

Jill Kempson

— place, time, connection

By Nyanda Smith
Visual arts writer

*Over the last twenty-five years
Jill Kempson has forged a practice
that features a dialogue across time,
as well as across continents.*

*Her work emerges as a meditation
upon place taking in different
locations, a refining of simple land-
scape elements – ground, sky, water
and vegetation.*

Waychinicup Sunset Clouds, 2006
Oil on Marine, 30 x 22 cm

¹ Jill Kempson,
in conversation
with Nyanda
Smith, Fremantle,
December 2007

A relationship between travel and painting is symbiotic for Kempson, whose artistic process centres upon a 'going somewhere new as a visitor, to absorb the place.'¹ She began painting in her early twenties, in the 1980s in Melbourne, Victoria, while studying at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. In 1989 she received an Australia Council scholarship to spend three months in Tuscany, at the Arthur Boyd artist in residence program, which then led to a further period studying at the Paris-American Academy.

This early experience of intertwined artistic practice and travel was deeply influential, stimulating an approach that Kempson has further refined over the past two and a half decades.

Living in the port city of Fremantle, Western Australia since 1982 she has made regular travels to Italy, Spain and France as well as within her home country – predominantly to the inland deserts, and the coastal bushlands of the South West. Spending intensely concentrated bursts of time in these places, and working from sketches and photographs for her oil paintings, her works re-figure her experiences of place – capturing the sensations of finding, and physically responding to that place.

The works emerge as an artistic travelogue of sorts, a tracing of the experiential aspect of landscape, or what the late Australian artist Rosalie Gascoigne described as a '*being in country*'² – something which is similarly replicated for the viewer.

² Mary Eagle,
Rosalie Gascoigne,
Fine Arts Gallery,
The University of
Tasmania, 1985,
p 3

Intimate in scale, a heightened depth of colour is used to create a hyper-reality of sensation, prompting the viewer to get up close to the works and viscerally respond. A sense of perspective is similarly explored with the consequence of engulfing the viewer. In the recent series entitled '*Skyscapes*', the horizon line is reduced, so that the sky remains the entry point. In *Waychinicup Clouds II* (2006) it is a sky that swirls with jostling tones of a brilliant sunset, footed by a small sliver of ground – as dark greys and searing pinks intercept patches of bright blue in an colossal sky. *Cloudspace* (2007) depicts clouds at eye-line level, sighted from the plane on a trip to London, and in *Sugar Loaf Rock II* (2007) the monolith of the title and it's surrounding wild ocean, are dwarfed by a larger, animated summer sky.



Saint Cloud 1906, 2006
Oil on Marine, 68.5 x 90 cm



Saint Cloud 1921, 2006
Oil on Marine, 68.5 x 90 cm

Kempson's interest in sixteenth and seventeenth century European painting techniques kindled by her early travels to Europe, mark her stylistic approach – and was recently developed further by a foray into experimentation with method, hand-mixing authentic pigments made from vegetable matter and minerals. An ArtsWA funded project in 2004 allowed her to study at the Centre for Research and Restoration for French Museums at the Musee du Louvre in Paris, and in 2005 she studied Old Masters painting techniques at the Limburg Conservation Institute Maastricht Netherlands.

Viewing a collection of photographs from the early 1900s by the French photographer Eugene Atget in central Paris became the catalyst for a response. Kempson's 2006 series *Tonalities of Time*, re-visits Atget's sepia images of the Parc de Saint Cloud, today. Each work is a direct response to a photograph, and draws from Kempson's own experience of walking in the park, evoking the 'elusive moods and subtle tonalities'³ she experienced, exploring scale and colour while remaining in dialogue with the photographer's original vision. The series thus exists as much of a conversation between artists, as one that stands across both history, and locations.

³ Jill Kempson, Jill Kempson: Skyscapes, 2007, p 15

In *Saint Cloud, 1906* (2006), a cool fog laden with precipitation gently envelops cultivated arbor of the Parisian park – as leaves drift and scatter. This attuning to the particularities of the elements is something that strongly grounds her work. Precipitation appears again, in *Golden Haze II* (2007), in Ocean Beach, in the South West of Australia. However in this environment an early morning mist that bloats with moisture, as it battles a sharply rising heat, in a Southern climate a half-world away from Europe. The investigation of these simple tropes – an exploration of basic natural elements that link across locations, provides an ongoing thematic connection across Kempson's works.

