

**Eleanor Louise Butt**

***Time Circles***

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*Suffice it to note that our relation to the environment in which we find ourselves, and of which we form a part, is multiply constituted: the real, perceptions of the real, the imaginary, the symbolic, memory and experience, form a complex tapestry at the heart of our response to our environment, and by extension, to landscape imagery.<sup>1</sup>*

Concerned with the ways in which people are connected to place, Eleanor Louise Butt's artistic practice can be understood as an exploration and expression of her relationship with the natural environment. Butt engages in observation and a quiet reflection of place through the mediums of painting, photography and sculpture. As such, *Time Circles* is a mixed-media installation, consisting of a series of framed painting and collage works on paper, and an assortment of found and handmade objects assembled in the form of a "still life as landscape."

Describing her practice as "rooted in the Australian landscape", Butt has long recognised the gravitational pull and influence that certain places have over people. This exhibition presents the outcomes of Butt's exploration of, and reflections on, a specific place – a forest in Maldon, central Victoria. The landscape of this area captured her imagination when she first visited it a number of years ago and she has been working with imagery and impressions of this place ever since. A large-scale, hand-printed, black and white photograph that Butt took of the gigantic, looming boulder, which sits at the site, forms the basis of the centerpiece painting, *Sundial (marking the passage of time)*, and has informed much of this body of work.

The title of the exhibition, *Time Circles*, is fitting on a multitude of levels. Time, or more specifically the passage of time, is a central theme of Butt's work. Presented as a series, these paintings show the same landscape depicted again and again over time. The elements in the landscape remain unaffected by time; they are the constants in our ever-changing world. Yet it is the shifting shapes of the shadows, which appear throughout Butt's paintings and sculptural works that reveal the passage of the sun and the passing of time. The notion of nature existing on a timeline independent of us, enduring and sustaining, reinforces the temporal nature of human existence. Furthermore, the idea of time as an ongoing, cyclical movement is reflected in the repetitive, almost obsessive

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*, 2011, p. 2.

nature of Butt's practice. The continuous cycle of paintings and compositions exist collectively as well as autonomously, with one informing the other so that it is impossible to tell which was conceptualised first. The installation of this exhibition, with twenty-one paintings arranged in a grid and running across two walls, effectively mirrors the obsessiveness and repetition of Butt's practice.

Butt's work is clearly informed by an intimate, bodily relationship to the materials she uses, which are predominantly sourced directly from the landscape. These include hand-printed black and white photographs, hand-mixed pigments which she makes using clay collected from forest walks, and objects she has collected such as sticks, rocks and clumps of clay. Many of the sculptural objects displayed within the space are made from clay sourced from the site, which she moulds into organic forms to mimic the shapes found in the landscape, such as boulders, pathways, ledges and shadows. By literally incorporating elements of the natural environment into her works, Butt illustrates the vital relationship between the body, or more specifically, her body, and the landscape.

Butt is inspired by Ikebana, the ancient Japanese practice of flower arrangement, which seeks to bring nature and humanity together, encouraging a close connection and understanding between the two. Ikebana practice is characterised by a minimalist approach, emphasising often overlooked parts of the plant such as its stems and leaves, and drawing emphasis to its shape, line and form. Similarly, Butt simplifies her painted and sculpted objects, presenting them in an abstract, minimalist form. Inspired by Ikebana, the natural environment plays a vital role in the way Butt composes objects within the space, or elements within a painting. Observing the change placements of objects in nature, she attempts to recreate these arrangements within her compositions; "balancing objects as a branch might hang on a cliff, or a pool of water might reflect the sky." In this way, her 'chance compositions' often appear awkward and unstable, yet they possess an essential sense of balance.

The paintings presented in *Time Circles* are a combination of works made in the studio, and works painted en plein air over a period of two days when Butt returned to the site of her original inspiration. The studio paintings draw inspiration from the collected objects that Butt arranges into constantly evolving still life scenes on her workbench. These works rely on a memory of place, and because the arrangement of the imagined landscape can be physically manipulated, the resulting compositions are considered, conveying the sense of having been deliberately constructed. By contrast, the plein air paintings are more instinctual; the free-flowing movement in the lines and shapes assumedly mirroring the actual movement of the shapes and shadows as the wind blew and the sun moved across the sky, changing the landscape before the artist's very eyes.

Interestingly, the two styles of painting are distinguishable from their differing colour palettes. The often muted palette of blacks, creams and browns, colours found in nature, reflect the colours of the objects Butt picks up from her walks, and are a result of the hand-mixed clay paints she uses. These muted tones are intercepted by an occasional splash of bright yellow. The plein air paintings have a distinctly different palette of pink, grey and black, the unconscious result of Butt responding to the different quality of light at the site and the colours that appeared as the light cast shadows on the granite rock.

Despite the marked difference in style and colour, these works contain many recurring motifs and shapes, each of which represent specific elements found in nature. Circles are the most significant recurring motif throughout the paintings and sculptural works, and as the title suggests, they tie the series together. Functioning as a motif for the sun, the circles appear frequently as a bright yellow orb, like that of a child's painting. As an immediately recognisable shape the circles stand out from the more organic forms, and are sometimes used strategically to balance and anchor the composition. The triangle shaped rock which sits on Butt's workbench often turns up in her paintings in an abstracted form and the painted yellow twigs appear repeatedly in her works as bright yellow lines. Black stripes, a new element appearing in later works, represent fallen trees, strikes through the landscape that are possibly the charred remains of a bushfire. A horizontal line anchors many of the works, suggesting the horizon and thus signaling the paintings as landscapes rather than purely abstract compositions. Shadows, in the form of replicated shapes, create the idea of light and dark, and reflect the passage of time as the shapes shift through the sky of the paintings.

Butt's works are not intended to be realistic representations of place. As such, size and scale need not be accurate. The paintings are Picasso-esque in their composition, presenting objects viewed from different perspectives and planes. Butt sees this approach as reflecting an equality of objects, a deliberate practice of non-hierarchical representation. Privileging expression and intuition over realism and objectivity, she consciously imbues objects with value by choosing to include them in the painting.

The abstract, imagined landscapes offer impressions of the natural environment rather than a figurative representation of it. Butt cites one of her influences as the abstract landscape paintings of twentieth-century Australian artist John Wolseley, who conveyed the desire to draw not the landscape itself, but an expression of it. Similarly, Butt moved away from her earlier focus on photography towards painting because she felt that the technique and approach of painting enables a more bodily response, offering a way of actively engaging with and physically relating to place, rather than simply documenting. The rise and accessibility of photography in the twentieth century absolved the need for painting en plein air, a tradition made popular by Impressionism in the late nineteenth century. According to some schools of thought, photography spelled the end of painting altogether. However, by returning to the tradition of landscape painting, Butt acknowledges the importance of physicality as a means of making a connection to place in a meaningful way.

Butt's work does not seek to present a specific place and time, but an abstract landscape that can stand in for any place, and any time. Her practice is intuitive and repetitive, a sort of personal ritual, the outcome of which she describes as "a shrine of sorts to the physical experience of landscape." The icons that are obsessively replicated in sculptural and pictorial form become like deities to the artist, offering comfort and connection. In this way, the repetitive, ritualistic process of creating can be seen as a reverential ode to the landscape, an attempt to achieve oneness with place. In *Time Circles*, Butt presents a cyclical exploration of place, a study that begins and returns to the same site, a revisiting that can be viewed as a pilgrimage to the site of worship.

Text by Laura Couttie.