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See the Light

Susan Baird

Story **BROOKE BOLAND**

THE HISTORIC VILLAGE OF HILL END, RENOWNED FOR CAPTIVATING ARTISTS AND WRITERS OVER THE DECADES, HAS BECOME A RECURRING SUBJECT FOR LANDSCAPE PAINTER SUSAN BAIRD. THERE SHE IMMERSSES HERSELF IN LIGHT AND ATMOSPHERE TO PAINT SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST WHAT SHE SEES.

When I call Susan Baird, the rain starts pelting down on my thin tin roof. We struggle to hear each other over the phone and soon decide email might be easier. She writes later the same day. 'It's torrential here now and very loud!'

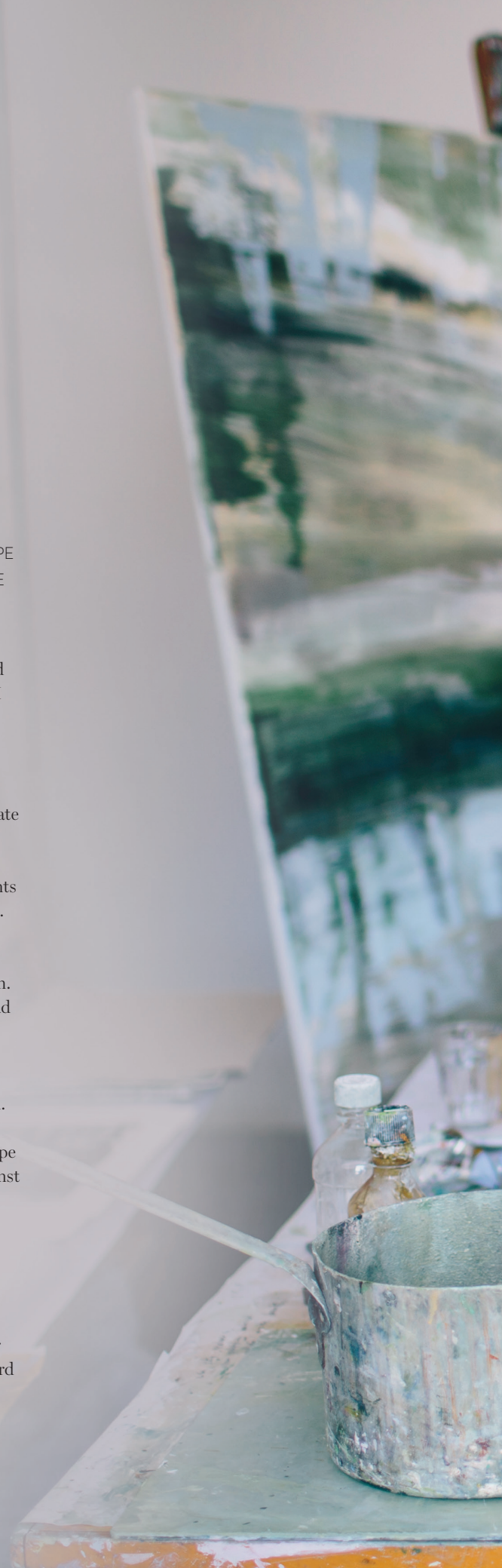
For ten days Baird has been sitting tight in her cottage in Hill End, a four-hour drive north-west of Sydney. The unrelenting rainfall is breaking records across the state, overflowing local bridges and roads. She's unsure how safe it is to drive back to her home in Sydney where her partner is waiting. In the meantime, she continues to paint. But access to materials is always at the back of her mind. 'If I'm up here for long periods of time, you have to be really logistic with materials. There's always a colour you've forgotten or run out of,' she says.

The day before we spoke, the weather cleared for a brief moment and Baird was able to settle into her preferred practice of plein air painting. She's trying to finish a large work 2.4 metres in size and has lugged it and all the necessary materials to a small shack nearby. Looking out over a field, she paints the light – her constant interest – and works quickly to capture the sensation of it passing through the landscape. 'Yesterday, there were lots of interesting things happening with the light,' Baird says. 'I wasn't sure how I was going to progress the work and then

a large section of purply-grey cloud moved across, and my response was immediate, I had to paint it in.' This is how she works, not painting the view but referencing the landscape through close observation.

Her landscapes are often small and intimate in scale – she prefers 25 x 30 cm. Some of these paintings are soft and ethereal; purpled skies melding over golden moments when the last light of the day hits the hills. Others, like *Bush Telegraph*, 2019, look in the opposite direction, towards the east, and evoke the glare of Summer in the bush. 'It's a very different landscape from one end of town to the other,' she explains. On one hand, she is talking about the afternoon light and how, when the sun sets in the west, the skies are tinged alizarin crimson. But the contrast is also evident in deeper colonial histories written into the landscape as European species of trees push up against the Australian bush.

