

ACROSS &



D O W N

IAN SMITH PAINTINGS

Exhibition Catalogue

Designed & published by Woolloongabba Art Gallery 2022

Images © Ian Smith

Photography: Kerrin Smith

ISBN: 978-0-6489950-1-2

cover image: *Dilemma in a kitchen* 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 121 × 182 cm



The not OK corral 2002. Oil & acrylic on canvas, 74 × 183 cm (Collection: Graham & Judith Bell, Brisbane)

ACROSS & DOWN

Across and down. The directional designation of clues in a crossword puzzle's spatial grid. Down and across. The literal reverse, yet not at all equal and opposite – particularly if applied to the puzzle of life. Across and down deploys and controls from the high ground. Down and across struggles to rise back up from below. In primary school we learnt to differentiate between stalactites hanging *tight* from the ceiling of caves and stalagmites standing *mightily* up from the cave floor, formed by calcareous water dripping down from the stalactites. Two gravitational positions from which to view life, the world and, in turn, compose pictures.

Once upon a time in a discussion I had with Ray Hughes – my long time art dealer and friend – about Australian landscape painting by white artists, Ray leapt to his feet and, with much arm waving, finger prodding and contortions of his rubbery facial features, declared: "Olsen did it like this, Bill [Robinson] did it like this and Fred Williams did it like this! So how are you doing it,

Smith?!" I fended with a fairground analogy which his wild gestures and flailing arms brought instantly to mind. [With Ray one was always either fending, defending or offending – not in the sense of giving offence, although Ray often took it – but rather as in an offensive, an attack.] I said: "You mean Olsen does the Ferris wheel, Bill does the roller-coaster and Williams is taking paint ball potshots in the shooting gallery." I paused, mind racing. "Then I guess I'm doing the Tilt-a-whirl!"

As a boy at the Cairns Show I loved the Dodgem Cars but dreaded the rides. The spinning vertigo of the Ferris wheel and Octopus pre-dated the Tilt-a-whirl. When it came, I spent a long time watching, gauging its 'flattish' across, down, up and across action. The riders seemed relatively stable and recognizable in their seats, rather than being blurs of flesh with gaping mouths. This could be the answer to correct my 'ride-whimp' status. Needless to say, after trying it, I could hardly walk off and away from the thing on my jellied legs, with a light, spinning head; and I couldn't do justice to a Dagwood dog, twirled icecream or fairy-floss tuft for the rest of the day. But the Tilt-a-whirl gave me a metaphor for that undulating 'lie of the land' most common in the experience of East Coast Australians.

My landscape discussion with Ray took place in the mid 1990s when I was seeing East Coast Australia through fresh eyes after living for 7 years in Belgium which, along with The Netherlands, was often called 'The Low Countries'. The perfect land for bicycles. Even Belgian musical hero, Jaques Brel, wrote a song lamenting 'My Poor Flat Country'. As I travelled in Australia again by car and train from visiting my ageing mother in Cairns, NQ, to Sydney to rebuild my main art outlet at Ray Hughes Gallery, to my studio in Brisbane/Gold Coast I saw, between the mountain ranges and the sea, how hilly and undulating Australia's coastal plain really was – not only in the bush, but in all those big and small towns from Innisfail to Dungog. Few house builders had enjoyed the ease of flat foundations. Instead, so many houses with their up or down curving driveways had different stump heights from side to side or front to back; sometimes drastically different, more commonly slight, deceptive and problematic. Hence the Tilt-a-whirl town and country landscape metaphor. More subtle aspects of this Tilt-a-whirl reading of terrain had arisen during those halcyon, free-wheeling days of my 1980s 'golf period', spent for fun with artist and collector mates. While playing badly in general, if putting well, I would espouse my tongue-in-cheek theory that I could read the greens well because of my years of life drawing. My skill in mapping a graphic path, I said, from hillocky breasts, across undulating rib cages, over the bulge of the stomach and finding home in the hole of the naval, equated to a good putt. On days my putting was worst of all, I would trundle despondently to the next tee muttering about expressionist drawing styles.

My 'new eyes' review of my homeland during the 1990s prompted my first actual landscape-based paintings. Twenty years earlier I had recoiled from Australia's fixation with landscape painting – even by artists I admired – and the dominant assumption that Australian art *was, could only be* landscape. Instead, I pursued my interest in figurative, social, even Pop narratives and removed any sense of horizon from my work. At art school I already worked out the only way to stand out among young artists [so many emulating in pastiche their current heroes of New York geometric abstraction and minimalism] was to do the opposite. Within my figuration, I did take influence from earlier American 'all over' abstract expressionism on the one hand and, on the other, seeing no contradiction, got my compositions 'up in the air' in the historic, Baroque mannerism of Rubens, Caravaggio,



Between Stop & Give Way 1998, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 153 × 122 cm
(Collection: Graham & Judith Bell, Brisbane)



Caution smoke – Cattle slow 1996, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 148 × 105 cm
(Collection: Graham & Judith Bell, Brisbane)

Michelangelo and El Greco. The up, across and down of these artists I had admired from afar in time and space as a schoolboy, dreaming away in a soporific, tropical Cairns high school art room.

