal experience and processes in an informal question-and- answer-based conversation. It was pleasing to see a large audience, including fellow artists, at my artist talk. Following the presentation, and while answering the numerous questions from the audience, I realized the significance of the learning aspect of the residency to the community, not just the artist.

My residency at Rockhampton Museum of Art was a rich and rewarding experience, which afforded a wonderful opportunity to experiment, and be courageous and more inventive in my mark making. I have come away with a renewed enthusiasm to continue moving forward with my regional practice, and to continue mentoring emerging artists. Overall, on reflection, it has reinforced to me that for an artist’s practice to evolve, it is necessary to always be receptive to new ideas, and

processes, and to engage with the community wherever possible through exhibitions, tutoring at workshops, and artist talks.

### **References**

Hart, Deborah (1991) *John Olsen*, p.162; Craftsman House  
McCaughey, Patrick (Rev.ed.1980) *Fred Williams*, p.17