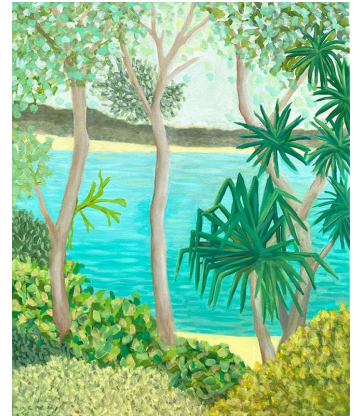


# Judy oakenfull

## *Subtropic Utopic*

August 17 – August 31, 2024

The title of this exhibition is fun and colourful like the work. It describes the idyllic surrounds of our subtropical area, but it also has a more meaningful side, as it references a rich history of utopian style art. Artists, philosophers and writers have always been in the business of imagining better and brighter worlds. From art in religious traditions, both Eastern and Western, to the whole history of Modernism, which can in itself be described as a Utopian project.



These paintings are inspired by the Bundjalung coastline of our region. Several of them began at Cabarita in Northern NSW. There is a mown grassy section between the Halcyon House Hotel, and the coastal bushland next to the beach. You can sit or walk on the grass and look through the coastal bush to see the ocean. I find it a great spot to sit and hang out and draw or paint and my small dog just loves to run around here and roll on the grass. I am interested in the edges between things, and this is a perfectly mown example of an edge, between a cultured grass area and a wild uncultivated bush area. I am mainly painting the wild bit, but the paintings can also include some of the mown grass section.

The paintings begin with observational drawing and sometimes en plein air painting. Then they really come to life in the studio, over many weeks and many layers. I feel like this process over time can allow room for other ideas, feelings and imaginings about the coast to come into the mix. I consciously try to push myself to take the work beyond visual representation, even though I find my work is better if I start there. My favourite Modernist artists with a Utopian/Imaginative outlook, were the Post Impressionists. (Though it must be said, some of these utopian visions had a few issues, as is especially the case with Gauguin) The paintings of artists like Gauguin and Bonnard were composed and coloured with thought and imagination and I am inspired by these approaches. One of my all-time favourite painting quotes is from one of Australia's most renowned early Modernists, Margaret Preston. She says, "Colour is to be decided by the mind, not the eye"! I can only hope to one day be as masterful as Margaret in colour and composition.

The brighter palette in many of these works emerged in the Northern Rivers Floods of 2022. Sometimes more utopian style art can appear as a reaction to more challenging times. After the floods, I went to draw at the coast and the previously blue sea water was brown with evidence of flood destruction everywhere. It was like this for months. Brighter colours in my work somehow came about as a reaction to this. I have continued exploring this bright palette as it has other associations and meanings for me that I wish to explore further, but there are also some more muted works in this show as well, as I play with different dreamlike visual manifestations of our coast.

This exhibition explores painting as world making. It's about creating a world I want to be in, that starts with the local landscape and takes it further. For me they work as speculations about a world where nature is thriving and also appreciated and cared for by us. Somewhere we can feel nourished and connected.

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