So it was after decades of this sort of resistance that, on my return from Europe in my 40s, I gave in to Australia's undeniable landscape. I still wanted a way around that dominant horizon used so masterfully by Fred Williams against his scatter of blobs, logs, stumps, sprouts and bandicoot holes – his paint ball potshots. I found that way in my surging, uncertain Tilt-a-whirl format, whose angles and increments were pre-empted in my facetious 'golf link[s]' to life drawing skills. However I maintained my social narrative in these landscapes through human references, along the highways, railways, country roads and winding tracks of my vantage points. I rarely, if ever paint totally natural scenes – and never go really 'bush' looking for one. Even the across and down figtrees are planted by people in towns. These figtrees are among those specific motifs – like clouds passing across a sky – which allow complete subjective freedom while remaining unquestionably 'real'. I can paint at will, following [made up] branches across and roots down wherever I want them to lead me. This 'mindless' creative freedom while maintaining a cohesive image is a most desirable, relaxed state for an older artist's brain after years of mental wrangling about my work; free to enjoy simply weaving the fabric of the paintings surface, while reflecting on ALL the many ways of painting, from the simple to the extremely complex.

In my earlier anti-landscape years I had experimented with formats. Refusing to make decisions on size or shape before anything else appeared, I worked on unstretched canvases, cropping and shaping later, after the image determined itself. Also I kept open the option to add more bits on, which prompted odd shapes and led to disjunctive, harshly divided diptychs of unlike components. After all I figured, paintings usually end up hanging or existing next to foreign objects or areas – even if just blank, indifferent wall space – so why not impose such settings myself. These days I've mellowed into convenient, pre-stretched supports, yet my anticipation of shape for concept is most evident in this exhibition. Necessity has also given birth to invention. In lean times I've marked time painting on long, narrow canvas offcuts with satisfying results – sometimes with surprising commercial outcomes. Collectors of my work despairing of no more wall space, have suddenly found room above the picture rail, or between the kitchen door and the servery for one more Smith in these long, narrow, horizontal or vertical shapes!

On goes my rebellion against harmonious 'golden mean' proportions. Although the rigorous square grid of a crossword gives me metaphors for life's puzzles, I still seek to paint 'outside the square', across, down and outside the outlines of the shapes and forms in the work. In recent history Impressionism made more of shimmering light and atmosphere than form. Van Gogh advanced the 'break-out' through physicality of brushwork. Cezanne hovered intellectually in and outside the lines and the Cubists struggled with all sides at once. Of course, indigenous artists in Australia and many other places never worried about these false constrictions in the first place. But to be convincing, contemporary artists must find their own way to 'a manner', learning from but not just copying their heroes.

In my 20s, one of my evolving themes was tourists in Pacific Island shirts. Frustrated with them being too static instead of appearing blown away in the wind on beaches and at the rails of cruise ships, I threw buckets of high key colour across the

figures and my fastidiously painted, tonally-gradated background skies. In its simplicity, it was one of the best painting moves I ever made – it got me 'outside the lines'; and I've painted inside and outside forms simultaneously ever since. I let the brushwork 'wander off', breaking down the tyranny of outline – that false construct of convenience in Western Art. The energy of the forms – especially if they are 'living' subjects – is liberated to hover like auras around the forms, enlivening the spaces beyond. When painting something like the figtrees, this flow of energy looks after itself.

