

On the Paintings of Kittey Malarvie

Olivia Cole

On the surface, the paintings in this solo show of Kittey Malarvie's works seem to reference two distinct periods in the artist's life. There is her past which we can see in her engagement with the landscape of her childhood: paintings of the 'Luga', the baked, cracked mud flats south west of Kununurra and north of the Great Sandy Desert where she played as a child. This is territory intermittently cooked totally dry, and flooded in the wet season. Representing a total departure in style, and a more recent series of works, is her focus on the "living water" of the wet times in the calendar. These large fluid paintings are of the 'Milkwater' of Sturt Creek whose constant movements continue to hold her attention today. These are canvases in which she catches the interplay of sunlight, wind, and tidal movement. As she says, "Because the wind blows and the tide comes in and I try to paint it like that with the paint brush." There's so much motion and so many layers that these paintings take on a powerful abstract quality as well as alluding to the water's sacred stories told to Kittey by her grandmother.

There are also Kittey's paintings of Halls Creek. In these dot paintings, her perspective has zeroed out from the surfaces of the creek and the mud flats to consider the landscape from high above, representing the crater of Halls Creek itself. This is an image that we might also see mirrored in the round mud formations of the Luga. The concentric circles of dots she uses to show the crater are Kittey's own depiction of one of the 'Dreaming' creation stories: the crater is the shape left when a huge star (or meteorite) fell to earth. This is a story and a place which Kittey connects to her grandfather, but whose mysteries she knows about now as an adult artist. "They reckon a star fell" she says of the famous crater, "in the olden days and created the hole. My grandpa never told me the dreamtime story of the crater" she says. "Possibly due to men's business" she says. As an adult, it is something she has come to know, and to depict in her paintings, which were themselves first encouraged by her father and by her grandparents.

Kittey was born in 1939 in Ord Station, very near to a gold mine which gave the family their livelihood in the gold rush of the 1940s. "My mother and father were working there on a big machine chucking all the rock that way, the gold that way and the dirt another way. There was a big hole in the hill that went all right through. I used to go there and pick up any gold on the ground for my Aunty, it was everywhere at rain time" she remembers. Perhaps the excitement of those glittering finds is there in Kittey's fondness for yellow and ochre tones. Another place to play was the dry mud flats shown in her Luga paintings. However, despite the very different styles in the paintings of the surface of the river bed where she played, and the "living waters" of the creek, it's too simple to see the two different approaches representing on the one hand, Kittey's childhood, and on the other, her life today. The past, in fact, is a part of the present: after going north, leaving for the town of Kununurra with her family when she was in her early 30s, now in her 70s, it was only fairly recently, in 2006 – a whole lifetime later – that Kittey was able to return here and to focus on her painting. As she says, emphatically, that return "helps me paint my Country better. It is good for me."

As an audience, if we take a step back from the paintings of one artist and think about Kittey Malarvie in the context of indigenous Australian art, a complex sense of time becomes an even more important aid to appreciating these paintings. Whilst the development of a sophisticated audience and market for the work of Australian indigenous art has gone on for decades, a recent landmark exhibition was Harvard University's 2016 'Everywhen', curated by Stephen Gilchrist. The title of the exhibition comes from anthropologist William Stanner, who in his classic account 'The Dreaming' (1953)

explained that “One cannot ‘fix’ the Dreaming in time; it was, and is, everywhen.” The most prominent allusion to The Dreaming (how we would describe the origin myths of the indigenous Australians) in Kittey’s work is the star that formed the Halls Creek crater. As Gilchrist writes of the phrase “everywhen”, “This poetic neologism was not necessarily offered to suggest a synonym for the Dreaming, but rather to provide that concept with nuance. Nonetheless, the term captures something elusive about the Dreaming’s approach to time... The Everywhen is everywhere. It is found in the dynamic of transformation, and it is quickened through the mindfulness of ritual. It surges through the seasonal growth of tubers and it is sensed in the poetry and pain of memory.” As he suggests, the work of the indigenous Australian artists presents:

“an invitation for us all to become synonymous with the Everywhen, if only momentarily. The artists... demonstrate how Indigenous people can be both couriers and keepers of what has been, what is, and what will be. [Their themes] Transformation, performance, seasonality and remembrance – reflect an experience of time that is active, abiding, and expansive. The Everywhen can show us that Indigenous art and culture do not merely represent the time before time, but in fact awaken us to the fullness of it.”

As well as the peace and contemplation her works inspire, taking us into her private world of being at one with her landscape, when we think about her work and her life story, this understanding of the “Everywhen” also offers a wonderful framework in which to consider Kittey’s work, too. To know just a few more details of her life story is to sense that beyond their visual power, Kittey’s paintings can be understood as acts of ‘remembrance’, exploring both the ‘poetry and pain of memory.’

