



Map For My Mother, Artist Collection, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 125cm, 2000

MYTHIC LANDSCAPE

THE LANDSCAPE PAINTING OF KERRY JOHNS

Some landscape painters cannot escape the thrall of the object and, compelled by pictorial convention, never have us look beyond appearances. Others vary their approaches and adapt their processes to explore their experience of place beyond externalities.

KERRY JOHNS is a painter of the adaptive kind. Her changing engagement with landscape is not easily explained by the various living environments that have furnished material for her work. There have been successive changes in her felt understanding of landscape.



*My desire is to translate
the dynamic life within the
landscape into visual form*

Long resident in the Blue Mountains and familiar with its massive sandstone escarpments and deep gorges, at some point she came to new ways of working that looked for a more intimate engagement with the familiar landscape.

In this approach Johns felt compelled to 'abandon any authority over form, any desire to shape things'. She put her faith in 'deconstructing and building up the world again through layered mark-making, in a million small ways'. Her process was an arduous one of translating momentary impressions. Eventually this non-authorial mark-making made possible a transition where an emotional response could assert itself in a powerful way and give effect to subjective meaning.

In 2003, Johns completed a series of works she called *Mythic Landscape* that arose from recollecting and re-experiencing the coastal landscape of her Caloundra childhood. These made reference to the looming forms of the Glasshouse Mountains, in a wild and fey landscape rendered in dense and richly layered colour intricacies. They project a landscape of intimate meaning, not grand prospect.

An earlier work, *Map for My Mother* signalled this exploration of place as infinitely layered with memory. Over a dimly suggested (or remembered) coastal town seen from afar a looming ancestral figure is imposed. Concentrated mark-making over the entire canvas coalesces in a vortex of dark reds at the painting's heart.



This is not mapping in any objective sense, but a calling up of archetypal meanings of place.

This intensity will be found in later works that can be called 'mythic' for their density, and complexity, their ambiguity and poetic working. They seem to invoke intimate and hidden worlds that constitute the painter's 'imaginaire'. Place is inhabited by meaning.

This quality comes about not by 'taking a view' but through being 'drawn into complexity' with a realisation that form is not stable but changeable, not representing anything but a breaking down and reforming of elements. Through such a process there is a knowing of place and one's reactions to it.

By 2005 Johns was ending her long association with the Blue Mountains and moving to the Eurobodalla coast where she encountered quite different coastal and riverine landscapes. New motifs abound in spotted gum and casuarina forest, headland, estuary and off-shore islands, calling forth an element of figurative play that works happily with a responsive abstraction. Vertical forms constrain the abstraction which plays out in colour passages and a wild poetic figuration of delicate white patterning.

In paintings like *Tollgates Through Trees* we are invited into a myriad world of dancing forms, speaking of a hundred joys. This is mythic landscape in its playful aspect.

Yet in the large work *Lilli Pilli* there is mythic power of another kind, something darker and more dramatic, a crush of tortuous vegetative forms swayed by strong vertical rhythms. We are confronted by a multiplicity of worlds. Dominant greys, reds and blacks now out-compete pale blues and white tracery, suggesting something more forbidding in its ambiguities of positive and negative space. Later works, notably *Rosedale Diptych* and *Stand of Trees* have the same orchestral scale and complexity.

These paintings reflect a maturing of Johns' commitment to remain open to encounter with the world beyond the objective. As she expressed it at the time:

For me, there has to be complete openness throughout the process of painting. That means forbearing to stick to any program, subject, composition, colour register. I have to feel it is possible to change everything.

I try to stay blind to [the work's] future, taking no heed for possible or even probable consequences, just trying to enter but at every point trying to hold my sense of conviction that it's this colour, this place, in this way.

In 2010, Johns moved again, this time to Canberra and found herself confronted with the rolling hills and valleys of the Monaro. Her paintings for a time abandon the intricacy of the dancing line and layered complexity for a simpler interplay of shape and colour.

Opposite page top: *Rosedale Diptych*, Private Collection, acrylic on canvas, 110 x 180cm, 2010

Far left: *Stand of Trees*, Artist Collection, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150cm, 2011

Left: *Tollgates Through Trees*, Private Collection, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 125cm, 2009



Lilli Pilli, Basil Sellers Collection , acrylic on canvas 100 x 132cm, 2008

Opposite page top:
Forest Conjunction, Artist's Collection, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 122cm, 2013

Left: *There*, Private Collection, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 95cm, 2015 (photo Sean Davey)

There is a peaceful openness in paintings like *Cold Country* (2012) resolving to abstraction in *Forest Conjunction* and *Gathered Form* (2013) and *There* (2015).

Far from the layered density of the earlier works, these paintings rejoice in a simplicity of colour passage and a playful approach to form. The artist is opening up to the possibilities of abstraction to generate unexpected relationships.

Johns would say that mythic properties only emerge from an empathetic knowledge of the landscape. The Monaro paintings reflect a new and unfamiliar environment calling for a simpler observational response that sets aside the forceful quality of the larger coastal works like *Lilli Pilli*.



