



Of People & Things
Paintings by Alison Mackay



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Alison Mackay (A) has worked as a painter for the last 15 years.

Initially drawn to still life and 'object painting' her work now includes portraiture and, more recently, interiors.

Much of the accompanying text is based on her 'Exhibition' interview with Richard Morecroft (R).

R: Your work covers different subject matter but you seem to have a special fondness for fish – “Black Whiting”, "Perch" and “Still life with Hardyheads”. What’s the attraction?

A: Fish are the most wonderful things to paint and they’ve been used in still life *forever* by many of the greatest of painters, partly because oil paint is the perfect medium for describing fish – its flexible sinuosity, and rich lustre. And there are so many different and interesting types of fish – they’re completely non-generic, so each time you’re painting a fish you’re actually painting an individual... it’s more like painting a portrait really. And the names! ‘Hardyheads’ for these tiny gorgeous little fish.





Above left: **Perch** Oil on birch panel 70cm x 60cm

Above right: **Yellow Oysters** Oil on stretched canvas 40cm x 40cm

Below right: **Yellow Whiting** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm

Opposite page:

Below left: **Black Whiting** Oil on birch panel 70cm x 60cm

Below right: **Still life with Hardyheads** Oil on birch panel 60cm x 60cm







Above: **Ocean Perch with Wasabi** Oil on stretched canvas 50cm x 50cm

Previous page: Clockwise from Top left:

Pilchard Tumble Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm; **Gurnard and Pilchards** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm:

Bream and Scad with Grater Oil on masonite 30cm x 30cm; **Perch** Oil on masonite 30cm x 30cm



R: Besides the joy of fish, there's also subtle symbolism in other works – the book Stravinsky's Lunch and the picture of The Sock Knitter.

A: Yes the symbolism is important. The book is by Drusilla Modjeska and she's investigating creativity differences between men and women through the lives of two well-known female painters, Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington-Smith. It can be hard to be completely committed and selfish in one's art-making unless you have a lot of support - financial, emotional, practical. . And historically women haven't really had that - they're more often cast in the role of wife, supporting their husband and looking after the family, rather than receiving support to follow a chosen path. The Sock Knitter was painted by Grace Cossington Smith and it's partly a commentary on 'women's roles' so I used this imagery in my painting. By placing a vase of flowers over the woman's face her identity is obscured and replaced by a generically pleasing subject matter... flowers were considered 'acceptable' subject matter for women painters. And the title, 'A Woman's Work' is rather more a question than a statement. Is a 'woman's work' that of domestic labour? Or is it being a painter or perhaps a writer or scientist or even Prime Minister - what roles are 'acceptable' for women these days?

