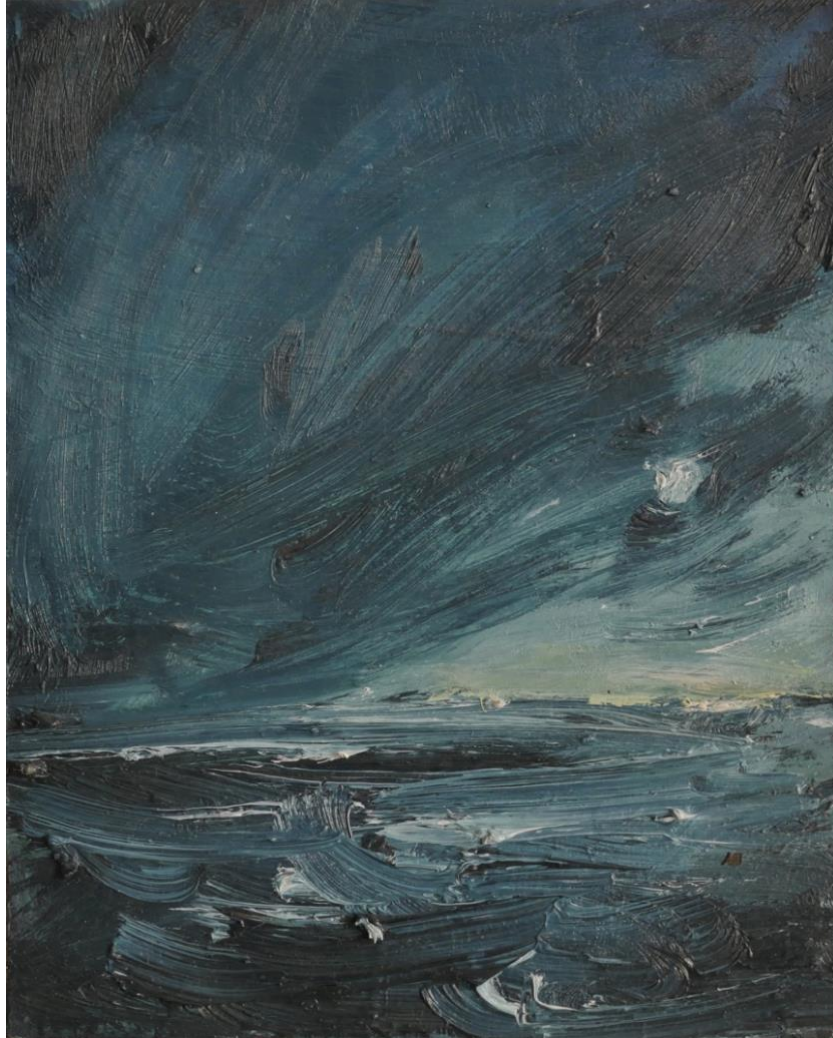


ESTHER BOSSHARD



RONA ON THE MOON
Selected Paintings by Esther
Bosshard

RDS Gallery
2021

ESTHER BOSSHARD

RONA ON THE MOON *Selected Paintings by* *Esther Bosshard*

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition
Held at RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin,
7 August – 2 September 2021

Occasional Essay Series

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Moon over the Sea*, Esther Bosshard (2021), oil on board, 17.5 x 14 cm.

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Rocky Coast with Shags, Esther Bosshard (2020-21), oil on hessian, 40 x 50.5 cm.

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A Studio Conversation with Esther Bosshard

By Pippi Miller

I had intended to write a well formulated and nicely constructed essay on Esther Bosshard, painter, and owner of floristry business Company of Flowers. But upon listening back to our interview in her studio in early June 2021, I thought that readers might find our conversation as interesting as I did.