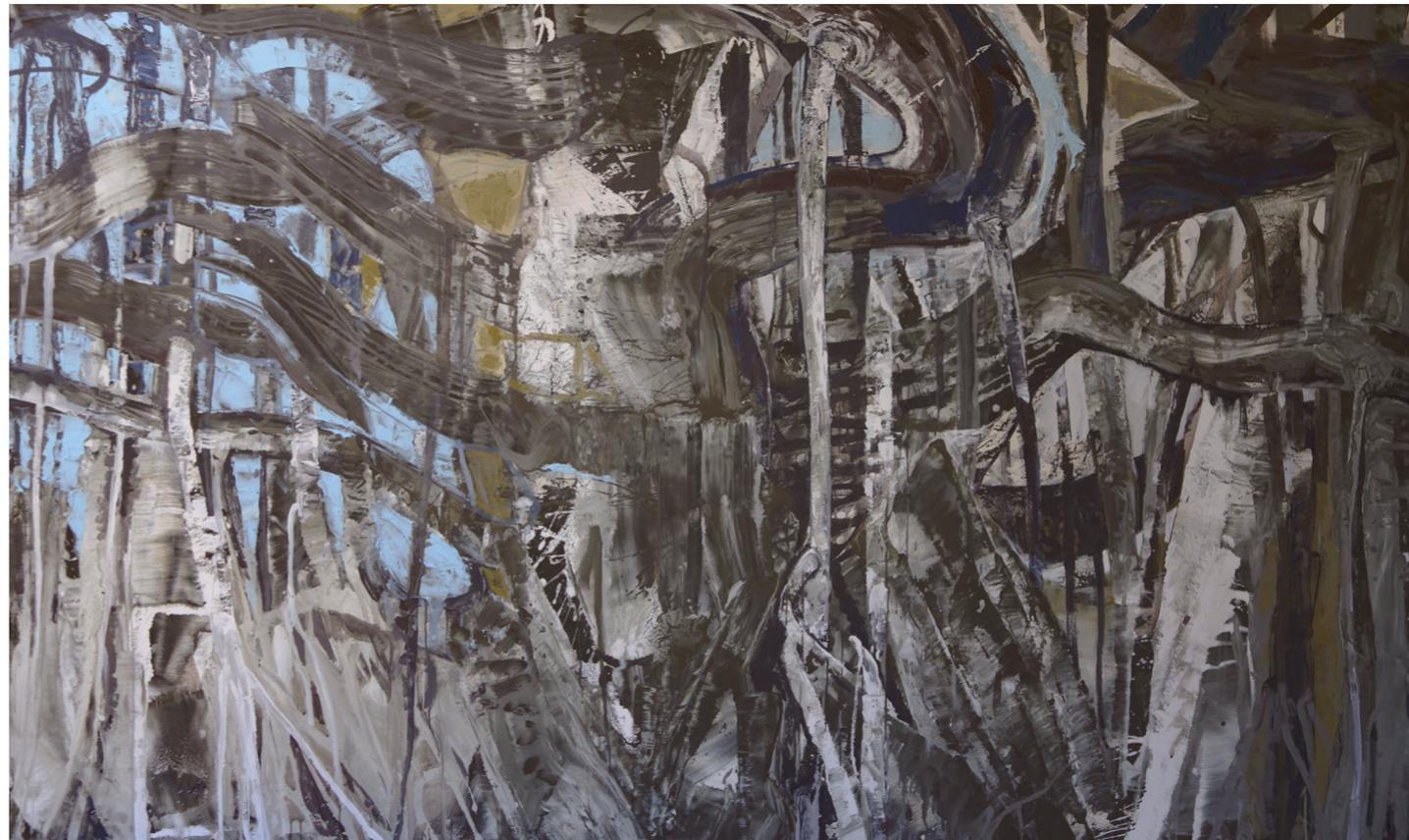
Bridges are another motif to which I often return for their dynamic, but also symbolic, uses. In life, bridges are usually built up from below. Then, through their long lives they act as ways across to avoid going down. At Gundagai in southern NSW, the two parallel, old log-built, rail and road bridges across the flood plain are no longer in use, but stand as grand heritage structures. From the southside of town [now built on a hill] they cross a kilometre of flat, open gumtree landscape to an arched steel section across the Murrumbidgee River's regular course where the town was originally built. The first white settlers did not consult, or chose arrogantly to ignore local indigenous knowledge and within ten years the town was totally swept away by flood waters. Rebuilt on hills on the northside of the flood plain, Gundagai is now a beautiful country town where I like to stop over if travelling on the Hume Highway. Further west on the Newell Highway another long, low flood plain bridge inspired 'Murrumbidgee Sunset'. When painting them, bridges intrinsically impose across and down composition, placement and direction, but also unavoidable symbolism. Is the gap between artist and viewer 'bridged' by the work, communicated across? Does it even need to be? Do an artist's ideas and feelings need to correspond with the viewer's reaction and response? I believe the artist's role is to evoke, provoke, not preach or teach.

