

Julie Keating. ARTIST ESSAY

Walhalla Winter is not the exhibition that I had planned. Despite trying to work on a different theme, I found myself constantly being drawn to the idea of painting and recording the landscape of Gellibrand Lower. Specifically, the ever-changing beauty of the farm that I live on, Walhalla Park, belonging to my Uncle, Antonius Van Duynhoven.

This exhibition is really a response to place- an ode to Walhalla, if you like. For nine years, I have regularly visited my uncle at Walhalla Park and three years ago, made the decision to move there, on his generous invitation, to have more time and a fantastic dedicated studio space to work in.

It was 2007 when I first travelled down from Melbourne to visit my uncle. I was on my motorcycle, riding through the green rolling hills and it was breathtaking! I had the strongest feeling that I was coming home. Twelve years of visiting and three years of living there have only reinforced my love of the place. Walhalla Park is an unusual property of 1500 acres and though it is run as a dairy farm, the land is rich in variety. It has huge hills, at least 500 acres of preserved old growth forest and there are deep pockets of rainforest. It drops away down to the River Flats with six kilometres of Gellibrand River frontage that floods during the winter, creating its own wetland environment. It is a truly stunning place to live and work.

However, everything must move and change, and now it's time for us to leave Walhalla Park. I realise that once Walhalla is sold, I will no longer have possession of the place in the way I do now, nor the feelings associated with the luxury of this temporary guardianship. In other words, time is pressing, and I feel as though I must say something, paint something, that shows that I was here, that I saw the beauty and that I tried to capture a little of that in my work.

It wasn't an easy resolution to come to. I'm not a landscape painter and yet some interesting ideas about landscape and how it affects a place and the people in it had been building its own momentum in the back of my mind.

Last year, I was granted a month-long residency at OBRAS Holland, in Renkum, The Netherlands, with my friend and fellow-artist, Debbie Hill.

I went expecting to explore a number of themes related to the isolation of living in the Australian bush and comparing that to the Veluwe, an area of complex geography and relatively low population in this area of Gelderland, much of it is a National Park.

What I didn't know was that I was going to an historically important region associated with the artist's colony that in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, formed the Oosterbeek School, considered to the birthplace of Dutch Impressionism.

Painters such as J.W. Bilders, Willem and Matthijs Maris, Anton Mauve, Théophile de Bock, Maria Vos, Willem Roelofs, left cities like The Hague, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam to gather in the towns of Oosterbeek, Renkum and Wolfheze to paint the landscape in and around the forests of the Veluwe.

What also struck me was the continuing sense of pride that the people of Renkum have in these painters and their importance in the cultural history of the area. Castle Doorwerth has a permanent gallery dedicated to the artists of the Veluwezoom and the artists that followed the landscape tradition there. The town had huge pictorial signboards showing various paintings by the artists and sometimes these scenes could be discovered, some having barely changed.

It was summer when we arrived. It was hot and the light was sublime. Debbie and I explored the forests by bike. We were able to cycle to the towns close by in about 15 minutes and these journeys were made through the cool forests and along river flats. All reminiscent of the features at Walhalla but with the hills on a less dramatic scale. However, those river flats bordered the lower Rhine which can also flood the farming land on its border. I watched the summer harvest being cut and baled and bought in, just like at Tony's farm. The similarities were a delight, the differences, fascinating.

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I spent the first week in the garden of our house, Grunsfoort, making watercolours and doing oil colour studies. I realised during this time the colours I was using were too flat, too dull... My standard oil palette simply didn't cater for the luminous quality of filtered light through forest leaves, or skies so blue that the Dutch paint makers create their own specific range with enchanting names like Scheveningen Blue. So I went to another art shop and came home with a new range of higher key colours and began to experiment with them.

Many of these experiments were quite awful and yet, long after I returned to Australia, something kept pulling me back to them. I have had these samples hanging on my studio wall ever since.

I finally decided that I must paint Walhalla. Not so much because I wanted to but because I felt I had to. In the act of painting, I felt like I could in some way possess a little of the place in a way that no photograph could ever do for me. (Not that I haven't tried, with an archive of over 30, 000 images taken over the years!)

That having been said, the options for what and where to paint and in what light or weather to paint at Walhalla are virtually endless. This exhibition is not a final and finished thing. It is simply a small offering that I hope suggests the depth of content behind it.

In choosing the paintings, I soon found that the nocturne is a seductive thing. I could have easily painted an entire show of them. Walhalla at last light is a magical place; the quiet of the garden before darkness settles, the sunset views over the rolling hills, made soft with the gentling light; it's perhaps my favourite time of the day.

Walhalla has big skies! The cloudscapes change as constantly as the weather. The farm is situated only about five kilometres from the sea and the weather rolls in from the west at great speed. To see a sunny day be subsumed by a moody dark Paynes Grey sky whilst the sunlight valiantly flights through, illuminating the land with golden light is truly something to behold. And whatever job I was doing is stopped so that I can enjoy those fleeting moments.

Walhalla is special in every season but winter is perhaps the most dramatic. When the river floods and inches of rain pour down from the Otways, the River Flats go under water. In summer, they provide almost endless cuts of hay to feed the cattle. In winter, they go under water and become an entirely different landscape. Where we walked and cut hay, now we need to kayak. The Flats are lakes and the birds come and the paddocks fill with eels and water plants and fish. The rain haze is often there, softening all the hills into sage coloured shapes in the distance. I have tried to capture this in the River Flat paintings.

Winter also holds clear blue-sky days and days with icy clouds. When you get down into the rain forest areas there is no wind and it is almost warm. Looking up through the trees you could almost imagine it was summer... until you climb back up into the biting wind.

On some cold mornings, looking out towards the Otways, the mist is still hanging low amongst the folds of the hills but on foggy mornings, the hills cannot be seen at all. Watching the fog and the sun rising and warming it, the visibility of the hills moves and fluctuates and this is a beautiful thing to watch and to try to paint.

Living on a working farm is hard labour. Sometimes there is barely time to notice the surroundings. I am not a good farmer but I am trying to be a good artist. Long after the relentless grind of our farming work has been forgotten, I hope that the Walhalla Park landscape endures in its ever-changing beauty and that my paintings remain a small celebration of the time I was fortunate enough to live here.