

rachel ellis: sustaining light

rachel ellis sustaining light

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—	for	my	parents	
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INTRODUCTION

Sarah Gurich

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery is committed to fostering and showcasing the work of artists based in the Central West of NSW. In recent years BRAG has developed a series of focus exhibitions by some of the region's leading artists including Ros Auld (Orange), Harrie Fasher (Oberon), Anne Graham (Little Hartley), Joanna Logue (Oberon), Mandy Martin (Mandurama), Rosemary Valadon (Hill End), Luke Sciberras (Hill End), David Serisier (Orange), Nicole Welch (Bathurst), and Peter Wilson (Bathurst).

In 2018, BRAG is pleased to present the work of Rachel Ellis, an artist who is highly regarded for her beautifully rendered drawings and paintings, and who is without doubt one of Bathurst's most loved and respected creative spirits. Rachel's attention to light, colour, and geometry transform the everyday scenes she paints — street corners, the sides of buildings, the view from a window — into exquisite vignettes imbued with spiritual overtones that both reflect her faith as a Christian, and celebrate the beauty of the place in which we live.

Rachel Ellis: Sustaining Light is a survey of work produced from 2001 to 2018. The exhibition reflects Rachel's connection to the landscapes, streetscapes and seasons of Bathurst, but for the artist the true subject of her work is light:

"Drawing and painting for me is about light — and the relationships it describes. Light is the essential element for giving and sustaining life, and it enables us to see. To draw or paint light is to confront the reality of what it is to be alive!"

Through her work, Rachel aims to convey the essence of what she sees and feels. The shadow cast by buildings, a tree reaching upwards, a shaft of light from a window are all allusions to what lies beyond, pointers to deeper meaning and connection.

This is particularly evident in the works produced in Hill End in 2006 and 2016 as part of BRAG's Hill End Artists in Residence Program. For Rachel, the large, light-filled window of Jean Bellette's studio at Haefligers Cottage became a portal for contemplation, charged with symbolism and poignancy.

I would like to thank Rachel Ellis for sharing her work with us, and to the individuals and institutions from across Australia who have loaned works to this exhibition.

Special thanks also go to Hendrik Kolenberg for his catalogue essay; Silversalt Photography for the catalogue images; Catherine Hunter and Bruce Inglis for the documentary film which accompanies this exhibition; King Street Gallery and MAY SPACE for their assistance in locating works; and Julian Woods, for his attention to detail and fine eye in the curation of this exhibition.

Sarah Gurich Director Bathurst Regional Art Gallery May 2018

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RACHEL ELLIS IN BATHURST

Hendrik Kolenberg

Walking along the Kings Cross end of William Street in Sydney on a day last November, I passed the picture window of King Street Gallery, where a big painting by Rachel Ellis stopped me in my tracks. A "majestic elm arching heavenward" displaying its yellowing foliage is at the centre of the composition, a handsome brick-coloured Victorian terrace on Bentinck Street, Bathurst, to the right; but it is a scattering of loose leaves lifted skywards in brilliant sunlight that makes this work an exultant spacious whole. Ambitious, felt and poetic, its scraped and scumbled painted surface suggests radiating light. For Rachel, an ardent practising Christian, the splendour of the subject reminded her of Psalm 96: "Let the field be joyful and all that is therein, then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice." Hence its title, Bentinck Psalm 2017. To me however, it is utterly Keatsian, a veritable ode to autumn.

Bentinck Psalm featured earlier in the year in Cowra, as an entry in the Calleen Art Award. Rachel Ellis would have passed the subject many times in her rambles around

Bathurst. A certain fall of light and the resulting arrangement of its parts (as subject) set her to work. A preliminary pencil drawing and at least two large sensitively rendered charcoal drawings followed. The big painting is the result of fastidious construction and the judicious elimination of all unnecessary description.

Another much more direct version of the same scene, painted 'on-the-spot' was her 2017 Parliament Plein Air Prize winning entry. To a *Western Advocate* reporter she admitted "... it was cathartic to paint *in situ* ... before the tree lost any more of its beautiful yellow autumn leaves." Both are a painter's equivalent to William Wordsworth's oft-quoted "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" of "emotion recollected in tranquillity."

It isn't the first time I have been captivated by a painting or drawing by Rachel Ellis, nor was it a matter of its size or unexpected exposure in a large window on a main Sydney road.

A year or so earlier, at a friend's house in Melbourne, a much smaller

painting by her left me green with collector's envy. Featuring a steep pile of rubble visible from a window. it reminded me of the British Camden Town School of painters, each of whom were similarly restrained and disciplined, Spencer Gore in particular. Between a neighbour's house and hers, an empty block has long been cleared for building. In her painting this pile of rubble is seen from a side window of her house. In daylight this rubble mound, brightly lit, cuts obliquely across the contrasting vertical rectangle of a window in her house. It is an inspired and uncompromising composition.

Windows often feature in her work
- especially her windows, those she
looks through daily at home. Windows
mirror the format of a canvas or
sheet of paper and define the edges/
limits of a subject or composition.
They also suggest inner and outer
states of mind, a certain quiet
detachment, or even the stillness
which is characteristic of her work.

In the winning entry for the first Adelaide Perry Drawing Prize in 2006, the sitting room window of her Bathurst house was the subject. As

Bentinck Psalm 2017, oil on board, 122 x 177 cm, Private collection

she explained: "My intention was to convey the sensation of what I saw and felt. I was drawn to the light interacting with the shapes and forms both inside and out and the way light can transform what we see."