Whilst it’s idyllic to think of the artist focusing on the freedom of her years before any adult responsibilities there is a loss very close to their playful surface too. Kittey grew up with her three brothers, after her mother died giving birth to a baby that would have been a sister for Kittey. “They sent her to Wyndham” she remembers, “and they both passed away in Wyndham hospital. My mother’s cousin [sister in Aboriginal law] grew us up.” To know this is to identify an elegiac quality to these paintings far more visceral than simply the loss of childish freedoms and the move away in the 1970s from the landscape of her formative years. In these seemingly playful paintings is the sister she might have had, as well as the solitude of a child growing up without her mother.

To admire the style of an artist is always to want to know more about their personality and the circumstances that made them and their work. To mark Kittey Malarvie’s first solo show, with the help of Waringarri Arts Centre, where Kittey has been able to work for the last ten years, I was able to ask some questions about her practice and her life story. It’s a privilege to be able to share some of what I learned along with the paintings in this show. Kittey’s aunt’s name, who took over her mother’s role, was Ruby Cook, she remembers. “She was good and was a cook as well, worked in a kitchen.” Painting was key in the earliest part of her life. Kittey was taught by her father and her grandparents. “He used to make boomerangs and coolamans” she says of her father, “and I would do the painting on them. I used to paint blue tongue, goanna, and honey bee.” They would sell some of what they made to tourists which was her first experience of finding an audience for what she made – it was she has said “a hard time but a good time.” The most painful question is how much Kittey would have liked to carry on with this work in the intervening decades.

“When I grew up [aged 15] I started working” she recounts, “learning milking cow, milking nanny goat, making bread and working in the kitchen. From there I worked in the mens’ quarters making all the beds for the Jackaroos and the Manager’s big house. I made the bed, mop the floor, keep the floor clean, you know. The Manager and missus didn’t send me to school, I don’t know why. When they were asked whether there were any kids, he would say no. He was lying.” These are powerful statements that are the facts of her life, resonating with the experience of indigenous Australians of her generation across the country. Whilst the circumstances are particular to Australian history, this is a version of a story

with which we are familiar for female artists in many different cultures. Asked if she would have liked to start painting full-time earlier in her life instead of working doing other things, she is unequivocal. “Yes! I used to make cups from trees and paint them and coolamans. We would camp at Bamboo Springs in the bush, after working at the Station. I would walk around with an axe and my husband would ask “what you doing?” I’m looking for a Sid wood tree, when you cut it, it smells nice. This lady Sylvia, boss for Walkabout Shop in Kununurra, would ask “what you got there Kitty?” And I would show her, she would give me good money, sometimes.” Right now, although she has passed on her love of her art to her own daughter, she is too busy with, as Kitty says, “too many grandkids” to come to the Art Centre.

Kitty’s fulfilment as an artist has come in her 60s and 70s. “I feel happy everytime I paint. I feel good doing my painting, my Country, my water, my bush fruits. I feel good for my painting. I feel good ‘binji’ [stomach, inside]” she says. It’s our great good fortune to be able to share these good feelings, spending time with these works now as they go on show at JGM’s inaugural show in London. The power of these beautiful paintings is a reminder too of the importance of safeguarding the landscape for the “future ancestors” too. The concern that Australian indigenous artists have that their descendants should be able to see their Country as it once was, contains an implicit fear that it could alter, or be lost. This is a concern that Kitty expresses too – in her lifetime she saw her town of Kununurra slowly change for the better, with her people able to live closer to where they wished to be, but as a wish for the future she is anxious too. She would like “to keep the painting going, the Art Centre. Keep the river the same as we go down to the river for fishing”

Whilst all artists want to send their paintings out into the world and to sell their work, it’s two of her paintings of Sturt Creek - the “living water” – that are most precious to her and that she keeps close by. Perhaps more precious to her than the memory of her freedom as a child, is the artistic freedom she has found as an adult. To admire the work of Kitty Malarvie is inevitably to wish for a version of time and the “everywhen” with a flexibility that might allow Kitty her own time all over again: to not have been a secret kept from school or forced from the landscape she holds most dear, to have been able to find her fulfilment as an artist earlier in life, and to have spent her whole life painting. And yet as her admirers, we also have to celebrate her work to date, and to look forward to the work she still has to do. The complex set of emotions these feelings produce, can only add to the arresting power of her paintings.

Olivia Cole is a writer and journalist. A graduate of Christ Church, Oxford she has written widely about culture for magazines and newspapers including the Evening Standard, the Spectator, the New Statesman, Vanity Fair On Travel and Conde Nast Traveller. Her first book of poems is Restricted View (published by Salt in 2009) and she is literary editor for British GQ.