



Above: *Retracing Giverny* polytych. 183 x 760cm Acrylic and oilstick on canvas. Image courtesy Lou Farina.



Drawing provides the means by which to feel and know the rhythms of a site. Drawing also allows for a navigation of intangible aspects of landscape experiences. Trying to make sense of my encounter with Monet's Nymphéas paintings and the Giverny pond site became about engagement, act, residue and memory. Drawing provided a site of understanding, while painting became the residue of experiences carried within the body.

The artist gratefully acknowledges Fondation Claude Monet for granting private access to the garden.

Above: *Willow* 2 plein air drawings (from a set of 13). 29 x 21cm Coloured progressio pencil on paper

Front: *Retracing Giverny* polytych (panel 4 and 5). 183 x 760cm Acrylic and oilstick on canvas

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Retracing Memory

Wendy Stokes

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Wendy Stokes: an interview with Louise Martin-Chew



Wendy Stokes has developed a visual conversation – across centuries and continents – with impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840-1926). His renditions of the water garden in France’s Giverny harness colour and light, and may be read simultaneously as figurative and abstract. To this dialogue, contemporary Australian painter Stokes has added her immersive experience of Monet’s environments, infusing them with Antipodean parallels that draw on memory, place and experience.

When and how did your artistic interaction with Monet’s garden in France’s Giverny begin?

I had been working for a few years on large paintings in an expanded landscape format drawing on my coastal experiences (in New South Wales). They were dealing with the ephemeral nature of form and mark from within the landscape. To me it was a natural progression to historically backtrack to Monet. I took myself to Paris (in 2010) to ‘experience’ Monet’s Grande Decorations at the Musee Orangerie. Later, in 2014, a residency at Cité International des Arts provided an opportunity to spend time in the Giverny garden which presented new ideas.

As an Australian artist with significant connection to your own place in northern NSW, how did you approach an unfamiliar country and landscape? What parallels exist between you and Monet?

Initially it was all about being there with the work; navigating Monet’s use of space and mark, the materiality of surface and seeing the links to abstraction. Yet, being in his garden reinforced the nature of landscape as a site and a place of meaning. The unfamiliar became familiar. Monet was not only drawing on what he saw but also memories from his youth spent rambling the Normandy coastline; a landscape of expansive skies and mutable boundaries not dissimilar to my own coastal experiences over five decades. My early childhood was immersed in a rural landscape and a large country garden, a place dominated by a creek with willows and poplars. I found parallels in Monet’s landscapes and garden with my own.

What memories do you take to the landscape?

My paintings and drawings play with psychological notions of openness and enclosure, familiarity and nurture, as well as the atmospheric of weather. They connect to places of personal meaning. I am interested in how the body engages with these places – how we move through spaces, what we see and what we feel; how we respond to nature’s rhythms. Landscape becomes about sensory experiences rather than isolated views. It is a place where personal meaning and experiences are intensified.

Your interest in the landscape is both physical and psychological. How does your process create these experiences on the page and canvas?

The drawings are about passage and movement – the immediate lived experience. In Giverny, I walked around the garden considering how I was experiencing it, relating this to my ritual of coastal walking. Monet’s paintings of the Giverny garden are condensed, yet his drawings are the opposite. They are loose, open and lineal. This provided the trigger for me to reinterpret the garden through drawing. I made drawings as I walked within the garden and they connect this to their making. They are a continuum, composites, considering overlays and repetitive drawing of the willows in response to the shifting rhythms of light and breezes. The paintings involved ‘retrieval’ of the experiences.

Your mode of ‘mapping’ landscape transforms the experience of being physically in a place into another medium. How does that translation affect body and mind?

Mapping place in this way seeks to reach into a place otherwise unavailable. I am living it through the drawing, which connects hand and body to the psychology of the maker. Shifts in medium provide their individual dialogues; imparting different energies that are pivotal to the work. Monet’s sketchbooks and painted studies have openness and ‘life’ encapsulated in their marks; you can feel their trace through the body. My work moves across these connections through active engagement and memory. I hope that audiences allow themselves to reach into their own experiences.

Drawing is key. Was this due to its immediacy?

Drawing was pivotal to engaging with and making the work. Walking and drawing within the garden was a means of becoming familiar with, knowing, and understanding the space. Adopting repetitive drawing techniques as a means of rehearsal to locate and harness the essence of place was an important part of the process. The mark is raw, unmediated, even perhaps unfinished, but authentic to its time and act of making.

Your work pares down the Giverny experience, with light, air and transparency; crystallising its essential character. Does this reflect the more open character of Australian light?

I feel Monet’s painted studies are most interesting where he leaves the canvas open to allow the light in. These works are about ideas; they offer an entry point to the maker. Although the Giverny garden is dense and compact and in a tiny village, it is surrounded by ‘open’ farmland. Once again I was drawn to edges, there but not there; blurring boundaries, just as the boundaries are removed between sky and water in the pond. This had me considering the openness of my rural roots, the coast and light in Australia, but also Monet’s Normandy coast.

‘Retracing memory’, your title for these works, suggests not just the experience of being in Giverny, but process: an overlay of loss, recall and emotional power. They also reach for the indefinable, a spiritual and cultural memory that extends beyond the individual.

We imprint layers of connection to place, and bring our past to new experiences. What is strange, in visual terms, is that I am drawn to the rugged and wilder landscapes of Australia, and less to the manicured pastoral charm of the European countryside yet, at the same time, I feel their psychological attraction. These works are as much about Monet as a resonance with my own experiences. Trying to understand my connection to site was made through the plein air studies; linking the psychology of place and memory through my own immersion in it. The willow became a trigger for memory and loss, vulnerability and resilience.

There is a strong downward pull in these paintings and drawings, a real sense of the willow and its drooping leaves and branches. Can you talk about their visual forms?

The work is considerably monochromatic. This was deliberate; to reinforce the lineal dialogue of the drawing; taking its cue not only from Monet’s open and sparsely coloured sketchbooks but the openness of the surrounding rural space beyond the garden, the light through the trees, the stillness and softness of the early morning dawn and evening light, the fusion of sky and water; which pulls back to mutable qualities of the coastal experiences. The vertiginous character was new and developed out of the direct experience but is also part of my coastal walk, where space is randomly dissected by vegetation. It became about taking the work back to a site of landscape and opening it out toward an eastern approach, allowing space in, a place to wander. They capture a sense of being in the space, grounded, yet disorientated at the same time. I was conscious of being enveloped by the plants foliage; being physically centred in the garden yet moving within it.

Interview conducted November 2016