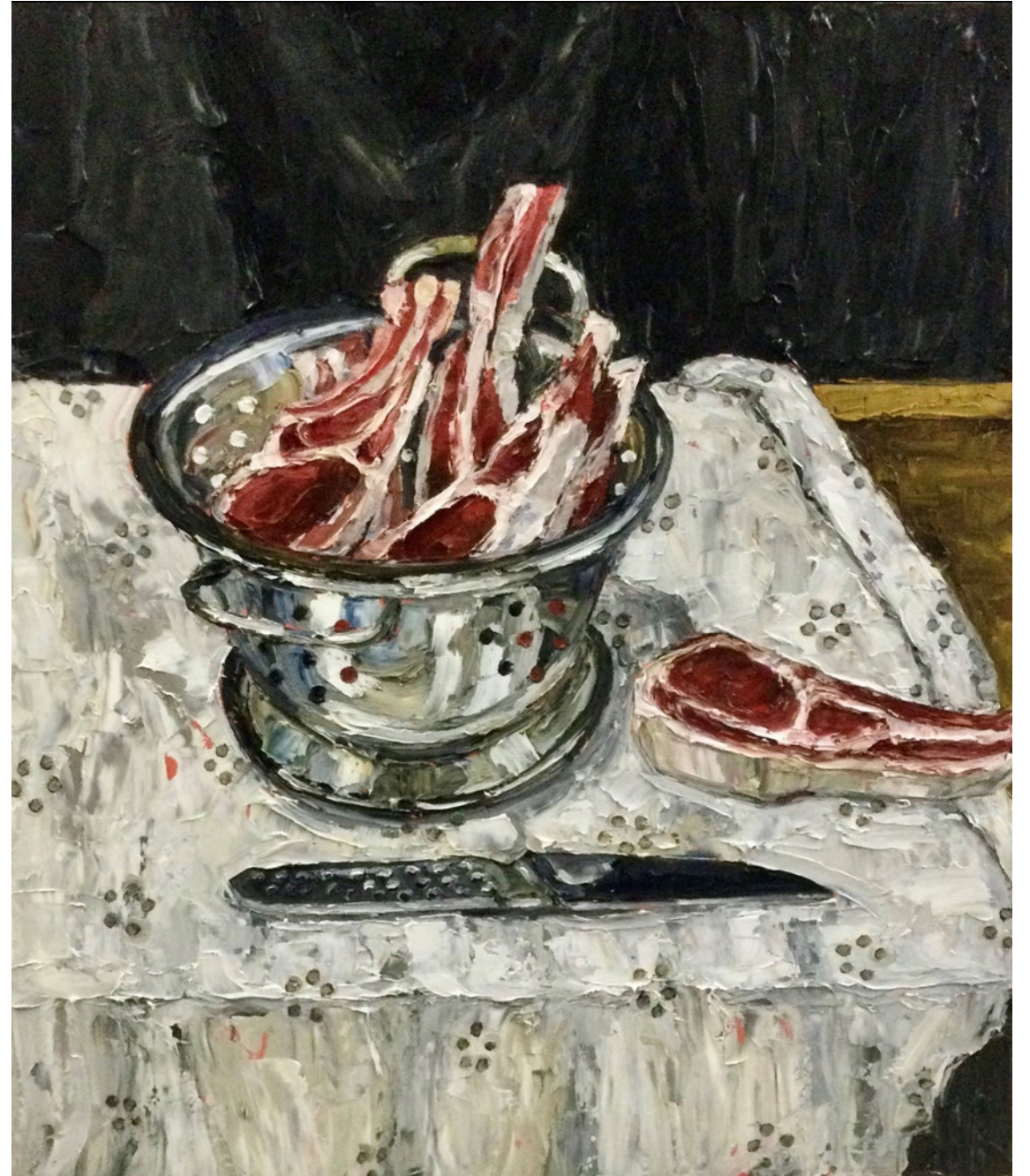


Previous page, left: **Fay's Gardenias** Oil on birch panel 45cm x 35cm; Right: **A Woman's Work** Oil on birch panel 47cm x 34cm
This page, Clockwise from top left: **Hot Pink**, **Sunset**, **Lollipop** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm; **Blue Sky Flowers** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm;
Flowers on Skull Cloth Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm; **Bottles and Jugs** Oil on stretched canvas 50cm x 50cm





Previous page, Clockwise from top left: **The Red Striped Cloth** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm; **Flowers and Ebay tablecloth** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm; **Grevilleas with Jug** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm; **Geraniums and Gum Leaves** Oil on birch panel 60cm x 60cm
Above: **Bottles and Blooms** Oil on stretched canvas 90cm x 75cm



R: You've painted a lot of meat paintings over the years too and I believe a couple were on display at the iconic Lucio's restaurant in Sydney for a number of years as part of his collection.

A: Lucio's collection was a who's who of Australian Art for many decades - he was a huge supporter of the arts and I was honoured to be a part of the collection. So many artists enjoyed dinners at his restaurant - it was the place to go for that food and art combo. I miss it.

I really enjoy a good meat painting - whether it's mine or somebody else's. I remember being in the Musee D'Orsay in Paris a couple of decades ago; it's brim-full of amazing art but the one that sticks in my mind was a small Manet painting of a slab of meat. It glowed with life and completely captivated me - although there were arguably larger, more impressive works in the room. I couldn't look away from this one.

That's what I aspire towards!