Esther leads me through a chilly warren of halls and stairwells, finally reaching a heavy metal door, like the door to a safe, which she pulls open. I walk into Esther's studio and immediately notice the huge range of practices adorning the walls and tables. There are clay shapes on a desk, a board clustered with scraps of paper bearing minute drawings of people, a bookshelf stuffed with sketchbooks, a wall with gestural acrylics of nude figures. On the left-hand back wall hang the paintings that I came to see and discuss; an array of textural oil landscapes, seascapes, and skyscapes. The light cast by the window set across one wall of the studio is not bright, but it does allow the grey sky outside to

illuminate the room, catching the spikes and deepening the furrows of Esther's paintings.

I sit on a chair next to Esther, press record, and we begin.

PM – I really like those drawings.

EB – Yeah these are my little blob people. I do them from all my sketchbooks.

PM – That is a good collection of sketchbooks.

EB – I've got them all numbered in order. It's super interesting to see how your drawing changes and develops, and what you're interested in changes.

PM – How has it changed?

EB – Recently I've been more into experimenting with colour. I used to draw really lightly because I was afraid of the pencil. Then I got way darker, and more into colour and more curves instead of angles. The other rule I made up for myself was that I'm not allowed to use erasers. I used to get really uptight about having all my sketchbooks look really nice. A sketchbook is really a place for experimentation. I also stopped showing my sketchbooks for a while. Then they don't have to look good for anyone.

PM – Was that helpful?

EB – Yeah it was. Now, sometimes I show people, sometimes I don't.

PM – How long since you finished art school?

EB – I think that 2015 was my last year.

PM – How has your painting changed since then?

EB – Well, for one, I did still life, just like jugs, and oranges. I really like oranges. But then I got sick of being stuck inside all the time, so I did landscapes.

PM – Do you paint outside?

EB – When I'm just doing my normal life I go around drawing things, and then I just do paintings from my drawings. They start off based on the place, but normally they just take their own path. I'm not trying to re-create or copy the landscape, it's a template to start off. I like it that paintings can just be so unexpected and you don't really know where they're going. Nothing's super predetermined.

PM – Is that feeling something you found easy to embrace in the past?

EB – Probably less so. At art school I was just seeing if I could paint what I saw, to see if I could do it or not.

PM – How are you finding being based in Dunedin?

EB – I'm pretty happy here. There's sunshine, we live in an awesome beautiful place, I've got a nice painting studio, I feel really lucky.

PM – I have some more specific questions for you as well. I thought I'd start off with asking if there is a common thread between these paintings?

EB – They're all based off places that I've been, and probably around here, and the Catlins a little bit too. I was thinking about travel as well, and how we always glamourise going far away. It always seems so much better. Somehow putting things in paintings makes them seem beautiful and glamorous.

PM – Every time I go to a beach or look at the ocean here, I feel like it's so special.

EB – Yeah, it's about appreciating where we are, but I also like to make them not too specific. I like them to be not too predetermined, so whoever's looking at them can bring their own stories and life and experiences to it. Ideally, they would grow

beyond me deciding what they are, so they have their own life. What has definitely changed in painting is my approach to it, which does change the paintings a bit. For example, I'm less likely to try to control the paint, and I let the paint more do what it wants even if it wasn't what I first intended. In my other landscapes I was a lot more pushy. Whereas now, I think it's more interesting to let the paint do the talking.

PM – Do you use oil paint?

EB – Yeah. I've also got a lot more patience. So, for example, back in the day, if I didn't finish a painting in one sitting, I would get annoyed. If it didn't work, I would get annoyed and put it to the side. I used to just do one painting at a time. But now I have five or six going at the same time, and I just move between them.

PM – Does that make them feel more connected?

EB – Yeah, probably it does. The result of me doing multiple, instead of just doing one, is that it lets the layers dry, whereas before I would always just be painting wet on wet the whole time, which is really slippery. But since now sometimes the layers dry, it's going to be a whole different brush technique. I can scumble over things. So, I think that's changed a quality of the painting. There's a lot more of a sense of time. I always like to think that they mature like cheese. Before they were fresh cheese.

PM – So now you're making blue cheeses?

