

sophie gralton

Last Time We Were Here

March 26 – April 10 2022

Sydney-based Sophie Gralton's artwork animates a shift in consciousness to a more intuitive, natural realm that is characterised by childhood. Fleeting memories and thoughts are revisited and given tangible form on canvases alive with tactile surfaces. Transcending specific locations or personalities, the paintings aim to evoke a sense of integration between days long past, the present and what might lie ahead.

Largely self-referential but with universal relevance, the images of a lone child embody the recollections, desires and feelings of a time when the everyday world was interlaced with fantasy and imaginative possibilities. Although these works are based on the poses of actual children, they are not conventional portraits. Gralton explains that the cropping of eyes from the figures and the posterior stances are not a means of ensuring anonymity. Rather than the traditional reliance on the gaze to convey the sitter's essence, Gralton steers the viewer into a different reading of the subject - one where nuance is captured in the posture and background vitality.



Pets often play a meaningful role in one's early years and so virtually every work depicts such a companion. Invested with symbolic intent, a tame bird is present in each of the interiors where the child is positioned against a richly patterned backdrop. Stencilled numerals float atop vintage storybook pages. Unlike the children's self-absorption, the birds are vigilant. They seemingly collude in a need for independence and a yearning to fly free from restriction.

Other works also reflect childhood ponderings but in an outdoor setting. Living in a beach locale, Gralton has ample opportunity to observe the antics of youngsters along the shoreline. She describes the imagery depicted as "the conversations children have with nature". They stand or sit at the ocean's edge looking out towards the horizon and symbolically, the future that lies ahead. There is usually a dog in attendance – a creature long associated with loyalty and protectiveness. Surfaces pulsating in gestural markings convey the ocean's immensity and power.

In imagery and execution, a quieter atmosphere envelops *The Farmer's Son* and *The Farmer's Daughter* paintings. Standing upon a hillock, backs turned to the viewer, the children's attitudes are deeply contemplative as they survey the rural vista beyond. Their personal thoughts however, may well be contrary.

Gralton wants us to respond not solely to the subject matter but also to the aesthetic signals the paintings communicate. In this quest she employs a direct technique, the loaded brush and palette knife spontaneously eliciting form and engendering a visceral reaction. Figure and ground vacillate: the fluidity of time evoked. She stresses that the focus of her art-making lies in the quality of interaction between medium and meaning.

Eschewing any notion of sentimentality, Gralton hopes that the viewer will resonate with the scenarios depicted and perchance recall one's own childhood experiences of a time interlaced with wonder and limitless curiosity. A fusion of concealment and revelation, nuance and aesthetic statement, the exhibition inspires a loosening of our everyday personae. Image empathy guides us back through portals congested by objectivity and cultural conventions into a world once again radiant with the 'eternal moment'.

JACQUELINE HOUGHTON