

# URBAN POETRY



BEN GARRARD explores the serendipitous semi-urban landscapes of painter John Bokor, who left the inner city of Sydney for Bulli on the South Coast.

In May 2012, John Bokor was announced as the winner of the NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize for a work entitled *Quiet Street, Bulli*. Earlier that week he was crestfallen to discover his drawing *My Untidy Kitchen* had finished runner-up by the slimmest of margins in the Rick Amor Drawing Prize, then heard that the Art Gallery of Ballarat had decided to purchase the drawing for its permanent collection.

"I don't know what happened to my stars that week but it was intense. That was as good as it gets."

Bokor, who grew up in inner-city Sydney, recalls that there have been a few paintings in his life that inspired many further works, and *Quiet Street, Bulli* was one of them; the first to really 'gel' his new environment for him.

"I kept looking at it and thought, gee, there's something in it I'm really happy about, a freshness and an ambiguity, and it sort of spurred me on to do a lot of landscape paintings."

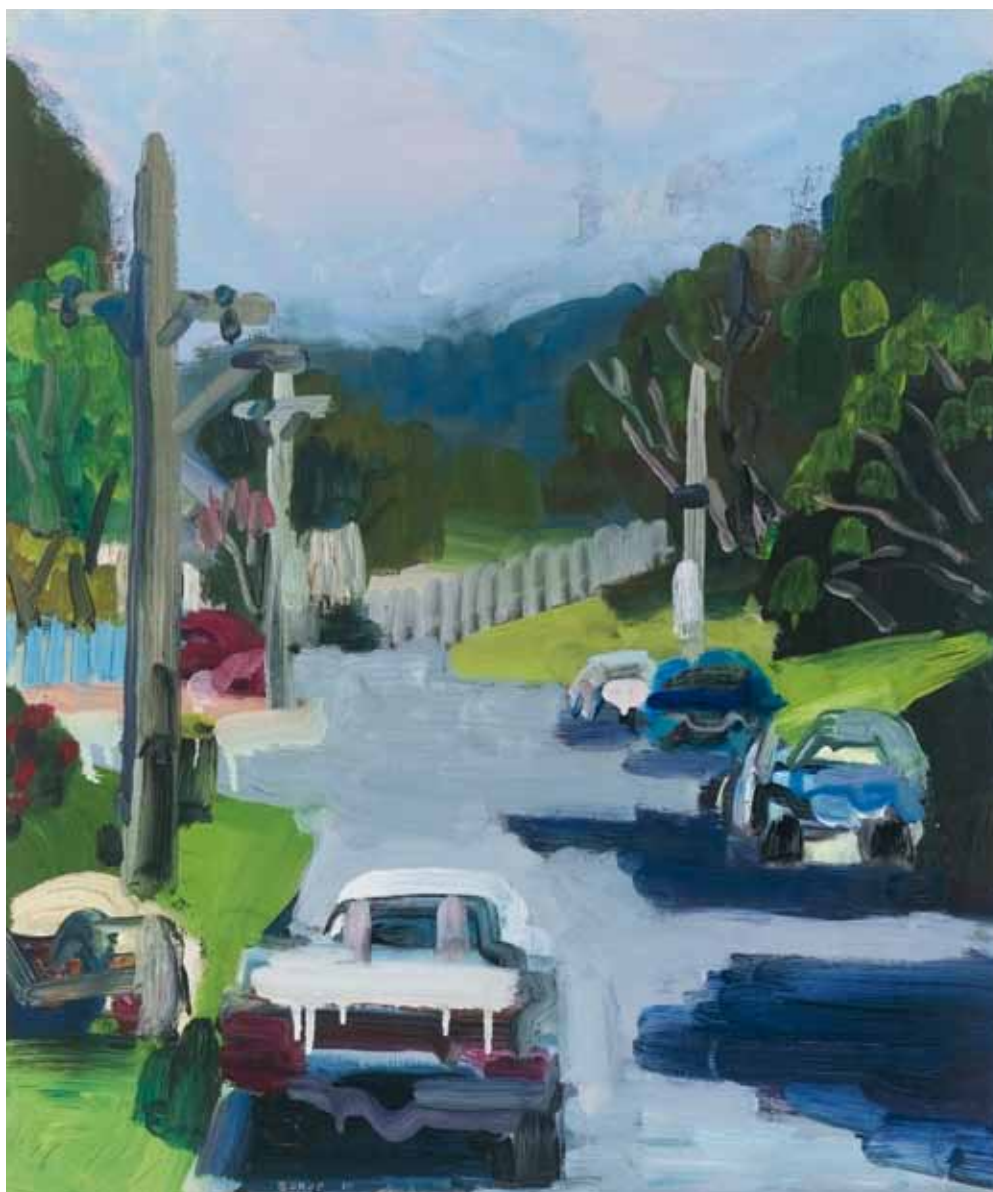
Having left behind the redbrick houses, concrete car parks and train lines of Marrickville five years before, it took Bokor a while to work out the light, colour and sheer abundance of foliage in Bulli.

