



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 intertwining of vision and movement' a shifting through the spaces within the work. [1] 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 became 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

[1] From Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964

All Images Wendy Stokes.
cover: *Conversation*(detail), 2014, acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 183 x 183cm
overleaf *Notation 11* (detail), 2014, acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 178 x 650 cm
overleaf centre: *Giverny - spatial reading 1* (detail), 2015, acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 183 x 750 cm
Photography: Wendy Stokes.

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Wendy Stokes

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It is about physicality, it is about the body. One listens not just with the mind but with the body... that's a quality that I'm always looking for in any music: you know, this way of being inside the music and living through the music.

- Liza Lim, contemporary composer [1]

In these ambitious new works, Wendy Stokes develops a conversation across the centuries and continents with impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840-1926) and his well known series, The Nymphéas. Monet painted these during the last three decades of his life. Renditions of the water lilies in his garden in France's Giverny, they harness colour and light and, with their highly compressed picture plane, may be read as both figurative and abstract. To this dialogue, contemporary Australian painter Stokes develops her own immersive experience of landscape, the antipodean light, and her coastal place. Her experiences in Monet's environment - both at Giverny and coastal Etretat - infuse the paintings, with these places in France aligned and connected to Stokes's Australian experiences of gardens and the beach respectively.

Of similar scale to Monet's paintings, which embrace the viewer on curved walls in Paris's Musée d'Orangerie, Stokes's contemporary abstractions span up to seven metres, and draw the viewer along their length, with calligraphic marks and energetic lines inviting the eye and the body to participate in a change of pace. She immerses the viewer in her canvas in the same way as she is in her landscape, connecting to the lived experience of the coast, with the physicality of daily swimming and walking.

Her intention is clear: "Landscape is a spatial experience of nature - rather than a view". An interest in repetition of motif drew her to Monet's work and his interest in a sensory translation of place. While recognising that Monet's interest was not abstract, Stokes used her mark-making to evoke memory and familiarity, without the requirement of literal references.

These works are free of the horizon line, and tip the viewer into their depths. "I am trying to fuse the spaces of landscape rather than offer a literal translation; to bring to a contemporary surface a flat plane yet one the viewer moves through."



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 writ large both in her work and the sensory memories offered in these works.

Her subject matter is oriented less toward the land than the ethereal and sublime - and suggests that, through Monet, she has found an alternative approach that links into an eastern sensibility. Parts of the white primed canvas are left open and untouched, and these offer the viewer 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. *Vestige* reads like music, with visual changes of tune and tempo that shimmer across the surface.

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

Louise Martin-Chew

19 May 2015

[1] Andrew Ford, "Spiritual Ecstasy and Earthly Desire: An Interview with Liza Lim", *Earth Dances: Music in Search of the Primitive*, Black Inc. 2014; p. 140.