



Jan Davis *Big Garden*



LISMORE
REGIONAL GALLERY

Jan Davis
Big Garden¹

>> Essay by Robyn Daw
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'... familiarity with a place will lead not to absolute knowledge but only ever to further enquiry.'

Robert MacFarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*,
Hamish Hamilton, 2012, p. 111

Jan Davis' *Big Garden* articulates a relationship between the artist and the landscape, of the reciprocal and discretionary bonds that connect oneself to place. For the past 25 years Davis has lived in and around Lismore, including for the last 15 years on a property at Tullera, listening to, caring for and observing the place by which she has been sustained. During this time her art has reflected on a different place: the histories of Gippsland where she grew up, particularly stories of relations between settler and Indigenous inhabitants. By drawing and painting the landscape from her childhood, she metaphorically returned there, making manifest a place through rediscovery and imagination.

Strong connections are made to places where people are nurtured. The myths, legends and wisdom learned, alongside scraped knees and illicit adventures, become part of our existence. Migrating – even within Australia – means severing those ties and starting anew. While this is exciting,

it can also be challenging. Just as language has subtle differences from region to region, so does the landscape. What works in one place can fail in another, and yet there can also be unexpected successes and surprises. *Big Garden* is Davis' homage to the place that has become her home, describing the impact on the artist of the 'overwhelming presence of the natural environment'. It is also an attuned understanding of what it is to live in the land, but not be of it.

One convention in Australian landscape painting is based on observing nature from a high point, where the landscape is spread out below eye level. The artist's position is detached, an observer somewhat apart from the scene they describe, and yet they also appear so obviously present. Their role may be to provide evidence of expeditions, mapping, (real or imagined) ownership, or to capture the sublime beauty and terror of the land as seen from a high place. From Eugene von Guerard's nineteenth century picturesque interpretation of Mount Kosciusko to Margaret Preston's post-flight Shoalhaven River paintings of the 1940s, many Australian landscape artists have worked – and continue to work – in this manner. To create landscape paintings

in the twenty first century owes as much to this manner of viewing the landscape as it does to the commonplace experience of looking from a verandah, a viewing platform or deck.

To visit Jan Davis' house and studio in Tullera is to walk into her inspiration for this exhibition. She and her partner Linzi have planted a garden of fruit trees, native and indigenous trees and shrubs, and vegetables. Tending the garden inspires and sustains a broader appreciation of life where, even in the harsh times of drought, flowers and fruit are propagated. Beyond the garden the land drops away steeply and the view across the valley floor to the distant hills is immense. Here eagles circle, riding the thermals up to the head of the valley, and the Nimbin Rocks can sometimes be seen glinting in the distance.

The country in which Davis lives is at once domestic and grand. Since her arrival in Lismore, she has learned to understand it by observation, through weather patterns, experiencing the changing seasons and corresponding wildlife behaviour, and by listening to the stories people have been willing to share. It is, in part, a visceral understanding, where the body reacts

and responds to the seasonal changes in parallel with local plants and animals. Underlying this is a deeper knowledge of the land, of its ancient past, gained by walking the hills and valleys and understanding their shape and form, and being privy to its stories and secrets. It is this deeper knowledge that eludes Davis and has spurred her current work.

Big Garden makes explicit Davis' negotiated relationship with the landscape. It is, she acknowledges, a 'light engagement' based on her own experience, but one that is not unfamiliar. Davis proposes, in *Big Garden*, that we see the landscape with our bodies, not just our eyes. She seeks an authentic tactile experience that does more than describe the landscape, but alludes to it. Each aspect of the work is a response by the artist to the land and simulates the garden/foreground and mountains/background as experienced both at her home and to a certain extent Lismore, ringed as it is by hills.

A garden has been recreated within the gallery with bright green, native grasses (*Lomandra longifolia*) propagated by Davis during the long, hot summer, under some difficult conditions. Two patterned wallpapers have as their repeat motif flowers from the introduced hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-*



sinensis) and African tulip trees (*Spathodea campanulata*), also grown in her garden. The flowers were semi-dried and scanned, and the images manipulated before being printed onto lengths of paper. Even though the wallpapers are digitally printed, their black and white graphic quality echoe Davis' love of traditional woodcut printing, and the retro colours hint at cosy domestic interiors, of nurturing and fecundity. It is perhaps no coincidence here that the word 'nursery' is used for both plants and people.

From being within and surrounded by the garden, an elevated view is provided by a platform which also creates a sense of detachment from the ground. This is akin to the disconnection felt when walking on elevated platforms in national parks: it improves the view, but the experience underfoot is lost. The view here is of a series of drawings: tactile, soft representations of the folds and striations of mountains and river valleys eroded over time. The paper is hung high and at a slight distance, due to the platform and its edge, but the drawings are at eye level. Just out of reach, they are close enough to see the folds, stitches, puncture marks and overlapping washes of colour, working as a metaphor for the complex geology and history of the place and how it is perceived.

Big Garden is Davis' first deep investigation into the landscape of her home near Lismore. In the face of such overwhelming beauty, it would be tempting to paint picturesque views. Instead, Davis has represented *how* she experiences the landscape in which she lives, based on being present, listening and observing closely. This daily familiarity leads to a more intimate engagement with place and, as Robert MacFarlane suggests, leads only ever to further enquiry.

¹ The link between gardens and sustenance is woven into the history of Lismore. In 1845, Jane and William Wilson established Lismore Station, thought to be named after the Inner Hebrides island of Lismore. In Scottish Gaelic *Lios Mór* translates as 'big garden'. Prior to being named Lismore, the area was known as Tuckurimbah, derived from the Bundjalung name 'Dugarimbah', 'Doogarimbah' or 'Dugirinba', which is sometimes translated as 'glutton'.

cover: *Gardenesque I* (detail) 2014
digital print on adhesive paper, 240 x 180cm
inside fold: *Gardenesque II* (detail) 2014
digital print on adhesive paper, 240 x 180cm

inside (left to right): *Big Garden # 10, # 11, and # 12* (detail) 2014
liquid graphite on japanese paper on Hahnemühle
102 x 74.5cm (each), photographer: Christopher Meagher
all images courtesy the artist







Jan Davis: *Big Garden*

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Jan Davis is Adjunct Associate Professor at Southern Cross University

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