

Be transported to a celestial realm

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Sarah Tomasetti: Celestial ground. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until February 26. beavergalleries.com.au.

Sarah Tomasetti's work is distinctive and immediately recognisable through its technique and imagery.

Over a number of decades, Tomasetti has been experimenting with a form of fresco mural painting that goes back to antiquity and had a glorious flowering during the Italian Renaissance. Cloth is stretched over a wall and is covered by a lime plaster that she paints and stains with soluble pigments and other pigments are applied mixed with a wax binder in an encaustic technique or with oils in secco on the dry surface. Once the painting has been resolved, the cloth is detached from the wall and is attached to a new support - canvas, wooden panel or stone.

The imagery is a personal, emotive and spiritual response to a particular scene or encounter, frequently evoking a feeling for the sublime. In this, it is in keeping with the conventions of High Romanticism that we may associate with artists including JMW Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. However, the peculiarity of the technique guides the viewer to a more contemplative, mystical state of mind rather than an unbridled emotive outburst. The melting snows of great mountain ranges may also be making a comment on global warming as the peaks are now melting at an unprecedented rate.

The catalyst for this body of work was a trip that the artist undertook in 2019 to a small village at the foot of the Himalayas. She notes in her artist's statement: "This series of works emerged from a single day's trek upwards to a tiny stone temple from which the Himalayas can be seen in the distance in three directions and in the fourth the hills and plains to the south ... For locals, the gods and goddesses reside in the mountains, and some hold that living at high altitude, one is closer to the sacred landscape."



Sarah Tomasetti's *Ground sky II*, detail. Picture: Supplied

From a distance there is the impression of drama and majesty, but close up, the work possesses a preciousness.

Tomasetti aims for a holistic experience where the mountains kiss the skies, and a celestial zone is created that is more evoked than graphically delineated and clearly

defined. Many of the paintings create a luminous haze where the light reflects off the snow and there is a glow and a radiance that is impossible to photograph and difficult to convey in paint.

Her small paintings, such as *Approaching storm I*, have a crispness, lightness and clarity, but the strongest works are also among the largest in the exhibition and include *Ground sky II* where the abstracted elements of the sky have quiet majesty and power. Tomasetti enters a fine balancing act where she aims to seduce the eye and to pull it into the composition where it will discover a myriad of small, enchanted details.

Inherent in her technique is a texture

where there are hairline cracks in the surface created when the fresco plaster was pulled from the wall, and this creates an interesting, mysterious patina. In some of the small paintings, including *Ground fracture* and *Black pool IV*, this patina is particularly evident. Her work plays on this macro/micro contrast where from a distance there is the impression of drama and majesty, but close up, the work possesses a preciousness and unplanned chance encounters.

Although working within the broad conventions of landscape art, Tomasetti's paintings are unusual and have the power to enchant the viewer and to transport them into a celestial realm.