

# ROSS LAURIE

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Having travelled to the other side of the world and back seeking his source as a young artist, Ross Laurie finally found mature inspiration where he started, in the spiritual sense of country that is bathed in the melancholic light around Walcha on the New England tablelands. He now divides his time between caring for his sheep and cattle and making his mark as an artist.





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**THE PATH TO BECOMING A PAINTER OF LANDSCAPES** has not been a straight one for Ross Laurie. Introduced to the Old Masters of European art by a fondly remembered art teacher and later inspired by modern American painting, he was not initially driven to capture the lie of the land around Walcha, his home town on the New England tablelands of New South Wales.

It may even be that the 18-year-old Laurie, leaving the town in 1979 to enrol at the Sydney College of the Arts, wanted to escape the place altogether, the better to immerse himself in the alternative reality of art. His hankering to stand before the monuments of art history and the desire to make his own mark led him in time to the other side of the world.

“I ended up going to about five art schools,” Laurie recalls, adding drily, “mostly because after a year they pleaded with me to go somewhere else. London, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Melbourne, Sydney, Bathurst. My curiosity was a bit of an irritant.”

Between study, travel and studio work, from first experiments in post-modern appropriation to more personal, autobiographical tableaux, Laurie’s compulsion to find and develop what was strongest in his painting led him to a pivotal realisation: it was when a sense of locality, of a real, tangible place shone through that his pictures were at their most distinctive and convincing. And it was the dappled, melancholic



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light of New England that kept appearing before his eyes unbidden, even when his work was at its most resolutely non-representational.

“When I had my third exhibition at Coventry Gallery in 1996,” he recalls, “everyone said how much my abstract paintings looked like the road in to my studio. There’s always been that pendulum swing in my work, between more overtly descriptive pictures and then more abstract.”

The circumstances of life had led Laurie back to Walcha in the early ‘90s, where he took up residence in a weathered fibro cottage on his family’s farm and turned it into a home. The final paintings he had made in Melbourne, grand compositions of saddlebags and fence posts that owed much to the late paintings of Philip Guston, were already pointing there. He has lived and worked on the property known as Ram’s Gully ever since, working the property towards viability as a sheep and cattle farm, and bringing the same patient determination to bear upon painting.

The endless puzzle of the picture plane, the dance of the mind between precedent, calculation and spontaneity, has been the constant fascination of Laurie’s life as a painter. The piles of monographs and exhibition catalogues throughout his home have not arrived there by accident. Giotto is there, and Masaccio, Uccello and Piero: these are the artists from whom he says he learnt “how to locate an image of form”. There’s Leonardo, Mantegna, Bellini, Titian and Tintoretto, plus all the major modernists from the northern and southern hemispheres, de Kooning (many books on de Kooning), contemporary Australians such as Idris Murphy and Elisabeth Cummings and quite a number of naïve painters. His insistence upon returning to the source to comprehend exactly what it is that holds each artist’s pictorial structures together has sometimes been taken as a contrarian, retrogressive tendency, although it has given him a deep well of understanding from which to draw his own insights.

“When I was a student in Melbourne,” he recalls, “I painted pictures that got very close to other artists’ paintings and the suggestion was I had no original ideas, which may have been the case. But sometimes you just can’t get enough by standing and looking. You need to know what it feels like to make something like that: to actually suck everything you can, all the knowledge you can out of that. I was criticised for that and it made me think that originality can be seriously overrated because it can stop you from gaining a deeper understanding.”

He continues: “It can take a long time to find your own language. I’m not really conscious if I’ve got my own language or not. I think



01 To Niangala – Dry Times, 2013, oil on canvas, 160 x 200cm  
02 Rams Gully near the Ridge, 2014, oil on canvas, 55 x 72cm





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you just end up painting a certain way and you become too curmudgeonly to want to shift it unless you feel you need to. It finds itself over time."