I can think of few better experiences than being surrounded by Rachel Ellis's paintings and drawings. On a hot summer's night in her Bathurst house last January, she went to some pains over several hours to show me the paintings being considered for inclusion in 'Sustaining Light'. Soon there were works of all sizes (big, small and inbetween) propped up around me and at my feet on the floor. The variety was not only in size but also in subject, approach and states of completion. Despite her claims otherwise, there can be no more industrious and intensely engaged artist at work anywhere.

In an effort to show me as much as possible, she gave me a concentrated sense of how she works, as well as many images of Bathurst, where she lives. There are numerous studies in paint, watercolour, ink, pencil, charcoal, experiments in composition, exploring different

effects of light, times of day or season. As I was enjoying looking at and discussing with her the paintings and drawings in her house (with several brought inside, from her studio), it was suddenly obvious just how central her house is to her work. Interiors, views to outside through doors and windows, the garden and beyond. And just beyond her house her street, the streets close by, and also those further off are brought home for further examination. Not only does her house provide her with subjects but it is 'her place' alone, free from the influence of others. or of interruption and distraction. She can set up an easel anywhere, position drawings, photographs and studies strategically, or where she will see them as she moves from room to room, and anything else that may be of use to her. Her house is a second, additional or alternative studio and a sanctuary where she can pursue her interests without compromise.

She could, of course, be living anywhere to find subjects of interest. Bathurst didn't necessarily attract her for its

picturesqueness, landmarks, history or for any personal association. Her circumstances – convenience and its affordability - brought her to Bathurst.⁴ She is also nearer her mother and step-father, who live in Forbes, and a brother who farms in the area. Born in South Australia, with siblings in various Australian states including Victoria, she could choose to live anywhere else. All the same. Bathurst is the richer for her presence and focus on its streets and buildings, and she in turn appreciates the support she has received there. including from the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery.

Before moving to Bathurst in 2001, she lived for a few years in a rented share-house in Newtown (Sydney), where nearby subjects, roofs and streets, became her subject. As a result she became identified with Newtown. It was temporarily hers, as is Bathurst these last 15 or more years.

Rachel's work as a whole celebrates light and where she lives, as the titles of her works attest. Amongst the many, *Bathurst landscape in Hope Street* 2011 (both versions),

Bathurst landscape, William Street 2012 (the Mosman Prize winner) and Orange wall in George Street, Bathurst 2014 impress for monumentality of form and the breadth of space they encompass. Their paint handling is bold, confident and vigorous. And then there are the exceptional drawings of the side fence to her garden, each imbued with a guiet dignity and meditative calm. In these she is unquestionably the inheritor of Lloyd Rees. The tall dried-out forked stump of a once giant ribbon gum in her garden has also provided her with a powerful subject. In Evensong 2011 (Art Gallery of NSW) just one of its truncated branches protrudes (a little ominously) at the left, as the casuarina at the centre of the composition reaches joyously upward - one life ended making room for another. Significant is the densely layered working of charcoal on paper, creating a penumbral glow of light that is deeply felt, as much a sign of her faith as of graphic mastery.

Rachel's is largely an internalized vision of observable reality, heightened by spiritual belief, yet readily shareable and hence

universal. The play of light on walls, a roof or tree-lined street, attention given to shadows which throw otherwise unremarkable urban or domestic scenes into relief, accentuate colour, shape and form, and thereby transform them into memorable images. It is as if she lifts a curtain on the everyday, drawing our attention to light effects on or around a door or window, kitchen sink or the paling fence 'we' would otherwise overlook. She invites us to linger, to discover ever-present realities and sharpen our perception. A treated (green) telegraph pole (as in Bant Street tree, Bathurst 2005) or the partial sight of a backyard from an open door or window (as in her Haefliger studio interiors⁵) is common enough experience for any of us. It is what she chooses to eliminate or emphasize in any scene that sets her work apart; paintings and drawings which encourage quiet looking and reflection.

Beyond subject and design, her sensitivity for materials (charcoal on paper and paint on canvas) is striking. And, compositional skills aside, she is masterly in revealing the inherent abstraction of all we see. In other words, she is instinctively drawn to the underlying order, structure and inter-relationship of everything she sees and seeks to understand.

It was the drawing of a dog curled over its backside that first attracted public attention to her work. One of the exhibited finalists of the first Dobell Drawing Prize in 1993, it was bought by fellow artist Peter Kingston (also a Dobell finalist) and presented to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Arthur Boyd, the judge of that first prize, was much taken with the drawing and insisted it be set aside for inclusion in the accompanying exhibition of finalists. It certainly demonstrated her ability to strip a subject to its essentials. Subsequent Dobell Prize entries by Rachel Ellis have also stood out over the years, though unfortunately she never won.

I met her a year later when I successfully recommended the purchase of a drawing of Newtown rooftops for the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection. I had seen it in the Waverley Art Prize where it was highly commended and appropriately, bought using Thea Proctor Memorial

ILLUSTRATIONS

Funds (equally an independent woman and artist from an earlier age). Before long she had won several prizes for her drawings, including the Lloyd Rees Memorial Youth Art award (1994) and the Blake Prize for religious art (1996). It took her longer to find her way as a painter, though characteristically she persisted with unwavering determination and soon enough produced remarkable results. One major painting, the surface of which she had vigorously scraped back and doubted more than most. was awarded the Mosman Prize in 2013.