For Kempson, landscape remains as 'elusive'⁴ – unknowable, as much as one might spend time in that place. And it is this sense of wonder, reverence for the 'sublimity of nature'⁵, that imbues her work with its power.

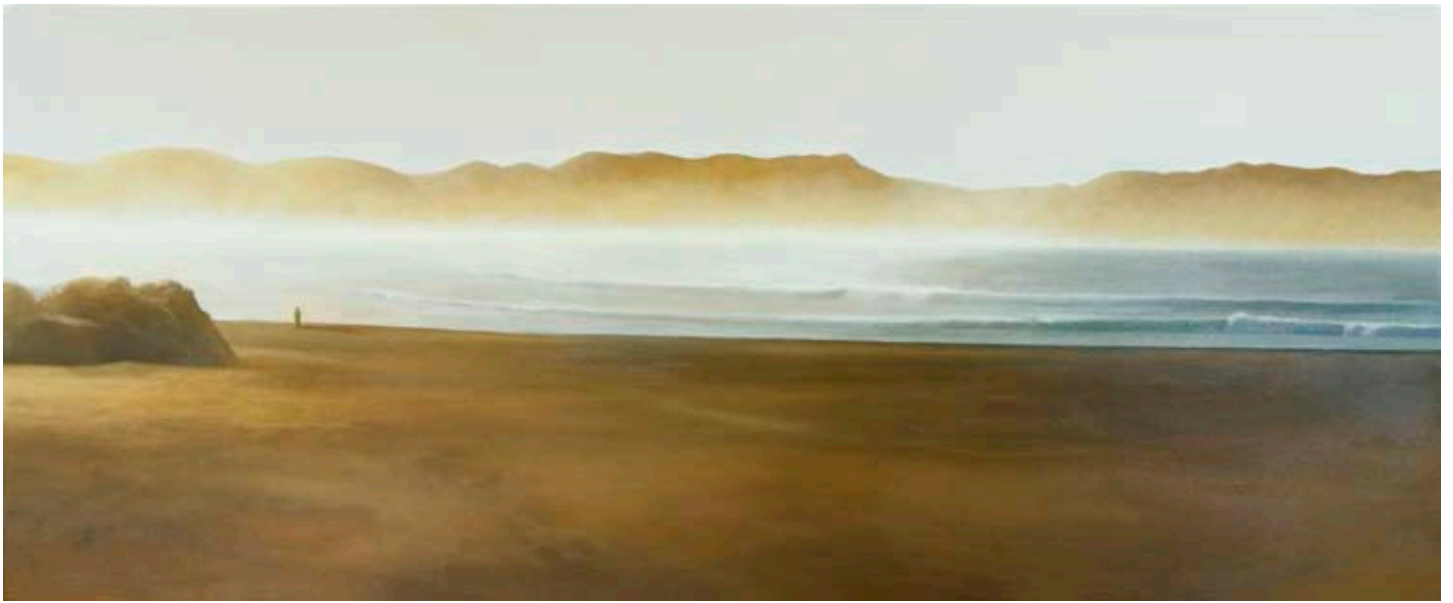
⁴ Jill Kempson, in conversation with Nyanda Smith, Fremantle, December 2007
⁵ Kant, Immanuel, The Critique of Reason, Trans. Werner Pluhar, Cambridge: 1987, p 98

Apart from the occasional occurrence, her last two series of landscape paintings are without human figures. This lack of human interruption within landscape portrays a sense of stillness, however the landscapes are far from without movement. In *Wilson Inlet Mist I* (2006), the expanse of empty beach is pristine, appearing as if humans may have never stumbled upon it. With Kempson's delicate rendering the composition of light, water and vegetation evoke an environment that hums with gentle life – in water that perfectly mirrors the sky, in sand that softens as it meets the inlet's edge: a *seeing* of the ecological balance of this landscape.

In *Verdant Green II* (2007) the drippingly lustrous tones of New Zealand fields similarly conjure an organic system, ever-making in its design.

In other works, Kempson turns her hand to the developed landscape. In *Amsterdam Sunset I and II* (2006) it is the toxic luminosity of a truly man-made sky is depicted. A city river with chimney sending spiralling smoke is shown in two moments of time – one as the sun goes down, and the bright sun tinges everything orange against the smoke, and another, possibly a moment later, post-sunset: a calmer, mottled atmosphere.

