

Melissa Egan

Paintings From The Oast House

December 9 – December 23, 2023

An oast house one might wonder? Such a building can be described as a storied brick structure designed for drying produce, especially hops to flavour the brewing of beer. Apart from allegorical associations, some of Melissa Egan's current works were in fact painted in an oast house! Her Launceston summertime residence was once an 1840's Tasmanian colonial garrison that boasted its own oast house. Today, the still intact building is covered with climbing roses. The ambience of this historic milieu fosters flights of the imagination into other realms where specifics of time and place have dissolved. Egan's ensuing visual narratives are fused in a radiance of subtle grandeur and humour.



Not far from Egan's Tasmanian abode is her friends' 19th century heritage listed house, Clairville, situated in a 13 acre rural property. Its beautiful gardens, hawthorn hedges and deciduous trees from which regular starling murmuration's can be witnessed inspired the setting for the *Garden Party* painting. Apart from the literal venue, any notion of objective reality has been blithely suspended within this picture. Very formally attired rabbits assuming human persona are gathering for a social occasion. Perhaps some have already overly imbibed preliminary refreshments, given posture and antics. One rabbit is supine amidst the domical flowering shrubbery. Another has climbed via rope to sit atop an enormous, centrally placed Grecian-like urn. The birds fluttering about up there are incongruously depicted very much larger than him. Certain flowers are also enormous in size – a device Egan says is to accentuate the surrealism of scenario.

Rabbits are ubiquitous characters in the exhibition, appearing in the guise of library dwelling scholar, contemplative farmer, boat rowing enthusiast or just enjoying a relaxing Bay of Fires swim. Dressed in period costume, human personages also materialise in bucolic locales. Often they are portrayed dining al fresco on sumptuous spreads, animal companions ever present. A notable example is the 18th century artist Thomas Gainsborough who is said to have declared his first love was landscape.

A somewhat different context imbues *The Artist's Garden* work. Here, warm-hued hazy sky and loosely painted surrounds usher the eye down to the artist, brushes and palette in hand, standing amid a host of gigantic flowers and wild creatures. The beret-donned artist is a subtle reference to Egan's longstanding relationship with the late Charles Blackman and his family members. However, Egan relays that the artist depicted is representative of herself. She actually owns a yellow beret and smock and has an ardent connection with the multifarious array of blooms planted in her gardens.

Egan is now well recognised for an extraordinary ability to transport the onlooker far from the everyday. The appeal of her pictorial storytelling is due not only to the diverse subjects and improbable juxtapositions but equally, an expressive depiction of them. Egan's atmospheric lyricism beckons us to come step over into alternative worlds devoid of ponderous considerations.

JACQUELINE HOUGHTON