Over the last 10 years a large and growing audience has recognised the lyricism and tough beauty of Laurie's work. He has received critical praise, gained selection for major exhibitions and won a number of prizes for landscape painting. As we talk about his latest paintings, to be shown in Sydney in October, Laurie maintains that each sortie in the studio requires him to forget what he has already achieved and plough headlong into the perennial problem of creating a new image.

"I don't really feel that I get hold of the paintings until I get out of the picture. As long as I'm too self-consciously involved there is something stiff about it that I can't quite come to terms with, and that

often involves repainting pictures. There's a white painting in the show, which was the most descriptive of all the paintings. I just couldn't pull it off and in the end I started to paint it out, but what I realised was that I was redrawing it in broader marks and white paint – describing what I had been painting in a much clearer fashion."

This capacity to build a painting towards a certain conclusion, only to conduct a total overhaul of the image towards a different, less familiar expression of visual sensation, is close to the heart of what painting means to Laurie. "Sometimes the experience of looking at a painting – and this is one of the purposes of painting, one of the things it can achieve – can bring you so close to the pointy end of the meaning of life itself, because it makes you feel so alive and gives you a sense of something that you just can't find any other voice to."

This is the standard Laurie aspires to, and he admires how it has been

sustained over the course of a lifetime in the work of German-born, English painter Frank Auerbach. "There is somebody who can paint the world and use paint in a really beautiful, visceral, gestural fashion. The mark-making has a very human-animal thing going on in it, yet he's seemingly also engaging in the non-specific, the abstract at the same time."

"That's what I've got closer towards trying to engage with: to have both, whereas once I was less interested in a more overt engagement with the world. So," he explains, with the honesty that he has always brought to bear on his progress as a painter, "those two have become a huge problem, because I've come at it from a less obvious parallel to the world through non-representation and I find it difficult." But if he has one great advantage it is that like so many of the painters he admires – Constable, Cezanne and Morandi in the past, Eubena Nampitjin and Makinti Napanangka in more recent times – his home terrain is his motif.

Three years ago the boundaries of his farm were redrawn to include tracts of land with sheer hillsides and deep, open vistas. After years of painting that had evoked the feeling of being held close amidst trees, the point of view in his pictorial space suddenly rose to a high place, looking onto distant slopes textured with stone and tussocks. Open space had entered Laurie's purview, and in many of his latest works the horizon and the sky again give breadth and depth.

"The place you have a long association with has the ghost of memories and your thinking and experience in it, and that certainly gives weight to the paintings. Without drawing too long a bow, there are certain Indigenous painters whose pictures seem to be a reflection of the experience of being in country, as opposed to an illustration. They seem to have an inherent knowledge of the land and that's something that I'm interested in trying to get involved in from a non-Indigenous person's point of view."

"Looking at the European and American painters who I really like, there are certain qualities in the mark, the gesture, the resonances and echoes of the world, that are the sort of things I find in Indigenous artists who I appreciate. I guess they're the sorts of things that I am to some extent concerned with in my own painting. I don't look at it and say 'I can't understand this – I'm not an Indigenous person and I haven't been to their country.' I look at it and I say 'that feels so much like the world. I guess that's what the world looks like, feels like out there.' Not pretending to understand a whole lot of stuff that I don't understand, but I appreciate the way their paintings are put together."

"As soon as you're talking about gesture and mark-making you're talking about a type of human mark that is so rarely in the world anymore. Today, painting is almost the last thing that has a human gesture associated with it, especially now that letter-writing has almost disappeared, and I find that the human touch on the wall or a canvas is so enormously communicative. The idea of remaining involved in something as old as that is very appealing." ■

EXHIBITION  
 Ross Laurie  
 11 October - 5 November, 2016  
 King Street Gallery on William, Darlinghurst, NSW  
[kingstreetgallery.com.au](http://kingstreetgallery.com.au)

Ross Laurie is represented by King Street Gallery, Sydney

03 *Natura Morta*, 2016, oil on canvas, 91 x 137cm  
 04 *Landscape with three suns (Tryptich)*, 2016, oil on canvas.

Courtesy the artist and King Street Gallery, Sydney