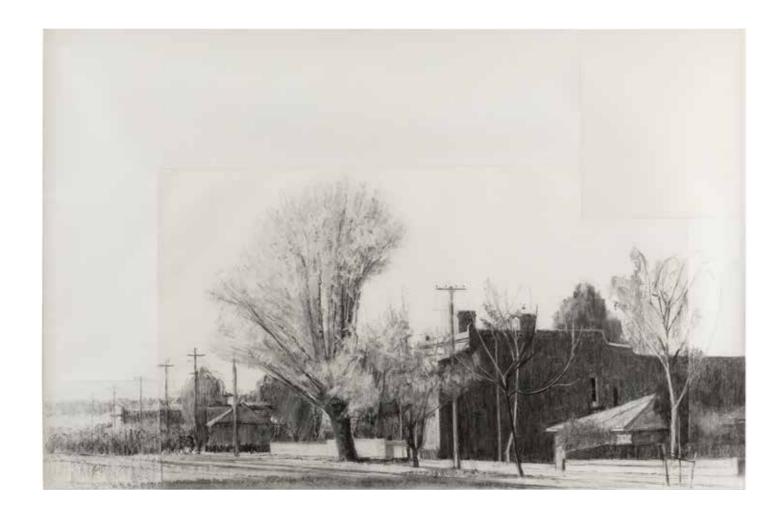
Doubt about her work and her abilities, is partly what drives her. That may frustrate some of her friends and supporting gallery owners or managers but also underscores the seriousness of her endeavour and the testing standards she sets herself. One of the abiding and most admirable features of Rachel's work is that she doesn't dismiss any subject lightly or seek easy pictorial solutions, instead returning over and over to a drawing or painting long after it is (seemingly) finished or abandoned, re-working,

adding, adjusting and subtracting, starting another, re-considering, reflecting – always (unfailingly) self-critical. Each subject is a challenge, to be mulled over in an attempt to resolve it pictorially, and the process of change layering and enriching her work.

Just as I thought she had shown me everything possible that summer night in January, she turned two large panels on which were stretched spectacularly colourful watercolours of a large tree in vivid orange-red. Subject-wise they are consistent with her work as a whole but they also promise much more to come. Though now 50, Rachel Ellis remains youthful, fresh and exploratory, an artist who will continue to surprise and delight.

ENDNOTES

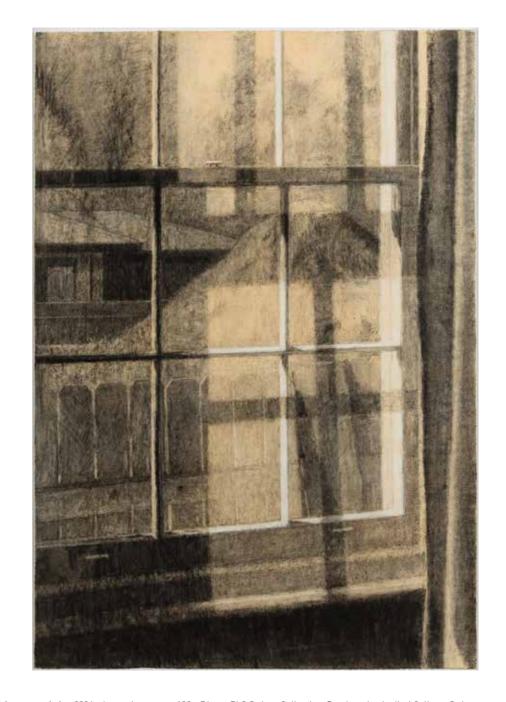
- 1 Ciara Bastow 'Rachel Ellis's winning painting inspired by an elm on Bentinck Street' Western Advocate 18 October 2017: The subject of Mes Ellis' painting was a majestic elm tree which stands on Bentinck Street "arching heavenward" outside a two-storey terrace.
- 2 ibid
- 3 Rachel Ellis's 'Artist's statement' as winning drawing in the catalogue for the Adelaide Perry Prize for Drawing 2006, at Adelaide Perry Gallery, Presbyterian Ladies' College. Crovdon (Sydney).
- 4 She had affection for Bathurst long before she moved there: "I loved that the landscape was hilly ... and remember saying to myself that if I ever moved to the country, Bathurst or nearby would be a good place to live, both for its convenience to Sydney and Forbes and its affordability. And I do remember always liking its heritage, its buildings and cottages and ... knowing Lloyd Rees spent time there." Email from Rachel Ellis 18 January 2018.
- 5 In both of her Hill End residencies, the windows of the Haefliger cottage occupied her. The second time they became the focus of tragic events: "My time at Hill End as a resident at Haefliger's Cottage, was spent looking through a window, contemplating, as it turned out, human suffering. A year earlier my proposal for the residency was to re-visit the window of Jean Bellete's studio (which I had painted during my first residency in 2006) and to see how I might respond ten years on. The day I arrived at Hill End I heard tragic news - from my former neighbour and friend - that her father had been killed by a falling tree at Canowindra. In shock, sitting on a stool in the studio that evening, an extraordinary warm glow of last light illuminated the curtain opposite, revealing the crosspiece of the window. Uncompromisingly, this cruciform demanded a response. The next morning I washed the two yellow towels which were hanging on the back of the bathroom door. Once on the line, which stretched the length of the studio's verandah, I began to consider the possibilities for painting. The two yellow towels were visible between the curtains. At once they represented, for me, my friend Robyn's father, Robert, and her sister Stephanie who had been murdered 18 months earlier. Yellow was the colour used to commemorate Stephanie's life at her funeral. It was a subject charged with symbolism. Therefore, these paintings from my time at Hill End, invite the viewer to ponder unthinkable tragedy and suffering, and the God who reveals his love and mercy through the death of Christ on the cross who claims to love and care for us." From notes by the artist. February, 2018