I like to think I think long, deep and critically about the choices and approaches adopted in my paintings. Yet all sorts of other divergent, irrelevant stuff strays across my mind while I'm actually painting them. When determination chains me in my studio on Brisbane days of glorious weather, I drift off in nostalgic desire for past road trips, not only of my wild young days, but also from that visionary, back-from-Europe decade. On gloomy, pensive days, however jubilant the paintwork in hand, associations triggered by chance send me raking over the embers of historic family and love affairs. I dwell on destructive misunderstandings or missed opportunities for meaningful repairs. Good or bad, these reminiscences leave me feeling hollow, worried that while I'm sacrificing the day to my [maybe futile] 'higher calling' everyone else is out having fun. In reality, many are grinding through the day in jobs they're tired of or even hate, thinking about their own problems and wishing they had all day to enjoy something fulfilling – like painting a picture! These lateral meanderings, along with thoughts of fairground-ride space frames, golf's similarity to drawing, historic European art movements, hobby puzzles, popular songs and so on, help me unravel greater concepts. In this mental smorgasbord I find metaphors, symbols and mixed, multiple meanings for my attempts to make enduring art. I take up the brush once more, consider the clues and work across and down within and outside the crossword puzzle grid of our lives.

IAN SMITH, Brisbane, 2022



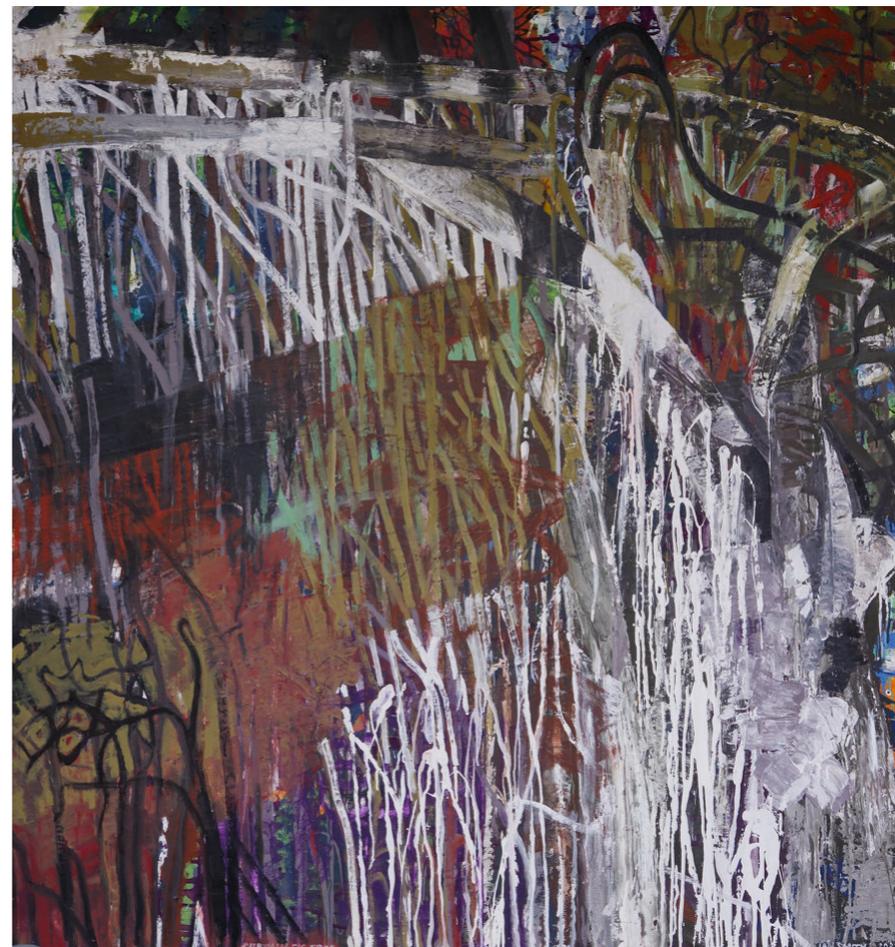
Across & down fig 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 188 × 278 cm Collection: Rockhampton Museum of Art



Forth, back, across & down fig 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 178 × 300 cm



Jesse in botanica 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 126 × 183 cm



Curtain fig tree 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 146 × 139 cm



Report from the land 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 96 × 196 cm



*Report from the city 2021
Acrylic on canvas
142 × 52 cm*



*Report from the town 2021
Acrylic on canvas
136 × 46 cm*



Landscape detail 2020, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 90 cm



