

Vault™

Australasian Art & Culture



ISSUE 24 · NOVEMBER *to* JANUARY 2019

Genesis Belanger, Bill Culbert, Juan Davila, Shoufay Derz,
David Goldblatt, Pierre Mukeba, Alondra de la Parra, Easton Pearson,
Michael Rakowitz, Sally Ross, Eva Rothschild, Nicola Smith, teamLab,
The 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art & more

AUS \$17.50 NZ \$25.00

ISSN 0220-830X 24





VAULT speaks to artist Sally Ross, about why genre painting can breed creative possibility and the pleasure of bringing small details to life.

FEATURE *by* NEHA KALE

SALLY ROSS OBJETS D'ART

Sally Ross is a fan of keeping a little distance. Earlier this year, the Melbourne-based artist, whose landscapes and portraits imbue the well-worn tropes of genre painting with a quality that's coolly, thrillingly mystical, sat down to paint the artists Will and Garrett Huxley for the 2018 Archibald Prize. She asked them to "look dead".

"I'm really interested in Otto Dix's portraits, because he was obsessed with this idea of antiquity and how it informs what we do now," she says. "I wanted the portrait to be sphinx-like. I didn't want to see any expression in their eyes. If you look at the tradition of painting, there's never been the assumption that [the medium] can fully encapsulate anything. A lot of my students try to confidently explain the meaning of something, but actually I think that a lot of cool shit in life is quite mysterious." A mischievous smile flits across her face. "In a performance at the Melbourne Fringe last year, The Huxleys said the lines, 'Everything happens for no reason.' I find that terribly comforting."

Ross, 49, is wearing a violet shirt with a Nehru collar and sunglasses with reflective lenses. She's just arrived in Sydney from Melbourne and says she nearly missed her plane after falling down a wormhole



Top to bottom
SALLY ROSS
Landscape, 2018
oil on wood panel
130 x 110 cm

Installation view
Paintings and Carpets, 2016
Murray White
Room, Melbourne

Opposite
Left to right
SALLY ROSS
Landscape
(6 trees), 2018
oil on wood panel
100 x 80 cm

SALLY ROSS
Landscape
(4 trees), 2018
oil on wood panel
100 x 80 cm

Previous page
SALLY ROSS
The Huxleys, 2018
oil on wood panel
132 x 112 cm
Finalist 2018
Archibald Prize

Photos: Graham Baring

Courtesy the artist
and Murray White
Room, Melbourne

In *My 1980s and Other Essays*, the American poet Wayne Koestenbaum describes the writer Susan Sontag as a “cosmophage”: someone who ‘eats’ the world and makes art about the experience. Similarly, Ross often refers to herself as an ‘art monster’. She trawls op-shops, auction houses and archives for the old magazines, images and photographs that are the basis of her compositions. But back in her Prahran studio, she embarks on a painstaking process of translation and interpretation. She subtly recalibrates colours and patterns to make paintings that are more than the sum of their parts.

“I think that Cézanne said that happiness is finding the right formula – and the simple process of finding an image and transforming it means that there’s endless possibilities for me to work forever,” laughs Ross, who’s currently preparing a new body of landscapes, based on a love affair with early Flemish crucifixion paintings, as part of an upcoming show with her long-time Melbourne gallerist Murray White.



involving Georgian needlepoints and something called a “lustre plate”. Ross pulls out her smartphone to show me photos. In person, the artist possesses none of the chilly remove of her subjects. She’s a self-described “hugger”. She exudes a friendly curiosity. She has that disarming ability to toggle between topics and idioms. It feels perfectly natural to hear her describe the media circus around the Archibald as a “chook raffle”, lament the crockery fads that permeate café culture (a fact we both agree on) and refer to the Proustian edict that to forget we must first remember – all in one breath.

A few minutes away, Sydney Contemporary welcomes a stream of dealers and collectors whose transactions, soundtracked by the clink of champagne glasses, dictate the art world’s aesthetic values. (This year, it’s post-ironic cat sculptures and self-reflexive smuttiness in the form of dirty Santa Claus pictures by Ben Quilty.) Meanwhile, *Night Landscape* (2017), a small oil painting by Ross, hangs at a booth by Sydney gallerist Martin Browne. Its childlike composition and delicate pointillist patterns, done in a palette of sea greens and deep blues, occupy their own orbit. It quietly makes a case for old-fashioned beauty: for the way that visual pleasure can propel us into imaginary worlds.

