

Land in Layers: Repositioning Landscape in Contemporary Australia

Culliton, Jones, Laurie, Tonkin and Wagner on History, Labour and Consequence



THIS ART LIFE | ANDREW MCILROY

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Lucy Culliton, 'Yambulla II study', 2025. Photo: King Street Gallery on William,

Geelong

In Lucy Culliton's recent Monaro plains works at King Street Gallery on William's *Common Sense & Secrets: Landscapes* group exhibition (February to March 2026), fences, creek beds and furrowed soil carry centuries of occupation, drought and frost. Light moves across the land, but the brush refuses to soften its embedded history. These paintings do not present landscape as backdrop or escape. The land is dense with traces of work and weather, and the surface records time rather than dissolving it. As the famed art critic **John Ruskin** (1809-1900) observed, landscape painting gains moral and perceptual force when it registers historical fact through material and temporal layering. In this sense, **Lucy Culliton**, **Alan Daniel Jones**, **Ross Laurie**, **Mary Tonkin**, **Graeme Altmann**, and **Luke Wagner** are not revisiting tradition so much as reasserting a principle: history is carried by the land itself, and painting can still make that visible.

In contemporary Australia, that principle matters. These artists work with pigment to register accumulation rather than event. Their landscapes are neither scenic illustrations nor decorative exercises. Soil, fencing, vegetation, light and shadow function as evidence of labour, environmental change and seasonal pressure. Consequence, rather than surface effect alone, forms the subject.

Any discussion of Australian landscape must acknowledge the long and continuous relationship between First Nations peoples and land, and the centrality of Indigenous art in articulating that relationship. Country is not a motif or theme but a living system of knowledge, responsibility and law. This post does not attempt to enter that domain. Instead, it focuses on non Indigenous painters working within inherited European traditions who nonetheless insist that land cannot be treated as neutral or ahistorical. Their work operates alongside, not in place of, Indigenous understandings, and its ethical weight lies in refusing erasure rather than claiming authority.





Lucy Culliton, 'View from the Pavillion, Gunningrah', 2025. Photo: King Street Gallery on William, Sydney

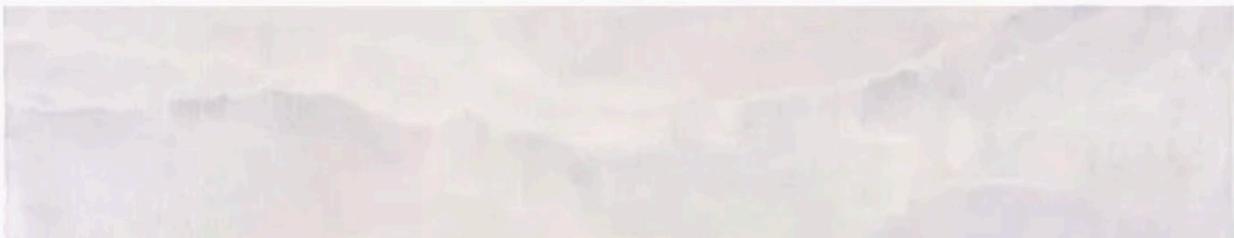


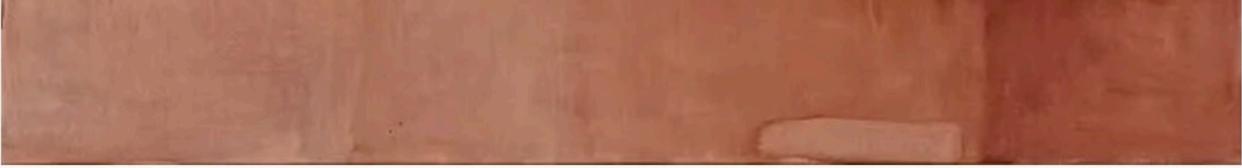
Alan Daniel Jones, 'Painting 259 (Beechwood Parade)', 2018. Photo: King Street Gallery on William, Sydney

Culliton's Monaro plains emphasise density and labour. Fences, creeks and grazing stock register long occupation and environmental fluctuation without sentiment. Alan Daniel Jones, also exhibiting at King Street Gallery on William in early 2026, unsettles expectation. Horizon, light and terrain resist easy coherence, recording friction between human use and topography. Ross Laurie's paintings here too complicate this further. Attentive to erosion, weather and slow abrasion, his works resist immediacy altogether. History is not illustrated or dramatised; it accumulates. Together, these paintings reject the picturesque as a sufficient mode, insisting instead on duration, attrition and the marks left by work, weather and time.