This page:
Flowers at a Window,
 Coffs Harbour Regional
 Gallery Collection,
 acrylic on canvas,
 70 x 80cm, 2016

Opposite:
History of an Upland Valley
 Artist's collection, mixed
 media on paper, 102 x 80cm
 2015



Yet the mythic reappeared in the body of work for her *Forest Subjective* exhibition of 2015, when the power of the forest motif appeared to be reasserting itself. Johns was drawn back to a more radical exploration of coastal landscape.

The motif of multi-coloured bark and vertical form is returned to again and again, as if the painter is trying to unlock some un-grasped meaning beyond the immediate scene. The landscape of coast, river and headland is known anew through forest motifs that have proven so workable.

'The view' is obscured by a screen of trees and we encounter the colour patterning of bark, the constraining verticality of trunk forms, and the ambiguous play of positive and negative space. The viewer is constrained to stay in the present world, standing with the painter in her experience of immediacy.

A further abandoning of mythic density and complexity appears in *South Coast Symphonic* (2016), reworked from an earlier canvas. The screen of trees is made to part, revealing distant headlands and islands in a breadth of perspective. There is no hint of darker mythic values here, only a manifest lightness and joy—all is delighted abstraction on familiar ground. There is a confident venturing into an equal partnership of figuration and abstraction.

Perhaps this is why Johns has recently enjoyed working *en plein air*, opening up to challenges not found in studio painting. Working out of doors, she says, is 'an exercise in honesty'. The subject is nearly always unfamiliar, so 'there is nothing subjective to invest'. This *plein air* work is also smaller in scale and the immediacy of encounter shapes her larger studio works. She finds it a way of grounding herself in a new environment.

Johns is reluctant to make broad philosophical statements although she acknowledges how much she owes to Cezanne, Matisse and Bonnard, and speaks of a desire to achieve a 'union of felt subject with visual language':

For me, painting landscape is a relational exploration, using the fundamental elements of visual structure (colour, tone, space, rhythm and a flat surface) to find personal meaning out of a strong sense of place. This is a relational search both in terms of paint language and in discovering the 'inner significance' of landscape.

My paintings are formed out of a process in which uncertainty and intuitive exploration of the subject and the language are determining factors. My intention is to translate through aesthetic means the forms of nature into a subjective and sensual reality.

To look at a painting is to read a visual and plastic language, and what we seek in art is the poetic conviction in its internal resolution, even without much knowledge of the syntax. This search is the reason art is boundless and why I continue to make paintings.

Thus Johns' desire is to understand the 'complexity and oneness of nature'. The result is 'poetic conviction', surely a touchstone of her practice.

As Johns completes her seventieth year, she is enjoying the challenge of direct encounters with place, relishing the freedom of working 'on the spot' and what it asks of her. Age does confer the benefits of a dedicated practice, a virtuosity and a compelling range of work. Undoubtedly there will be more intensity of the mythic kind to come.

John McIntyre is a former academic, writer and graphic designer for artists. He is married to Kerry Johns.



Cold Country, Private Collection, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 125cm, 2012

KERRY JOHNS grew up in coastal Queensland, and after graduating as an art teacher studied painting with John Ogburn in Sydney. She continued her studies for two years in European museums drawing from the Old Masters.

Since her first solo exhibition in 1979 she has exhibited consistently in numerous solo and group shows in commercial and public galleries including Broken Hill City Art Gallery, Penrith Regional Gallery and the Lewers Bequest, Caloundra Regional Gallery and Fremantle Arts Centre.

She has been a finalist in prizes including Basil Sellers Prize, Calleen Art Award, Paddington Art Prize, Fishers Ghost Prize (Drawing), M16 Drawing Prize Canberra and the Kedumba Drawing Prize from which her work was acquired for the Kedumba Collection. She held two shows at Ezair Gallery New York in 2002 and 2004. She won the Basil Sellers Art Prize (Eurobodalla) in 2008 and M16 Drawing Prize Canberra (2nd prize) in 2015. In 2016 she won the Empire Global Art Award, Tuggeranong and the Eutick Memorial Still Life Award (EMSLA) Coffs Harbour.

Kerry Johns lives in Canberra and works from a studio at ANCA with a continuing connection to the Eurobodalla coast.

She is represented by Artsite Gallery, Sydney where she will show in August 2017.

Recent exhibitions

- 2017 In Plain Sight, Ivy Hill Gallery, Wapengo NSW
- 2016 On the Spot, Form Studio & Gallery, Queanbeyan, NSW
- 2015 Forest Subjective, Form Studio & Gallery, Queanbeyan, NSW
- 2013 Under Southern Skies, Charles Hewitt Gallery, Sydney
- 2012 Taking Place, Chapman Gallery, Canberra, ACT
- 2011 New Work, Ivy Hill Gallery, Wapengo NSW