

NEIL TAYLOR

DRIFTLESS: PAINTINGS OF STONE AND MIST



Born in Brisbane in 1953 Neil Taylor studied with William Robinson and taught art at high schools in Queensland. In the 1970s he made the move to Sydney, worked as a screen printer for Florence Broadhurst and began painting and exhibiting full time. He is described as a realist landscape painter and after living for almost thirty years in the Hawkesbury River region Taylor moved to the mountains west of Sydney from where he continues to travel extensively in Australia and abroad for painting projects.

'I was brought up on a 100-acre farm north of Brisbane – it used to be my playground until I was about 13 and it was where I developed all my fantasies – so when we had to sell (when the farm became unviable) I had this sort of 'paradise lost' feeling. It's like I'm always searching for something in nature, there is something missing for me.

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Taylor immerses himself into his environment and in his most recent paintings these are the mythic mountains which range down our eastern seaboard, the great dissected sandstone plateau once under the sea which has worn down over the millennia into an extraordinary ancient and seeming bottomless world,

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called in part the Blue Labyrinth. Works in this new series entitled *Driftless: Paintings of Stone and Mist*, have moved away from the traditional realist landscapes. They have been described as 'unmistakably a montage of intricately painted images – both of European and of Chinese influence – brought together to form a single, coherent pictorial representation of a tamed and untamed wilderness' (Andrew McIlroy).

Of these new works, Taylor says: 'I have focused on my own front yard - the misty sandstone cliffs and valleys of the Blue Mountains. When Charles Darwin first laid eyes on these massive cliffs in 1836, he was deeply impressed by their ability to convey a window into the ancient past, through the layers of time they indicated. So much so that he gained crucial insights into what, twenty years later, became his Theory of Evolution..

'These paintings are attempts at poetic investigations into similar impressions - but with the benefit (and accompanying confusion) of the much wider lens of today's science, geology, archaeology and painting language. With this viewpoint, the mists forming and vanishing in the sandstone valleys are no longer



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symbolic of the contrast between transience and permanence - both the mist and even the stone itself are moving, changing creations in me - *driftless*.

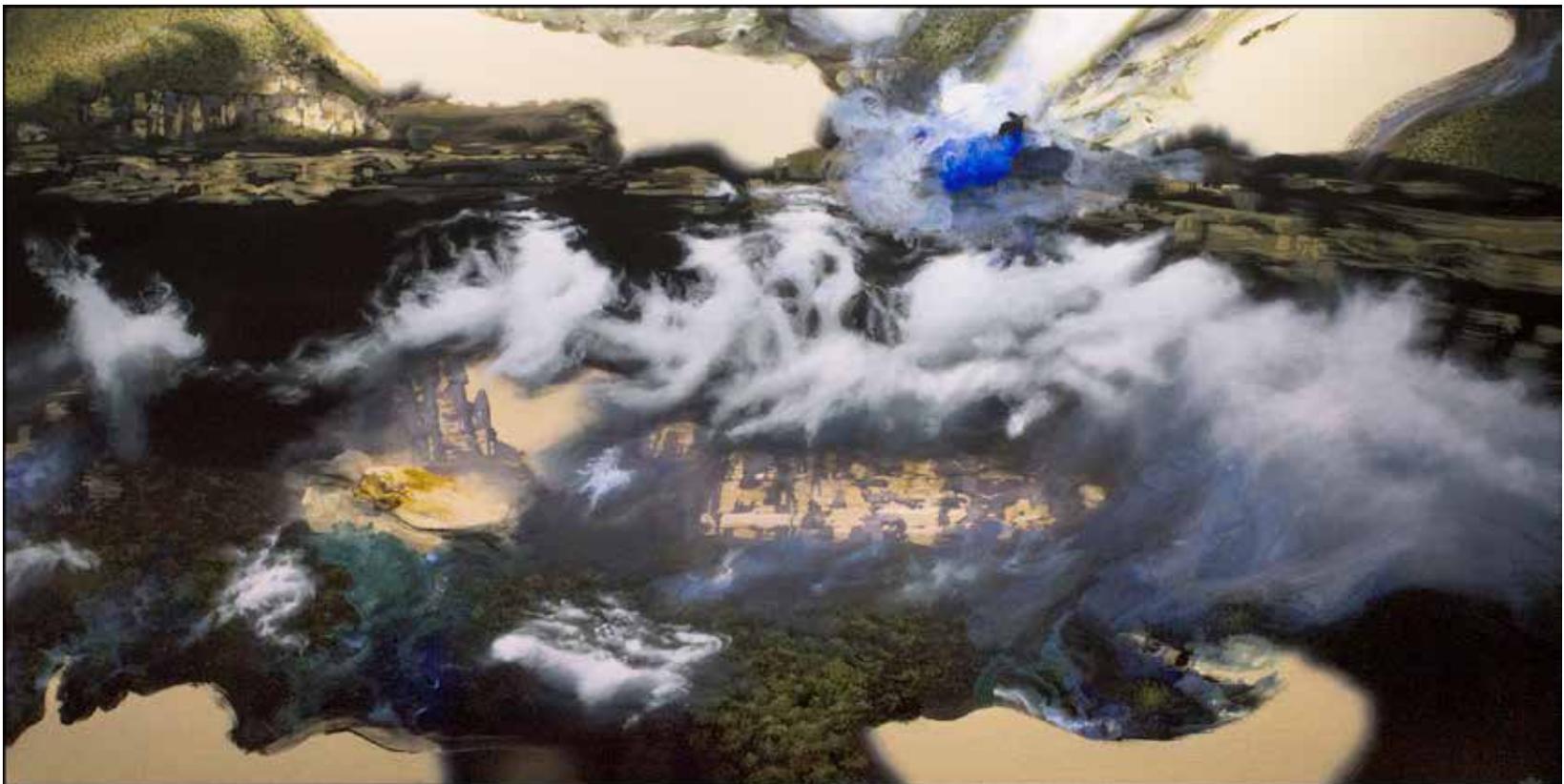
'When we experience the bush (or ocean or desert or wilderness) every idea we have about it and pretty well everything we feel about it is an additional artificial layer - coming not from the bush itself but from our own ideas and emotions.

