

EN PLEIN AIR

A Personal Account
Kerry Johns and Vicki Hersey

Our first view of Dalgety took our breath away. What a visual wealth appeared before us. The view was so attractive, looking down at a bank of dark pines making a square statement in front of gentle slopes of pink and sap green with the purple-blue range behind. Dark trees punctuating the soft light bathing the almost bare hills reminded us of a Corot painting.

Our plein air painting assignment also took us to a windswept coast near Narooma where Glasshouse Rock is positioned just out to sea, looking like a cardboard cut-out stuck solidly in the white crested ocean and being pounded by heavy waves with a backdrop of a pale blue-green curtain of sky. With such a scene, one could wish to stay forever and watch the changing play of Nature's power.

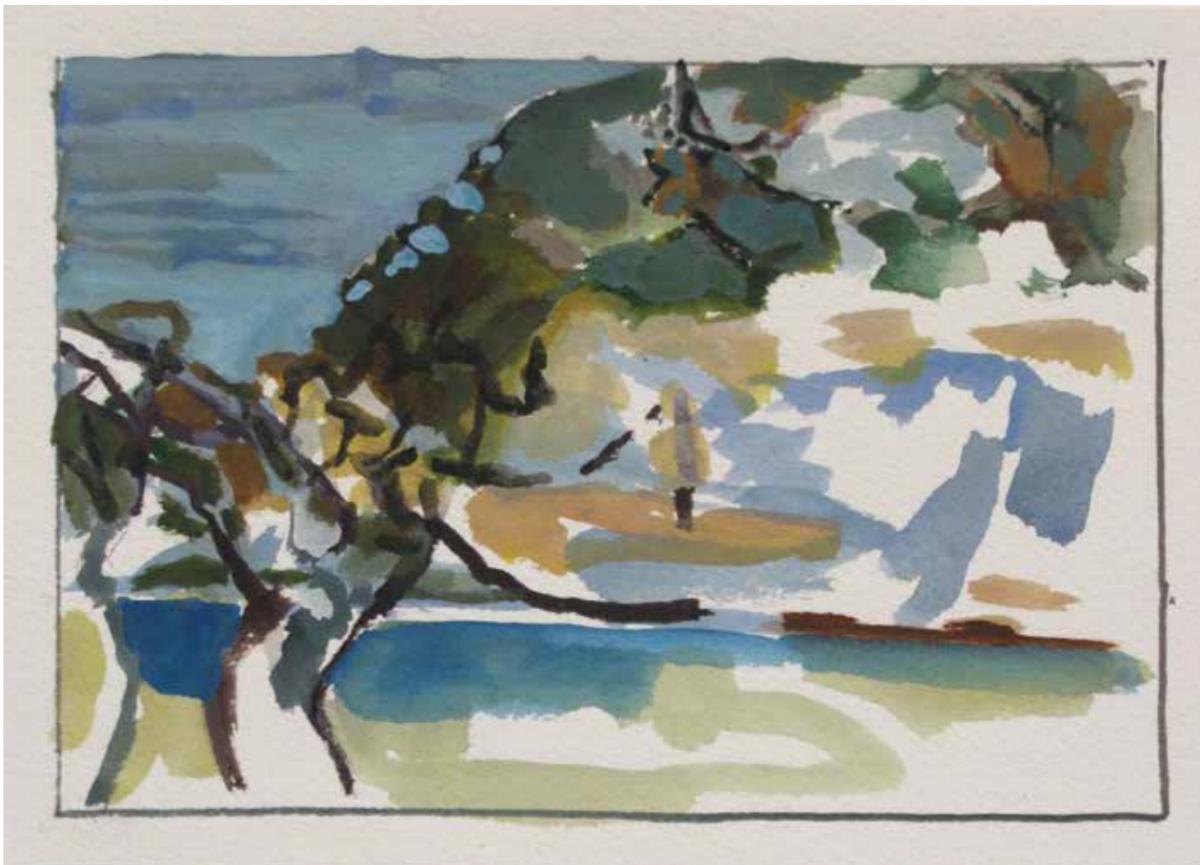
Opposite page top:
Kerry Johns:
Close Up,
watercolour on
paper 18.5 x 21cm

Top:
Kerry Johns:
Colour Marks
Broulee, mixed
media on paper
15 x 20.5cm

Right:
Kerry Johns painting
on Rosedale
Headland



Kerry Johns: Lost Headland, mixed media on paper 13 x 18.5cm



Such moments are those most remembered and those feelings that are prompted when confronted by such beauty are what we hope can be captured if only in a small way in painting 'on the spot'.