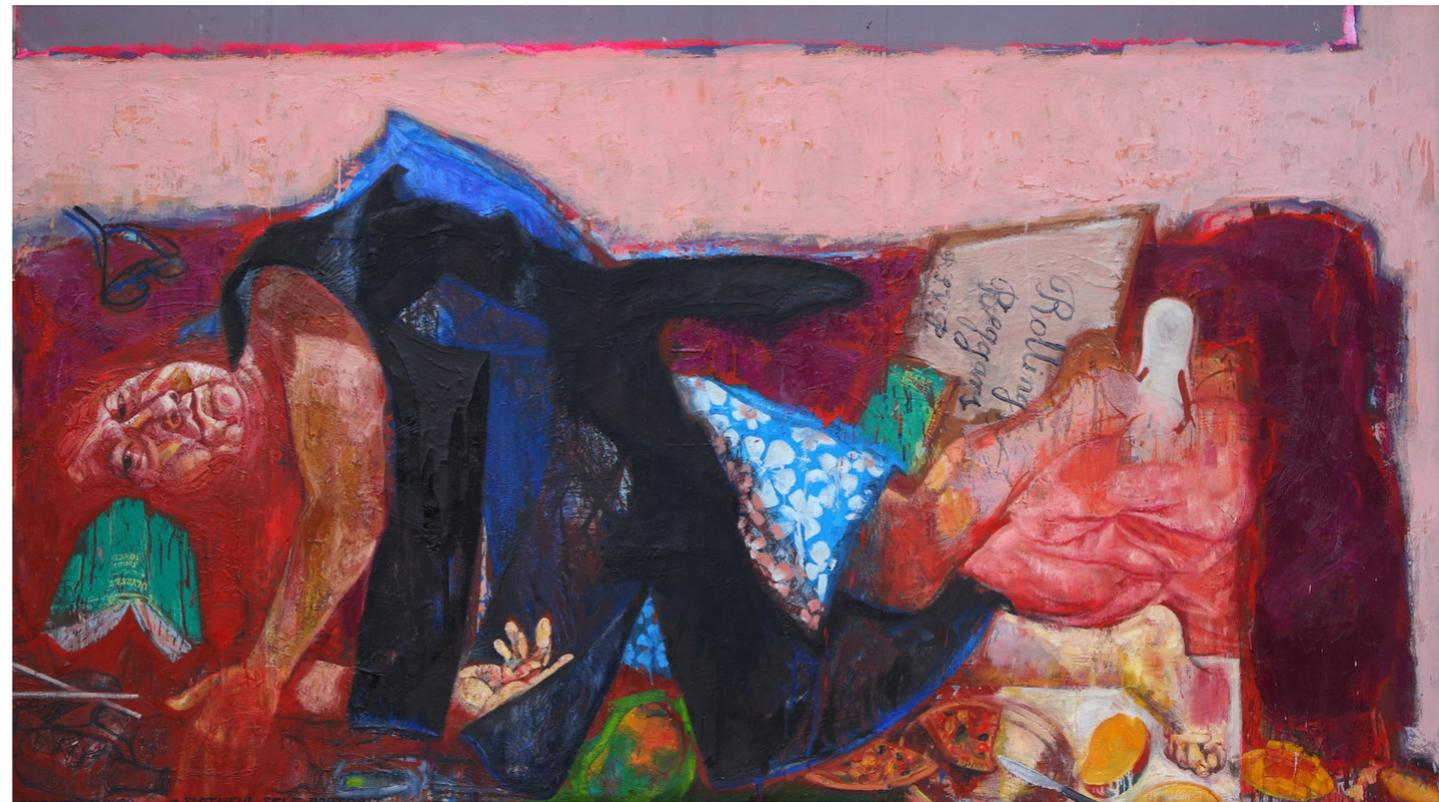
Report from the bush 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 61 x 217 cm



Go West 2009, Oil on canvas, 128 x 170 cm



In bed with skin issues 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 183 cm



Slothful self portrait 2008, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 120 × 216 cm



Island messages 2010, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 67 × 107 cm



Trinder Park 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 168 × 38 cm



A bridge divided 1998, Watercolour, pencil collage on paper, 67 × 55 cm



Murrumbidgee sunset 2008, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 112 × 334 cm



Murrumbidgee nocturne 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 61 x 183 cm



On the bridge to Gundagai 2011, Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 180 cm



Gundagai Autumn 2018, Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 180 cm