EB – Yeah! Cheese is great.

PM – It's really fascinating, all the age-old processes involved in making it. I love how once you get it going, the bacteria are kind of making it for you.

EB – That reminds me of another thing that I do like about landscape paintings. Landscape painting has been really big in New Zealand, and landscape painting has been done for ages. So, I thought that there must be something good about it, if people have been doing it so long. There must be something that draws people to it or fascinates people about it.

PM – What do you think it is?

EB – For me, drawing it or being in it, it's nice to look at things that are bigger than you. You can get so caught up in yourself, it's refreshing to look at a really big sky or see all the night and think I'm just a tiny little fleck and all my problems aren't really that big.

PM – Do you think that as you're painting or as you're standing in the landscape?

EB – Mostly as I'm standing in the landscape. That's a common experience with lots of people and also connects people around the world. I read this book... it was so sad. It was set in Soviet Russia, and there were two lovers, and they get put into internment camps. It was written maybe 20 years ago, but it's based in that era. They get put in separate internment camps for ten years, and before they separate, they say, "Look at the moon every night, and I'll look at the moon too, and we'll know that we will both always be looking at the moon." They go into the internment camps, and ten years later the main character, the guy, gets out and he goes to find his lover, and it turns out that she was killed three days after they'd been put in the internment camps. So, he'd been looking at the moon for ten years thinking that she was looking at it too. I thought that that was terribly sad, but it means that even though

she's not alive he gets to see her every time he looks at the moon in some ways.

PM – She was kind of alive for ten years. That is sad. Is that why you painted the moon, or is that something you were thinking about anyway?

EB – That's not why I was painting the moon. I read the book a couple of years ago, and I've only started being interested in the moon more lately. I started painting the moon because I'd painted heaps of the daytime.¹ Also because now I'm doing the flowers, I am doing most of my painting in winter, when the moon is way more present.

PM – Because you have to do the flowers when they need to be planted?

EB – Yeah. The flowers teach me lots. Since doing the flowers, painting has become way easier. I fail so much with the flowers. I kill so many seedlings and I have to get over it really fast. I used to be quite scared of failing, like doing a bad painting or something. Like failing if you do a painting is not that bad, you can just paint over it. But failing if you stuff up some of your seeds, you have to wait a whole other season before you can sow those seeds again. The fact that I stuff up my seed sowing all the time has just made me think oh well.

PM – That does take the weight off things, doesn't it.

¹ The artist has since elaborated these comments as follows: "I wasn't particularly thinking about the book with the Soviet lovers while painting. I read it years ago. I can't remember its name, but the author is Andrei Makine. I am not really sure why it came up with Pippi, it just did. The Maori legend I had been thinking a bit about recently (Esther Bosshard, email communication with the editor, 18 July 2021)."

EB – Yeah, and it's super nice coming here, because I'm outside all the time, and it's windy or rainy. You don't have to talk to anyone, you don't have to see anyone. You can just be here all day, no driving, no rushing around.

PM – I guess studios are a whole mental space in themselves.

EB – I really like having my own space. Some people like having other people to talk to, I guess it just takes a while to work that out.

PM – How do you find new subjects?

EB – I have only done two subjects, still lifes, landscapes. I am quite into people, and I've sort of experimented a little bit with flowers.

PM – If you've been doing landscapes for a very long time, do you return to the same landscapes or seascapes?

EB – There are things that I seem to be really into, like circular things. I guess most of the landscapes are places I've been to a lot, like the Catlins, where my grandparents live.

PM – I wanted to ask what artists, painters, and so on do you draw from, if any?

EB – I like Euan Macleod and Joan Eardley.

PM – Do you refer back to them often?

EB – I might flick through my books on them once every few months. I sort of have fads where I don't look at anyone for a while, and then I go to the library and get out heaps of books.

PM – I wanted to ask about how you feel about paint. An artist's relationship with materials is always interesting.

