



NICOLE KELLY
Opacity of time

THIS IS NO FANTASY
dianne tanzer + nicola stein

Nicole Kelly: Opacity of Time

by Erin McFayden

Let's start with a slant question: How much time is in a moment? Then, let's take a particular example: How much time is in the moment before a snowball, thrown by a figure half-glimpsed through falling flecks of paint, collides with the eye of the viewer? Nicole Kelly's *Rest stop (falling white)*, 2021 is one of the only paintings in *Opacity of Time* worked from a photograph – one taken in 2018, and showing her partner on a road trip through Tasmania. The painting is then, in one sense, of and about the past: its composite layers, its mass and volume, appearing for a moment through the gauzes of memory and snow. Materially, however, the work is absolutely immediate. There is no languid horizon line for an eye to slink off into. Rather, a dense, luscious field of snow through the central third of the picture plane meets – with only the intermission of short trees against a darkened sky – the clouds of the picture's upper third. Gritty flecks of congealed paint along the surface of the canvas call attention to the work as a painted object. It is all here, all now, bearing down upon us.

Only in the lower third of this image do we catch a second of the sparseness which characterised much of Kelly's earlier work, particularly in landscape painting. When she and I talk about what's changed in her thinking and making over the past eighteen months or so, we talk about the wandering of her attention away from the slippages, gaps, and places where meaning goes missing which had earlier preoccupied her. Viewers familiar with her work might recall these qualities from Kelly's 2018 exhibition with *THIS IS NO FANTASY*, *Fragmented imaginings*. Here, landscapes, interiors, and figures were untethered from themselves, with empty space and the ambivalence which animates it populating much of the picture plane. Fragmentation is less of a concern to Kelly now, whose interest, across the genres which she moves with and through, I want to call something closer to thickness.

Thickness, in this body of work, is to do with the rich heaping of paint onto the canvas, but it is also to do with time. Thick time, in Kelly's recent pictures, is the historically-loaded moment of painting, and also of viewing a scene or subject. It is, in other works, the present of the painting indivisible from (sometimes conflicting) pasts and possible futures. Take the interior *Last Song*, 2022, for instance. In this picture, the ground is dense and dark, suggesting that the image is "set" in night time – or perhaps in many night times. A figure, unnamed but warmly rendered in intense, full-bodied colour, looks out a large window into a tightly-packed exterior world – at once wild and overgrown with greenery, and suburban, packed with the neat red brick of the house next door. Diagonally opposite from this figure, as if a reflection of her, is a startling sky: bright blue, impossible for anything far from high noon. So, this reflection must more properly be a refraction: a sideways expansion of the painting's temporal scope, spread as it is across two separate canvases. Times remembered, grasped at as they are fleeting, imagined, studied, or dreamed, are all rendered across the flattened picture plane. In some of Kelly's recent interiors, this knitting-together of time evolves from repeated observations of the rooms she paints from "life," and in others, as in *Last Song*, it emerges from memory, and the soft, surprising affects carried along it into the present.

Kelly carries this “thick time” across to landscape works, as well. Much of her thinking about the histories that lay in the land – and in the people who move across it – was developed through two residencies at Fowler’s Gap Research Station, undertaken during an Master of Fine Arts at UNSW Art & Design, for which she wrote a thesis entitled “Unsettling Landscape in Australia.” Since completing this research in 2020, and showing a body of work emerging from it in Sydney in 2021, Kelly has continued to add new layers to the loom on which she weaves together time and the land.

Many of these further disrupt the ease with which the landscape painter is, in a long generic tradition – even, perversely, in colonial Australia – supposed to relate to the environment around them. The placement of ghostly, often translucent figures in the landscape is one example of this complication. It might take a minute to spot the figure in *Night walker*, 2022, whose body is nestled, as if supernaturally, across the fore and middle grounds of the painting. At once an anchor for the eye and a perspectival impossibility, it is as if the landscape falls over her, wave-like: converging upon her only to run her over entirely. What place, the painting seems to ask, does a human interlocutor have within their environment? Can we see place through any lens other than ourselves? Or, can we see ourselves without seeing our places, too, and the stories they contain? A sense of being in and out of space is registered, too, by the two figures in *Between doubt and dream*, 2021, which was a finalist work in the 2021 Portia Geach Memorial Award. It is futile trying to ground these figures organically into the landscape, though their position as focal points in the picture space itself is clear. The figures – or really, the one figure shown from different sides – was painted using a mirror. This is a slant way of saying: the figures are Kelly herself, unnamed, and unmoored from a sense of self-specificity by the shifting touches which occur between person and place.

Lingering on the idea of touch, I want to suggest, finally, that Kelly’s new paintings are as much about the thin as they are about thickness. If time is thick under Kelly’s brush, what’s thin is the space between things: between people and the places they live in and with, between spots in time, between genres, and, ultimately between the far depths of a work and the surface which rushes up to greet the viewer. In these works, things buried deep are brought close enough to touch, and to be touched by in turn.