Living room window, 2007–08, oil on board, 65 x 58 cm. Private collection

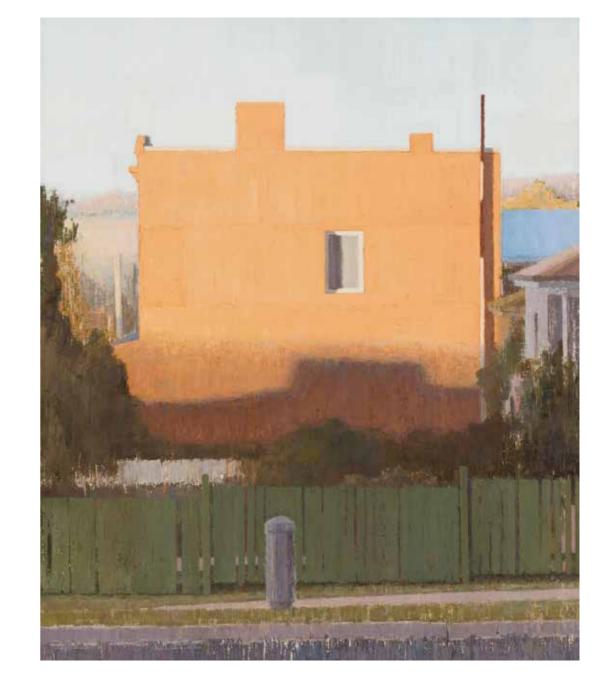


Living room window 2006, charcoal on paper, 108 x 76 cm. PLC Sydney Collection, Presbyterian Ladies' College, Sydney