Opposite page, left: **Lamb racks with blue-striped cloth** Oil on birch panel 47cm x 34cm Right: **Chops** Oil on birch panel 70cm x 60cm
Above left: **Chops, Tongs, Glass** Oil on birch panel 30cm x 30cm; Below left: **Chops on Ornamental Plate** Oil on stretched canvas 40cm x 40cm
Above right: **Chops in Glass** Oil on stretched canvas 101cm x 91cm

R: You won the Gallipoli Art Prize in 2020 during the early stages of the pandemic - what was that work about?

A: The summer of 2020 here on the south coast of NSW became known as the Black Summer. Bushfires, the like of which had not been experienced by any living person, raged up and down our beautiful coast for months. Huge tracts of bush were lost, habitat to many precious native species. Billions of wild animals were killed, both during the fires and afterwards when there was no shelter or food left for them. We humans lost lives and homes as well. For those who lived through it, it shook us to the core.

The fires led me to paint 'Breathe' a study of gasmasks from wars gone by. We were wearing masks to protect us from the smoke and embers and it felt like we were at war with a fire that just would not die. This work won the Gallipoli Art prize in early 2022 so there was also an eerie prescience as the world went into a pandemic lockdown and face masks became the new normal.

The 'Gasmask birds' were also born of the bushfire experience. If we as humans were struggling to cope with this experience, what chance did the wildlife have?

I imagined them with tiny bespoke gasmasks that perfectly fitted their different beak shapes and plumage.





Above: **Breathe** Oil on 9 birch panels 90cm x 90cm

Opposite page, left: **For The Birds - Masked Finch** Oil on birch panel 20cm x 25cm;

Right: **For The Birds - Masked Spinebill** Oil on birch panel 25cm x 20cm



Opposite page: **Weapons' Mandala** Oil on birch panel 120cm diameter

Above: **Dark Places** Oil on 9 birch panels 120cm x 120cm



A: I painted this work 'Weapons Mandala' for an earlier Gallipoli Art Prize.

A mandala is intended to encourage contemplation and is most often used as a visual aid to meditation. Traditionally, a mandala is a highly decorated square or circle made up of repeated patterns and symbols of spiritual significance to the user. This mandala uses weapons to build its repeated pattern. The user can concentrate on the overall form of the mandala or contemplate the individual elements contained within it – bombs, rifles, knives, mines, grenades. Whatever the approach, the aim is to encourage thought about the complexity of conflict through these repeated objects. There is, of course, an irony that a mandala – a tool for peace and spirituality – is being used for a meditation on warfare. The irony is echoed in the unusual beauty of these objects which have been created to cause death or injury. It's extraordinary how much time, energy and money mankind has invested in ways to destroy itself.



R: And the flannelette shirts and other slightly unexpected subject matter – what’s the attraction of flannelette shirts?

A: I can’t believe you have to ask! They’re glorious – the patterns, the colours, the chunkiness. They’re iconic pieces of clothing and great work wear too!

Actually, they do have a personal resonance for me too. A couple of years ago I was going through cancer treatment in the middle of winter so I was freezing all the time with no hair (from the chemo) and I ended up wearing multiple flannies just to stay warm – 3 at a time – and I found those multiple patterns intriguing. So the flanny is intimately linked with that time in my life – there’s a slightly maudlin self-portrait that I made of this time called “Triple Flanny – A Winter Poisoning”!

And now a couple of years down the track the paintings of the discarded flanny on the chair speak about a period of time that I hope is behind me.



Above left: **Pink Flanny on Green Chair** Oil on birch panel 30cm x 30cm

Above right: **Triple Flanny - A Winter Poisoning** Oil on paper on board 47cm x 34cm

Opposite page: **Dear Ancestor (Portrait of Andrew Barnum)** Oil on wood panel 50cm x 37cm







R: You've painted a number of portraits over the years that have been hung in various prizes. Can you talk about some of them?

A: This painting entitled 'Self portrait - Armoured' began as a response to the exposure which comes with having work in the public domain. Many artists feel the need to protect themselves from too much scrutiny. But sometimes the meaning of a painting shifts completely during its creation. This work morphed as I received a cancer diagnosis and began chemotherapy. It became a “strapping on the armour” for the challenges ahead.

