

VISUAL ARTS

"You just have to throw the paint around and see what happens."

A Review of Nicholas Harding's Flora, Figures and Landscape Exhibition at the Olsen Irwin Gallery

"Go away and come back when you're better." These were the words Nicholas Harding heard from Sydney art dealer Rex Irwin each time he was repeatedly rejected from exhibiting with him. I find this extremely hard to believe, particularly after visiting his current Flora, Figures and Landscape exhibition in the Olsen Irwin Gallery in Woollahra, in which Rex has recently become a partner, open from February 20 until March 10 2013. My first impression upon entering from the street was of the bold and highly expressive oil painting *Turon River Jump Boy* (2013), visible through the spacious gallery window framed by old-fashioned white bricks. This display was very simple and bright, openly inviting any passer-by to come in and see what other wonders might be in store behind that intriguing painting.

This is by no means Nicholas Harding's first major solo exhibition. Born in the U.K in 1956, he moved to Australia at the age of nine and later studied a Bachelor of Arts in 1975. Recently he has been exhibited at Theo Waddington Fine Art, London (1997), Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne (2008, 2010) and SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney (2010) and he has been awarded both the Archibald Prize in 2001 and the People's Choice in the Archibald Prize in 2005, to name a few of his many noteworthy achievements. His work also features in many prominent Australian galleries including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Portrait Gallery and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.



Nicholas Harding's barely blended colour close up in *Swamp Lily (with glory lilies)* (2012)

Harding recognises that his artmaking practice has been considerably influenced by the work of Francis Bacon, which he believes is summed up in Bacon's quote: "You just have to throw the paint around and see what happens." This is reflected in Harding's oil paintings in this exhibition; he uses luscious, thick paint application and in different sections of the Belgian linen canvases you can find swirls, flicks and globules of barely blended colours (shown in the picture to the left)– but positioned and merged just enough so that a strong meaning can be communicated through the works. I find both his paintings and drawings highly emotive, with his expressive and unrefined technique conveying aspects of the distinctive scruffy nature of the Australian landscape, which is the dominant subject matter of the exhibition. Perhaps this depiction of Australia has stemmed from the change in scenery he would have experienced after moving here from the U.K as a child.

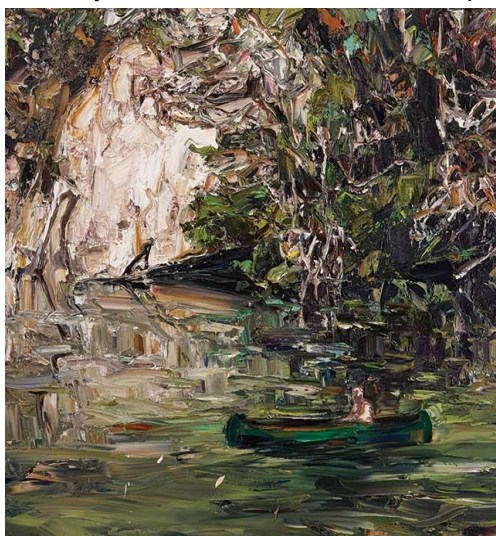


Nicholas Harding
Turon River Jump Boy (2013)
Oil on Belgian Linen

Before entering the gallery, I take a moment to admire *Turon River Jump Boy* (2013). The density of the paint and the application of thick strokes of colour seem to enhance the sense of movement and adrenaline accompanying the boy jumping off the rock; it's as if the painting is alive. This is heightened by the strong, heavy downward directional lines in the paint application over the rock, which also draws the eyes of the audience to the focal point of the boy himself. White paint is extensively used in this work, except in the depths of the trees in the background, creating that almost bleaching Australian light which is typical in landscapes such as this. I find it incredible that Nicholas Harding can even manage to create realistic facial features and body structure with such seemingly swift and generous strokes of paint.

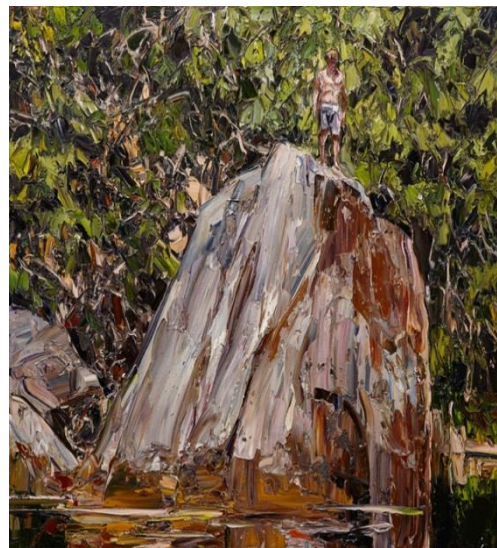
Continuing into the gallery, I notice that the first room, with its pleasant natural light, has high ceilings which give the area a spacious feel. This room contains only his larger oil paintings which are all evenly spaced along the walls. Looking at the row of paintings side-on, the amount of paint he uses is simply unbelievable. They look as if they're almost three dimensional with their layers upon layers of paint, which apparently will sometimes not dry completely for up to a year. I notice that escarpments and rocks appear to be recurring motifs in many of the other paintings in this room, including *Turon River landscape (with jump boy)* (2013) and *Lagoon (canoe)* (2012) which both depict the landscape at the Wooli estuary, where he and his family go for holidays.

