

Jo Bertini

ELEANOR ZEICHNER

'Land of Shining Stone', Jo Bertini's first body of work since relocating to the remote high desert region of Abiquiú in Northern New Mexico, applies her deep knowledge of the Australian desert to a new and captivating terrain. She joins the tradition of generations of women artists, including indigenous women of twenty three nations, who have lived and made work in this landscape.

The pioneering modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe reflected on New Mexico at the end of her painting career, 'As soon as I saw it, that was my country. I'd never seen anything like it before, but it fitted to me exactly. It's something that's in the air, it's just different. The sky is different, the stars are different, the wind is different.'

As official artist on numerous scientific expeditions to the Australian Central Desert, Bertini has honed her eye to capture the shifting effect of weather on the land, painting shimmering planes of bold colour in nuanced compositions. Her practice is both impressionistic and corporeal, capturing the look of a place and expressing the experience of being in it. But as O'Keeffe said, there really is something different in the air in New Mexico.

To begin, the altitude creates dramatic weather and brilliant technicolour sunsets, while the 'mountains are a magnet for the clouds', Bertini explains. Cloud cover will throw purple shadows across a valley at one moment, revealing red sands the next. Virga, the rain seen from a distance that evaporates before it hits the ground, sometimes stripes the sky.

The rocky topography brings to mind the many Westerns filmed here, mesas protruding from the landscape like the prows of ships. But perhaps most crucially, the high mountain climate means temperatures are relatively mild, meaning Bertini can live year-round in the desert she loves. From her adobe studio, every view is a potential painting.

Accustomed to working quickly in the harsh Australian light, Bertini's adept plein air techniques capture rapid changes in weather and mood. Views sketched in gouache and watercolour, often made while walking, are built up into oil compositions in the studio. While she has deep knowledge of working in the desert and educates herself on the places she travels through, Bertini values her first dizzying impressions of a new place, saying 'I want that freshness and freedom of the beginner's eye.'

Bertini's bold palette has also adapted to her new climate. *Abiquiú Fall, New Mexico* and *Geese flying the snow up river* deploy bottle greens, lavender and tones of grey to depict a northern hemisphere autumn. Local vegetation reshapes these complex compositions, with the sunny yellows of chamisa shrubs and cottonwood trees playing against soft pink and deep blue shadows. In a large scale work, *Abiquiú Arroyo*, Bertini pairs magenta with teal and grey-blue in grappling with the desert's unique geology.

The exhibition's title refers to New Mexico's official nickname, first used in 1941 (just a few years before O'Keeffe relocated permanently). In its dual definitions of a magic spell and the experience of being moved to great delight, enchantment holds the tension of Bertini's burgeoning understanding of a new place. Having been granted an extraordinary ability visa by the US government, her engagement with the deserts of New Mexico will only mature and deepen.

EXHIBITION

Jo Bertini: Land of Shining Stone

1–17 August 2019

Arthouse Gallery, Sydney

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