The Nymphéas: in conversation

My walk as a daily ritual along the coastal fringe, irrespective of the weather has been integral to my practice. It has been through such an immersive and familiar experience of landscape which led to a subsequent interest in Monet’s Nymphéas cycle. Walking involves moving through a space and upon a surface, it becomes a way of seeing, feeling or ‘knowing’ a landscape. For me, Monet was feeling his way toward a pictorial equivalent of ‘lived experience’ of a site as much as a preoccupation with observation. Monet’s legacy tends towards abstraction, yet at the time of the Nymphéas installation in 1927, he sat unfavourably between the two poles of abstraction and representation. I was interested in magnifying the zone between.

As paintings, the Nymphéas became an interface between Monet and myself, both as a maker and viewer. Monet’s sketchbooks were of equal interest, as were the Giverny water garden and Étretat, for their possibilities of an imprint of coastal memory. Together they presented a passage to immersive landscape experiences connecting to intimate territories. They explore the experience of landscape: mutable boundaries of water and atmosphere, combined with the psychological connection to place and ritual of the everyday. My journey became about an experience of ‘returning’ to somewhere ‘familiar’ in memory.

In making this body of work; focusing on the life inherent in mark and shifting spatial relationships, I was aiming to address a bodily engagement; one which becomes ‘an interweaving of vision and movement’ a shifting through the spaces within the work. Originally, as a process I isolated the marks which were embedded into the weight of surface of the Nymphéas paintings, and found later a way to release my mark into its own rhythm and space in landscape. The paintings become a filter, through which air, light, space and mark could hover and suspend allowing the mark to oscillate between abstraction, landscape and fluid geographies.

Wendy Stokes

The Nymphéas: in conversation
Wendy Stokes

25 July - 5 September 2015
These works are free of the horizon line, and tip the viewer into their depths. “I am trying to place. While recognising that Monet's interest was not abstract, Stokes used her mark-making to swimming and walking.

Her intention is clear: “Landscape is a spatial experience of nature - rather than a view”. An imaginative space within a multiplicity of colours from sky and sea – purples, blues and greys. Giverny - spatial reading 1 [2015] offers up gestures as shapes that cascade down the vertical space of the canvas, buoyed and supported by each other. Subtlety of tone evokes water, dark depths and organic plants that, nonetheless, are imbued with an Australian light.

For indigenous Australian artists, place is primal, constant and present. While Stokes does not claim a level of connection beyond her forty years in this place, the nuance of her coastal landscape (and its echo in Monet’s Giverny ponds and Etretat cliffs and shorelines) is will large both in her work and the sensory memories offered in these works.

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In Stokes’ work we are taken inside, both her memories and our own, to depths that are meditative, stimulating and holistic, enveloping the intellect, body and psyche.

Louise Martin-Chew

19 May 2015