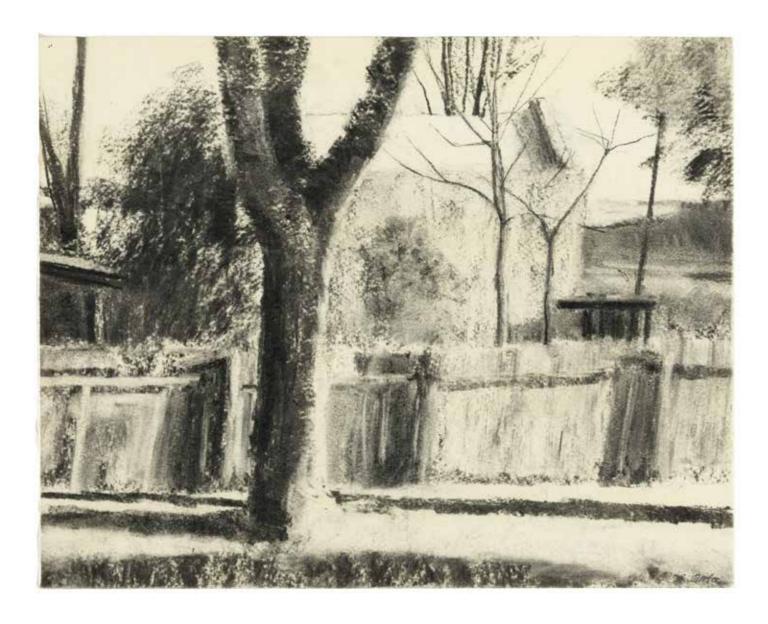


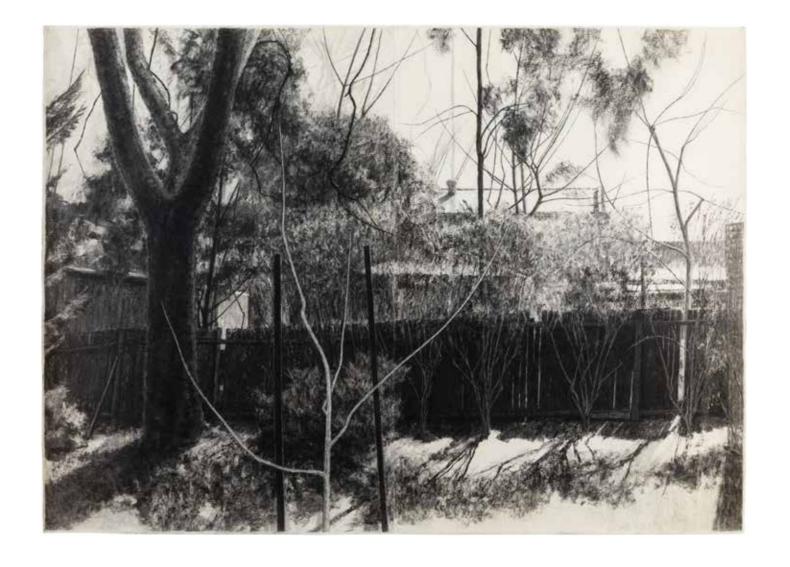




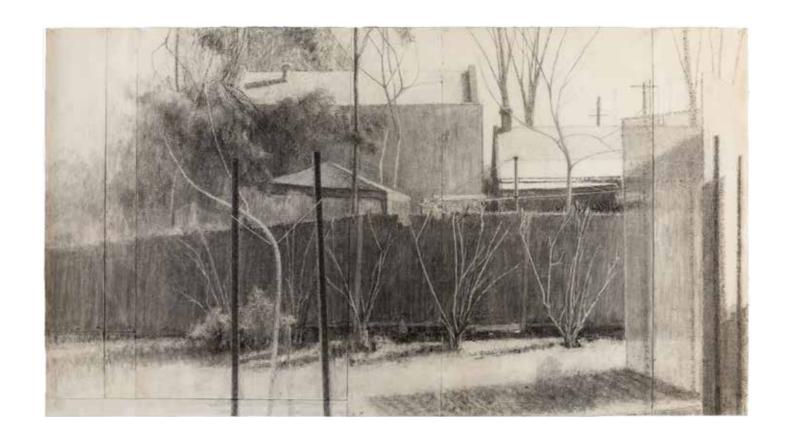


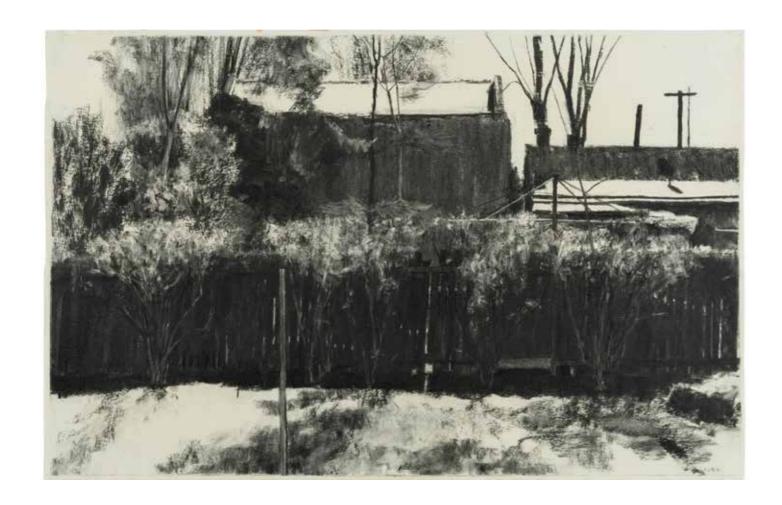
Orange wall, George Street, Bathurst 2014, oil on linen on board, 102 x 85 cm. Private collection of Mosman Art Gallery

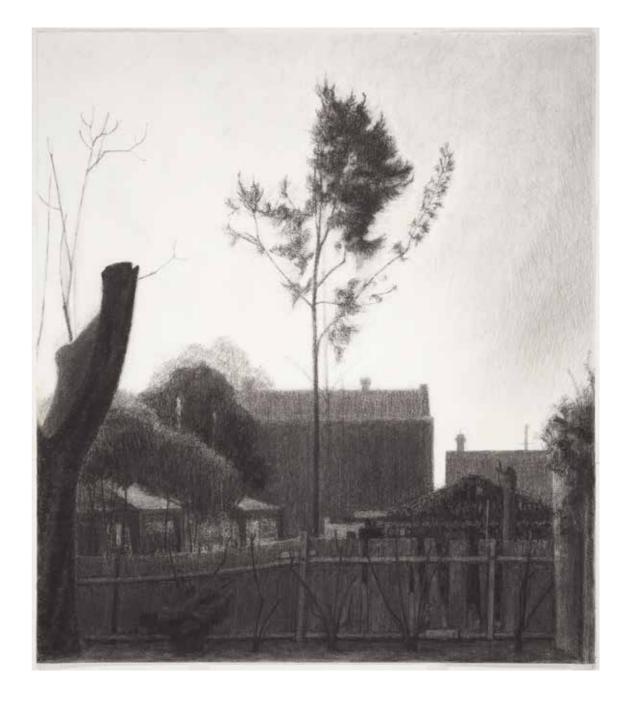






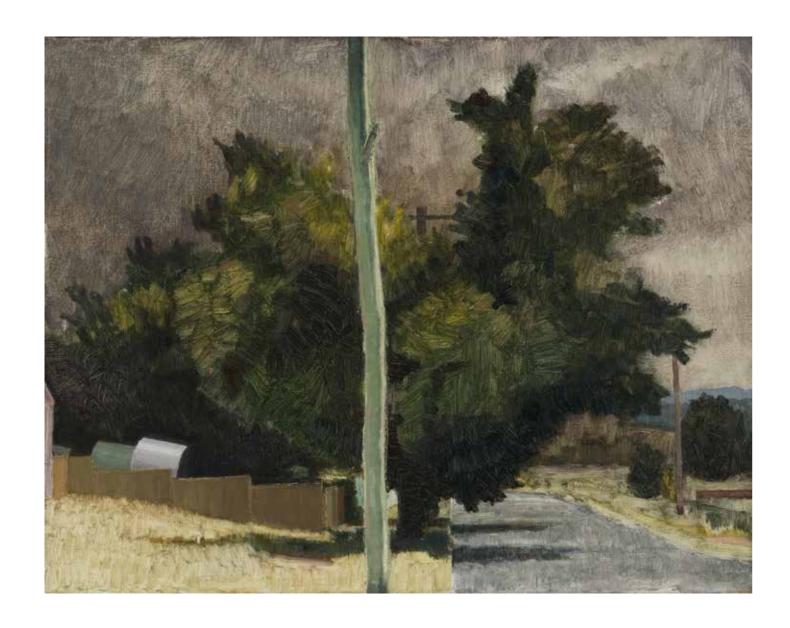






Evensong 2011, charcoal on paper, 113 x 100 cm. Collection of Art Gallery of New South Wales – Thea Proctor Memorial Fund 2012. Photograph: Mim Stirling, AGNSW

