

Angus Nivison: A Survey

A world-class survey show at one of Australia's modest regional galleries is a must-see, writes Susie Burge



Above clockwise: Tamworth Regional Gallery Angus Nivison Survey Show; Summer Cotton Bimbang (detail); Hard Rain (detail).

The New England does winter well. Lean, spare, hungry-looking hills, coloured in pale shades of wheat and silver, with grey woolly sheep bunkering down or white-faced cattle huddled under lone eucalypts, and avenues of leafless poplars etched against a watery sky laced with mackerel cloud. On a very cold day, there is snow out here, a slender blanket laid like icing over the landscape, and dangerous slip on the road.

The region is variously known: as big sky country (the high plateau gives a sense of the curvature of the earth and, on clear nights, matchless views of the stars); as poet Judith Wright's home, her "blood's country" that she wrote of with raw intensity; and as traditional grazier heartland. The hard stony plateau gives way to spectacular mountain gorges towards the coast, with blue gum forests and bucketing waterfalls.

Walcha-based artist Angus Nivison draws his inspiration from all these elements: the poetic vision, the big sky, the fierce weather, his grazier heritage, the trees, mountains and waterfalls. A farmer before painting fulltime, he was born here like his father before him. He lives and breathes this landscape and it finds its way irrevocably, transmuted and transformed, abstracted and acknowledged, into his work.



Above: Angus Nivison in his Walcha studio

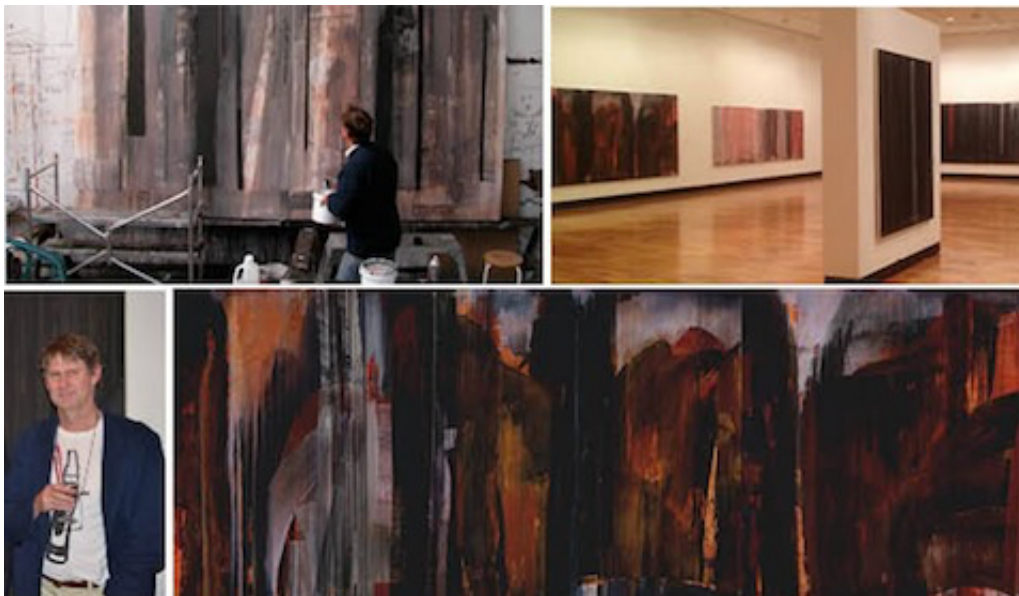
Nivison's pictures aren't conventional landscapes. Using a special matte acrylic paint that allows for layers of opaqueness and luminosity, and occasionally charcoal, his oeuvre connects, instead, with the great lineage of western abstract painting (abstract with a capital A) with its roots in landscape. From Pollock and Rothko to Gerhard Richter, Ian Fairweather and Tony Tuckson to Colin McCahon, it's a tradition of painting that functions on an intuitive visual level, resonating with emotion and private symbolism, deeply concerned with mark making - the evocative tensions of light and dark, the dynamic interplay of colour and line and form.