The portrait that directly followed this was one of my partner, Richard Morecroft entitled 'The Beloved'. It was a very personal tribute to this human.

For the last half of 2019 Richard, became my carer. After my cancer diagnosis I undertook a 6 month treatment programme of surgeries and chemotherapy. During this time, he fed me, drove me to endless appointments, lay uncomfortably on chairs all night after my surgery, held my hand for every 6 hour session of chemo, shaved my head when my hair began to fall and listened without judgment to my fearful ramblings at all hours of the day and night. Cancer treatment is no walk in the park, but he made it easier, funnier, more hopeful. The dark places were a little less dark. Everyone needs 'a Beloved' by their side unconditionally at times like this.

On a lighter note, Richard has always had a penchant for patterned shirts. In this painting he wears an imaginary shirt that might pass as Gucci, but in fact the pattern is based on the biohazard symbols that we saw so often in hospitals over the past year.

Opposite page: **The Beloved** Oil on birch panel 60cm x 60cm
Above: **Self portrait - Armoured** Oil on card 40cm x 21cm



A: My forays into portraiture began, as with many artists, with self-portraits. This expanded to include my partner - another relatively 'safe' subject who was more amused than offended at my attempts to capture him in paint. Then photographer, Gary Grealy took a photo of Richard and me which went on to win the National Photographic Portrait Prize in 2017. Watching Gary work was a fascinating experience for me and he produced an intense, gothic image that ignited my interest in portraiture more broadly. I asked Gary if I could paint his portrait in return – firstly because of the ‘mutual portraiture’ resonance, but also because I thought it would be hard for him to say no - a ‘Quid Pro Quo’ situation! This painting was hung in the AGNSW for the Archibald Prize 2018.

From here I felt brave enough to approach a female sitter and, having great respect for Charlotte Wood and her writings, I requested a sitting and the painting “Under Her Eye (Charlotte Wood after Otto Dix) was the result.

Charlotte is an Australian novelist who won the 2016 Stella Prize (for female writers) with her brilliant and confronting book, “The Natural Way of Things”.

This painting references the 1926 Otto Dix portrait of journalist Sylvia Von Harden - another strong, enigmatic woman writer. As a sitter, Charlotte was gracious and cooperative; but as a writer, she is fierce and intellectually uncompromising.



Above left: **Shower. Head.** Oil on birch panel under resin 40cm diameter

Above right: **Glenn as Pox Pot with Fancy Handles** Oil on paper on wood 76cm x 56cm

Opposite page, left:

Quid Pro Quo (Portrait of Gary Grealy) Oil on shellac on card 40cm x 40cm

Right: **Under Her Eye - Charlotte Wood after Otto Dix** Oil on shellac on card 21cm x 30cm





R: Can you tell us a little about your most recent work - the Passionflower series?

A: A passionflower vine grows wild outside my studio. It's incredibly vigorous, snaking its way through and around other plants. And the flowers themselves are extravagant creations. But, despite the eye-catching floral glamour, it was really the leaves and their journey on the trailing vines that captured my attention. They're a perfect device for taking the eye on a trip through the painting.

These works, though based around a small subject - the passionflower - include some of the largest I have made. To render these flowers and other elements at a scale so much larger than life invites a heightened intimacy; a sense that, like Alice in Wonderland, one has shrunk enough to be immersed in a slightly magical world. Maintaining focus on a single subject and exploring small variations on this consistent theme has been a challenge for my restless nature, but I wanted this exhibition to offer the sense of being inside a secret garden where the passionflowers reign..



Opposite page, left: **Yellow Passionflower with Green Bottle** Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm Above right: **Blood Red Passionflower** Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm
Above: **Passionflower (diptych)** Oil on stretched canvas 122cm x 182cm







Above: **Passionflower with Bottles** Oil on stretched canvas 122cm x 182cm

Opposite page, top to bottom: **Foraged Flowers** Oil on birch panel 30cm x 30cm; **Foraged Flowers on Table** Oil on birch panel 55cm x 60cm;

Red Corner Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm

Following pages: **Passionflower (triptych)** Oil on stretched canvas 122cm x 153cm

R: There is some conventional subject matter in your paintings. but also scateurs and particularly scissors, cutting implements, do you see these as deliberately slightly unsettling elements?