The historic township offered more space, and although Bokor admits he was sick of Sydney, it is with fondness that he recalls growing up in Paddington in the late 1970s. "There were bubblers on the corner and real butcher shops. It changed a lot, as everywhere does."

Enrolling at the National Art School in 1991, Bokor came under the tutelage of Elisabeth Cummings in his third year. Cummings was showing at King Street Gallery in Newtown at the time, and also across the road at the gallery's Burton Street premises. Bokor would often attend exhibitions and arrange to show his work to director Randi Linnegar over a cup of tea.

Almost twenty years later, Bokor has joined his former lecturer in the King Street stable and is preparing to have his fifth solo show with the gallery, now located in William Street, Darlinghurst. Currently deep in "still life mode", he has seen his style and subject matter go through several distinct phases.

A first show at Crawford Gallery in East Sydney consisted of ideas drawn from the urban







Previous pages:

Left: John Bokor, *Beach Front*, 2010, oil on board, 60 x 50cm.

Right top: John Bokor, *Fence Line*, 2010, 60 x 50cm.

Right bottom: John Bokor, *The Playing Fields, Bulli*, 2011, 90 x 122cm.

This page:

Top: John Bokor, *Pink House*, 2011, 50 x 60cm.

Above: John Bokor, *Quiet Street, Bulli*, 2011, 50 x 60cm.

landscape but pared down to just a few marks, reflecting his insistence that abstraction has its genesis in natural forms. His penultimate show at King Street Gallery on William, entitled *Inside*, was made up entirely of interior paintings from his Bulli home.

It was over the top of such an interior that Bokor painted his *plein air* prize-winning painting, revealing his preferred method of recycling works that have fallen out of favour. After taping up the frame, he scrapes the painting flat with a razor

blade and begins again with a new subject. The habit extends to works that have been exhibited or entered into regional prizes and represents not so much an economical approach to materials as a way of taking paintings in a direction other than that originally intended.

The resulting palimpsests cannibalise the existing shades of light and colour to create strange dark areas, unexpected under-hues and, ultimately, an ambiguity that Bokor welcomes in his paintings. They are inclusive and reassuring, reminding us of familiar scenes without resorting to rigid description, or being anchored to a particular time or place.

Bokor attempts not to get too involved in the detail of a scene; working from sketches done straight onto the canvas, he adds and subtracts cars, loses a tree here or there and eliminates houses completely. All this reveals more of a concern with the atmosphere and feeling of a place, rather than the accurate representation of its outward appearance, and reflects some of his earliest and strongest influences.

While at art school, Bokor worked in the stockroom at Australian Galleries in Royston Street, Paddington, receiving new work and hanging shows. It was here he saw the work of Kevin Connor, whose paintings of streets around Newtown, Erskineville and Haymarket have been collected by institutions across Australia.

Bokor was captivated by Connor's ability and painted out his own homage to the artist's urban landscapes in his impasto canvases depicting the streets around his Chinatown studio.

Ken Whisson (whose major retrospective *As If* became the first solo exhibition in the new galleries of the MCA earlier this year) was another Royston Street luminary to make an impression. His landscapes, punctuated by farmhouses and factories, struck a chord with Bokor.

"Man-made structures within the landscape appeal to me. With pure landscape, there's nothing to push and pull against. The ugly goes nicely with the beautiful in painting."

Bokor's work is beginning to garner serious attention and has evolved out of and benefited from his optimism and an ability to embrace errors made along the way and celebrate mistakes. It remains a mystery to the artist why some paintings tap into the public consciousness while others do not, and he is philosophical about his latest prize-winning painting: "It wasn't what I wanted it to be, but I wasn't sure what it was. That's what's interesting about painting and why you keep doing it. You surprise yourself." □