

ARTIST PROFILE



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Clifford How

Great Southern Land

Story
PIPPA MOTT





CLIFFORD HOW'S LUSH AND LOADED PAINTED LANDSCAPES INVITE VIEWERS TO JOURNEY INTO THE TASMANIAN WILDERNESS AND SUBMIT TO THE ELEMENTS. WORKING WITH A PALETTE KNIFE AND A RESTRICTED SPECTRUM OF COLOUR, THE SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST CONJURES A NATURAL WORLD WITH A QUIET AND ANCIENT POWER.



*“ Teaching myself allowed me to
paint the way I wanted ”*



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The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent border control measures have abruptly severed Tasmania's connection to the mainland, temporarily suspending that sense of not-so-far-awayness. With our parks now closed to day walkers and campers, your unpeopled landscapes seem more relevant now than ever.

You can feel like the only person on earth in Tassie. This cut-off has made the thought of isolation even more poignant. I hope that the 'closing of the borders' will make us realise how unique and important our wilderness is. These are ancient and endemic places that are being taken for granted. But on the other hand, for a lot of Tasmanians, self-isolation is nothing new. It's a way of life down here.

This virus highlights our vulnerability. We are quite small in the scheme of things and these places will exist beyond us.

You clearly hold the northern wilderness in high esteem. What is your connection to the region?

Most of my work up to this point has been focused on the North. I am a fourth-generation Tasmanian. I come from an agricultural family – my grandfather was a grazier in the Mole Creek area. We even have lakes named after our family in the Central Plateau area. I've been going up to that country since I was a child and it's very close to my heart.

I lived in Melbourne for eleven years, working as a floor sander. But Tassie gets in your blood. I moved back in 2009. When I began revisiting these places I had experienced as a child,



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I started connecting to them on a deeper level and felt compelled to capture them artistically. I am entirely self-taught. I started with small studies, tinkering with pastels, and around seven years ago I started experimenting with oils. I read everything I could read on painting, travelled to Europe and studied the old masters, and just practised and practised. Teaching myself allowed me to paint the way I wanted. I could paint the Tasmanian landscape in a way that communicated its rawness.

Your paintings have a dynamic, almost living, surface quality. Could you expand on your technical approach and research process?

A lot of the work is in the preparation; the painting is quite fast in comparison. I go out into nature and take photographs and produce small colour studies, often in the early morning light. Back in the studio, I use these to produce thumbnail drawings in graphite, which form the basis of my compositions. I use a prismatic colour range of warm primaries, cool primaries and a couple of secondaries, mostly oranges and greens. I use a palette knife for ninety percent of my work, employing alla prima method, where all of the paint is dropped in one go. Once all of the pigments are laid down, I use big brushes to diffuse and sharpen edges. The surface of my work is very organic. I need to

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- 01 Clifford How, 2020, photograph Melanie de Ruyter
 - 02 *Where thoughts collide (nothofagus gunii)*, 2019, oil on linen, 153 x 168 cm
 - 03 *Coalesce*, 2019, oil on linen, 138 x 153 cm
 - 04 *Eternal*, 2019, oil on linen, 122 x 138 cm



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step back every few seconds and analyse from a distance, to see how each mark correlates with the rest of the surface.

To what extent do you take liberties with your landscapes? Are they real or imagined?

There's a lot of imagination in my work. In fact, almost every scene I've produced has been manipulated or exaggerated in some way; even the most natural-looking works. I love producing studies en plein air, capturing an accurate rendering of the landscape. Then, in the studio, I see how far I can push it. I exaggerate the lights and darks, move elements around for dramatic effect and so on – it's a very analytical process. I like to think of my work as organic abstraction.

Your 2016 Glover Prize entry, *Plateau Detritus*, represents a stylistic and thematic departure from your prior work. A wintry landscape is sublimated by a junk pile – yet the scene bears the dignity and pathos of a shipwreck. What inspired this new path?

The scene was based on industrial debris, abandoned on the Central Plateau following the construction of the Liawenee Canal and the damming of Lake Augusta in the 1950s. That painting was a real turning point for my practice. I'm interested in combining traditional, centuries-old art practice with a more contemporary application of paint. I am deeply moved by the work of Caspar David Friedrich and his sublime paintings. By centering many of his subjects within the picture plane, he

“ I like its romantic ‘edge of the earth’ undertones, and the palpable feeling of solitude ”



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created a sense of stillness and calm. With *Plateau Detritus* I sought to echo Friedrich’s compositional approach.

You capture the volatility, and the drama and rhythm of the Tasmanian seasons – whether that be in the copper hues of the autumnal *Where thoughts collide (nothofagus guniii)* (2019), or a cold change sweeping through the midlands ...

I’m particularly drawn to Tasmania’s winter, because of the richness of colour – everything is drenched, and the low rating light draws out some really beautiful nuances of colour. I tend to steer away from our summers, where the light flattens and whitens. I am attracted to the winter for that moodiness and changeability – clouds skimming the ground in high altitude areas, and cold fronts churning up from the south ... Sometimes it’s like a wall in which you can clearly see the snow or rain bearing down upon a perfectly clear sky. I look for this contrast.

So I take it you’ve never been tempted to smash out a Bay of Fires vista?!

Sentimentality is killer ... I’ve seen too many badly-painted sunsets. I am, however, working on a series that will focus on the Tarkine coastline. I’d like to produce a body of work that

highlights its extremely important ecological value. I like its romantic ‘edge of the earth’ undertones, and the palpable feeling of solitude. Very high rainfall means you have rich greens of the vegetation infiltrating the eroded granite, flourishing right up to the water’s edge. I’m looking forward to playing with a new colour palette of blues and cool greens, also. ■

 @clifford_how

EXHIBITIONS

31 July to 15 August 2020

Arthouse Gallery, Sydney

21 August to 14 September 2020

Handmark Gallery, Hobart

05 *Plateau Detritus*, 2016, oil on linen, 152 x 167 cm

06 *Pour I*, 2019, oil on linen 82 x 87 cm

07 Clifford How working en plein air, photograph Eddy Delorie

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