EB – One thing that I really like about oil paint, in particular, is that I feel like the world is always disintegrating. Things are always moving and changing, and you can never really stop anything at any time and people come and go and disappear, and beaches get

washed away and rains come so the trees fall over, nothing is ever really solid. I love how paint, especially oil paint, sort of feels like that. Because it's very slippery and slides into each other, and you get lumps in your paintings. When you look at them from different angles, they look completely different. It's never really there but it's always there. It's always different. It's also kind of like icing. It feels really good to just put down.

PM – It must be so nice to be the painter of your paintings, because it means you can touch them – textural paintings always make me want to touch them, but you never can because they're not yours.

EB – Yeah. The paint has got thicker and thicker as I've gone along, because painting thickly is fun, and because I've been painting over old paintings. For example, one of the sea paintings has heaps of paintings underneath. At art school I was painting on hessian because I liked the way the hessian grabbed the paint off your brush in unexpected ways. But then I got really used to how it did that, so I've just gone back to more plain canvas because it's super slippery, and painting over old paintings, which do random things that you're not expecting, which I like.

PM – What would make you pick a painting to paint over?

EB – Partly it's because sometimes paintings just aren't working. I don't know how I know, sometimes paintings are ready to be painted over. That tree one, I got so stuck I just couldn't finish it, for more than a year, and then one day I just walked into the studio and knew how to finish it.

PM – That makes the whole process of painting completely different.

EB – Yeah, same with that dark blue one, I couldn't finish it, and then one day I was on the bus and I saw some shags on the rocks and I thought, "Oh, that's what I need to do – I need to put some birds on the rocks to finish it."

PM – Tell me about your smaller paintings.

EB – My favourite things are the little things really. You can say just as much or sometimes more in little things. These are really my favourite ones.

PM – They get into your heart, the little ones.

EB – These bigger ones are probably the biggest ones I've done. I realised I was using the same sized brush for the big ones, so I cut some 14cm wide cardboard and I did the next big one really fast.

PM – Do you find any of your life or the people around you influence things?

EB – Definitely. All these grey ones are a lot greyer. They're all my earlier ones. Things I've been doing more recently have more colour and are brighter. And I think that's because in general I am feeling a lot more cheerful than I used to feel. I think it's probably because I put less pressure on myself.

PM – My final question is what kind of things would you like to be written about you?

EB – My main thing is that I don't like when things are isolating for people. Like when you read something or see an artwork and you just feel isolated and confused, or you can't understand.

PM – You want people to feel connected to your work?

EB – Yeah, and not be isolated by complicated language or concepts. I guess the other thing is I don't like when a work is closed

down. It's nice when it's like this could be what it's about, this is what I think, but there's not one answer or one meaning for anything.

9 June 2021

Dunedin

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Rona on the Moon

By Jane Malthus

Rona is a spirited woman, living with her husband in the bush. When they argue over who will fetch water, she storms off with their tahā (gourd) cursing her husband, but trips in the dark on the way back, spilling the water, so curses the moon too. Marama, the moon, warns her to be more polite, but Rona continues her insults, so Marama kidnaps Rona. Her husband searches for her, but Marama treats her kindly, so Rona decides to stay on the moon and is gifted a korowai of stars and becomes Rona-whakamaui-tai, controller of the tides. Rona looks down on us whenever the moon is in our sky.

Moons, moonlit nights, land, sea, sand and trees are all subjects of this show of Esther's paintings. These works celebrate places on the edge: coastlines and inlets, seascapes at night, big sky landscapes, beaches and baches. Drawings done by day and night out in her surroundings are the inspiration for the luscious paintings worked up in the studio. Sketching her environment as part of appreciating it is almost a life-long habit. Esther's connection to place is vital and personal. The paintings capture the essence of those places but don't give viewers many clues as to the actual site. Instead,

observers are transported to places they know or relate to: a beach where they've walked their dog, trees they've encountered, a hut or bach they've stayed in.

