

Paintings that are meditative, understated and powerful

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THORNTON Walker:
Studies in solitude. Beaver
Galleries, 81 Denison
Street, Deakin. Until
November 1, 2020.

The immortal Matsuo Basho wrote in the 17th century, "What is there to say? I have not led a clerical life, nor have I served normal pursuits ... I labour without results, am worn of spirit and wrinkled of brow. Now when autumn is half over, and every morning and each evening brings changes to the scene, I wonder if that is not what is meant by dwelling in unreality."

"Dwelling in unreality" has become familiar to many artists, particularly those living in locked-down Melbourne.

Thornton Walker is a Melbourne-based artist who has for many decades engaged with Zen Buddhism

in general and the writings of Basho in particular.

His art involves a prolonged meditation on the states of reality particularly while working in the enforced isolation of his studio. In the catalogue note to this exhibition, he quotes the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi, who in *The Book of Love* wrote, "Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love

be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

This exhibition is all about ways to kneel and kiss the ground and an inner silence and stillness that this evokes. Unlike many of Walker's exhibitions that are fairly tightly organised around a particular theme or narrative, this one is more

about a thought process or sensibility.

The sense of stillness to be discovered within a scattered still life composition accompanied by a quote from Basho, brushes and bowls, leaves and fruit, shells and skulls and the various other paraphernalia that abounds in his studio.

It is as if objects have been brought together in a random pattern, but within that randomness there is an eternal pattern that can be discovered through meditation.

Possibly the most adventurous paintings at this exhibition are those of seascapes that appear almost like an investigation into the metaphysics of the scene.

Take, for example, the largish canvas, *Stillness 1*, measuring 120 centimetres by 100 centimetres.

We seem to be observing



Thornton Walker, *Stillness I*. Picture: Supplied

four waves moving towards the shore that in the foreground space, closest to the viewer, dissolve into layers of paint that dribble over largely indecipherable script.

There is movement, but within this movement there seems to be an inner peace, a special sense of stillness.

A feature of Walker's work is that he does not illustrate

something that happens, but evokes a state of meditation within which we perceive the essence of what is alluded to in the painting.

This is not so much a seascape as an exploration of the special stillness that one experiences between the moment when a wave fully forms, but the crest has not yet broken, and when we can feel the moving swell on

the surface of the sea.

In the process of painting, the artist constantly combats the desire to create a simple illusionistic depiction and allows his working on the canvas to remain transferring the meditative process to the viewer.

You are drawn into the vast stillness of the ocean - a space within which you can lose yourself.

Walker's *Storm coming in* is an oil painting of similar dimensions, where the artist places himself amongst the waves and we are invited to share in the sensation of the magnitude of the forces of nature.

It is grand and awe-inspiring, sublime but also elemental.

This is a quietly powerful exhibition and, as with much of this artist's work, it gains strength through its meditative and understated nature.