Outside In

In Sally Anderson’s *Sea Belly Screen*, the sea is always at a distance. It’s seen from the shore, up high, through a window. It’s always *out there,* *over there*—never something you’re in*.* In these paintings, distance has to be constantly negotiated.

Anderson’s landscape imagery is often taken second-hand, borrowed and filtered through the experiences of others. She takes screenshots of her friends’ social media and references this part of her process in her titles. *Heather's Sea View with GM Vessel and MM Banksias*, 2021, is a riff on a view that does not strictly belong to her, and yet it does.

In the *en plein air* tradition, direct sensory experience is essential to capturing place. Anderson’s works treat landscape as something far less fugitive—far less in need of capturing, and much more powerful. When she paints these fleeting moments, Anderson is acknowledging the split-screen nature of contemporary life, with its layering of simultaneous experience, and also questioning inherited values around immediacy and authenticity.

Anderson then builds on these riffs around landscapes, sometimes painting just the shadows within an image, or reproducing it in outline. A screenshot of a cliff, in her hands, might become a panel of spidering lines like a torn piece of map, or a diagram of roots pressing through earth. These transformations are often about compression. She handles these pieces like vignettes, like glimpses into much larger worlds, and then brings them together with tonal blues and other idiosyncratic references to memories, histories and relationships.

Banksias are one of these personal motifs in *Sea Belly Screen*. Their spiky leaves and hairy seedpods bring a bristle of energy but they’re also a piece of the outside brought in—a part of a living tree that has been cut from its landscape, and the birds that might have scattered its seeds, and placed into a vase of still water.

Images of containment run through these works, from domestic interiors, to vessels, framing devices and the belly of her title. But Anderson also appears deeply ambivalent about boundaries and borders. She leaves evidence, at the edges of her canvases and in the seams between panels of colour, of many layers of paint—of histories shifting below the surface. Other works suggest layering through the use of masking, over-painting or the unexpected. One centres on the branching shadow of a banksia, but the vase painted above it is not the one that cast the shadow. In *Sea Belly Screen*, what things are and how they might be perceived is often a matter of perspective.

It’s in these moments that Anderson’s paintings start to describe other kinds of terrain. It becomes difficult, to paraphrase James Turrell, to differentiate between seeing from the inside and seeing from the outside. The vignettes suggest processes of memory. The handling of distance speaks to the way that identity, especially for women, is so often forged in relation to others. Daughter. Lover. Mother. We’re always seeing ourselves, not just from afar, but from multiple points at once.

Jane O’Sullivan 2021