

The Artist's Corner

With
Melissa Becker



TMC: I was impressed with the array of subjects that I got to see in your paintings. What are your sources that inspire your painting?

MELISSA: There isn't anything I wouldn't consider as a source for art, because ever since I was a kid, art was a means of enquiry. I'm really interested in human origins, ancient history, literature, philosophy, psychology, broad scientific issues, art and culture of all kinds and so on. I think of art as the puzzle pieces that help me put together a coherent picture of the world that is always changing and growing, so my art moves along with it. Aesthetics is paramount but not for its own sake. Creativity is a way of finding a halfway place between internal and external realities. I have to externalise this interior world in order to feel balanced.

TMC: The styles that you use are sometimes quite diverse. For example, the method used in depicting the human figures in "Portrait of a Nurse" or "Eye of the Spring" is very different from the figures in "Workers at Rest" and "Worker in Hostel". Why is this? Is it due to particular influences?

MELISSA: The styles differ in response to what I'm looking at but also what I'm trying to express. 'Workers at Rest' was influenced by German Expressionism because of the content being something quite grim. That period of art between the wars in Germany resonated with me because of the South African struggle. 'Portrait of a Nurse' was more naturalistic because it was a softer subject. I was experimenting with not using turpentine as I was pregnant and I came up with some brushwork that was quite rough which I didn't mind. I don't think about the style issue self-consciously. It just comes out in the mix. I am always studying as I think one needs a lot of knowledge to awaken a genuine response and come anywhere near to authentic self-expression. Whenever I can see good painting, such as 'The Great Masters' Scottish exhibition in Sydney at the moment I go back as often as I can and try to pin down the elements of construction by analysing the painting. Sometimes I write about it too. I've been to that exhibition 7 times already. I don't think I've ever gotten over the feeling of deprivation I had having only books to study from in my early years.

TMC: You were raised in South Africa, educated in New York and now you call Australia home. Has race, racism and culture within a country ever influenced your work?

MELISSA: Yes, these issues are central to my thinking and interests. I was aware of cultural differences as a very young child and really wanted badly to visit the huts that we passed in the Transkei en route to Natal to visit my grandparents. I loved the two big volumes of National Geographic's People of the World that my parents had and used to page through it and draw the ones I fancied. I had a little Dutch phase because I knew about the Dutch heritage of South Africa. Race didn't enter it – I thought grass skirts were a great idea and made an embroidery picture of someone in a multi-coloured one outside a hut. Later I understood the political implications of all this but I knew I didn't have the considerable strength or skill it took to be involved in politics at that time. Inevitably though it fed a kind of rage and when I left South Africa at twenty-two and was homesick. It all became more focused under the guidance of a strong teacher who encouraged me to write and then paint about 'home'. It was a difficult thing because I was in step with the abstraction of the times and this pushed me into figurative work, which I felt was tantamount to going backwards at the time.

While doing some semi-abstract work about South Africa in New York, I was quite fired up by the political situation ramping up there. The stimulus also came from the awful race relations in the U.S.A. I started reading about the history of racism (including the influential works of Ivon Von Sertima's Journal of African Studies, Martin Bernal's book 'Black Athena' and Jared Diamond's 'Guns, Germs and Steel'). Yes, the race/culture topic is close to my heart and is probably the core issue for me.

TMC: Other than some excellent colour underlay, many of your still life paintings depict fishes in many forms. This intrigued me. Is there a reason for this or do you just 'like' painting fishes?

MELISSA: Fish are challenging to paint as you have a very limited time unless you intend to waste them. I like the feeling of urgency and immediacy. It pushes me in a good way to use paint

in a vibrant and direct manner because there is just no time to be timid. I enjoyed many hours at the beach while my Dad fished. I paint them in a mood of reverence, wondering if there will be a last time. I started to include paper fish accidentally when I wanted to reserve a space for a fish I hadn't bought yet but keep doing it as I felt it alluded to my anxiety about their future, which is our future too. Although I'm an atheist I think they are sublime creatures and it's not lost on me that fish have been a sacred symbol for more than one civilization.

TMC: Your surreal art is refreshingly different. The artist needs a different mindset for creating surreal art. What is your *modus operandi*? Do you visualize the end product first before commencing work? Or do ideas come through as you paint?

MELISSA: The surreal work is generated from collages, which I started as an exercise. I never intended to use them as a source for painting but after making about a hundred I noticed that I could group them into themes and that intrigued me. There is no visualization of the end product - it simply develops. I find it better to let go of any ideas and work intuitively, through aesthetic engagement. Then somehow the content asserts itself but in a way that allows a narrative that is open-ended. I have my own associations to the images but am amazed at the complex ideas that they generate in viewers. They are often far more interesting than my ideas but never too farfetched. I did a lot of Jungian psychoanalysis in New York and used to analyse my dreams, so I feel the symbolic potency of imagery. The trick is not to let it become mechanical.

TMC: In 2009, you started the Sydney Community college Tutors Sketch Club. Tell us something about this venture.

MELISSA: I've been involved with art education for a long time, both with adults and children. Sometimes you wish you could have a teacher too, or that you could work alongside others rather than in isolation, which is more often the case. I developed the sketch club to share expertise and practise with other tutors and included other professionals and amateurs as well. It was a place where a lot of exchange took place on an informal level.

TMC: Has your work been influenced by any of the masters from the past?

