

MOUNTAINS OF THE MIND BETRA FRAVAL, JAMES MAKIN GALLERY, 2024.

This work is about a woman. This work is about making. This work is about searching. This work is about journeys. This work is about the act of getting lost, to find. This work is about realising, when you are at the point of near-finding, you will return to being lost anew. The ever in-flux boundaries that exist between space and site are synonymous with ideas and experiences of the landscape, with the act of painting, and with the insatiable curiosity that accompanies most artists. These states sum up Betra Fraval.

I visited Fraval's studio just as she had finished this suite of paintings. They chart a period of searching, finding and loss in Fraval's life, influenced by time at Uluru on Anangu Country—in her words: “the heart centre.” We spent most of our time together talking about the “search”. The “search” of being an artist, of finding inspiration in the landscape, of our shared love of travelling, and of the challenges that accompany being a woman.

Fraval talked about how writer Rebecca Solnit's considerations of being lost have shaped her, and by extension her work. Solnit considers the sublime in many guises, through her experiences of walking through and getting lost in landscapes; through telling other's stories; and through literary investigations for self-definition. Solnit ultimately considers the sublime through her craft: the act of writing—a vast and unwieldy landscape, just like painting. The act of painting exists as a landscape to be explored, where danger and possibility collide, and the unknown is ever-present. These paintings are images of a contemporary sublime, harkening back to echoes of the sublime that have shaped art's history. Like the sublime represented through the past—charting sites that bore feelings of both awe and danger—this sublime represents both possibility and loss. Anangu Country is imbued with deep history, memory and Tjukurpa stories—echoing back through lines of Anangu culture for millennia, and ascending forward towards future Anangu peoples. As settlers, much of these histories and storylines are unknown to Fraval and myself. Even without this cultural knowledge, Fraval felt the land's sacred possibility. Painting too is a field of vast and endless happenings. As Solnit notes, “writing is its own desert, its own wilderness.”¹ Aside Solnit, Fraval is exploring the wilderness that is painting. And, like Fraval's experiences of the landscape where this work was conceived, the act of painting forms space for the unknown, for that which is out of one's control.

Of the paintings Fraval has produced, some are direct reflections of the landscape, and others, painted later in the studio, are memorized fields. The latter created from memories of the feeling of being within the landscape. We create our futures through remembrances of our past. As artists, we become a mirror to the world around us. Through contemporary painting, the intention of a good painter becomes coupled with the mistakes and accidents of painting that

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 2005 (Edinburgh: Canongate Books), 131.

are in and unto themselves, an intuitive force that takes the painter as vehicle, and makes the work. Incidental marks build a new world, co-created by the artist and the alchemy of painting. The challenge for Fraval is to decide how far the memory of the landscape should be pushed into the realm of painting. As I listened to Fraval talk about her work, I recognised an insatiable curiosity for making and living that I know exists within myself. As we considered each painting, Fraval asked herself aloud, “if I let go of the horizon line, could it become more abstracted?”

There is one painting that sits apart from the rest. Sits separately to the joyous wildflowers and meandering horizon lines that meet most of the canvases. *Body and Landscape* shows a highly angularized and aestheticized landscape—two mountains, depicted as flat plains, meet in block colour. It is more of a painting, as a painting; than a painting of a landscape. The starkness of the work denounces the organic naturalness of the other paintings. Fraval confided that the painting connects to the period during lockdown where she suffered a miscarriage. The lines of paint, intentionally streaked in strong horizontal and vertical lines on the canvas, give a sense of being pulled down. There is a barrier to this work. It doesn't feel as accessible as the others. It marks a visual halting in connection to the natural landscape, perhaps echoing a halting of the self—a visual representation of a stage of deep grief.

Through painting, and the courage that this requires, Fraval has pushed through this period, acknowledging that there is a subsequent “opening up” in the works that have followed. *After the Rains* returns to the sensuousness of the landscape. The lines and marks of the rockface in this work are vaginal and bloody in form and colour. The painting is imbued with a deep desire and a sense of release. There is a feeling of female fecundity in the burgeoning lines. When speaking of those Anangu plain's Fraval recalled, “this sense of everything being alive, just after the rains had come.” This work articulates this feeling, speaks of a pushing forward after loss, to allow things to open again. There is much possibility to be found after the rains.

Speaking of desire, Solnit wonders if “it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed?”² As my eyes move across the different canvases there is a sense of opening up. Dense carpets of wildflowers, that are at once spaces ready to be explored and spaces without clear trajectories for movement, open into paths. When talking about the instability of being an artist, Fraval optimistically remarks that “when we are precarious we can keep things in motion. The precariousness always makes things more precious. We exist because at one point in time conditions were perfect for our conception—artists get to sit within this and reflect upon it.”

² Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 2005 (Edinburgh: Canongate Books), 30.

Solnit recounts how, in the fifteenth century, European painters began to paint the blue of distance. As knowledges of perspective were forming, the blue of distance allowed them to add depth to their work. Realisations through painting enabled them to create stronger articulations of memory. Solnit notes, “at any given moment the sun is setting someplace on earth, and another day is slipping away largely undocumented as people slide into dreams that will seldom be remembered when they awaken. Only the continuation of abundance makes loss sustainable, makes it natural. There are more sunrises coming.”³ Through these paintings Fraval is forming platforms for memory, while building space for possibility. The last painting created in the series is titled *Familiar Falling Away*. Here Fraval returns to the wildflowers—returns to a landscape that is calling to be explored, but in a more relaxed and loose style than before. The flowers are more dispersed and we can see moments of under-painting. As we spoke, Fraval questioned whether it was finished. In painting, as in life, nothing is ever finished. Realisations reside within moments of un-finish, surrender, acceptance and return.

³ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 2005 (Edinburgh: Canongate Books), 188.