

The Artist's Garden

I ve had a long association with Newcastle through family, friends and the university, and now, after an invitation to undertake this residency from Kerrie Coles, the director of the Lock-Up, I have extended and deepened my connection to this special place.

At different times over the past 20 years I have been drawn to paint the city's harbour, headland, ocean pool and, of course, Nobbys. During my residency at the Lock-Up, however, I wanted to focus on a more intimate view of Newcastle's parks and gardens, places that many of us walk past with little regard or that we take for granted but that nevertheless are cared for, planned and reworked over time. Locations such as Civic Park and King Edward Park are an important part of the cultural and recreational life of Newcastle, and by exploring and highlighting such places through these paintings, my hope is that they can be experienced in a different way.

These recent Newcastle paintings will become an important part of a much larger body of work and will form part of my PhD project, The Artist's Garden: Humanising the Landscape, which I am undertaking at Australian National University in Canberra.

When I first spoke to Kerrie about my plans to make paintings of public parks and gardens, she suggested I may also like to paint one of the city's best-known private gardens, the magnificent sculptured garden of Lee and Jan Rowan in Lambton Heights. In characteristic style she was straight on the phone and had it organised in a matter of minutes.

Over a three-week period I spent four or five days painting en plein air in the Rowans' garden, allowing me to share their private obsession in this special, secret little world.

One of the most interesting aspects of this experience was the opportunity it gave me to spend time talking with their gardener, Mal, with whom I shared gardening stories, ideas about plants, colour and shapes as well as his thoughts on Jan's ongoing vision and passion for the garden and his commitment to delivering her vision. As he mowed, pruned and clipped, taking obvious pride in the health of the plants, he would regularly check on me to see how my paintings were progressing and to make sure I had enough mozzie repellent or to apologise for the noise of the mower.

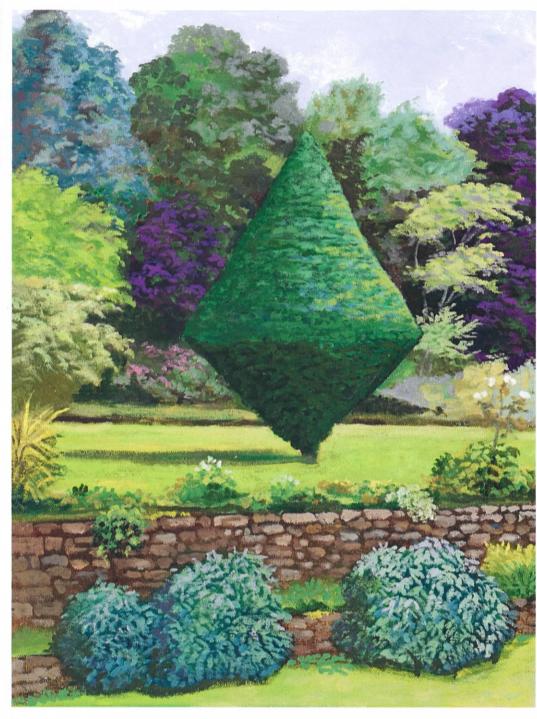
Each time I visited the garden I saw Mal hard at work: I noticed the precision of the way he clipped the many different hedges and the immense effort he put into maintaining the existing forms. Each week his challenge was to renew this growing, living space, while all the time trying to work with the elements and the changing seasons.

For me what is fascinating is that we now have a shared experience and a personal connection through that wonderful garden, that time, the paintings and now this exhibition. In that sense, these paintings are not only an expression of the way I chose to explore my own thoughts and relationship with gardens and nature but also embody the Rowans passion for gardening, their vision and Mals hard work and personal connection to the space.

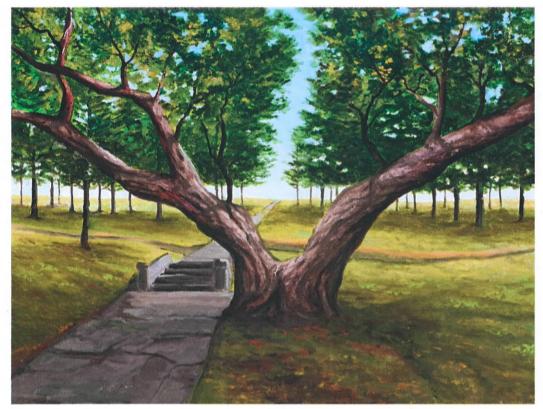
Gardens are special places that hold deep historical and cultural connections for many individuals and societies. The myth of the Garden of Eden, for example, contains one of the most enduring human narratives, of death and resurrection, loss and recovery, paradise lost and paradise regained. The idea of death and resurrection and our connection to the earth was expressed by Simon Schama in Landscape and Memory like this: The sum of our pasts, generation laid over generation, like the slow mould of the seasons, forms the compost of our future. We live off it.

Painting and gardening have much in common, both in the tangible and the not so tangible. Both require physical interaction, both allow for personal reflection and both require planning, reworking and an understanding of composition and colour. And when all these elements come together, both can be a truly uplifting.

Leo Robba, Artist



Shaped Pine, Cotswold 2011, acrylic on carivas, 40cm x 30cm



Above: Split Tree and Pines, King Edward Park 2011, oil on canvas, 38cm x 52cm. Cover: Inside looking Through at the Rowans 2011, oil on canvas, 122cm x 85cm.

The artist would like to thank:

Kerrie Coles, Gillean Shaw, Professor Kevin McConkey, Gordon Bull, ANU, Ruth Waller, ANU, Lady Poppy Cooksey, Richard and June Wiggins, Jan and Lee Rowan and Mal (The Gardener)

The John Paynter Gallery
4 - 20 November 2011
90 Hunter Street, Newcastle NSW 2300
02 4925 2265
info@thelockup.info | www.thelockup.info



