

To Adam Pyett, subject matter is not of primary importance; rather it is the act of painting itself that is paramount to his practice. While Pyett is best known for his still life paintings of native flowers and skulls, the depiction of these objects is secondary to the overall success of a work. Pyett's background in abstraction and his interest in colour theory is evident in his evocative compositions, and his textured, worked surfaces showcase his chosen material.

# ADAM PYETT

STORY **BRIDGET MACLEOD**



01 Adam Pyett, 2018, photograph Sean McPhillips



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**YOU HAVE SAID YOUR WORKS ARE PRIMARILY ABOUT painting. Why did the still life genre become the best way to explore this for you?**

I've always loved painting, looking at great paintings and trying to make great paintings. That was always my ambition, even before art school. The still life format came about organically in the studio. I was painting abstractly, this is maybe fifteen years ago, and I found that I was struggling to produce interesting works. Through discussions with friends and other painters the idea came to me that I just didn't have enough content to inform the painting, so I used still life setups and that really led me to want to learn how to paint again from first principles. I felt like my art school education was lacking in formal education.

**Did you go to further lessons?**

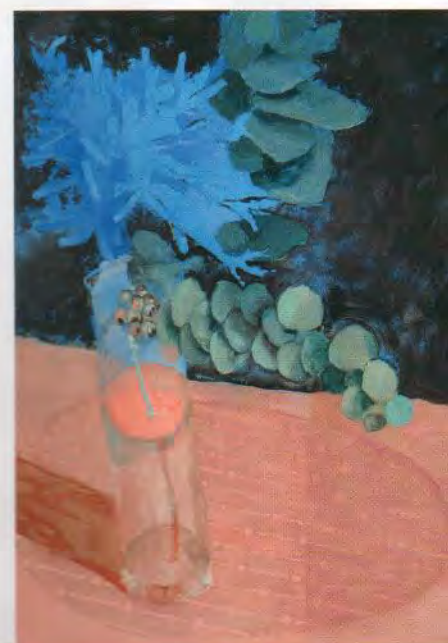
I have a fantastic resource in my father, Christopher Pyett, a painter whose biggest interest over his career has been colour. I started to talk to him at length and got him to give me some detailed colour theory, which used to be taught. I became very interested in colour and then started using the still life format in my studio. At the time I think I was most interested in working out how to make believable paintings, for want of a better word, realistic paintings.

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*I'm also interested in the idea, best expressed by David Hockney, that once he has drawn something then he will always know it, and can draw it again.*



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#### Can you go into this?

It's never been about realism in the true sense, it's more about rewarding paintings. You definitely feel that you are looking at a skull or a bunch of flowers in a vase, but I've been very interested in the idea of exaggerating some things and ignoring other things, cropping things out. In order to believe an image is interesting you don't need to describe every single last thing. It's a little bit more than reality but it's also a bit less. It's acknowledging that it's a two-dimensional image.

#### Do you plan out a painting or is it a more spontaneous process?

What I've been most interested in doing for the last few years is paintings that come from drawings and from life. If I'm doing a still life subject or a landscape I'll do a few drawings, mostly in charcoal, and then I won't look at the original subject again. I'll just look at the charcoal drawing to create the painting. I found that I was getting too bogged down by trying to mimic reality – the colour of the leaf or the colour of the flower, and that's not how paintings work. The painting has to work in reference to itself, and giving away the subject and referring to the black and white image has allowed me to experiment a lot more with colour and to dictate my own terms to the painting a bit more.

I'm also interested in the idea, best expressed by David Hockney, that once he has drawn something then he will always know it, and can draw it again. So I found that by sitting down and drawing something, even if only for ten minutes, the amount you learn from the drawing is kind of intrinsic in your memory, and so over the weeks or months that the painting goes on that memory is nice and strong. So the painting comes about in reference to the drawing and in reference to my memory of it. In the end what's important is that it stimulates a belief or a memory in myself and in the viewer.

#### What is it that attracts you to oil painting?

I've always used oil paint, it's just the most beautiful and rewarding colour and I can't get the feeling of it with any other paint.

#### And you exploit it to create textures and effects in your works?

That's something I'm particularly interested in. I want the painting to be rewarding when you stand up close to it and also when you are standing on the other side of the room. It will reveal itself in different ways. I've spent a lot of time looking at the great painters of the world trying to work out what they have done, and for the most part there tends to be a lot of variation in the surface and in the marks, and that's what is rewarding to the eye.

#### A lot of your still life works feature a skull; what led to this?

I decided if I was going to do still lifes I was going to really embrace the genre, the Vanitas tradition, as it has a universal reality. I feel like a lot of the subject matter in, say, Golden Age Dutch still life is not really relevant to us in the same way, but the skull is as relevant as it ever was. With all the subjects I've chosen I've felt like they have to be relevant to me, I don't want them to feel put on.


#### You tend to be drawn to native plant species. Is this an active choice?

I love flowers and trees, especially Australian natives. I've found that their foliage is much more rewarding to me than introduced species, there's a toughness that I respond to in Australian natives. I love the idea that some of my still lifes are a little bit threatening in a way. It's not really important if other people see that but I've always felt it.

#### Your 2017 exhibition at Sophie Gannon Gallery featured landscape works. Is this a recent development?

It's something that I've tried on and off over the years and had no success. I've found it quite difficult to transition from doing the still lifes to landscapes. Last year was the first time I've shown them, but I will be exhibiting more in the next show. I felt like I needed to expand my subject, and I still see myself as learning to paint. As I got close to my initial aim of learning how to paint still lifes I started to move away from simply representing a scene. They started to become more abstract, more playful, introducing pattern and referencing themselves as paintings more. Basically I just wanted to stay interested in it. So the landscapes are something I feel like I need to keep doing, challenging myself and what I can do. ■

Adam Pyett is represented by Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane

 @adam\_pyett

02 Pink and yellow flowering eucalyptus, 2017, oil on linen, 76.5 x 61.5 cm, private collection, Melbourne

03 Banksia on black, 2017, oil on linen, 76.5 x 61.5 cm, private collection, Melbourne

04 Blue agapanthus, 2017, oil on linen, 76.5 x 61.5 cm, private collection, Melbourne

05 Kangaroo paw, 2017, oil on linen, 76.5 x 61.5 cm, private collection, Melbourne

06 Narcissus, 2006, oil on linen, 86.5 x 76.5 cm, Collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

07 Wattle sapling, 2016–17, oil on linen, 102 x 87 cm, private collection, Sydney

Courtesy the artist, Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane