

Robert Malherbe

Almost the sun

30 September – 24 October 2026

Robert Malherbe moves through the world paying close attention. A road after rain, flowers gathered from the garden, a figure tying back their hair or the shifting light across a hillside - each has the potential to stop him in his tracks. What begins as an ordinary encounter often becomes the catalyst for a painting, not because the subject itself is extraordinary, but because something about the experience refuses to let go. He speaks about the petals of a rose carrying the same softness as flesh, his eye already translating the world before him into paint. Looking, for Malherbe, is never passive. It is the beginning of transformation.

There is a generosity to this way of seeing that recalls Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days*. The film lingers over the smallest details: light passing through trees, reflections in windows, the quiet rhythms of ordinary life. Nothing remarkable appears to happen, yet everything does. Malherbe's paintings share that same attentiveness. They ask us to stop over moments that would otherwise slip unnoticed into the day. Beauty, in this sense, is not something to be sought elsewhere. It already exists, waiting for someone to stop long enough to recognise it.

That openness to the world demands a particular way of working. Malherbe paints directly from life, completing each work in a single sitting. There are no returns the following day, no gradual refinements or careful revisions. If the momentum disappears, so too does the painting. Every work begins without the certainty that it will succeed, only the belief that something truthful might emerge through the attempt. That willingness to accept uncertainty gives the paintings their vitality. Rather than polished conclusions, they remain records of an encounter between the artist, the subject and the unpredictable behaviour of paint itself.

Malherbe claims that "as soon as you put a mark down it becomes abstract." It is a deceptively simple observation, but one that quietly dissolves the familiar distinction between realism and abstraction. The world provides the point of departure, but from the first brushstroke the painting begins to assert its own logic. Before long, it becomes impossible to separate what is being depicted from the act of painting itself. Description gives way to colour, gesture and surface. The painting is no longer simply about what was seen, but about the experience of seeing.

Whether standing ankle-deep in the surf, arranging flowers in the studio or painting from a live model, Malherbe approaches each subject with equal curiosity. As he puts it, "painting is painting." Landscape, still life and figure are not separate pursuits so much as different invitations to look. The subject simply provides a starting point.

That curiosity extends into *Almost the Sun*, where Malherbe introduces artist-quality silver paint into his work for the first time. The idea emerged after leaving the Sydney studio he had occupied for almost twenty-five years and moving to the Blue Mountains. Weeks of rain changed the landscape around him. Roads shimmered. Tree trunks darkened. Low cloud flattened the light until familiar colours seemed to dissolve into a subdued metallic glow. If petrichor had a colour, he decided, it might be silver. Rather than trying to imitate that elusive atmosphere, Malherbe introduced silver itself into the painting, not as embellishment but simply as another colour available to him. Sometimes it sits quietly beneath the painted surface, revealing itself only as the viewer moves. Elsewhere it becomes the painting's defining note. It is less a visual effect than another attempt to paint something that usually escapes description.

Malherbe is drawn to artists who continue pushing their own language long after it has become recognisable. He speaks about Matisse driving colour towards ever greater emotional intensity, or the late paintings of Willem de Kooning and Frank Auerbach, where decades of looking distil into something almost instinctive. What interests him is not their style, but their refusal to settle. It is this courage, rather than any particular aesthetic, that Malherbe continues to pursue in his own practice.

For all this searching, what he is chasing is surprisingly direct. "What I'm really chasing," he says, "is making something beautiful."

It is a deceptively simple ambition. Not because beauty offers an escape from the difficulties of the world, but because it asks us to stay attentive to them. For Malherbe, beauty is found in fleeting moments that stop us without warning: light lingering on wet bitumen after rain, the weight of a flower bending towards the table, a figure caught in an unguarded gesture. Painting does not explain those moments, nor does it attempt to preserve them exactly as they were. It simply allows us to stay with them a little longer.

– Milena Stojanovska

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Malherbe emigrated to Australia from Mauritius as a young boy. He worked as an animator before spending a decade travelling and living in Europe. Malherbe was awarded the NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize (2016) and won the Manning Art Prize (2015). He has exhibited extensively in Australia and has been a regular finalist in prestigious prizes, including the Archibald Prize, the Wynne Prize, the Mosman Art Prize, the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize and the Kilgour Art Prize.