

ARTIST PROFILE

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Michaye Boulter

MICHAYE BOULTER'S LIFELONG LOVE OF THE SEA SUFFUSES HER EVOCATIVE PAINTINGS OF THE TASMANIAN LANDSCAPE. IN HER HOBART STUDIO, THE ARTIST EXPLAINS HOW HER WORKS ARE AS MUCH A STUDY OF LIGHT, MEMORY AND SOLITUDE AS THEY ARE A REPRESENTATION OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT.

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What informs your work?

I've been painting for a long time now. I finished art school in my mid-twenties and more or less lived on Bruny Island until moving to Hobart about seven years ago. Sailing, fishing, family and painting have been my life since then. I paint about being on the water and living by the water, but also about the reflection of these experiences – the memories and feelings of those times. My paintings have a lot to do with the edge of land to sea to horizon, and to the landforms that border those spaces.

Your dad was a fisherman. Did you spend a lot of time at sea as a child?

Yes, my parents built a boat when I was about two. We sailed from Queensland to Canada and back again. We spent many years at sea with my mum teaching me – an amazing lifestyle which has totally stayed with me. It's part of me now.

When did you move to Tasmania?

When I was a teenager. My dad had a small wooden boat and we'd go around the West Coast (of Tasmania) a lot. I remember lots of





times fishing with dad. And then I married a fisherman ... by accident. He's not fishing anymore, but still he's boat-based and we go on the water a lot.

Tasmania's West Coast is notorious for its rough water, and yet your paintings appear so still and peaceful. How do you go about trying to convey the experience of being in this incredible landscape?

I like to take time. I like to absorb the experiences and I like them to be accumulative. I return to places many times in an ongoing process of attachment. I've been really interested in the more intimate spaces that are actually in the rugged places – the kind of sheltered, secluded, calm spots that you find after you've sailed past the rugged cliffs and caves to get to Port Davey.

I don't paint out in the landscape. I tend to be just doing what I'm doing – travelling there, walking there, or in a boat. I'll take photographs, and I might make some notes or a little sketch, but then I go back to the protected space of my studio – again, these protected spaces I'm attracted to. I'll allow the memories or the feelings to come back out in a new way. The paintings are not that topographical – they're more about a reflection of a human psychology or emotion than the landscape. It's about trying to see ourselves as humans in nature, and nature being part of us rather than something outside of us. It's using landscape as a way of painting about the human condition, I suppose.

And yet there aren't any humans – or evidence of humans – in your paintings.

No, and that's us too. At art school, I remember seeing Caspar David Friedrich's beautiful Romantic landscapes and thinking he's painting the human condition outside of himself. At that point, my work shifted to landscape and I've never wanted to put a person in there. I

want the viewer to be that person, looking at the landscape, taking it in. But I think it's also about being alone. I feel most connected to the landscape when I'm alone and I think that there's usually a sense of melancholy, and a yearning for seclusion or removal from others' expectations.

Sailing to a remote place like Port Davey is quite a feat. Does the journey itself inform your artwork?

It certainly does. It's an incredibly wild, rugged and exposed place, and there's this open horizon that invites endless possibilities. The experience of getting to Port Davey is about that exposure. When you come into Port Davey, it's very calm. There's a sense of shelter, protection and inward journey. Spaces become intimate. Sometimes I liken that to the experience when you're on a boat, and it's a very intimate space – there's this relationship between the intimacy of the boat and the vastness of the ocean around you. Humans need this spaciousness, but we also want to feel protected and safe.

Your painting *Interlude* (2019) was recently hung as a finalist in the Wynne Prize. Can you tell me about the work and the significance of its title?

It relates to your previous question about how the journey affects my work. As you're travelling through the waterways, you're always moving. There's little moments of pause where you almost stop because either you're not sure which way you're meant to be going, or for whatever reason you just cut the engine and float. And that's what I was referring to – that break, that moment of pause where you're not actually moving, but you sort of are.

This work – along with several others – is painted on hand-beaten steel.

Yes, a Tasmanian sculptor, Gerhard Mausz, makes the steel plates for me. I wanted something more organic than

the standard rectangles that come from the art shop. I like the sense that they're already a beautiful object before I start, and they have a sense of being worn or used. The unique shape can be challenging to work with, but also gives you another way of working.

There aren't many rectangles in nature.

That's right. I like the roundness and the softness and subtlety. These are qualities that I aspire to have in my work.

I first viewed *Interlude* in a digital image format, but it's so much more textured in real life. It must be a challenge relating the warped surface to the landforms you're painting.

True, but then it mirrors it too. The pitted bits are actually part of the texture of water or cloud as well.

Talk me through your process.

I really like the process of resolving a painting. In the beginning there's this raw energy. The image is out there in almost one session. I think, 'yep, that's what the painting's about'. I'll often let the painting sit in my studio for a while in that beginning stage and enjoy it because it's got something about it that I want to have back in the end. Then the painting goes through this whole gangly, ugly middle stage, becoming really tight and contrived, and I try and work its way back to the loose thing at the end that it was at the beginning.

The pink and blue tones in *The Sky becomes Shelter* are striking. Can you tell me about your use of colour?

I've started using cobalt blue, which I'm really loving at the moment. I get quite taken with a particular colour and want to explore all its intricacies before I finish with it and move onto another one. I love trying to blend one colour into another, say, a dark deep purple blue into a warm

“ I don't paint out in the landscape ... I'll take photos and do sketches ... but then I go back to the protected space of my studio. ”

01 *Encompass*, 2019, oil on linen, 122 x 152 cm

02 *Interlude*, 2019, oil on hand-beaten steel, 67 x 87 x 6 cm

03 *Withheld*, 2018, oil on linen, 122 x 152 cm



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M. Boulter



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light pink, and tease out all the subtleties in between; so sometimes the painting is about abstract qualities of colour. In a way the colours are quite divorced from the fact that I'm painting Southport Lagoon. This painting has reduced itself down to being about the light (in the sky) and then the reflected light. Everything else is just a support. Ultimately, I just want you to be able to disappear into the painting – to be engulfed. ■

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[@michayeboulter](https://www.instagram.com/michayeboulter)

EXHIBITION

Sydney Contemporary, Arthouse Gallery Booth F09
12 to 15 September 2019
Carriageworks, Sydney

04 *Becoming*, 2019, oil on linen, 122 x 152 cm

05 Michaye Boulter in her studio, 2019, photograph Julien Scheffer

Courtesy the artist, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney and Bett Gallery, Hobart