

Melissa Egan

Paintings From The Island

April 19 to May 3, 2025

The works in Melissa Egan's current exhibition are indeed paintings from the island. They were all painted in Launceston on the island of Tasmania where she dwells during the summer months to escape the heat of Queensland's Sunshine Coast. Although much of the imagery takes its source of inspiration from encounters with actual localities in Tasmania, the scenarios are imaginative depictions. The viewer is ushered beyond any defined sense of place into enigmatic, fictional realms. After all, an island traditionally symbolises a refuge or mystical 'other' region set apart from the civilized noisy world.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is an island painting sharing its title with that of an 18th century poem by Coleridge which recounts the travails of an old sailor who has eventually returned from a long sea voyage. The work evolved from Egan's memory of a quite frightening experience she had endured when taking a small boat tour around Bruny Island off Tasmania's southeast coast. A gale had been blowing as the vessel manoeuvred under towering cliffs, waves churning amidst the might of the Great Southern Ocean. Cape Bruny Lighthouse, the second oldest surviving in Australia, is referenced albeit out of actual situational context.



Animals are ubiquitous in Egan's paintings, both in natural state or attired with clothes and human personas. The *Afternoon Drinks at the Oasthouse* work is a good example. A lady and yellow-jacketed rabbit are sitting at a table enjoying an alfresco beverage alongside the central, hops drying oast kiln. A nearby horse and dog have heads turned to observe a visitor approaching up the flower-edged garden path, or perhaps the painting's viewer? Egan's Launceston residence was once an 1840's Tasmanian colonial garrison with an oasthouse that became her studio.

The large *Beatrix and Bertram in the Garden* is an extraordinary visual narrative that is set amidst a bucolic landscape. It features Beatrix Potter, an English writer, illustrator, natural scientist and conservationist who is best known for her children's books, especially *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Here Beatrix is depicted looking up from her sketching of two abnormally big rabbits posing on the draped table with a mollifying bunch of carrots. At the opposite end sits her younger brother Bertram. Egan relays that she still has a childhood collection of Beatrix Potter books stored in the attic.

Rooms in Egan's Launceston abode have sometimes been depicted in her artworks, such is the case with the *Breakfast in Bed* image. The chandelier, carpet, set of drawers and the fireplace behind the bed with her prized John Kelly cow sculpture atop exist in reality. The bunny relishing his tray of food could possibly recollect Beatrix Potter's mischievous Peter Rabbit. He was put to bed by his mother and given a restorative beverage when returning home exhausted after disobediently romping through a vegetable garden.

A very different milieu is evidenced in the *Wedding at Woolmers Estate* painting. In Longford, which is not far from Launceston, the Woolmers Estate is a UNESCO World Heritage site rich in convict history. Founded in 1817, it is one of Australia's most intact pioneer farm regions and has surviving woolsheds from that era. The estate with its beautiful rose gardens has now become a popular wedding venue. Egan's visit there was not as a wedding guest but for an historical tour. The painting is purely imaginative and intentionally quizzical. The landscape is devoid of flowers and we are to ponder why the bride, in her elaborately detailed blue gown, is standing with sheep in attendance and a ram by her side instead of the bewildered fiancé.

Sensory evocations of Egan's island experiences, the paintings have the power to transport the viewer far from the everyday and into another world where notions of time and place have been dissolved. The allure of Egan's visual tales stems not only from their subjects, but equally from her expressive depiction of them. With animated, spontaneous brushwork, story and landscape are fused in a radiance of subtle grandeur.

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