Mary Tonkin's *Coprosma Madonna, Kalorama* (2021–22) anchors the survey *Among the Trees* at S.H. Ervin Gallery (January to March 2026). **John McDonald**, writing on Tonkin in recent weeks, has emphasised her attention to seasonal light and the material presence of the bush, positioning her work as a recalibration of landscape painting away from scenic resolution. That assessment is persuasive, but incomplete. Tonkin's forests do more than refine perception. They register consequence. Density, repetition and restricted vantage deny mastery, placing the viewer within environments shaped by time, growth and attrition rather than aesthetic control. Read alongside Culliton, Jones, Laurie, Altmann and Wagner, Tonkin's work participates in a broader insistence that landscape painting can still function as record, not illustration.

Graeme Altmann and Luke Wagner extend this position through different terrains. Altmann's *Moonah* series, shown at Boom Gallery from late January to February 2026, focuses on estuarine edges shaped by water movement, vegetation and human presence. Shadow dominates. Forms emerge slowly. The paintings are less concerned with depiction than with the accumulation of ecological trace. Wagner's Tasmanian plains, exhibited at Handmark Gallery in Hobart during the same period, compress atmosphere and ground into tonal fields that suggest long exposure rather than momentary view. These works do not narrate change; they absorb it.





Graeme Altmann, 'Moonah', 2025. Photo: Graeme Altmann

What unites these artists is not style or subject but attention to consequence. History appears not as anecdote or symbol but as material presence. Soil is worked. Water shifts ground. Vegetation records pressure and time. Human activity is evident but not foregrounded. In an art climate that often rewards immediacy, legibility and surface appeal, this commitment to duration and accumulation is a quiet resistance.

This is not an argument against colonial history painting, itself often too easily dismissed as picturesque but in its best moments documents labour, settlement and the intermingling of peoples. Nor is it nostalgia for a lost authority of painting. It is a recognition that when landscape is confined to the picturesque, it risks becoming culturally weightless. Without context, land becomes décor.

Institutions have been slow to articulate this distinction. The Wynne Prize, for example, continues to reward technically accomplished landscapes, but its selections in recent years suggest a preference for clarity and finish over historical or ecological density. Artists such as Culliton, Jones, Tonkin, Altmann, Wagner and Laurie continue to circulate within these systems as finalists and exhibitors, yet the deeper implications of their work are rarely addressed. Their paintings operate within institutional frameworks while quietly pressing against their limits.



'THIS ART LIFE' with Andrew McIlroy

Mary Tonkin, *Coprosma madonna*, Kaitiaki from 'Among the Trees' exhibition at SH Ervin Gallery in Sydney

The stakes here are not theoretical. Landscape painting remains one of the most publicly visible forms of Australian art. What it chooses to show, and what it leaves aside, shapes how environments are understood and valued. These artists refuse simplification. They neither sentimentalise land nor aestheticise damage. Instead, they register the accumulated effects of use, change and duration with restraint.

What unites these painters is not style, geography or shared subject matter, but a refusal to empty landscape of history. Their paintings do not editorialise, nor do they retreat into surface pleasure. They insist that painting can still hold the marks of use, erosion and time without narrative instruction or institutional framing.

In early 2026, this work suggests a shift worth watching. Not a revival, not a correction, but a reassertion of seriousness without ceremony. If Australian landscape painting is moving again, it is doing so quietly, without permission, and without pretending that cultural memory can be tidied into themes. The year ahead looks interesting indeed.