To me, the cliffs are symbolic of the harsh and raw beauty of the Australian landscape, bared to the elements and devoid of the manicured, tamed shrubbery which the early traditional European artists tried to impose on Australian art. They may also represent, along with the people jumping off them, the recklessness and danger which could be considered an element of Australian society. The cultural contrast is evident when comparing the style of Harding's landscapes with, for example, that of British convict artist Joseph Lycett's work *View upon the South Esk River, Van Diemen's Land* (1825). Lycett's aquatint portrays the then quite recently discovered, and therefore presumably ragged, bush of Australia in a similar way to mown British parkland, with a soft and gentle light. Nicholas Harding, on the other hand, embraces the chaos and mess of the landscape by skillfully representing it with his loose application of paint and bright colours to convey the distinctive Australian light.



Nicholas Harding
Lagoon (canoe) (2012)
Oil on Belgian Linen

As well as the landscapes, there was a selection of floral paintings in the first room, which I also appreciated in the incredible skill with which they were made but I did find them a little too busy, almost like Harding had overworked them. It seemed to me that these paintings, for example *Wooli Garden (crucifix orchids with banana palm and geraniums)* (2012), were a bit more staged and not as strongly representative of the natural Australian landscape or as challenging to traditional European art.



Nicholas Harding
Turon River landscape (with jump boy) (2013)
Oil on Belgian Linen



Joseph Lycett
View upon the South Esk River, Van Diemen's Land
(1825) Hand colored aquatint

I then moved into the adjacent room, which lacked the natural light of the first room. This actually had quite an impact on the presentation of the works because they now had spotlights on them instead the gentler sunlight. Nevertheless, I found that this room had well balanced exhibition space, with the large black and white ink drawings in the centre of the wall, framed on either side by the small floral oil paintings with their vibrant oranges and greens. I appreciated the variety of media in this room because it wasn't as overwhelming as the piles of oil paint on the wall in the previous room.



Exhibition space in the second room – large ink drawing framed by small paintings.

Middle drawing referred to:

Nicholas Harding
Pandanus Stand (2013)
Ink on paper

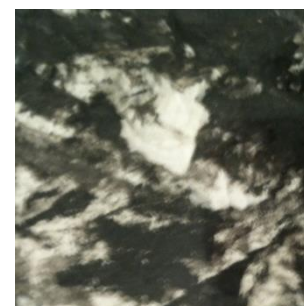


Nicholas Harding
Wooli Garden (crucifix orchide with banana palm and geraniums) (2012)
Oil on Belgian Linen

Nicholas Harding's ink drawings especially intrigued me in this exhibition. The techniques he implemented in

their production are very unusual. As Rex Irwin described, Harding begins by scratching and scraping back the surface of very thick paper with razor blades to achieve a rough, imperfect surface. Then he uses ink to create the basic structure of the subject matter before removing it in places with tools to get highlights, producing an overall texture which is reflective of the coarseness of the Australian coastal landscape. The Australian 'light' produced is literally the paper and as Irwin said: "the light just dances through," like natural sunlight.

I preferred the floral artworks in the second room to the first; I found them simpler and bolder with decisive flicks and twists of bright red and orange to counteract against the black and white of the drawing. They seemed to create a joyful mood which lit up the darker room and their smaller size complemented the larger drawing.



Scraped section and texture of *Pandanus Stand* (2013)



Guy Maestri
Study for falling water no. 7 (2013)
Oil on linen

The upstairs section of the gallery was very different – only a few of the artworks were Nicholas Harding's. However this juxtaposition of artists allowed me to compare the varying styles and media and thus fully appreciate Harding's skill and the depth of meaning his artworks conveyed. An example of another artist exhibited upstairs was Guy Maestri, with his oil painting *Study for falling water no. 7* (2013). This work appeared to me as having a lack of perceived skill and visual connection to the audience; while the title explains that the subject matter is water, I found that it wasn't captivating for me in any way because I couldn't read much meaning into it. Although it had a similar thickness and application of paint to Harding's work, it was very different in that its interpretations were limited.

I also found that the exhibition space in the upper level of the gallery wasn't as well organised as the bottom floor: there were paintings being sorted in racks and leaning against the desks. Yet this seemed to create a more relaxed, welcoming atmosphere where you could really see how the gallery worked. As a whole, I thought that the collection of artworks was well selected and the exhibition

was thoughtfully curated to showcase a variety of media, themes and subject matter utilised by the one artist. In my opinion Harding's work currently in the Olsen Irwin gallery is superior to his previous artworks, while conveying quite different meanings to those he usually does – earlier in his career he produced city views and portraits, as well as even working with cartoons and animation about twenty years ago.

At the conclusion of our brief talk and tour by Rex Irwin, we were bluntly asked: “Now does anyone have one intelligent question?” When he was met with no response, only the muffled sound of us uncomfortably shifting from one foot to another, he matter of factly said “I didn’t think so” and left. Nevertheless, the frank remarks of the straight-to-the-point art dealer did nothing to tarnish my positive opinion of the Flora, Figures and Landscape exhibition. For me, successful art should be produced by means of an expressive technique with the aim to allow an audience to have a visual connection with the work to extract meaning; Harding has most certainly achieved this in his most recent exhibition. Now that I think about it, although we (as a class of relatively naïve art students) weren’t able to conjure up any clever questions, it seems that through his exhibition Nicholas Harding has effectively raised and answered quite a few about how he believes the Australian landscape, its flora and its inhabitants should be depicted.