

HEARTLAND: GINA KALABISHIS

'Gloomy and indigestibly stodgy' is how art critic Robert Hughes famously described the paintings of Eugene von Guérard in his 1966 book *The Art of Australia*. Since then the nineteenth century émigré artist from Austria has been restored to the pantheon of artistic greats and Hughes himself has expired, and yet something of that 'gloom' remains imprinted on von Guérard and his contemporaries.

In the paintings of Gina Kalabishis, which freely pay homage to the early colonial art of Australia, that so-called 'gloom' has been not so much intensified but redefined, into a celebratory reclamation of this heritage. Peering through the veil of shadows we discover moving epitaphs to love, friendship and community. As a kind of romantic social-humanist Kalabishis draws together various fields of art making into poignant and powerfully cohesive images. Combining von Guérard and Ikebana shouldn't work but here it does—though neither are entirely orthodox in their depiction. Where once her lush botanic specimens occupied a shallow space of pure colour, Kalabishis has introduced details from iconic paintings by the heroes of Australian art—von Guérard, Streeton, Condor and McCubbin—to provide a background. Their icon status, however, has been dampened through a process of blurring and inversion, of both the original picture's orientation and tone. The results are both disorienting and dreamlike—Kalabishis presents us with a curious hybrid of the visible and the invisible, as if our heroes have travelled through a glass darkly. The genres, also, are muddled, to effectively level the playing field against a spectral light that has no precedent in art.

For Kalabishis—an Australian with Greek heritage living in Melbourne, with friends and family scattered near and far—'Heartland' is a place where all loved ones can gather. They unite just as the artist has united the fronds of her native plants, brought together against the odds in a common place. Kalabishis' plants are mostly Australian native—hardy, tolerant and adaptable (just like Australians, she says)—but are shown in monochrome, where the darker tones might symbolise Aboriginal Australians, and the lighter tones the fair-skinned arrivals from recent centuries. The mid-tones are the 'in-betweens', where the two have merged. Their compositions are not formal, but recall instead the jumble of seaweed.

The crisp, sharp detail of the botanical specimens contrasts with the out of focus landscapes behind. Both are subjects we commonly associate with sunlight—certainly within the Australian artistic tradition (think only of Streeton's 'Golden Summers')—but here become otherworldly and ethereal. These are potent hearths for the imagination to flare; they double as memento mori for the natural environment, under threat from the agencies of man, and serve as a warning of what we stand to lose. Kalabishis is at once the funnel for the past traditions of art to coalesce, and a prophet of its demise. The inverted landscapes and suspended plants give rise to a sensation of imminent collapse.

While not at the forefront of the artist's intentions, there is an indelible sexual energy about these pictures. From the languid, curling leaves to the inviting openings and apertures to the velvety dark tones, we sense the proximity of heady primal urges. As images of sex and love, community and togetherness, and environmental catastrophe, there is much to discover (and continually rediscover) within these haunting and very beautiful paintings. Kalabishis presents the vision through the doorway; we have only to draw breath, step through and enter.

Simon Gregg
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