The paintings evolve as imagination, feeling, mood and spirit combine in letting Esther know which sketches to choose, how they need to be painted and even what size they need to be. Gestural brush or cardboard swipes of paint evoke nature's forces of wind, waves, and weather. The drama of the landscape and the feelings of being "out there" are embedded even in the smallest works. For example, the nightscapes suggest journeys home along the harbour's edge after working long hours, perhaps. The small landscapes are almost sculptures as well as paintings, and clouds pop out of the picture plane to meet us. The varied sizes and scales of works attract our attention. All benefit from both close as well as distant viewing.

There is a strong sense of nostalgia, emotion, and escapism in these paintings. In their mostly cool colour palettes, they express a romantic connection with nature, and they are heavy with atmosphere and texture. That comes from their materiality and their making. They are done in thick impasto oils built up over time, often from memory after the initial idea is drawn from a sketch. The gloopy, gooey, slithery joy of oil paint is celebrated in every mark. The paint could so easily spill over the edge of the board or canvas, as Rona's water spilled from her gourd. Even the supports are beguiling: hessian glued on board creates textures that somehow

suggest the ripples of sand created by water or wind when paint grasps the yarns.

Esther's paintings freeze time, but also render landscape, beach, and moonlit seascape as both aged and ageless. They remind us of nature's diurnal rhythms and seasonality, and thus our own timespan of life. The viewpoint is often high, as if the artist is Rona on the moon looking down on the scene, not quite part of it, observing rather than implanted. Some include people and their pet dogs enjoying the beach, others driftwood fires and birds wheeling. These landscapes are always being modified by human presence and our sometimes thoughtless and reckless behaviour, even though we have an abiding longing for being out there with the land, sea and big sky.

Fuzzy horizons where sea and sky merge and uneven edges of land and sea or land and sky may just reflect the weather or the view, but speak to me of impending changes that may occur in our landscapes with climate change. Encroachment of the sea into land, or alterations of plant life with rainfall fluctuations and changes in temperature, seem to be implied if we don't act. Thus, the paintings present a poetical or dream time: not the past or the future, but not necessarily the here and now either.

Contributors

Esther Bosshard (b. 1994 in Wellington) spent three years studying Painting at the Dunedin School of Art and completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts in 2015. In a world she sees as increasingly fragmented, chaotic, and noisy, her paintings are a manifestation of her quest for a simpler, quieter meditation on life, paying homage to the modest overlooked objects and landscapes in our lives.

She has always been interested in the conceptualisation of the everyday in painting, because, in her words, "I love the myriad of detail, colour, pattern, form and light that we live amongst and remain largely oblivious to. My paintings, I hope, encourage introspection, recognition, and at the very best, the opening of the eyes of the viewer to the incidental beauty in his or her own life."

A recipient of the 2015 Feldspar Scholarship and the 2015 Webb Farry Award for drawing, as well as painting and growing flowers, she also teaches life drawing at the Dunedin School of Art night classes.

Pippi Miller (b.1997) was born in Wellington but grew up in Dunedin. A scholarship swayed her toward attending Otago University, and she emerged after four years of study in 2019 with a BA(HONS) first class in English literature, and an unexpected love for Dunedin. Pippi is currently enrolled in her MFA at the Dunedin School of Art, following on from the graduate diploma that she completed there in 2020. Her drawing and painting-based practice focuses on exploring line and colour, illustration, and children's literature.

Jane Malthus is a dress historian and honorary curator for the dress collection at Otago Museum with a background in textiles, clothing and fashion, history and fine arts. Her research explores historical, social and cultural intersections and implications of dress and textiles used by nineteenth and twentieth century New Zealanders.

Recent work includes a chapter, *Dressing Settlers in New Zealand: Global Interconnections*, for *Dressing Global Bodies: The Politics of Fashion in World History, 1600-2000* (Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello, eds, Routledge UK 2019). She is a co-curator of "Fashion Forward: Disruption through Design," an exhibition on at Otago Museum until mid-October 2021.