



DANELLE BERGSTROM

STORY **CHLOE MANDRYK**
PHOTOGRAPHY **WILLIAM MANSFIELD**

We spoke to Danelle Bergstrom in her Chippendale studio before she flew to Göteborg for a Konstpidemin residency, an offer to 20 international artists annually, spending the summer on one of the Åland Islands in Finland.



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DANELLE BERGSTROM COMPOSES AND RIFFS IN PAINT. As they coalesce, the earth, air and water enrich the visual vocabulary of her story. In the presence of her large and outstretched works you get a sense of the reciprocity between the artist and her subject. By mixing a palette of memory, emotion, sketches, music and library of art books Bergstrom sensitively presents portraits and the landscapes of Hill End, Darwin, Ireland and, increasingly, Sweden. Though classically trained, she follows her intuition, because for Bergstrom the ultimate goal is to rewind a formal art education and to lead with heart and soul. At home, she exhibits with Arthouse and is an Archibald finalist many times over. Bergstrom's painting of Guy Warren is hung in the popular Art Gallery of NSW prize now and is resonant for pairing two artists deeply connected to land.

How do you begin?

I throw a bucket of paint! (Not exactly) However, the virgin canvas can be rather scary. The colours I select or the way I approach it stems from this other place that's not analytical at all. More intuitive. I studied at Julian Ashton Art School from a very early age. I learnt about colour, I can mix any colour I want, I can draw what I see. It's like learning to play a piano; you know which keys to press, but you have to forget all that to a degree in order to play from the heart.

Now I am constantly battling to unlearn. I fiddle and I tighten up, it's an argument I constantly have with myself. Accidents are the best things that can happen. They are unplanned and surprising, creating opportunities and delivering a whole new set of problems to solve. When a painting appears to be completely lost I am faced with absolute freedom. There is some comfort in failure. Taking risks with my work then appears to be easy.

Being vulnerable is a space where something unexpected can happen ... So true. Vulnerability is about trust and the courage to be imperfect. To be true to yourself, authentic and real. Accepting pain and love and every other emotion. This vulnerable space is the catalyst to my work. Though I find that one of the hardest things to do is to describe what I do, how and why I do it.

The experience on the other end as a viewer can be like that too. For

me, a successful work is one that offers me an opportunity for contemplation or asks something of me. I hate artist statements, but you have to do them. I can never find the words to articulate it succinctly. It's like asking "could you just illustrate to me through drawing what it is you're trying to say?".

So, do you consider synesthesia in your practice?

I've always wanted my work to have sound. I'd love it if you could hear my paintings. I generally use sound and listen to music for mood to hover in the space when I work. When I painted a portrait of Peter Sculthorpe, however, I listened to music as a part of my research which included not just every piece of music he had written but many of his influences. As I listened I delighted in discovering the imagery, I could actually see his music.

Poetry can do that to me too. It would be lovely to think that people transcend that visual moment into something else. It doesn't have to be the five senses. Perhaps there is a sixth, the soul where all our emotions reside. Crying in a movie or with a piece of music, and it doesn't have to be sorrow – it can be joy. I can feel like this from viewing other artists' work.

Who are the visual artists that make you feel this way?

I adore Edvard Munch and Jean-Édouard Vuillard, and Mark Rothko just brings me to tears. But Käthe Kollwitz always comes to mind straight away; she was a German expressionist artist in the early 1900s, working mainly in prints and sculpture. Her work is filled with passion and compassion, expressing so much empathy and capturing the human suffering in war-torn Germany at the time. From a female perspective, a mother's love, 'Woman with Dead Child' 1903, a child is squashed in too close to the bosom of the mother, there's no space between them. This image draws out powerful emotions and expresses them through her approach to line, tone and composition.

01 Danelle Bergstrom in her Chippendale studio

02 Rekindle, 2015, oil on linen, 61 x 61cm

03 Echoes of a Distant Land, 2010, oil on canvas, 46 x 91cm



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Her son Peter modelled for her and sadly many years later she experienced all that she was expressing when he died. I cannot help but connect with her work. I *feel* Käthe Kollwitz's work, I don't just *see* it. The loneliness, the desperation is so powerful; she empathised with that loss, pain and love. You don't feel loss without love, and the greater the love the greater the loss.

I'm wondering what your most powerful sensual memory is.

Wherever you are, you can't escape yourself. It is difficult to say, but one very strong memory is from Sweden in 2010. I stayed in the middle of the forest on my own in a tiny tent-like structure made of wood, covered in soil, ferns, grasses and strawberries. Being summer the days were long, so at around 11pm at sunset I walked through the soft, spongy undergrowth of the forest pines picking delicious blueberries along the way, to the nearby mirrored lake. I perched myself on an old log and sat in the dark, still night to watch the sunrise at 2am. The silence was deafening. I could hear nothing but my breath and when I held my breath my heartbeats were annoyingly getting in the way of my searching for other sounds. The pines soared towards the heavens silhouetting against the starlit night sky and ever so gently whispered towards each other in the gentle breeze. Sounds too magical ... and it was.

You take this feeling several steps further bringing it to canvas ...

It's not *plein air* painting, especially because of the large scale of my work, but I do take back to the studio my experiences and memories. I feel that it's my emotional responses that predominate and that's probably why I find it the most difficult to articulate. I'm not drawing what's in front of me. It is recognisable, but depends on how the paint lands on the canvas. Like creating images from clouds. The next day if my thoughts or mood changes it becomes something else. I just go with it. It's like a snowball coming down the hill gathering momentum. I try not to stop it and allow it to take on its own force.

So, how do you know when you're finished?

I've thought about that a lot. It's the most important question to ask yourself. I used to be satisfied with a statement by Jenny Sages whose point of arrival was "until it stops irritating her". I thought, that's so true. But really it irritates me through the whole process, which can be quite a long time. When I reach that finished stage I sometimes think I should have stopped well before. At times things

are best left alone, you might need to walk away and come back later. I don't think I'll ever completely know how to resolve this.

Have you always felt in tune with nature?

Appreciating landscape and our environment has never been an issue. How could you not? Which is why I don't understand how we accept such abuse and catastrophic destruction of our environment all around the world. My mother provided a wonderful environment for my sister and me. The lounge room was our studio, we didn't have a traditional home and I loved it that way and assumed everyone lived as we did. Wherever we lived, we occupied the one big room as a place to create, we'd sculpt, draw and make a mess. It was all about problem solving, if we didn't know how to do it we'd find out how.

An 'outsider artist' collective in your living room!

We were never given limits. And that didn't mean you were always successful, there were many failures along the way. Though our failures were always considered as an important part of development.

Do you have any advice for those who, like you, operate from their "core feeling"?

The first thing is to be yourself. There is nothing more unique than your own signature and the way you see the world. You need to find out who you are first. Responding in an emotional way is only one path, and it's not always the best. It's just one way. Getting back to the raw state of a child is what Picasso aspired to all his life, trying to connect with the elementary part of us and have the courage to give in and when you're focused and in the zone of writing or painting you can forget everything else. It is just that powerful. Becoming an artist is not something you get a certificate for, you have to live and everything you learn along the way builds, grows and develops. I have a long way to go. I am just beginning. ■

Danelle Bergstrom is represented by Arthouse Gallery, Sydney
www.arthousegallery.com.au

04 Morning song II, oil on linen, 92 x 244cm

Courtesy the artist and Arthouse Gallery, Sydney