“We’re living with this idea that art has to have this appearance of the contemporary,” Ross says with a chuckle. “I paint landscapes and people and it’s not a very cool or sophisticated concept, but viewers resonate with it. I have a few collectors who buy my work for themselves even though it doesn’t look good on paper that they have a boring tree painting by Sally Ross.”

She pauses to take a bite of her tomatoes on toast.

“Sometimes a client emails me two years later saying, ‘I love my painting’ – and I love that,” says Ross, who was a finalist in the 2018 Geelong Art Prize, and worked with the Polish artist Paulina Olowska at her studio in Rabka-Zdrój outside Krakow in July 2017. “It’s almost the opposite of the art fair, where you have a few seconds to really make up your mind about something. I always say, ‘Look again.’ That’s really what good art [makes you do].”

Ross was born in Melbourne in 1969 and has painted obsessively as long as she can remember. She studied printmaking at Monash University in the late ’80s and later attended the Victorian College of the Arts. A stint working at Deutsch Fine Art would change her trajectory, but not in the ways she originally thought.

“We were involved in Bill Henson’s show for the 1995 Venice Biennale and I just faxed my boss and said that I wasn’t coming home,” she laughs. Ross ended up in Avignon, a town in the south of France. She cycled through the “shitty jobs” that are often the hallmark of being in your 20s, working in restaurants, as a cleaner and a tour guide. At one point, she lived in an artist’s squat in a 17th-century hospice with 35 other people. But, she says, she was also lucky enough to receive a different kind of education. “The restaurant I was running was very bohemian and the artists that would drink there were from the Sorbonne,” says Ross.

“I studied a postgraduate degree that came with a studio for only 700 francs. Later, I worked at Yvon Lambert’s Collection Lambert, which included beautiful paintings by Cy Twombly and Marcel Broodthaers. A lot of the conceptual stuff was also so poetic. I wasn’t selling any work but I lived and breathed art.”

**“EVEN IF YOU HAVE
A BANAL POINT OF
DEPARTURE, THE
MAGIC IS ALL IN
WHERE YOU TAKE IT.”**





Top to bottom
Sally Ross
studio portrait
Photo: Benjamin Loyseau

SALLY ROSS
Portrait, 2016
oil on wood
46 x 38 cm

SALLY ROSS
Zara, 2018
oil on wood panel
65 x 55 cm

Photos: Graham Baring

Courtesy the artist
and Murray White
Room, Melbourne

“One of my favourite books is the one by [Japanese conceptual artist] On Kawara. Even though he documented the way he made his date paintings, the results go far beyond anything he could demonstrate.”

Ross’s interest in flattening aesthetic hierarchies also extends to her obsession with the relationship between the artistic and the decorative. *Paintings and Carpets*, her 2016 show at Murray White Room, cast her scenes of emerald hills and lush valleys alongside a parade of Persian and Anatolian carpets curated by Bob Cadry, of Cadrys, Australia’s oldest retailer in antique, classic and contemporary rugs. It hinted both at the curious energy that inhabits antique objects as well as the way painterly fantasy can suffuse everyday life.

For Ross, who’s a four-time Archibald finalist and showed as part of *Portraiture*, a 2008 group show at the Karyn Lovegrove Gallery in Los Angeles, alongside the likes of Elizabeth Peyton, Martin Kippenberger and Lucian Freud, portraiture offers an opportunity to find “delicious pleasure” in details.

She talks passionately about being compelled by The Huxleys’ mushroom-

shaped wigs, about being fixated by the skivvies worn by Client Liaison’s Harvey Miller AO, the artist and musician who was the subject of her 2015 Archibald entry. Like all good contemporary portraits, hers are lightning rods for the zeitgeist, pinning down imperceptible shifts in fashion, art and pop culture. But in the manner of Otto Dix, a closer look reveals how these trivial details – a collar here, a pair of glasses there – seem to galvanise the essence of her subjects. The flatness of her images becomes a ruse for something that reaches into the past, towards something richer and more enigmatic.

“It’s all about celebrating the surface of things,” she smiles. “Throughout history, you were told you have to paint a picture, it has to be this big, it has to have a donkey. But as a contemporary genre painter, this doesn’t restrict me. Even if you have a banal point of departure, the magic is all in where you take it.” **V**

Sally Ross shows at Murray White Room from November 16 to December 22, 2018.

Sally Ross is represented by Murray White Room, Melbourne, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney and Galerie Sultana, Paris.

murraywhiteroom.com

martinbrownecontemporary.com