Angus Nivison: A Survey at Tamworth Regional Gallery is the first dedicated showcase of the artist's work ever held. It's not a Retrospective, none of the early works or smaller drawings and studies are shown. Instead, the focus is shone quite specifically on the extraordinary achievement of Nivison's large major canvasses. It's a tribute to gallery Director, curator Sandra McMahon (who acknowledges the invaluable assistance of Utopia Art Sydney) that she's got them all here, on loan from various public and private collections. A highlight is Remembering Rain, winner of the Wynne Prize, Australia's most prestigious award for landscape in 2002, a massive painting over 6 metres long, grided and cross hatched as if seen through flywire, painted in the midst of the worst drought this country has seen for decades, suffused with longing.



Above: Remembering Rain, 2002, acrylic on canvas.

Another stand out painting is “Uncertain Light” 2006, on loan from the AGNSW. Here the imaginary and the real intersect – these mountains are exaggerated, almost like a Chinese scroll, lit by a wavering sunset or sunrise, perhaps wreathed in fog, drifting with translucent layers of almost fluorescent colour and smoky grey. The work speaks directly to the “The Language of Mountains is Rain” on the opposite wall, and is echoed in “All the Places I’ve Never Been” and “Lament”, and reappears in elements of “Old Man’s Voice” forming a rich conversation. The exhibition is beautifully hung, fostering these kinds of connections and conversations between paintings without insisting on them. “Remembering Rain” reaches out across the entire gallery and across time to “Hard Rain” 1995, a turning point for the artist, the earliest work in the show, included in the acclaimed Federation: Australian Art and Society 1901-2001 at the National Gallery. It’s a treat to take in the long views and glimpses as well as spending time with individual paintings, to see how a work of sheer happiness like “Summer Cotton Bimbang” may be transmuted into monochrome by the sophisticated and very fine “Chaconne” 2009.



Above clockwise: Tamworth Regional Gallery Angus Nivison Survey Show; Uncertain Light, 2006 acrylic and charcoal on canvas; Artist at Tamworth Regional Gallery show opening; Artist in studio working on Chaconne, 2009, charcoal and gesso on canvas.

In terms of contemporary discourse, a number of Nivison’s paintings would have fitted well into this year’s Biennale of Sydney at the AGNSW I viewed a week prior. “Vestige” 2011, for instance, from a series inspired by a visit to Japan’s Inland Sea, manages to hold traces of the New England (in fog, in mist, in echoes of other paintings) and memories of Japan. It was painted after the tsunami, connecting cultures and landscapes through a kind of wistful compassion. The majestic 4.5 metre long Fallen 2007, once part of the Ann Lewis collection that was dispersed after her death last year, draws on actual landscape (it follows on from “Second Fall – Light into Darkness”, 2004 inspired by the gorge country east of Walcha), and a tribute to Lewis herself, battling pancreatic cancer, approaching the end of her life. (The artist & his wife Caroline were close friends of Lewis, an important patron of the arts, and the painting came out of a trip they took together in the USA to see Frank Lloyd Wright’s Falling Water). For me, and I now part-own the painting, as much as anyone can ever “own” a great work of art, it’s a painting about the inevitability of death (as the tree falls so may it lie), verging on the religious in its references to Colin McCahon. It can be read as a dark vision, but is not. As Nivison said on

seeing the painting anew, hung in the generous gallery space in Tamworth – “it’s quite delicate, from a distance it’s all about light”.



Above: Fallen, 2007, acrylic, charcoal, gesso on canvas.

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Angus Nivison: A Survey is on at Tamworth Regional Gallery 16 June – 28 July
www.tamworthregionalgallery.com.au

The exhibition will travel to Newcastle in October 2012 and Sydney’s S.H.Ervin Gallery in January 2013.

A full colour collectable catalogue with excellent essays by John McDonald and Barry Pearce accompanies the exhibition, published by Tamworth Regional Gallery.

Angus Nivison is represented by Utopia Art Sydney
www.utopiaartsydney.com.au

www.angusnivison.com

Images: Courtesy of Tamworth Regional Gallery and the artist.

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