

In Conversation with Catherine Hossack

by Atorina Saliba

In 2020, Catherine Hossack relocated from Victoria to Gold Coast, Queensland. In the past, she applied her artistic eye to occupations such as landscape gardener, interior designer, and hairdresser. Now she's presenting her first solo exhibition, *Finding My Way Out*, at the Dust Temple Gallery. The exhibition consists of almost thirty original artworks ranging from oil paint to charcoal to pencil. We talk to Hossack about her work, the origin of the title, and what motivates her to create art.

What was your earliest memory of artmaking?

I went to boarding school at eight, and shadows really interested me. Quite young I started drawing different things. I was not very attentive at school. I was always drawing horses on my books. I'm always drawing—and even if it's not pen to paper, it's finding something in a shadow or a wall or a wallpaper or a chair. I'm a visual person, it stays with me.

I do realise, at this point, everything I've sort of done has led me to space. For example, riding a horse. I remember when I was eight, there was a jump I was determined to make. I laugh now because it's a tiny jump, but as a child, it looked huge. I was even concussed at that jump. I eventually got over that jump but there's a thing with horse riding—and this is where I feel music, rhythm, distance, going the distance—comes into art because if you don't guide a horse into a jump properly, you'll fall off. The horse will crash. It's a collective thing of gathering that space safely to get in and over the jump. I think a lot of that young horse riding has been a metaphor for my life, for gathering space. Breaking boundaries and getting over the fence.

Painting came quite late. I played a lot with mosaic, gardening, tiling. The first time I went and bought a big canvas was *More Trains*, 2008. It received strong reactions. It's a very intense painting. I suppose that's where I first really thought "I love the medium of paint." And I found paints forgiving. You can scratch it back, sand it back, you can push it, pull it. You can go so many ways with colour. You can loosen it up, make it intense. I adore the centuries painting of light and how they use light, but for me, the light is more the idea.

Are there any artists that have inspired you?

I love Nicolas de Stael. A French painter who is from the 40s. I discovered him in a small book I found in New Zealand. I keep going back to his work. His style is from extremely intense to loosely abstract. He took his own life at forty-four, interestingly through criticism. I want to explore that even more, not to let ego get into my work.

ATORINA SALIBA: You mentioned you'd wanted to go to art school since you were seventeen, and you were able to go to art school later in life, in 2019.

I never forgot the dream. I was in a hospital, in pain. I came out of MRI and I remember I could see everyone I ever knew at the end of the bed. While there are people I'd take a train for, I adore them, it was a drop-dead moment of "This is your life. It's not their life." I'd been living for other people so much, trying to help their career, help them.

Where did the title of the exhibition, *Finding My Way Out*, come from?

I think that's my constant process. I've moved a lot. I did move to New Zealand for ten years. I adored New Zealand but found myself very homesick. Homesick for Australia, friends, but I realise it's familiarity. As much as I love going somewhere new, there's an exhaustion about it. So I'll put it this way: you meet all these great people and then you go out for lunch, and then they've got this connection because they talk about a certain primary school, or that eighteenth, or that twenty-first. As much as I wanted to belong, I just was like "I'm not there." It was a yearning for old friends. I went back to Melbourne, and all these childhood memories came back. I think that's how I ended up in the Gold Coast at the end because we came here every year with my father. And we had to drive. He said, "you don't see anything from the air," so we had to always drive.

It's a happy place for me, there are no bad memories. I really don't want to get old. There's an urgency; I want to get a lot more work out. I want to go to a lot of places. There's a lot I want to express. I want to move into lots of different art places. I got into university late, in 2019. The art history teacher I adored the most. He said the best thing you'll get out of art school is meeting other artists. It was true. There was a beauty in being in a room where everyone saw the pot differently. There was such a comfort in that because whatever I did wasn't wrong. That cemented me as an artist. I didn't want to be an artist in my own right, I want to be an artist that understands we do this because we love it. And not to stand out but finding your way out into a place where you feel you fit. Finding we're all different is finding where you fit.

One of the paintings that I really like – because the lines are so specific, so wonderful – is *Cross My Heart*. Right down to the horse's hair, that detail made the painting so different from the rest of the collection.

That is a self-portrait, strangely. That was called *Cross My Heart* because that was about me stepping into art and saying, "This is what I'm doing now." It was about being honest with it and reaching back to the shift and ripping off the mask. I'm fully masked in that self-portrait, from head to toe, with a sword. There's that energy coming off, saying, "I'm going in and doing this." So it's not about lifting the sword and fighting, but just having that protection, standing my ground. Being brave enough to say "I want to be an artist, I'm an artist now." That's what school cemented for me. It gave me the discipline, the work ethic. I'm glad you saw the detail in that. It was strange that a few months later we walked into COVID and the mask thing...

What's interesting about this collection is that each of the paintings is unique. No two artworks look alike.

Every object in every painting has a personal feeling of belonging in my life. My painting is not about anything else but me. My feelings, my experiences. I may be able to make a series about one thing in the future. I see that as a challenge. I don't think I've found anything or any one subject that drives me strongly enough to repeat it six times. I don't think it's right or wrong. I think some people have found that one series that means a lot to do. I think I'm still exploring. Like *White Island*, in this series for example. When White Island blew up I had just left New Zealand. It's horrifying for everyone involved in that. And it literally exploded into the canvas. I'm a very emotional painter so I get triggered

by grief, by other people's pain and suffering. I feel like that's my safest outlet, is to share it on canvas. Not in a dark way, but in a way that's documented.

What about on the other end of the spectrum. Not grief, but love, joy, ecstasy.

That's definitely there. Humour, I love playing with humour. Like *Vogue Kitchen* has a bit of humour in it. You get the new vogue kitchen and, really, you're getting the dishes and the new wedding dress and the responsibility. Being married, being a mother, it's the most beautiful thing in the world, but it's a very big burden and responsibility to carry. I did it wholeheartedly. I really did. I could not have done any more, I was a wife and mother. There's this idea where you've got to exhaust something before you move on, and that left me fairly exhausted. It's still a part of my life and that's where I can find a bit of humour. *The Grope* is another humorous moment. It's someone coming through your life, taking a part of you, and then they're gone. That's sort of me, the cow, looking back and saying, "Are you alright?"

I mean life is, I think very much that there are givers and takers. Some people are very good at taking things and doing something with them, and the rest of us just give and give and give. I don't see either of that as wrong, but we're all trying to find the balance.

How do you react to the audience's engagement with your work?

I think the fun of my work, being all very different, the fun I get out of that, is people's response to it. Like, people that like a certain painting and I wouldn't expect that. Like a masculine male would like *Flower Wow Her*.

Maybe it reaches a part of him? It hits a different note with the spectator.

Yes. It's really unexpected. My work, while people are looking at it, I'm sort of being the voyeur in the corner. I'm learning more about other people. And I think I love that. I love learning about other people because it exposes my own mistakes, my own journeys, my own wants.

Finding My Way Out will run at Dust Temple from 15 May — 24 June 2021.