

# in conversation

Interview with Lucy Stranger. (*Unfolding presence*, catalogue ORG 2021)

## **When you moved to Australia how did your work change?**

Though it made a clear break with the past - the shifts were gradual.

When I arrived in 1980 I set to work straightaway and it soon became apparent I had to rethink it all, work against my facility - what I knew I could do. It took time to clarify my direction, shake off many of my previous lessons, let the air in and find my footing again.

A breakthrough came with collage. I trained on construction, on plaster casts, on building an image slowly and gradually. I've always understood painting as being built – not just painted and certainly not about depiction. This is still at the foundation of my work. Yet my notions of composition and structure were so tightly wound.

Collage is lifting, reforming and repositioning the elements in the work. Its very process instantly unfixes, shakes off old structures and releases new meanings as the relationships in the work are continually reconfigured.

Using paper and combining different materials to build the image grew largely out of necessity as very little in terms of art supplies was available to me at the time. Collage would allow me to lift the image, curb any possibility of retreat to a way of working I already knew, let a new language develop, give the visual language I had trained in a new dimension.

## **When you use the term 'image' – what do you mean by it?**

A painting's inner life, its quality of form, the living presence building in a work.

When the painting reaches that stage, when an image begins to rise and lift of the surface, it feels equally anchored at great depth. It is an elevation of a direction I have been working in for some time - a unity where everything coheres, complete with an internal reasoning and structural logic entirely its own.

## **How do you begin a work?**

Paintings live in the present and so I look to the fabric of reality. I turn to something very specific, at times to literature and poetry. It triggers new material that is incorporated and has to be constructed. One source, one theme, generates associative thinking and connections that give me entry into the work, ignites a new direction, multiplying the potential.

The surface slowly discards what is unnecessary, sheds what doesn't clarify my construction. The work becomes more and more complex and gives me a lot to consider, to reflect on— a lot to do.

### **What draws you to working with oil paint?**

Everything! Material is only there to construct and be transformed. Oil paints capacity to transform itself means I can always return it to the freedom and purity of the start.

It is its ability to be worked and re-worked and worked against, without losing its vitality - complete the work in the midst of life and happening. At no stage does oil paint give-up...it persists.

I can draw deep into the paint, go back into the ground, all the way into the layers of the work - this keeps me connected to the painting's history.

Ultimately what gives me the painting is not the texture, it is the lack of it. I am simultaneously working with passages that are excessively full and excessively empty and with the complex spaces in-between.

To understand material in my work is to understand it in accord - in synchronicity with the open passages in the painting.

### **What painters have influenced you?**

I am drawn to paintings that have structure at their essence; structures that are not final, that remain persistent, even if painted in the 1200s.

The artists I gravitate towards, those I keep returning to, are the Italians of the Ducento and Trecento - to Cimabue, to Duccio and to Giotto and anonymous painters of that time. I am attracted by the rawness of their language, it is unadorned, unpolished by mannerisms, by professionalism. The paintings are left open, pure, retaining the grace of the beginning. We think of their work as representational but to me they are already abstract.

I tend to avoid words like influence and inspiration. It is more fundamental, more elemental than that. To think of them as influence or inspiration would be to downplay their importance.

### **What role does text play in your work?**

Text comes from the necessity to keep paintings in the midst of discovery, to find and retain a purer voice in the course of the work; let the painting whistle in an unexpected tune.

Words are primary bearers of meaning, and text keeps me connected to my surface. Often the words that link me to a work can be references from poetry, literature, a word from everyday life or a word that I saw written in a painting I was drawn to - like

with Colin McCahon's "A candle in a dark room" or in the case of literature, Canetti's *The Torch in my ear*. They often clarify my intention and set me on a firm course.

Sometimes I don't complete a word. It becomes a drawing rhythm that reacquaints me with the painting and gives me new access into the work. By using text I stay connected and let the painting open up again.

Once a word fulfils this function and it no longer interacts with the other elements in the work it is discarded. It gets painted over or erased yet it remains part of the history of the work.

### **What draws you to the vertical canvas?**

I have not yet exhausted the format and I keep returning to it and increasing the scale as a way of concentrating more content. Perhaps the format is inexhaustible. It is very much in relation to the body. It is not a view of something; it is a space to inhabit, to experience and become part of.

### **What do you mean when you use terms of "content" and "structure" versus a word like "composition"?**

The structure I'm after develops gradually, as if it is off in the distance... the painting travels to become itself, and find its identity. When the work reaches resolution, many complex things are going on at once. As I aim for a clarity of direction and for an architecture to emerge, a new organic structure begins inhabiting the work, slowly perceptible, more precarious, fragile- a structure that is not final, never static. It keeps building from the connections and interdependencies between the characters in the painting, from the correspondence between the layers and all the levels of transitions... down to the last drip and splatter. It holds within it possibilities for renewal, and keeps completing itself as we look, allowing us to become part of a painting.

The content of the work, just like the structure, emerges through the building of the painting. It is an encounter with a presence that feels definite, precise, yet open; a quality I can never fully explain, do not recognise yet I know it at first glance.

### **What role does colour play in your work?**

It may feel counterintuitive but despite the amount of colour I use - I am not a colourist.

You can't isolate colour. It is always very specific to the content developing in the painting. It is not there to illustrate or align with one single meaning that is often attached to colour. It is integral to the work's structure and when it is not, the painting tells you.

Over the past twenty years I began mixing colours directly on the surface. I began using scrapers rather than brushes, as a way of distancing myself from gesture.

As I scrape off colour, I also begin to build, the two activities are always connected. This simultaneous process alters my colours as previous layers mix and reconnect with the new - the temperature of my colours is shifting in response to the layers underneath. I like to think of it as 'found colour'.

### **In what ways does your new work intersect with other mediums?**

Painting has become a kind of composite that draws openly from themes developed in other media – from drawing and collage I retain a directness that amplifies and reveals freely the foundations of my approach to painting. This takes us back to our discussion on collage. We are coming back to the beginning – to painting that depends on structure and building.