From the first time we went away to paint en plein air for a show called *On the Spot* at Form Studio and Gallery in Queanbeyan, we tried not looking at the motif as a nameable thing.

Artists choose what are the essential elements in front of them. Essential elements are a subjective concept. Elizabeth Cummings, while working en plein air, uses every large and small thing in front of her to create works with a fabulous riot of colour and form. Neridah Stockley, however, isolates atmospheric indicators from some scenes, cloudscapes and the like, tonal differences from others, and ignores other information to create images that are calm and contemplative.

We work differently from one another only in that we choose a different emphasis to extract from the motif in front of us, but we both try to remember something Braque said: 'One must not proceed from the object but towards the object.'

As we consider the motif, or scene, we take the essential elements from the chaos and open up a possibility of discovery which can come in many forms. It may be simply seeing a striking colour sequence with the

potential to enhance a section of painting that would otherwise fall flat. It may be a rhythm, tone, or line flowing from a series of objects to others which in a logical narrative sense are quite unconnected.

Or it may be a more personal discovery as mentioned by Roy Jackson's partner Maggie, who said, regarding Roy working en plein air: 'Roy did not like being watched while painting. Even when he was working en plein air he needed space to discover himself anew and unmask the reality of his immediate surroundings.'

But to return to Braque's words—'not *from* the object but *towards* the object'. The narrative self-evidently comes from the object: that is a tree. But what does towards the object mean and how could one 'unmask reality'?

We have often given ourselves the conscious goal of 'truth-telling', so that from the start, at every moment, nothing is made up. We tried to ensure that subject matter or narrative should not be allowed to get a stranglehold on our painting practice.

Honesty of observation comes about when the scene appears as if nothing in it had ever been seen or understood before. For instance, if the whole thing can be seen in terms of tonal values or rhythms, or colour passages, then one is not caught by the idea 'this is a headland, a rock, a tree'. The moment one tries to represent a tree, then a generalised conception brings



Vicki Hersey at Lake Wollumboola

the actual appearance towards a kind of mediocrity or generic object, whereas if there is no idea of 'a tree', there is the utter surprise and freshness of two or three tones turning into a tree.

Concentrating only on doing that, concentrating on what is seen, somehow allows an emotional rapport to build between the artist and the object. This empathy infuses one's mark-making or colour placement or size, shape, rhythm, or any of the elements used to convey what appears to the eye. So concentrating only on the elements somehow allows a rapport for what is seen and has an effect on the placement, type of marks, the colour, how much goes in and how much is left out.

Often a surprising response to the place can result, not of deliberate making. Possibly this is what is meant by 'unmasking reality' but it is not something an artist actively or consciously does. It is something that may happen through keeping all these things together in one bubble of concentration. A new and different reality may appear. Looking for representation of the scene may lead

to disappointment but looking at the painting in its own integrity, one may discover a 'reality unmasked'.

That's the challenge and the joy of working right in the middle of Nature, of working quickly without thought or conceptualisation or ambition. Of course it doesn't always happen, and some of the time these ideals can't be met. We each might make four or five paintings in a day of which only one has something. The others are useless because concentration was lost, or maybe one tried to 'fix' it according to a conception—maybe one saw something good and tried to gild the lily. Maybe one never got off the ground! Concentration is a subtle companion.

But 'towards the object'—what did Braque mean? Imagine just sitting and looking at the scene for a long time, approaching it quietly, to find what it has to say or give. It may subtly change and seem to re-assemble, to present a different face after a while. This has a very different feel from stalking up and taking the appearance down. This is more an attitude of discovery, of being guided, keeping the mind open rather than appropriating

what is seen. Softening the mind to the motif. This is possibly what he meant by 'towards'—the artist trying to meet it halfway. Thinking about the subject in this way certainly gave us new attitudes and new ways to approach painting from Nature. Whether we understood what Braque or Roy Jackson said in the way they meant it was not the point. The point was to see things differently. It was valuable to have the words of other seekers shedding a different light on one's understanding of the task at hand.