MELISSA: Yes, very much so but I couldn't begin to say who exactly. Every epoch has its greats. One has to understand a linear progression in the history of painting on one level but ignore it on another, so you have to absorb whole movements. I don't think art exists unless it is part of a tradition. My training in New York was in a particularly untraditional period so we weren't taught any technique - not even how to stretch a canvas, and that was before the Internet too! It wasn't all bad, because we really focused on content, on what we wanted to say or how we felt. So I spent a lot of time in the library and in art museums communing with the paintings that moved me at the time. Perhaps I could say 'everything', including Jackson Pollock but not much later. Then I feel we are onto an entirely new wicket, which is more hit and miss and experimental again, so not so influential for painting which is long past its golden age.

TMC: What is your favourite media for your work?

MELISSA: I don't have a favourite - I have three: oil, watercolour and etching. They are so different that it's hard to compare them: they simply do different things. I need that diversity. I use watercolour in a very rapid, intuitive way. Etching is slow and graphic, mostly tonal and painting can be both and more.

TMC: You have had many exhibitions in the past – in many countries. Is there anything coming up in the near future? Is there any other major project that you are working on?

MELISSA: I wish there was but I've been travelling a lot and not doing putting energy into organising shows. I have four big paintings from a series with the working title of 'The Deep Water Project.' They all involve images of water and some of them make reference to issues that are problematic such as refugees coming on boats. I feel that this work has definitely 'arrived' in Australia as it addresses issues that are quintessentially Australian. I am also still experimenting with colour etching. I have been producing some still life paintings using more technical coloured under-painting that was inspired by layered techniques I have been using in colour printing with colour etching.



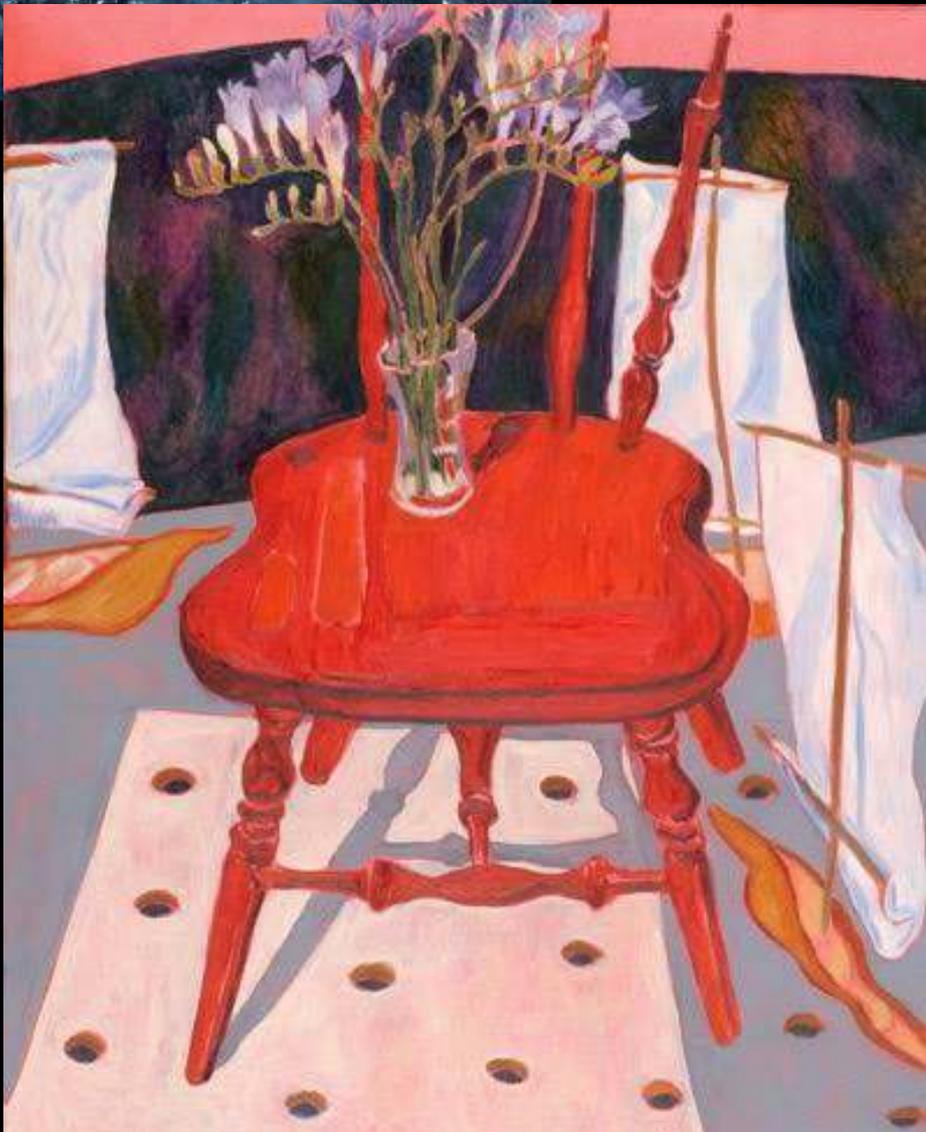
Spring Protection II



Untitled



Earth Moves



Red Chair (from Boat series)

Funnel with Plumbs



Fish and Loaf



Nest



Venus Mirage
(from Flight Song series)



Globetrotter