

MARIE HOBBS: SOONER & LATER

The trigger for Marie Hobbs' paintings is often something actual, visual, or maybe a memory, which then finds its own trajectory. David Malouf, when answering the question about the starting point of a work, said that the sight of the hem of a woman's skirt passing a doorway might be the image that sets a new novel in motion. In Marie's case this resonates. Marie takes a commonplace, familiar object, then liberates it into a space that doesn't locate it in a fixed setting. As one mark leads to another, a dynamic relationship develops between elements on the canvas, which may appear incongruous, while the demand to keep at it becomes a compulsion, to drive on until the painting gels and is alive in every aspect of its surface. This involves a terrific fearlessness: to lose in order to gain something deeper, to push and pull in order to take the subject beyond the limits of the literal, to give it a new, open and maybe paradoxical meaning. The objects become alive in their essence in their own space, free of grounding boundaries that might locate them on a domestic and recognisable ground – a table, a room. In *Plums*, a glass bowl and a plate of plums are set on an ambiguous surface that leads to a beckoning white door - or is it a monolith? – in the background. This provides a disruptive scale to what might otherwise be a predictable still life. Or, if they are trees, as in the *Bunker Bay* series, they are allowed to float free of a horizon line and local colour that would fix them in a naturalistic Australian setting. They speak to me of the wind, of relationships, of air and space.

In 1984, in a review in which he writes of Marie's exhibition at Artplace in *The West Australian*, Rod O'Brien was struck by this sense of space. He writes: "At Artplace I began to think about the wonderful word for the interval, the pause, the space between, that the Japanese use. It is ma. It describes the natural pauses between breaths and sentences and the white or negative spaces inside paintings. One of the outstanding examples of ma I have yet seen locally turns up in two watercolours by Marie Hobbs."

"Who dares, wins" is a saying Marie takes to heart. It is wonderfully epitomised by Hannibal's quest to conquer Rome, the subject of *Hannibal: Night Journey II*. The elephant, precariously perched on the top of the Italian Alps against a watery moon, stoically steps forward at the bequest of an unknown, power-hungry master, onwards, past a tablet acting as a sign post, towards an unknown Roman temple in the far distance, to the sound of a triumphant drum. As an artist, Marie, too, pushes herself to do something that is 'unnatural' to her, that doesn't come too easily. The result, even in a small work, is a field of images that seem to suggest both intimacy and monumentality, the private and epic, ambiguity and mystery. They set the viewer thinking.

For this viewer, many of Marie's paintings evoke the human condition. The symbols and the scale of the large works are often equally present in small canvases. The Chinese figure, the protagonist in the painting chosen for the diminutive invitation, is, to me, both poignant and heroic. A romantic soul is suggested as he stands alone surrounded by scattered flowers.

Marie's paintings, too, are deeply satisfying at a visual level. Her highly developed and totally individual visual language keeps the eye roving over the canvas, enjoying the journey on both a sensual as well as an intellectual level. For more than thirty years I have had the pleasure of watching Marie paint and have enjoyed lively discussions with her in her studio. At different times she has been excited by different artists – Giotto, Asger Jorn, David Bomberg, Kokoschka, Vuillard – to name a few. What she engaged with was their liberated spirit, their courage, but not their language. In this she has forged her own way with great integrity.

Fred Williams, when in Perth in the late 70s said, as he stopped in front of a large work of Marie's, "Now that's a sensitive painting." Nearly forty years later this is more resoundingly true.

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