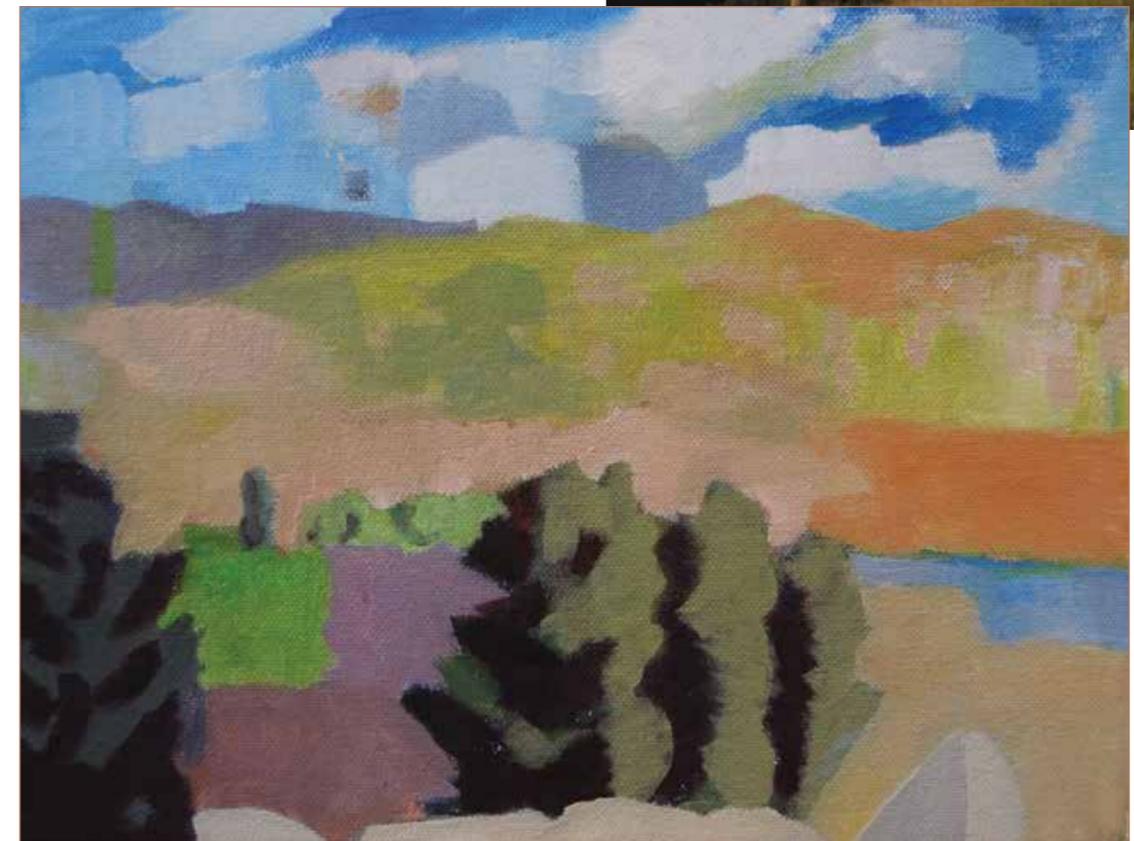
As Nature presents itself anew, trying to find a newness to one's approach and attempting once again to make something of it, is what makes working en plein air so exciting and worthwhile. It can be frustrating as well as fun. We have had some memorable experiences while painting out of doors because it is such a physical experience involving all the senses. One is not in control of the environment as one can be in the studio and this gives an edge to the practice. Almost never is everything satisfactory—one forgets to bring a rag or the water container, the tube of lemon yellow, or a hat, even lunch! While sitting in the weather and the elements, perhaps fending off annoyances such as marauding sandflies or