Landscape with figures 2005, Oil & acrylic on canvas, 80 x 140



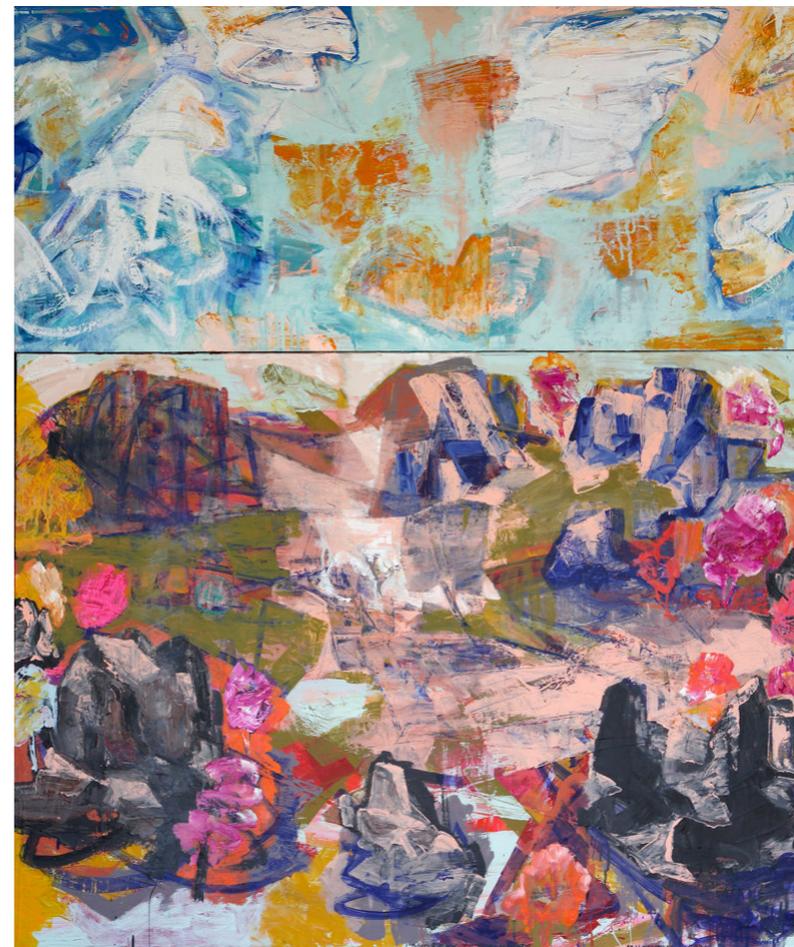
A cross, across & down fig 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 92 × 122 cm



Back & forth fig 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 92 × 122 cm



Tilt-a-whirl landscape for Jun Chen 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 91 × 122 cm



Land & sky tilt-a-whirl 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 144 × 122 cm



Fruitshop girl with aubergines 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 59 cm



Fruitshop girl with turnips 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 61 x 60 cm

*Fruitshop girl with nashi pears 2021
Acrylic on canvas
61 x 61 cm cm*





Rainbow wings over Duck Island 2020



Glam lounge 2020



Enjoy Christmas with giant inflatables 2022



Chicks on bulls 2022



Peacock Islands 2021

All works pencil, watercolour & collage on paper
42 x 30 cm, except 'Giant floaty mat'