Side fence IV 2002, charcoal and wash on paper, 48 x 75 cm. Private collection

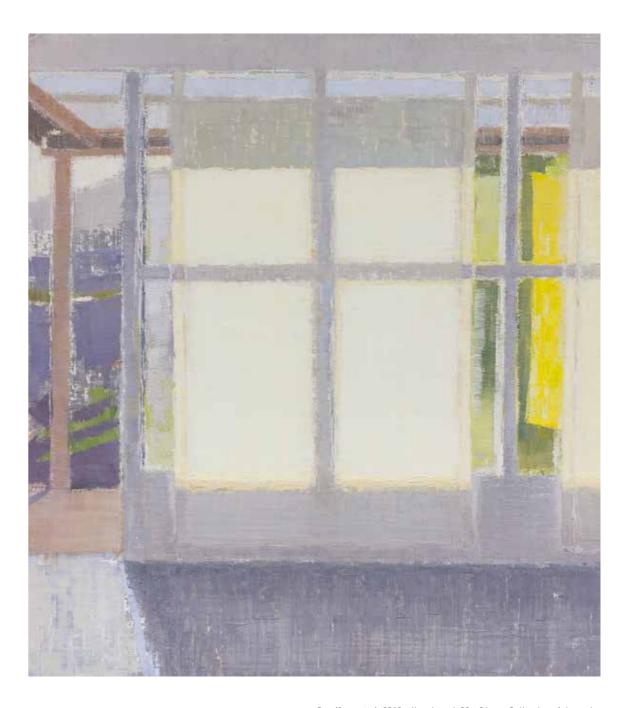












Cruciform study 2018, oil on board, 38 x 34 cm. Collection of the artist



Tree, Brilliant Street 2015-18, watercolour on paper, 81 x 81 cm. Collection of the artist

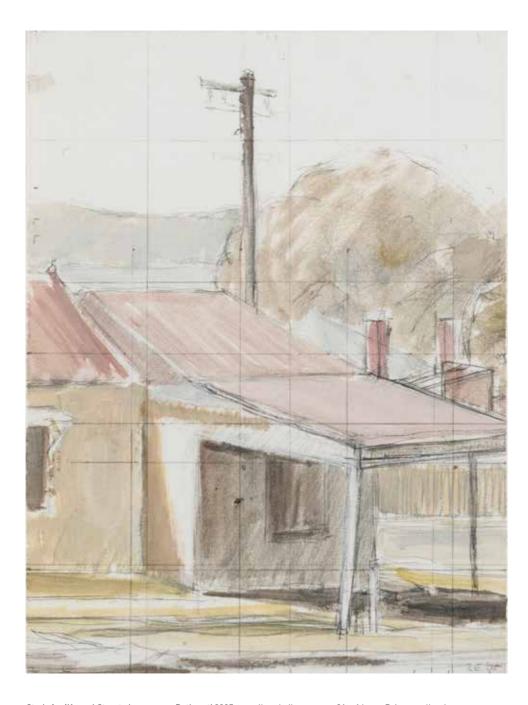
SELECTED WORKS



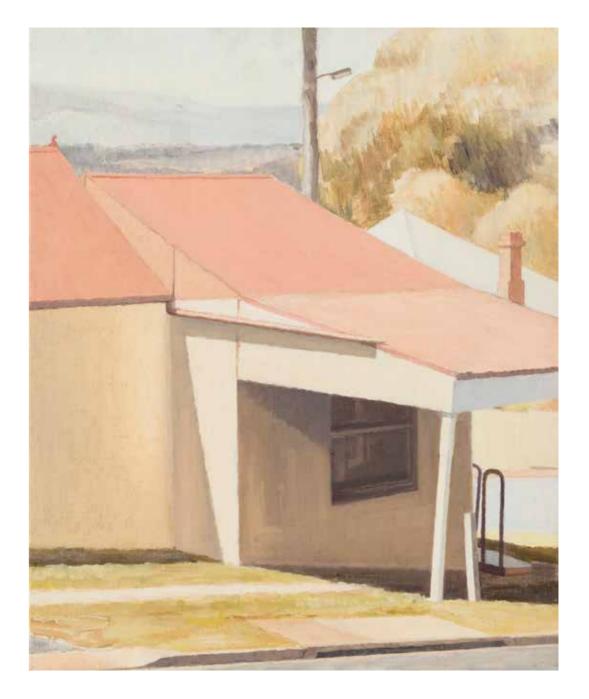








Study for 'Keppel Street shop corner, Bathurst' 2005, pencil and oil on paper. 21 x 16 cm. Private collection



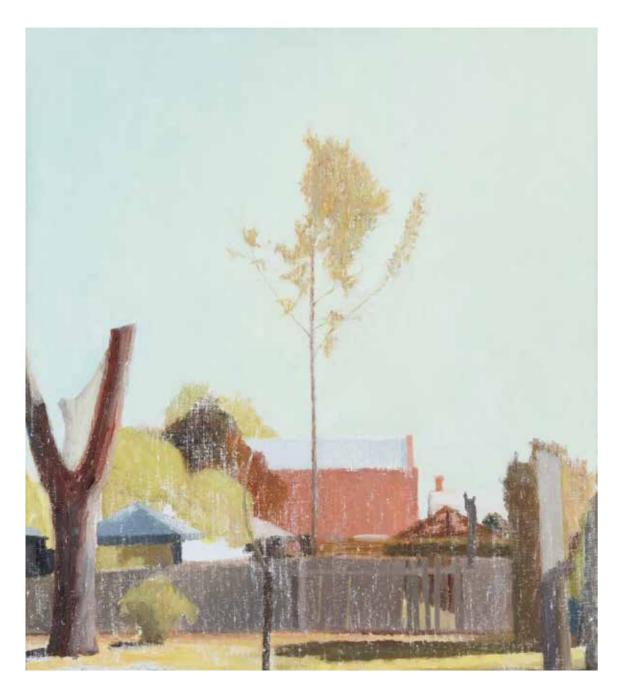
Keppel Street shop corner, Bathurst 2006, oil on linen on board, 60 x 40 cm. Private collection



