

A photograph of Nicole Kelly, an artist, sitting on a white folding chair in her studio. She is wearing a blue button-up jacket, blue jeans, and dark brown boots. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. Behind her is a large, abstract painting with vibrant colors like blue, yellow, purple, and green. In the foreground, there are various art supplies on the floor, including paint bottles, brushes, and a power drill.

Nicole Kelly

Story
ELEANOR ZEICHNER



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NICOLE KELLY'S PAINTINGS APPROACH THE LANDSCAPE AS A SILENT WITNESS TO HISTORY. DRAWING ON POETRY, ART HISTORY AND HER EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF PLACE, KELLY'S RECENT WORK FOCUSES ON HER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BUSH LANDSCAPES NEAR HER HOME. ARTIST PROFILE SPOKE WITH KELLY AHEAD OF HER EXHIBITION AT ARTHOUSE GALLERY.

01 Nicole Kelly, 2019, Silversalt Photography
02 *To the sky something lost*, 2019, oil on polyester,
121 x 167 cm

Do you paint en plein air or do you work in the studio from sketches or photos? Plein air is a really key aspect to my practice ... a way of seeing and feeling the landscape on quite an emotional level. Without that I'd have nothing to work from in the studio. The two painting practices are interlinked. The studio works are solely made from memory, being outside in the landscape, with pen line drawings as my only reference, trigger or emotional anchor. It's quite a responsive process in the studio. The studio works also allow me to filter thoughts or ideas of the landscape in a more reflective way, as opposed to when I'm painting outside that's quite a direct response.

What are the landscapes to which you're drawn?

France has evolved for me as a place of continual return in the last ten years since my first visit through the Brett Whiteley Scholarship. Undeniably I was, and continue to be, drawn to the layered history, particularly the art historical relevance of the landscape of Provence. In terms of the Australian landscape, I've grown up surrounded by National Parks and these landscapes have come to play quite a significant role in my work. I find, especially in the last couple of years, there's something for me really unsettling about these places. Within these landscapes, I've felt really safe as a child, they've been my refuge ... I can close my eyes and trace the contours of these landscapes in my memory. It's only as an adult that knowledge has drawn my attention to the historical brutality of these spaces as part of colonisation. This has provided a really unsettling tension that is driving a lot of the studio works at the moment.





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What has been your process of research into the colonial history of that space and the brutality of invasion?

I've been really influenced by a poet, Ali Cobby Eckermann, who is the author of a deeply moving verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* – this work has been a companion to me for the past year or more. I read this work for the first time sitting on a rock in Grays Point, in the landscape that I am referencing in the paintings. In that moment of reading, it shifted my way of seeing the landscape. The reading triggered an interest in knowledge of historical consciousness, layered upon our own felt understanding of landscapes, and how this collision affects our vision.

When I'm making the paintings in the studio, I'm reflecting on the idea of land as a silent witness, to the multiple and overlapping human narratives, a collection of layered memories and histories. I am interested in the limitations of my gaze, how I come to view the land, loaded with my own histories, and how this layers upon a depth of history in and of nature.

How does that manifest in the work you're making?

I'm not interested in capturing fleeting light but I'm more drawn towards this expanse of layered time. For me, my broken mark is about shattering the picture plane, shattering the image and shattering the landscape that speaks more to the broken world we inhabit. Paint is applied in pieces. The landscapes are pulled apart and pieced back together on the canvas, the image emerges with broken mark in order to change the focus of the painting.

What role does drawing play for you?

Drawing is central to my painting. In a sense they're almost more drawings than they are paintings. Drawing out with paint, that's how I start a painting, and then very early on, coloured marks are put down very directly, almost in the same way I would use charcoal, sometimes whipped out or pushed back spatially. I'm drawing in every sense. What makes it painting I suppose is the time spent back and forth at my palette, mixing colour, with a huge deal of precision. The time spent mixing colour would be close to equal to the time spent making marks.

Can you talk about the work *Ribbon of River* (2019)?

This work started with *Ruby Moonlight*, in which a number of short poems fit together to make a novel. I love the idea of these short works, complete within themselves that inform both the previous and the next works.

These paintings are worked as individual vertical panels but conceived as a whole. They fit together to speak of time that is nonlinear, with no beginning or end. Each holds the story of the other, alongside their own, impacted and shaped by the last in their making ... like our landscapes, they remain unsettled.

I've also always been drawn to Sidney Nolan's *Riverbend* series. It's a work that sits at the back of my mind. In many ways my nine-panel work is a personal reimagining of Nolan's riverbend, taking influence from my response to the land and nature and working through a lot of the ideas that have come to me through Eckermann's poetry.

How do you begin work when you're on a residency in a place you haven't been to before?

When I go to a place I haven't been to before, there is something excellent in my heightened awareness of my limited gaze. I paint to see. I paint to experience the place. This also crystallises for me the limitations of my gaze at home as well. A refreshing reminder. Painting in nature, without the reliance on photos allows for a deeper way to see, to begin to feel a sense of empathy with place. I keep returning to Provence because I do want the depth and I do feel that need of return.

You received the Brett Whiteley Scholarship at a very early stage in your career. How do you feel about its impact?

It had such a significant impact. The biggest thing for me was

03 *Ribbon of river*, 2019, oil on polyester, 107 x 800 cm

04 *Lauren's song*, 2018, oil on polyester, 107 x 112 cm

“ I spent every single day of that six months in a museum or gallery making drawings, to deconstruct the paintings. ”



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05 *Love letter to a friend*, 2015, oil on polyester, 101.5 x 122.5 cm, Wynne Prize finalist 2015

06 *Jumaadi + clouds + rain*, 2017, oil on polyester, 150 x 130 cm, Lismore Regional Gallery collection, Winner of the Hurford Hardwood Portrait Prize 2017

07 *Fairweather's Chang Lao in flames*, 2019, gouache on paper cut out, 187 x 198 cm, Hazelhurst Art on Paper Award finalist

Courtesy the artist, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney and This Is No Fantasy, Melbourne

affirmation from people who I really respect and value, and the opportunity to go overseas for such a long time. I was really very young, I think still the youngest ever awarded the scholarship and that could've gone two ways, but I have always been incredibly serious and focused about my work. I spent every single day of that six months in a museum or gallery making drawings, to deconstruct the paintings and trying to get at what makes a really good painting.

What happened when I returned after this quite critical process of evaluating who I was as a painter and putting myself up against these great painters, is I felt that I really fell short. That is when I came back to working from and in nature, so that was a significant shift. I was working quite abstractly, though it was always from drawings, I came back in a more intense way to the landscape and it opened up this other aspect for me. I think my work will always hover between these two poles of abstraction and representation. ■

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EXHIBITION

Nicole Kelly: It Remains
8 to 23 November 2019
Arthouse Gallery, Sydney