A: Well I hope they're a bit unsettling!

I've been painting flowers for five years or so, particularly since we made a new garden. The problem with flowers for me is that they're already a bit too pretty – what am I going to add to that? So I feel I have to insert something in juxtaposition to that... so that's where we get into the glassiness of the bottles and the sharpness of the scissors.

I don't like to explain everything in the paintings precisely, but scissors have been used by many artists over the years as a device in paintings - think of Deibenkorn, William Nicholson, Cressida Campbell. I like to think of them more as a question rather than an answer - they're there to 'disturb the comfortable'.

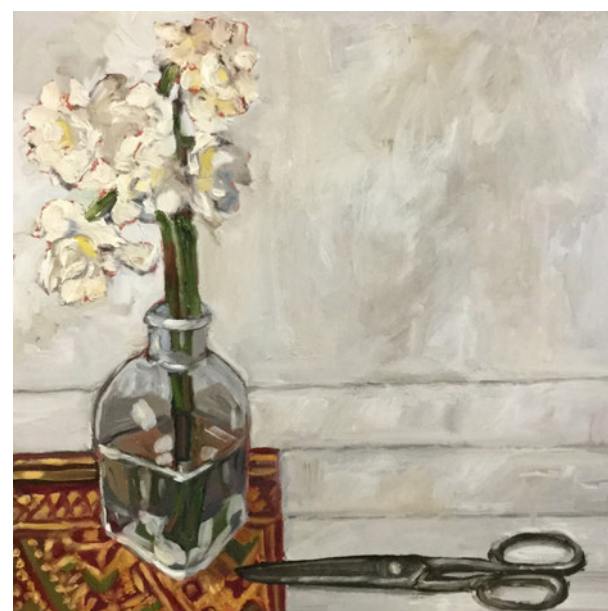
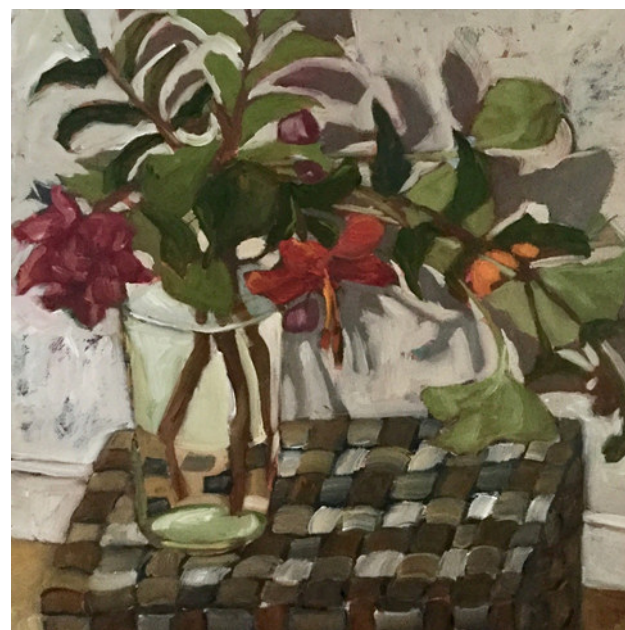
R: There's almost a verging on the surreal in some cases...

A: That never feels odd to me – I love the transparent the reflective the refractive. I love the way images break up when they're behind glass and the fact that our eye can still make sense of that in a painting whilst still appreciating the fragmentation of the image. So my meat and fish paintings were always going to collide with the glass paintings eventually.