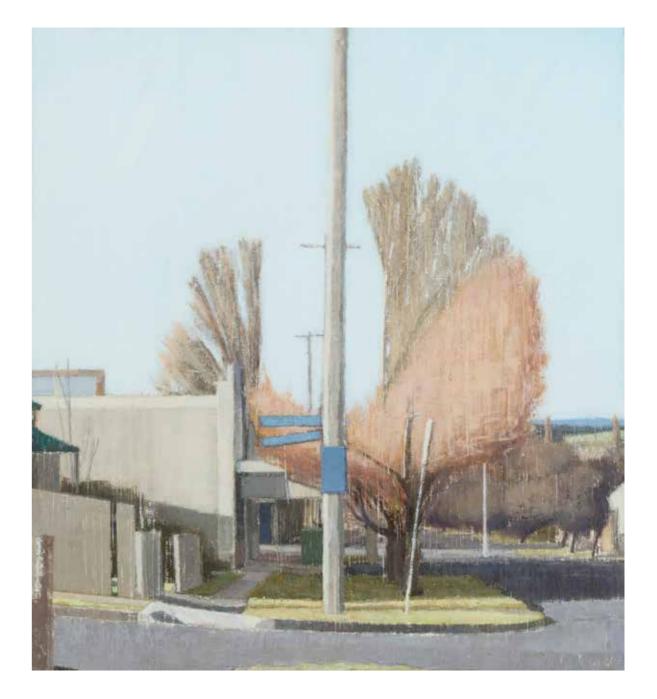


(Midday) Home renovations, Manilla Lane, Bathurst 2006, oil on board, 36 x 30 cm. Private collection

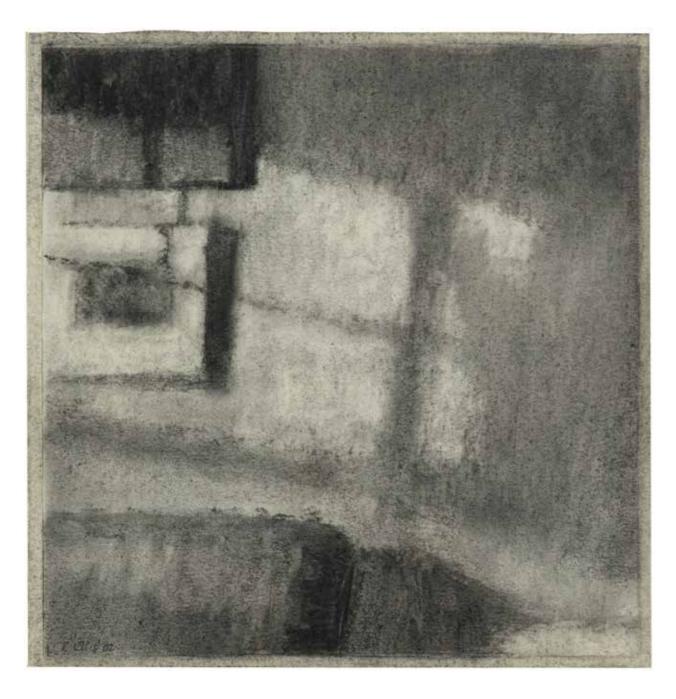
Bathurst landscape, Peel Street 2009, oil on board, 36 x 118 cm. Collection of the artist







Round from The Hub, Bathurst 2014, oil on linen on board, 66 x 61 cm. Private collection



Interior – Light on wall 2002, charcoal and wash on paper, 28 x 27 cm. Private collection

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

I would like to thank the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery for making this exhibition *Sustaining Light* and accompanying catalogue possible. Thank you to the former Director, Richard Perram OAM, and current Director, Sarah Gurich (then Curator), for generously conceiving the idea and offering me the opportunity to contemplate past works — a strangely helpful experience. I'm so grateful for their support of my work and along with their dedicated staff, for bringing the exhibition to fruition. Jo Dicksen has been so helpful and my particular thanks go to Julian Woods for painstakingly and meticulously gathering works from private and public collections and for his patience and thoughtfulness in curating the exhibition.

My special and heartfelt thanks go to Hendrik Kolenberg for his most generous and remarkably crafted and thoughtful catalogue essay. I'm lost for words. The line between friend and mentor is hard to define.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the owners of these works in the exhibition generously agreeing to lend their pictures for an extended period. My sincere gratitude to you all.

Thank you to Silversalt Photography for photographing the works for this catalogue and to Catherine Hunter and Bruce Inglis for the short film they have made to accompany the exhibition.

Lastly thank you to the directors and staff at King Street Gallery on William for their help in tracking down works and for their ongoing patience and support. I'm most grateful. Sincere thanks to my family and friends for your love and support and to the light of the world for sustaining us.

Rachel Ellis May 2018 Rachel Ellis was born in Adelaide in 1967 and later grew up in Forbes from 1976. She attended watercolour workshops with artist Judith White in Forbes and Bathurst in 1985 and studied at City Art Institute (now UNSW Art & Design) in Sydney from 1986-88. She worked and travelled for two years in the UK and Europe, via New York and attended a two week drawing workshop at the International School of Art in Umbria, Italy, near where she was working as an au-pair in 1991. In 1993 she completed a Master of Art by Coursework at the College of Fine Art (now UNSW Art & Design) in Sydney, majoring in drawing. Rachel returned to the UK and Europe on a Marten Bequest Travelling Scholarship (for painting) in 1998, and with the Art Gallery of New South Wales Dyason Bequest undertook a three month residency at the Cite Internationale des Arts, in Paris. She also participated in a still life painting Summer School at the Slade School of Fine Art in London.

In 2004 Rachel completed a Communion of Saints commission for St Patricks Cathedral in Parramatta. She has been the recipient of numerous awards for her work (mentioned in this catalogue essay) and has work in public and private collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Macquarie Bank.

In 2001 Rachel moved to Bathurst where she currently lives and works.