Leda & the flamingo 2020



Giant floaty mat 2021, 37 x 53 cm



Washboard floaty recliner 2020



When did unihorn turn into unicorn? 2022



Girl on a unicorn 2020



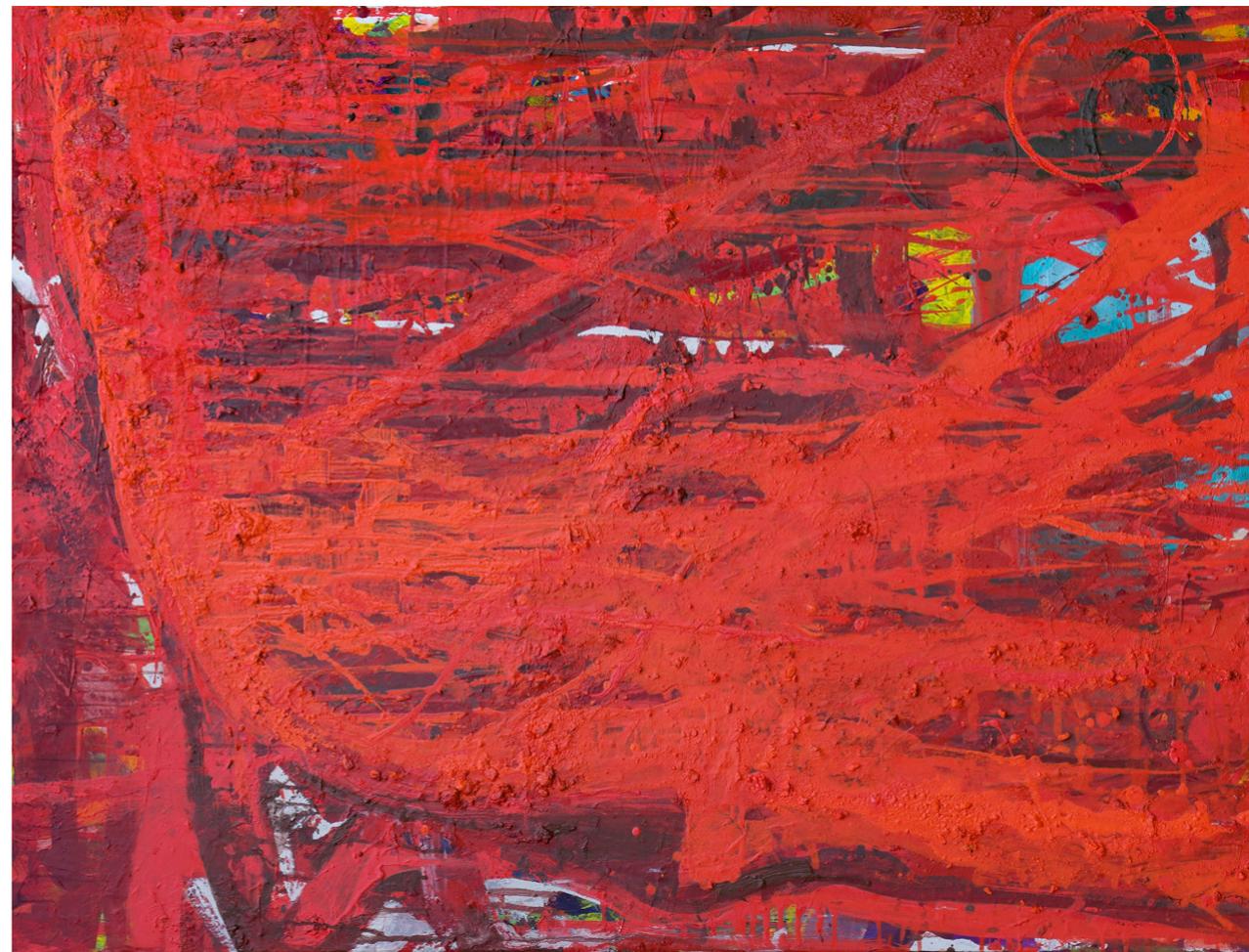
Strawberry floaty 2022



Crocodile boy 2021



1 way over – 2 ways under 1998, Pastel on paper, 56 × 76 cm



Red fig 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 122 × 92 cm



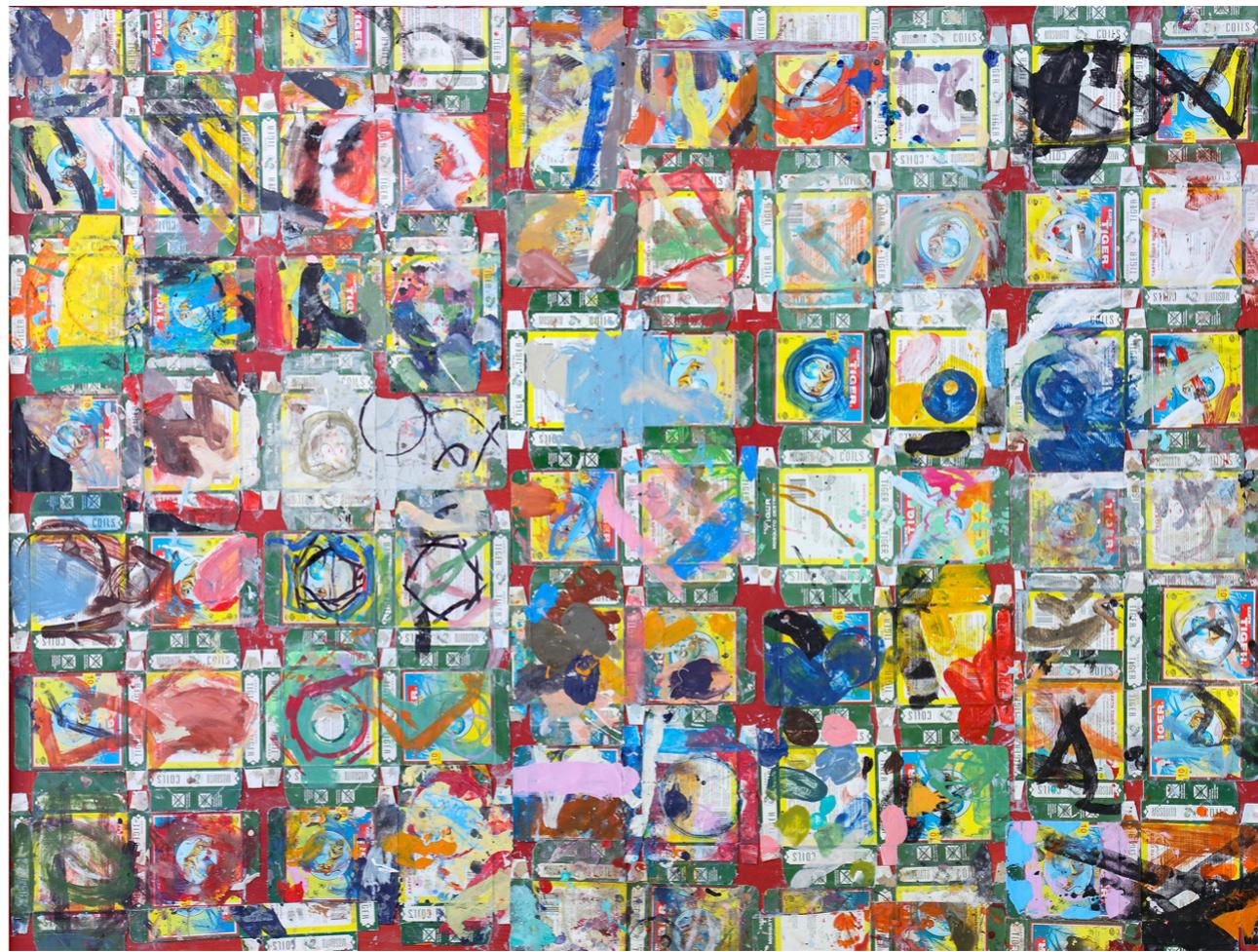
Water creature 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 141 x 88 cm