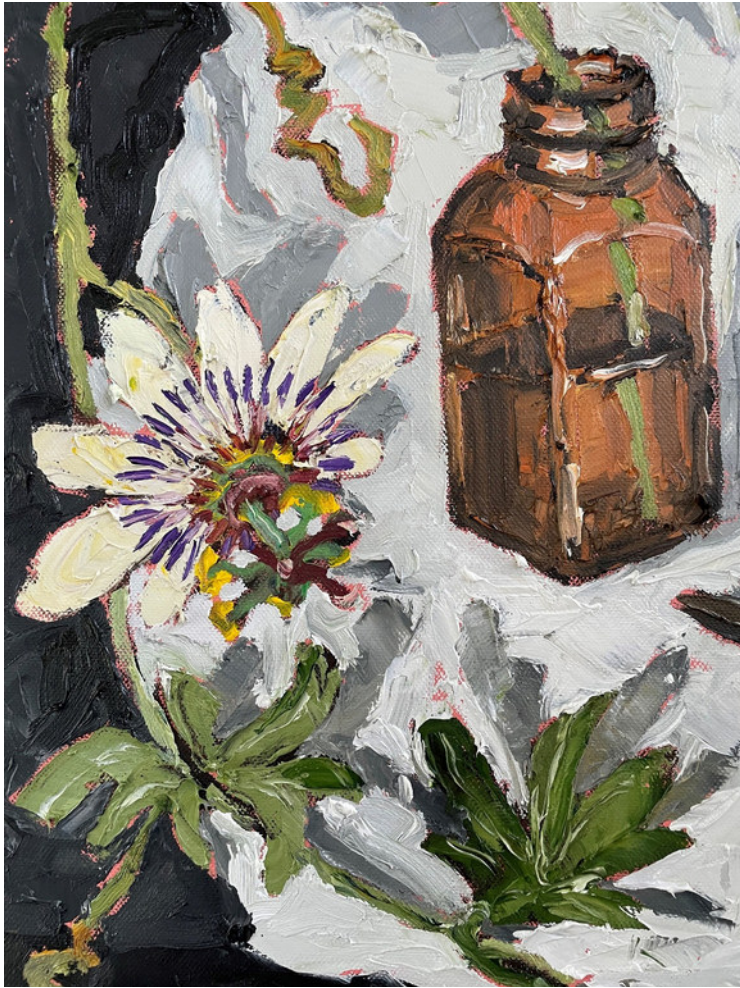
R: There's also very strong use of paint in many of your works, particularly with palette knife application.

A: Yes, the palette knife is a great tool for the larger paintings because you can really cover area quickly. But the palette knife also deliberately moves me away from the finickity and the controlled – I was trying to introduce an element of lack of control and removing the familiar way of painting to shake things up a bit. Things happen when you're painting like this that you can't control, so the question then is do you 'correct it' or do you decide you want to keep it.

Sometimes the marks that are made are not marks that you would deliberately make... they're marks made by chance that are left – an artefact of the process. So the paint is an active component, specifically what oil paint does makes it part of the process – an active collaborator.







Opposite page, left: **Yellow Passionflower with Cactus Pot** Oil on stretched canvas 30cm x 30cm

Right: **Passionflower with Scissors** Oil on birch panel 70cm x 60cm

Above: Passionflower - details from various paintings



A: They say that every painting is a self portrait and there is something in that.

My paintings show what I'm seeing and feeling at any given time... it's my experience of the world translated into paint, even if there's not seemingly very much going on at the time.

Maybe I've just built a new garden bed and I'm celebrating the burgeoning nature of my garden - lots of artists are also gardeners, which is something to ponder on. Perhaps I'm just recording events, as with the upside-down birds in jars. When we lived on bush acreage a few years ago there were so many little birds and inevitably there would also be dead ones from time to time - often exquisite little corpses that I couldn't bear to just leave to decay or be eaten. I kept them in the freezer for a long time, then they ended up preserved in tiny bottles of meths.

I painted them as small mementos to their lives and deaths.



Opposite Page: **Succulent Garden** Oil on birch panel 34cm x 95cm
Above left: **Bottled Bird** Oil on plywood under resin 25cm x 20cm
Above right: **Bird in Jar** Oil on plywood 25cm x 20cm





A: And sometimes it's much more personal than that.

Without it being a particularly 'thought' process, I document things in my life so you can often tell what part of my life each painting is from.