Vicki Hersey: In the Park, oil on canvas

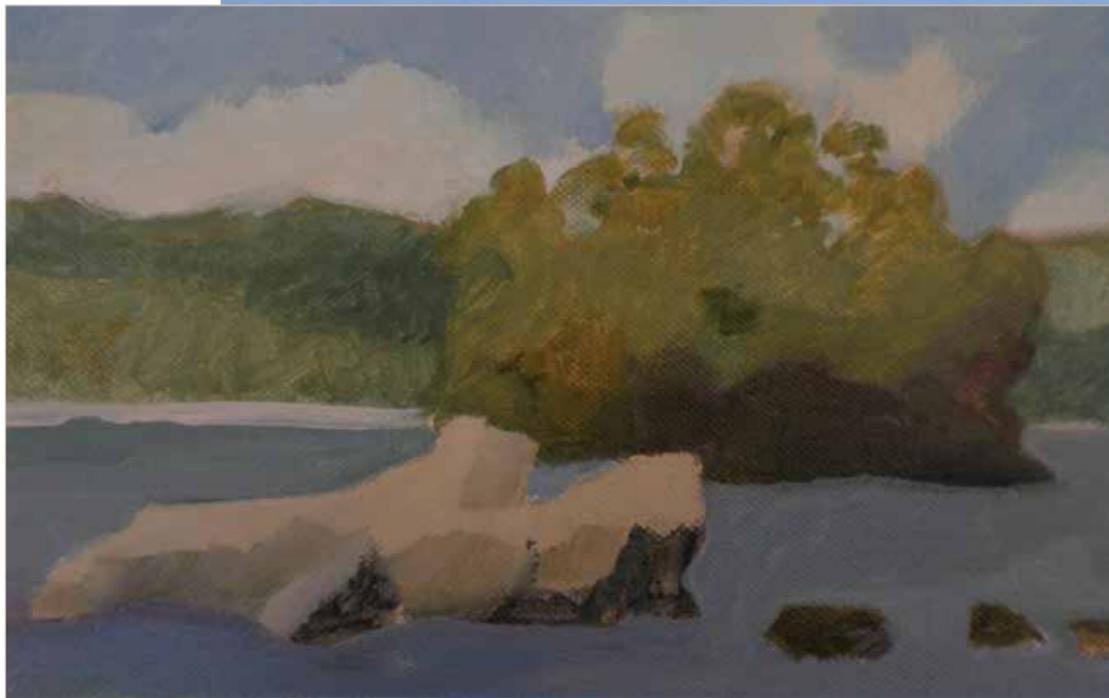


Dalgety Morning



Vicki Hersey: Dalgety landscape

Vicki Hersey: From Caseys Beach



suddenly finding an incoming tide lapping at our feet, we often felt it to be humbling and yet exciting work. We have been in perfect situations working away with the sun out and no wind and a calm scene, and an hour later a sudden blowing gale has sent us scrambling for cover as paper rips and canvases fly.

Sometimes the day is perfect and a wonderful shady tree is found with a fabulous view to rest the eyes upon and one is immersed in the quiet solitude of observation and practice. Images are made, painting chairs are moved about and

another possibility is presented. Some places or spots have been revisited several times, as some places seem to inhabit an energy that requires attention or perhaps something different is found, like the calm waters of the Clyde River snaking past the boats and falling quiet and peaceful as it moves towards the sea. Or the tide coming and going as each morning we settle down on the grassy bank of the Shoalhaven to try Mt. Cullengutty once again.

For us there was the sense of daily 'practising', of trying again, almost always feeling that one fell short and rarely

feeling elated. Often we would go home unhappy with our days work, only to find that the same works propped up on a dresser or a windowsill later that day would seem to reconstruct themselves and come into their own.

Pissarro said: 'Don't proceed according to any rules or principles but paint what you observe and feel. Paint generously and unhesitatingly, for it is best not to lose your first impression. One must have only one master—Nature. She is the one to be consulted.'

No matter how Nature is consulted, with the rapid flow of a first impression or a softened approach that encourages empathy, with a careful observation of tonal values, or by releasing the riot of forms that are there, or seeking the bare essential of its form, any of these approaches will serve the artist well, as long as she confers with Nature.

Good painting is a joyous truth and going into the embrace of Nature to practise again and again the telling of truth is what gives us the paintings that we value and want to have.