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ARTIST BELYNDA HENRY FINDS GLOBAL SUCCESS

JO BEVAN

COVER STORY

week ender.



From her studio at the base of the Watagan Mountains, artist Belynda Henry has captivated international collectors with her first solo exhibition in New York City, JO BEVAN writes.

As the shadowy blue-green mountain wilds close in from above, the landscapes within Dooralong Valley are opening up. Driving into the depths of the quiet hamlet, all around vistas emerge and disappear. This is the intrigue of painter Belynda Henry, who has inhabited this sparsely populated valley for almost all her life.

"I'm really focussing here because I know how special it is," she says.

Henry negotiates the rutted terrain as we travel in her car up the winding dirt track that is the driveway on her acreage property. The back seat is filled with bits and pieces of art supplies, telling the story of her recent run of success. After a sell-out show in New York City during the pandemic lockdown, and with solo shows upcoming in Los Angeles and Sydney, she's got little time for tidying up a car.

Her studio, however, is an oasis of creative calm. The barn-style building is near picture perfect. Light issues in. Views close and distant are ever present, ever changing. It's a private place, Henry says. "I completely disappear from everything ... hardly anyone comes here," she says. We sit amid piles of art books, a spot for meditating on pictures, and their forms. She pours out peppermint tea, after asking me to choose the cup-and-saucer set I'd most like to drink from.

We talk first about other artists, their names on the spines piled about us. Of the current age, Ken Done and Elisabeth Cummings. And image conjurers of days past, Tony Tuckson and Ian Fairweather. "It's the layering and the dusty look of the gouache," Henry says of the latter.

Lee Krasner and fellow American abstract expressionists are also up for discussion, as we sip from dainty cups and fork into little pieces of cake.

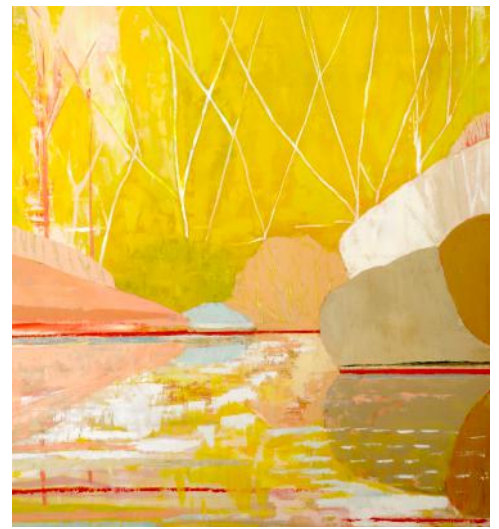
Henry's studio is currently being filled with her own imaginings, taken from her observations of the land around her. They are hypnotic, of drifting space and perspective. There are figurative elements, tree branches that reach and cluster. And there are elements that mean something, without seeming to be anything. Her Tangle series resonates with the familiar confusion of the Australian bush, without overstating it. "I can see myself absolutely abstract, but I don't want to go there straight away," she says. "It has to take its course, to happen organically, so slowly. It has to be real, based on the experience of what's out there and how it actually influences me, which it does.

"I think I'm a very emotional painter. I disappear into my works, it's kind of like meditating to me. It's very trance-like even."

Henry's current work is destined for an LA audience, for a gallery space in East Hollywood that looks like it emerged from an Edward Hopper painting. US-based gallery director Emerald Gruin says that following a recent group exhibition in LA, featuring four of Henry's "big wall" works, there is demand lining up for her solo show later this year.

"People love the placement of colour, the surface," Gruin says. "You really feel like you are looking into a pond or a valley."

In New York City, where Henry is represented by Olsen Gallery, an operation of Australian gallerist Tim Olsen, Henry's work brought an eye-opening response even though gallery doors were unable to open in any more than virtual fashion due to the pandemic crisis.



ENAMOURED WITH THE LAND: Belynda Henry's property in the Dooralong Valley has long been an inspiration for her artwork. Above, detail from her works, *Golden summer* with yellow and pink, and *Ordinance + Reimagined*. Artwork photos supplied by Belynda Henry. Belynda Henry was dressed by Parlour X.

A surprising call came from a representative of international fashion designer Christian Louboutin. Louboutin, best known for his signature lacquer-red soled stilettos, wanted every work. But other collectors were also taking note of Henry's mesmeric landscapes.

Olsen says Henry's work was a sell-out success in New York because it "seduces the eye". "People who had never seen Australia, felt enamoured enough by the ethereal qualities of her work," he says. "International collectors felt an intimacy and visual experience that extended beyond any axioms of a provincial experience. Her work is universal.

"Belynda Henry is a rare artist. Her interaction with landscape has a profound aesthetic and construct. She marries her incredible sensibility for the colours of her surrounding bushland with an underlying abstract structure." "Her sellout exhibition in New York with us, was a testament to her talent," Olsen says.

Louboutin secured a suite of six paintings for his Paris apartment, including the first of Henry's "stained" works created on canvas rolled out across the grass beside her studio. She mixed traditional paints with clay-in- fused water from the nearby dam. "Magnificent landscapes, and the reflections on the water are oh so vibrant - sublime colours," Louboutin relates, in a translated statement to *Weekender*.

Henry first drew wider attention as a finalist in the Wynne Prize in 2000. The then-director of the Art Gallery of NSW, Edmund Capon, pointed out her work to Stuart Purves, director of the prestigious Australian Galleries. Purves noted that she brought "simplicity in her work ... within a complicated world", and was quick to pull her into his artist stable. Her show last summer at Australian Galleries, titled "to paint is to love", caught the eye of another fashion icon, Akira Isogawa, with the designer describing Henry's work as "a pure form of metaphysical landscape which almost crossed over Japanese calligraphy". As he told *Weekender*, Henry's work "somehow triggered my childhood memory of gardens in Kyoto".

Henry's next Sydney show will be held at an inner-city local council space, the newly revamped Woollahra Gallery at Redleaf. She'll show watercolours. After being recently listed in a compilation of top artists "to invest in now", and two years ago finding herself acclaimed in the Thames & Hudson tome on Australian art, *A Painted Landscape*, Henry is awash with representation. The latest, coming in just this week, is with international limited edition print dealer Absolut Art.

She also recently joined Alstergren Artist Agency, with owner Kate Alstergren among the few who have been to Henry's secluded studio. Alstergren was taken by Henry's "knowing" of her surroundings. "She's grown up in this environment, she knows it intimately," Alstergren says.

Henry spent most of her childhood in a nearby valley, and has lived all her adult years in Dooralong Valley raising two daughters. She observes the land "constantly and automatically, gathering views, moments" even when on the school run, with youngest daughter Milla.

When Henry and I first met at Newcastle's former von Bertouch Galleries about two decades ago, she described the way mists crept across open land down the valley's belly, and the shapes that were formed by fenced lines advancing on wilderness.

Some of the new paintings have her "old shapes" in them, she says - "because I don't want to lose that altogether". Henry works *plein air* within the picturesque byways of rural living and deep in the untouched gullies beneath towering tree ferns, deliberately painting in different kinds of light. She also paints after darkness envelopes the studio. "Night time painting is very important," she says. "I wouldn't want to be just painting at certain times of the day."

The paintings emerge like the colours that swim on the surface of the dam, just outside the studio. Rain comes as we sit together, Henry stops to absorb its effect.



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