'Typically these layers can take the form of a scientific understanding, or reminiscences of past experiences, or fear of unknown dangers, or analysis in preparation for a painting, or looking for a good photo, or a search for flora and fauna, or a search for food and water, or any of the other countless ways we can pass the time in the bush.

'We can make a layer that analyses the contrasting attitudes of indigenous, nineteenth century and twenty-first century attitudes to "ownership" – as pointless and superficially clever as may at first glance appear.

'But it's only when you're aware that the origin of all of this is YOU (rather than the bush itself) that you can start to peel back these layers of meaning and feeling to arrive at the real bush and not the artificial. And when you get there all that's left is an enormous spiritual abyss-like depth where the notion of "you" is gone, just as is the notion of "bush".

'As John Olsen says (paraphrasing Ming Dynasty painter Shitao) "I am in the landscape and the landscape is in me". To make paintings from this place is possible but it's a very elusive place. Some of our best indigenous painters have done it. Painters like Lloyd Rees and Fred Williams have also attained it. One of the first things you notice with these works is that they are what Francis Bacon calls "areas of sensation rather than illustration" – they tell no stories, they illustrate



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no theory, they spring from no ideas – and so they are much closer to the “isness” of the bush. They’re in a place not easily described in the words of intellectuals and art critics but closer to the physical world of paint. A great painting to look at in this regard is Yukultji Napangati’s untitled painting which won the Wynne Prize in 2018.

‘While the didactic panel mentions a story associated with the “place” of this painting there is no attempt at all to show this story or any other in the painting. Instead there is a purified and extremely basic patterning which evokes the desert area in countless different ways. The writer (unlikely to be Napangati herself) mentions sand hills and tubers but these patterns are also reptile skins and wind patterns and muddy water pools and woven grass and human wrinkles and sound patterns and maps of tracks and contours and on and on as endless as the desert itself – only limited by your imagination.

‘It’s worth mentioning that Napangati is one of the Pintubi Nine – the last group of indigenous people to make contact with white culture back in 1984, so her painting is extremely uninfluenced by European art.

‘Painting in its purest form like this is *Creation Celebrating Creation* and as such reaches far back to the first paintings we know on cave walls many millennia ago. The more layers of ideas and concepts and emotions and theories we place onto a landscape the more this pure form will be obscured. In fact to do so takes the first steps towards a very real abuse of this landscape. It’s so much easier to destroy the bush if we’ve developed an attitude that it’s not “me” but it’s “that”. And in the end to use it to make (obscure) points by layering idea upon idea is just as cynical as using it to win a seat in parliament or mining it for jobs or starving it of water for offshore dollars.’

Neil Taylor has been exhibiting since 1975 and has been a Finalist in many major prizes, most recently the Tattersall’s Club Landscape Art Prize (2018). He has exhibited in the NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize, KAAF Art Prize and Calleen Art Award, Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Art Prizes. He is a past Winner of the Mount Eyre and Gosford Art Prizes and a previous winner of the Viewer’s Choice Award for the Mosman Art Prize.

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Previous pages:
Main painting: *Barricades of Heaven*
Opposite: *Night Comes to the Valley*

Left: *Driftless*, acrylic, 95 x 190 cm
Below: Neil Taylor on the Bridle Track near Hill End (photo Lu Malm)