LIST OF WORKS

Rockley landscape 2001 oil on board 25 x 30 cm Private collection

Interior – Conversation 2002 charcoal and wash on paper 28 x 27 cm Private collection

Interior – Light on sofa 2002 charcoal and wash on paper 28 x 27 cm Private collection

Interior – Light on wall 2002 charcoal and wash on paper 28 x 27 cm Private collection

Side fence, morning 2002 charcoal and wash on paper 28 x 27 cm Private collection

Side fence IV 2002 charcoal and wash on paper 48 x 75 cm Private collection Bant Street tree, Bathurst 2005 oil on linen 28 x 36 cm Private collection

IGA carpark, Bathurst 2005 oil on linen 30 x 58 cm Collection of the artist

Late afternoon, IGA carpark 2005 oil on linen 28 x 61 cm Collection of Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

Midday, Bentinck Street II 2005 oil on linen 28 x 40 cm Private collection

Russell and Havannah Street corner 2005 oil on linen 29 x 60 cm Private collection

Durham Street 2005 oil on linen 30 x 36 cm Private collection Eglinton landscape I 2005 oil on linen 73 x 30 cm Private collection

Late afternoon, Russell and Havannah Street corner 2005 oil on linen 29 x 60 cm Private collection

Lower Keppel Street buildings, Bathurst 2005 pencil and oil on paper 23 x 50 cm Private collection

Late afternoon, Havannah Street 2005, oil on linen 39 x 39 cm
Private collection

Riverwalk 2005
oil on linen
28 x 45 cm
Private collection

(Evening) Studio interior, Haefligers Cottage 2006 oil on board 50 x 124 cm Private collection (Midday) Home renovations, Manilla Lane, Bathurst 2006 oil on board 36 x 30 cm Private collection

Study for 'Keppel Street corner shop, Bathurst' 2006 pencil and oil on paper 21 x 16 cm Private collection

Keppel Street corner shop, Bathurst 2006 oil on linen on board 60 x 40 cm Private collection

Living room window 2006 charcoal on paper 108 x 76 cm Collection of PLC Sydney Collection, Presbyterian Ladies' College, Sydney

Side fence, Bathurst 2006 charcoal and wash on paper 94 x 196 cm Private collection Late afternoon, lower Keppel Street 2007 oil on board 58 x 44 cm Collection of the artist

Living room window 2007-08 oil on board 32 x 25 cm Private collection

Morning, side fence Bathurst 2008 charcoal on paper 108 x 150 cm Collection of the artist

Midday, side fence, Bathurst 2008 charcoal on paper 108 x 150 cm Private collection

Bathurst landscape, Peel Street 2009 oil on board 36 x 118 cm Private collection

Eglinton landscape II 2010 oil on board 36 x 67 cm Private collection Bathurst landscape, Hope Street 2011 oil on board 31 x 40 cm Private collection

Morning 2011 oil on board 65 x 58 cm Private collection

Evensong 2011
charcoal on paper
113 x 100 cm
Collection of Art Gallery of
New South Wales – Thea
Proctor Memorial Fund 2012

Eglinton landscape 2011 oil on board 30 x 48 cm Private collection

Railway bridge, lower
Durham Street 2011
oil on board
36 x 76 cm
Private collection

Street 2012
oil on linen on board
100 x 134 cm
Collection of Mosman Art Gallery

Rankin Street, Bathurst 2012 charcoal on paper 34 x 40 cm Private collection

Trees, Durham Street 2013
oil on board
30 x 40 cm
Private collection

Hope Street, Bathurst 2013-18 oil on linen on board 105 x 139 cm Collection of the artist

Orange wall, George Street, Bathurst 2014 oil on linen on board 102 x 85 cm Private collection

Round from The Hub, Bathurst 2014 oil on linen on board 66 x 61 cm Private collection Early morning, lighting shop, Bathurst 2015-18 oil on linen on board 72 x 164 cm Collection of the artist

Tree, Brilliant Street 2015–18 watercolour on paper 81 x 81 cm
Collection of the artist

La Paloma Pottery, Hill End 2016 oil on board 27 x 30 cm Private collection

Limekilns Road 2016 oil on linen 127 x 43 cm Private collection

Yellow towels I 2016 oil on board 50 x 129 cm Collection of the artist

Yellow towels II, Haefligers
Cottage 2016-18
oil on board
50 x 129 cm
Collection of the artist

Bentinck Psalm 2017 charcoal on paper 88 x 129 cm Private collection

Bentinck Psalm 2017 oil on board 122 x 177 cm Private Collection

Bentinck Street, Bathurst 2017 oil on board 30 x 40 cm Collection of NSW Parliament

Cruciform study 2018
oil on board
38 x 34 cm
Collection of the artist

Havannah Street trees 2018 oil on board 30 x 40 cm Collection of the artist This catalogue is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced without permission of the publisher.

Published in association with the exhibition Rachel Ellis: Sustaining Light Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 8 June – 5 August 2018



ISBN 978-1-925008-27-2

Published by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 2018 © Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 70-78 Keppel Street Bathurst NSW 2795 02 6333 6555 www.bathurstart.com.au Catalogue Contributors:
Sarah Gurich, Hendrik Kolenberg
Catalogue Design: Jo Dicksen
Catalogue Printer: CSU Print
Photography: Silversalt Photography,
unless otherwise stated

All dimensions are in centimetres, height before width before depth. All artworks © the artist

Rachel Ellis: Sustaining Light is a Bathurst Regional Art Gallery exhibition curated by Julian Woods. BRAG would like to acknowledge the generous sponsorship provided by The Hub Espresso Bar & Eatery and Robert Oatley Wines.



Bathurst Regional Art Gallery is supported by









Rachel Ellis is represented by King Street Gallery www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

