

Guido Maestri

Future nature

22 – 25 February 2024

Today the notion of landscape—always more idea than living thing—has shifted. For Guido Maestri, whose paintings have always been attentive to ecological precarity, the traditions of landscape painting could never account for the great uncertainties of contemporary life. Once known for painting en plein air, Maestri has in recent years turned his back on the landscape, moving to painting in the studio where time and place can stretch in non-linear ways. In the studio, collage has become central to his work. It is a way of discovering a painting through reference, accident and chance, and a means to express the losses and fecundity of a new nature in the age of the Anthropocene.

Future nature, Maestri's 2024 series, readdresses the idea of landscape today, confronting environments and ecologies transformed by human-induced climate change, and the long shadow landscape casts in the history of painting. With the outdoors behind him, Maestri works from the pictorial history of the landscape, at times directly quoting from twentieth century Australian landscape artists like Arthur Streeton and Hans Heysen through primary collages that gather through accident on his studio floor. Maestri's paintings in Future nature carry a refrain of uncertainty and fragility: a hand holds an egg, and figures radiate heat in fractured scenes that recall units of geologic time or the open tabs of a search engine. The European poplar, a criminally erosive species that has appeared recursively in Maestri's recent work, acts like a coda across several canvases.

Defined by lashes and stamps of textured and sculptural paint, Maestri's works express the act of painting itself as much as the seasons and contours of the environments they narrate. Future nature is physically supported by a sequence of red wax sculptures that flit between the corporeal and organic. Human ears (made from a cast of Maestri's own) are arranged like fungi, fingers pepper the floor like mangrove roots, and human heads prop up the paintings on the floor. These wax props are periodically melted and remade by Maestri—they're not for sale—and like his paintings they mimic the fleeting grace of growth and decay that all living things are subject to.

If the tradition of landscape painting is somehow culpable for our sense of alienation from the natural world, then Future nature is part remedy, part elegy for the medium and its subject. It captures an ecological twilight, illuminated by something as intangible and shifting as memory or sensation. As I stand in his inner-city studio, surrounded on three sides by paintings conjured from layers of time and memory, I'm struck by the idea that the paintings might have already outlasted the environments they depict. This is the devastating and beautiful wound at the heart of Future nature. Landscape is just a memory.

Text by Stella Rosa McDonald

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Guido Maestri won the Archibald Prize in 2009 and is an eight-time finalist in the Wynne Prize (2012-2017, 2020-2021). His work is held in several public collections, including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Portrait Gallery, the Art Gallery of South Australia, Artbank and Parliament House collections. In 2021 Maestri was honoured with a major solo exhibition titled 'Stories from Homedale' at the newly opened Mudgee Arts Precinct, NSW.