

18 ARTS

Art Peter Haynes



Artist Helen Geier has an exhibition at Beaver Galleries in Deakin and is also the subject of a new book by Canberra Times art critic Peter Haynes. Photo: Jay Cronan

Geier celebrates beauty in 60 exhibitions

On September 15, *Coming Storm*, an exhibition of new paintings and works on paper by Helen Geier, opened at Beaver Galleries in Deakin. While exhibition openings are regular and expected events for artists, this one was, according to my count, the artist's 60th solo exhibition since 1974. Add to this her participation (since 1972) in 126 group exhibitions and we have a very impressive exhibition record for one of Canberra's senior artists.

Her exhibitions cover a wide geographic spread that includes not only Australia but Austria, Singapore, New Zealand, China, Britain, Japan, France, South Korea, Serbia and India. Her work is in many public, institutional, corporate and private collections throughout Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Library of Australia, the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. Internationally, her work is represented in collections in Singapore, the United States, India and, most recently, in Shanghai, China.

A monograph on the artist authored by the present writer was launched as part of the opening proceedings of her Beaver Galleries exhibition. The book – from which all subsequent quotes are taken – follows the artist's career from the late 1960s to 2016 and includes discussions of 60 paintings and works on paper, the earliest from 1969, the most recent from 2016.

Geier was meant to be an artist. Her parents (Matt and Reg Wigg) actively encouraged her interest in artistic pursuits. Her mother Matt was a painter and the art teacher at Gosford High School on the New South Wales Central Coast. Her father Reg, also a teacher, instilled in her a lifelong connection

with the landscape that is powerfully demonstrated in her current exhibition.

After high school, Geier studied at Sydney's National Art School from 1964 to 1968. Geier undertook teaching training at Alexander Mackie Teachers' College (1969), subsequently teaching at Kingsgrove High School in Sydney before travelling in 1970 to Britain with her first husband, sculptor Patrick Geier.

Geier encountered an art world in 1970 London that was still feeling the influence of Pop Art. Pop's critique of the nature of making art within confined cultural parameters would have a profound impact on the future directions of Geier's art. In London, at St Martin's School of Art, Geier did a Certificate of Postgraduate Studies (1972-73) and returned to printmaking.

In 1974 Geier returned to Australia and, specifically, to Melbourne. Importantly for her practice, Melbourne was the centre of printmaking in Australia and, according to Professor Sasha Grishin, "she arrived in Australia as possibly the most accomplished photo-lithographer in the country".

From 1974 to 1980, Geier taught at Prahran College of Advanced Education. Her colleagues included Fred Cress, Jeff Makin, Victor Majzner and integral to her future development, Roger Kemp. "While she taught painting and colour theory she was able to concentrate on printmaking and photolithography in particular" (Haynes). She also reinforced ways of thinking that were incipient during her student days and given concrete expression in London. For her "the possibilities for the celebration of individual expression without (real or imagined) stylistic or thematic constraints were already with her following her London years. As always with this artist she was ready to get on

with it in her own determined way" (Haynes).

A marriage breakdown and a move to Braidwood with her new husband in 1981 saw the beginnings of Geier's continuing relationship with Canberra. She began teaching at the (then) Canberra School of Art and remained there until 1991 when she resigned in order to devote herself full-time to her art practice. Her new rural environment "was a revealing opposite to the urban environments of Melbourne and London that had been her recent homes" (Haynes). Landscape ("place") however "is not explicitly articulated (in her art). Geier prefers to infer its actuality in her life through subtle pictorial and spatial infusions into the amalgam of devices and aesthetic strategies that constitute her art" (Haynes). For Geier, the 1980s was a "decade of exploration, discovery and interpretation and a decade rich in express-

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Helen Geier

ive complexity and aesthetic interrogation" (Haynes). It was also a time when, unbeknownst to her, she was suffering from a brain tumour that was affecting, among other things, her sight and balance.

The 1990s began with the successful operation on her brain tumour in February 1991. This decade was characterised by a "singular determination to maintain her vision and follow through her own aesthetic and intellectual paths" (Haynes). This rich and fecund decade culminated in two large survey exhibitions that pointed to "an intrinsic

unity in Geier's work and invited a reassessment of her standing as an artist" (Haynes). These were *Different Fields of Vision*, a survey of Geier's printed work from 1972 to 1999 curated by Sasha Grishin; and *Dissolving View. The intellectual landscape of Helen Geier* curated by the present writer that looked at paintings and works on paper from 1969 to 2000.

Geier's art from 2000 is characterised by "a largeness of thematic interests and the openness and elasticity of her own thought processes and researches that preclude the possibilities of boring repetition as ever being present in her work" (Haynes). The years since 2010 see Geier continuing to be conspicuously productive and "witness new explorations, investigations and expressions that result not only from the mining of her personal archive but also from cultural associations that continue to give her art an incisive edge" (Haynes).

The works in Geier's 2016 Beaver Galleries exhibition see "her pictorial energies directed into further explorations of the landscape" (Haynes) and underscore that her undeviating exploration of herself and her world offers results that are important ingredients in Australia's visual culture.

In her own words, Helen Geier makes art "to celebrate beauty. And to affect other people by the things I've created... I'm so pleased when I've made something. It wouldn't exist otherwise... My work gives me a pathway to my inner, intuitive self and fully occupies me... Paintings are worlds within themselves".

Peter Haynes' monograph *Helen Geier* is available at the Beaver Galleries, Denisson Street, Deakin, \$70 rrp. *Coming Storm* by Helen Geier is on at Beaver Galleries until October 2.