View from MountView Court 1994, Oil & collage on canvas, 145 x 105 cm



My year of tiger – Black spot 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 120 cm



My year of tiger – Blue spiral 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 160 x 120 cm

IAN SMITH – Biography

Australian Collections: NGA, Canberra; NGV, Melbourne; QAG, Brisbane; GNT, Darwin; Regional and City council Galleries: Hamilton, Vic.; Karratha, WA; Cairns, Stanthorpe, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Gympie, Gladstone, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Townsville Logan and others; University of Qld, QUT, Griffith University, Brisbane; JCU, Townsville; Uni. Central Qld., Rockhampton; Parliment House, Canberra; Student Unions Sydney Uni., Uni. NSW, Sydney and Melbourne Uni. etc.

Overseas Collections: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; Shenzen Art Museum, China; National Collection Ghana, Emmen City Cultural Centre, Netherlands. Private collections in USA, UK, Netherlands, and Belgium – particularly in Antwerp – where Smith lived for 7 years with his Belgian wife and 2 Australian born children; 1988 to 1994 when he returned to Australia alone and lived Brisbane/Gold coast/Moreton Bay Islands, making frequent trips to Sydney and Cairns.

Born Cairns, 1950, he lived a working class, bush and beach yet artistically active boyhood. In 1968, on a Commonwealth Scholarship, he did one year of Architecture before dropping out, working in a bank for a year then moving to Melbourne to do a Diploma of Art & Design at Prahran College [1970 -1972]. 1973, painted TV sets at Channel 9, then mid-year returned to Brisbane to teach painting and drawing full-time at Qld College of Art until 1979 when he quit and has painted full-time ever since. He has staged many one man shows and been invited or contributed to numerous group shows here and overseas.

Exhibitions since 1972 in Australia and Overseas: include +/- 25 solo shows, Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane/Sydney 1972-2006; +/- 7 solo shows, Heiser Gallery, Brisbane 2006 to 2017. He is now represented by Woolloongabba Art Gallery, Brisbane. Shows: Best of Works on Paper, 2018; 'Big Paintings – small paintings', 2019; 'So You Want It In Black & White', 2020; 'Across & Down', 2022. While living in Europe, involved in many exhibitions; most notably solo shows at Campo & Campo, Antwerp and Emmen Cultural Centre, Netherlands. He has been in numerous curated group shows in commercial and public galleries here and overseas, most recently The Gold Awards, Rockhampton Museum of Art, 2022; and The Archie 100, a Century of the Archibald Prize, AGNSW and touring 2021 to 2024. Curated solo exhibitions include 'Ian Smith – Survey', MOCA, Brisbane, 1988. 'Since I left', 1996 Cairns Regional Gallery then touring; 'On and off the Road', 2010 Gold Coast City Art Gallery then touring to 8 regional galleries, ending appropriately in Cairns. 'Homegrown Images' , Kick Arts, Cairns, 2016; 'The Beenleigh Line', Logan Art Gallery, 2020; 'Flesh & Bone', Noosa Regional Gallery, 2020.

In a career which really started as a schoolboy, his work uses images of everyday even mundane existence from cane toads to grand bridges, from explicit sexual scenes to blank roadside billboards in landscape to evoke universal issues. He has won many prizes including Tattersalls Landscape Prize, Brisbane, 2012; and been an Archibald Prize finalist 9 times over 4 decades [first time 1977, most recently 2010]. Also hung several times in the Salon des Refuses, Wynne and Sulman Prizes.



Ian Smith in his studio 2022. Photograph Kerrin Smith.

Exhibition dates

14 June – 16 July 2022

Woolloongabba Art Gallery

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