During my cancer treatment there were lots of flower paintings from the flowers that people were sending me. I painted them living and then dead. Often with other objects juxtaposed that meant something to me - a small African mask which spoke of identity and the loss of it, an old Day of the Dead cloth covered in skull motifs. Not much explanation needed there.

I found it difficult painting during the turbulent times of cancer treatment. Of course I was fatigued and sick from the chemo; my eyesight was substantially affected along with my hands, where neuropathy from the chemo gave me tingles, pain and numbness. A scattered brain is not conducive to making paintings but I tried to work through it. My painting 'Upended' was an early response to my diagnosis - a collection of my beautiful little bottles and jugs all upside down and precariously balanced.

It was my mind at the time.

Opposite page: **Celia's Camellias** Oil on birch panel 90cm diameter

Above left: **Geisha with Dying Flowers** Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm; right: **Upended** Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm





R: And you've made a number of paintings of interiors as well - mostly of other people's houses - how did that come about?

A: It started with Margaret Olley's house. The Tweed Regional Gallery deconstructed Margaret Olley's famous house/studio in Sydney, shipped it to the gallery and rebuilt it there as a permanent exhibition. I did a residency there and spent time drawing and painting her home and belongings. It's all been meticulously reconstructed, right down to the old cigarette butts in the ashtray. It was a great experience and I fell in love with interiors.

Since then, I've done a number of other residencies and I always seem to end up painting the inside of the house rather than the outside landscape - I find it much more interesting to paint.



Opposite page, Clockwise from top left: **Towards the Window (Olley's Lounge)** Oil on birch panel under wax 25cm x 20cm, **The Painter's Hat (Yellow Room)** Oil on birch panel under wax 25cm x 20cm; **Flowers in the Yellow Room** Oil on birch panel under wax 25cm x 20cm; **Kitchen Corner** Oil on birch panel under wax 25cm x 20cm
This page, above left: **The White Chair** Oil on shellac on card 50cm x 50cm; Above: **Moses (Olley's walking frame)** Oil on birch panel under wax 25cm x 20cm



Above left: **Kitchen Still Life with Flying Fish** Oil on Shellac on card 40cm x 40cm

Above right: **Maffra Bush Shack (Image as Burden)** Oil on Shellac on card 40cm x 40cm

Opposite page left: **Cactus Pot with Bottle Brush (Homage to Preston)** Oil on birch panel 50cm x 50cm

Right: **Gardenias in the Window (Homage to Lois Dodd)** Oil on birch panel 40cm x 40cm



A: I'm very aware of what has come before me, in painting terms. Particularly with regard to women artists.

It can be difficult in the beginning to make work that really feels like your own and it's very easy to be overly influenced by prominent artists to the detriment of your own voice.

I hope that my paintings feel 'like me' even if they sometimes refer to, or even pay homage to, other painters who have come before.

I sometimes deliberately include something in a painting that references another artist, particularly in my 'homage paintings' to other female artists where I compose a still life around one of their images, usually in the form of a book. It's actually really interesting to paint someone else's image in a painting - you learn a lot!

And I really like to acknowledge those who have come before.

Artist's Biography

Alison Mackay

Born in the UK, Bachelor of Law LLB (Southampton University), now lives and works in Jervis Bay, NSW as a painter and writer.

Painting over the past 15 years has predominantly focused on the still life genre, but also includes portraiture, interiors and landscapes.

12 Solo and 2-person painting exhibitions throughout NSW and the ACT

20+ group exhibitions throughout Australia

50+ finalist places in major art prize exhibitions including: The Archibald, Portia Geach Portraiture Award, The Dobell Drawing Prize and the NSW Parliament's Plein Air Prize

7 prize awards including the 2020 Gallipoli Art Prize

Included in public and private collections throughout Australia, Asia and Europe.

Represented by Project Gallery 90 in Sydney and Grainger Gallery in the ACT.

Co-author of 2 non-fiction books and 2 children's books.

www.alisonmackay.net

Instagram: [@alisonmackayartist](https://www.instagram.com/alisonmackayartist)



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With thanks to Richard Morecroft for interview contribution.