This place has called her back again and again. 'It's the light that makes Hill End so painterly, I think that's really why I am drawn to it. The light comes up over the Hill from the east and filters through over the dam,' says Baird. 'In the evening a weird shade of blue that I have only ever seen here settles on the horizon. I walk up to this spot as our house is kind of bunkered into the land and I love to look out to see







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01 Interior World, 2021, oil on linen, 77 x 77 cm
 02 Homage, 2021, oil on linen, 77 x 77 cm

the light.' A residency at Haelfigers Cottage in Hill End in 2011 had a transformative effect on Baird's practice. There, she tried different things; making monotypes from water-based oil paint, drawing on etching plates, and painting a series of small 25 x 30 cm landscapes in response to light and atmosphere. 'You have limited time working plein air and this scale was the right size for what I wanted to say. It was the beginning for me of real immersion into a subject that was beyond just the landscape as a motif.' In these landscapes, you can see the two historic churches that form part of the view from Haelfigers Cottage. Forms are firmly grounded into the earth under a pink sky at dusk in the painting *All Welcome*, 2011, which takes its name from a wooden sign hung above the doorway of the church.

Years later, she bought a home in the area, gave up her Sydney studio, and settled into the remoteness of regional life. 'Being here for long periods of time has a unique hum. I settle into a different pace and become acutely aware that there are so many different levels of life existing here. The insect world, the animals and birds, and all the sounds add to the rich experience of day-to-day living. This has to have an effect on your work.' She likes the contrast of her

Sydney life and life in Hill End, adding that these two environments fuel a tension in her painting. Returning to her studio after time in her Sydney home also offers fresh eyes.

Baird finds herself continually drawn to bodies of water embedded in the landscape in the forms of dams and ponds, particularly one small dam near her home, which she returns to often. 'The water element helps me to unconsciously connect to feelings and sensations of things that are seen and unseen, it's very meditative. It transports me to a place where I can let go of the image and work a congruent surface in a painting and let the sensations carry the work,' she says. In these paintings, the significance of water is twofold; it is reflective of both the artist's psyche as well as the change in light and atmosphere, demonstrating a responsiveness in Baird's work attuned to the deeper sensations of experiencing the landscape throughout her process. These bodies of water are also a changeable element. At the time of writing, the dam is overflowing, but not long ago it was bone dry. These extremes (sometimes seasonal) reveal the paradox of experiences that Baird responds to.

This responsiveness is a central thread within Baird's practice, revealing the physicality of experience that leads to the emotional resonance of her work. In *Reflected Eucalypt*, 2014, a tall eucalypt stands alongside the dam, inseparable from the large movement of paint that skims across the canvas. These gestures are loose, necessarily captured in paint, which allow for the flexibility and speed of sensation. The twin views of the central tree, one reflected below, emphasises the vertical elements and draws the eye downwards into deeper consideration of the water, as if revealing two sides of the one coin, simultaneously, through a haze of light. It is the paint that allows Baird to show something more than just what she sees.

More recently Baird has turned inwards, towards the domestic space of her home in response to lockdown. These interior paintings expose a recurring element in Baird's practice, refining how inner psychological landscapes play out over topography and even architecture. In *Homage*, 2021, a window, almost like a promise of escape or exploration, frames



04

“ Each painting is a kind of portrait of what I'm observing ”

the view from inside her studio. In others, like *Interior World*, 2021, corrugated sheds and tin roofs emerge within a haze of light and afternoon heat. The landscape still figures strongly here, but it is reflected or framed by human habitation.

These latest paintings are a play of light against surfaces, textures, and reflections, and reveal a new intensity in Baird's work that speaks of isolation and regional life. When looking out through her studio window at night during lockdown, Baird could see her neighbour's light on. 'I found it really comforting to know someone was home, then that evolved into more interior exterior paintings of elements on my table in relation to the window and the view,' she said. Like her earlier landscapes, these paintings continue to place the artist in the view. 'I stand in a place for

a period of time and make marks on my canvas, like drawing in a figure in space except it's a landscape. Each painting is a kind of portrait of what I'm observing,' Baird says. ■

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EXHIBITION

Where the Light Falls
8 - 26 June 2021
Arthouse Gallery, Sydney

03 *All Welcome*, 2011, oil on linen, 25 x 30 cm

04 *Pink Sky at Night*, 2021, oil on linen, 100 x 100 cm

Courtesy the artist, Sheridan Nilsson and Arthouse Gallery