This tension – the animated with the still, the pondering of a moment that hums with possibility, an experiencing of place in all it's formations – as well an interest in human connection with place, that marks Kempson's striking oeuvre.



Golden Haze II, 2007
Oil on canvas, 50 x 120 cm

Resume

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Skyscapes*, Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth
- 2006 *Tonalities of Time: The Forgotten Ways*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 2004 *Remain in Light*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 2001 *Foreign Yet Familiar*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1999 *Reflections*, Fremantle Arts Centre
- 1998 *Unforeseen Journeys*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1995 *Looking Back to Look Forward*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1993 *Journeys to the Interior*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1991 *Threading Light and Land in Tuscany*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1989 *Secret Garden of the Interior*, Galerie Düsseldorf

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (Selected)

- 2006 *Reading the Collection*, Fremantle Arts Centre
- 2006 *30 Years On Galerie Düsseldorf*, Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth
- 2006 Bankwest Contemporary Art Prize, PICA
- 2006 *5 Figurative Artists in the West*, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1998 Redlands Westpac Art Prize, Sydney, NSW
- 1998 21 Years On, Galerie Düsseldorf
- 1997 Mosman Art Prize, Mosman, Sydney, NSW
- 1996 The Redlands Westpac Art Prize, Sydney, NSW
- 1995 Recent Acquisitions, Art Gallery of Western Australia
- 1995 *Recollection*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia
- 1994 Women of the West Royal Automobile Club, Sydney, NSW
- 1993 *Ten Women Artists*, Greenhill Galleries
- 1992 Artists' Choice, Greenhill Galleries
- 1991 Invitation Art Award, Deloitte Ross Tohmatso, Royal Perth Showgrounds
- 1990 Second Australian Contemporary Art Fair, Melbourne
- 1987 *Six Pack*, Praxis Gallery, Fremantle
- 1986 Opening Exhibition, Black Swan Gallery, Fremantle Arts Foundation
- 1984 *Destination China*, Nexus Galleries, Fremantle & Guang Dong Art Academy of Fine Art, Guang Dong, China

AWARDS

- 2006 Peoples Choice Award, Bankwest Contemporary Art Prize, PICA, Australia
- 2004 ArtsWA Development Grant: Research painting techniques Paris, France
- 2001 ArtsWA Development Grant: Research, Paris, France
- 1989 Australia Council: Overseas Studio "Paretaio", Tuscany, Italy



Wilson's Inlet Mist, 2006
Oil over gesso marine ply, 25 x 84.5 cm

COMMISSIONS

- 1999 Fremantle Festival 1999 Poster, Fremantle City Council
1994 Design for Wollen Scarf, Print on the Sheep's Back, Textiles for Nomads
1992 Urban Thresholds poster, Transperth Public Art Programme

COLLECTIONS

Artbank,
Art Gallery of Western Australia,
BankWest,
City of Fremantle,
Edith Cowan University,
Education Department of Western Australia,
Evans & Tate,
Joondalup Art Collection,
Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital,
Royal Perth Hospital,
TAFE,
The Holmes Court Collection,
The University of Western Australia,
Murdoch University,
Wesfarmers

BIBLIOGRAPHY (Selected)

- 2006
Mark Stewart, *On Campus*, Murdoch University, Vol 21 No 2 Apr p.7
Nyanda Smith, *Master Technique*, Insite 8 Autumn Edition p.47
Melbourne Art Fair Catalogue, p. 50 for Galerie Düsseldorf, Perth
2004
Simon Blond, *Kempson opens book of enlightenment*, The West Australian, Jun 5 2004, p.10-11
1995
Robert Cook, *Romancing Place*, Art and Australia, Dec 1995
1994
FAR Vol.9 No.2, Apr/May 1994, p.17
Stephanie Britton, *Art and the Feminist Project*, Artlink Vol.14 No. 1 Autumn 1994, p.35-86
1991
Melissa Harpley, *Natural and Unnatural Landscape*, W.A. Italy, Art Link Vol.11 No.3 Spring 1991, p.63-64
Ted Snell, *Affinity Reflects Pilgrims Progress*, The Weekend Australian, 23 May 91
David Bromfield, *Gods and Poetry in Italian Memories*, The West Australian 25 May 1991, p.7
Ted Snell, *The Painted Image*, Twenty Contemporary WA Painters, Western Australian Art No.1 1991, p.52-55