



Sarah Tomasetti, *Jewel of snows in Wayfaring* at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Supplied

## Artist uses fresco technique for images of the sublime

### Art review

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**SARAH Tomasetti: *Wayfaring*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until September 15.**

Quite a few years ago, the Melbourne-based artist Sarah Tomasetti devised a very peculiar technique of painting. It revived a traditional method of mural decoration that had its roots in antiquity and reached its heyday in the Italian Renaissance, where the artist worked on wet or dry plaster on a wall, usually with water-soluble pigments. In this way the painting became part of the wall.

Tomasetti generally works with oils and incises her plaster under which she suspends a cloth that separates it from the wall. At the end of the process, she transfers the painting on plaster off the wall and onto a canvas carrier to make it into a portable easel painting accessible to a domestic art collector. Painting in true fresco on walls still continues in Australia and I recently saw an impressive eight-metre-long fresco painted by Garry Shead earlier this year at St Paul's College at the University of Sydney.

Tomasetti's use of the fresco technique appears to be essentially for aesthetic and spiritual purposes to convey both the mood of antiquity and the idea of the handmade object that contains within itself traces of the passage of time. In virtually all of the paintings, there is a faint cracking in the surface

reminding the viewer that the surfaces in art are frequently animate and are known to age and decay. Tomasetti is an artist with a romantic temperament whose personal interaction with nature is of considerable importance and the art object itself is something designed for contemplation and asserts its own particular form of magic.

Tomasetti's technique and artistic temperament draw her to making images of the sublime - remote snow-laden mountains in very subtle dissolving tones, distant clouds and drifting mists that we associate with the German romantics, especially Caspar David Friedrich. We saw this imagery strongly expressed in her exhibition at this gallery in 2016 and there is a further exploration in the present exhibition.

She develops the idea of pilgrimage or wayfaring with a focus on the pilgrimage route to Kailash. The artist writes about this series of work, "A living deity, the peak spawns four of the six great rivers of South Asia that diverge into thousands of tributaries on their way to the sea. It is a source of life and spiritual cleansing, a path on the journey to enlightenment ... The plateau is melting, in some places up to ten times faster than the poles ... The slow tracing of the granite face of the mountain into the plaster by dot and scratch is, in itself, born of a devotional impulse."

The paintings in their role of meditative icons vary in success. *Jewel of snows* is the most successful of the series, where the im-



Sarah Tomasetti, *Dolma La* (detail) in *Wayfaring* at Beaver Galleries. Picture: Supplied

age hovers between a dream and a tangible reality - present but never fully graspable. It is a very subtle painting that reveals itself slowly on prolonged viewing. The white on white and the scratchiness of the surface suggest a mystical presence.

*Dolma La* is another strong painting, where the naked rock dominates the passages of snow and there is something quite

moving and forlorn in the image. Studies for her major paintings, such as the exquisite *Study for Dolma La dusk II*, demonstrate some of the thought processes involved in the resolution of the subject. Tomasetti's study of knots, as a metaphor for complexities in nature, or the use of etching on plaster are directions in her art that remain to be resolved.