



OLIVER WATTS
AT REDLEAF

THIS IS NO FANTASY
dianne tanzer + nicola stein

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AT REDLEAF

01 - 25 February 2023

"He looked down the slope and, at the base, in the shadow of the wall of the Park, he saw some human figures lying. Those venal and furtive loves filled him with despair. He gnawed the rectitude of his life; he felt that he had been outcast from life's feast." James Joyce, 'A Painful Case', from Dubliners

The idea that Sydney has "secret beaches" at first seems unconvincing, one of those harmless media fictions which announce the arrival of summer. How can any secret be mapped, accessible, and so crowded on a hot day? But the description hints at something true, because along the shoreline of the largest natural harbour in the world is a real, liminal double city. Very few locals know that Port Jackson holds as many as sixty beaches, or how wild and various they are. Rumps of sand that disappear and reappear with the moon, places penguins swim protected by snipers, and a tiny peninsula where a bad current brings a fresh tide of used syringes every night can all be called a Harbour beach.

Paradoxically, some can still be called secret even when they are famous, because they are layered with identities, and part-hidden by their urban setting. One, on the lip of Point Piper, is extra well-known for these cross-purposes. It has aliases. "Murray Rose Pool" and "Seven Shillings Beach" are the same place, but in real life no-one calls them anything other than Redleaf, or Redleaf Pool. Other tidal pools in the city share some of its features - the wooden pontoons and diving platforms, and the iron bars to keep out sharks. But at Redleaf they are arranged differently, at the bottom of a steep, tiered garden, that frames them like a Northern Hemisphere lido or lakeside pool.

This design caused a minor controversy before Redleaf opened in the late summer of 1941, and aldermen had to be assured it would look more Australian than European ("a Yugoslav with special knowledge" had assisted the architect). Soon it was so popular with post-war refugees and migrants that it was nicknamed "Refleaf". There were occasional tensions early on—an argument over Greeks dancing and playing a harmonica turned into a fifty man brawl—but for the most part, newspapers lingered over stand-offs between beach inspectors and improperly dressed women. A Daily Telegraph headline reading "FRENCH GIRL TOLD TO LEAVE POOL" was typical, and this status as a site of cosmopolitan, libidinal interest was set both immediately and permanently.

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It was during this period that Oliver Watts's grandfather, Janek Szczecinski, would frequent Redleaf every day. He browned his skin with coconut oil, and wore a Swiss ingot necklace that nestled in his chest hair, and went there not to swim but to hit a tennis ball against a wall with a net painted on it. He is not depicted in these paintings, but his spirit is - Jewish masculinity ripened by the sun, Old Europe becoming New Australian. That lineage also reflected in Oliver's media, acrylic paint on an extra fine grain canvas which dries matte to the point of harshness. It is the material of Pop Art and vigorous amateurs, and when depicting posed bathers, it becomes a 20th century route to the 19th, Courbet via David Hockney.

These works are informed and art historical, but not sagging with allusions. Instead, they are exuberant and jokey - there is a Sappho on the cliff in Speedos. They are innovative, especially with the palette (though Ollie actually uses a plate). Look at that sky, water and shadow - anyone who has nursed a hangover through to sunset on this dirty sand knows those afternoon violets, coppers and greens. This bunnies-and-hearts camouflage pattern in livid pastels is responsive and rich enough that you can almost hear the obnoxious, echoing music from a moored pleasure craft in the middle distance. It's a style that has become one of Ollie's signature achievements, like writing a glittering novel in comic sans.

Any contemporary Australian beach art has to reckon with Charles Meere, whose Beach Pattern helped reorientate national identity from the bush to the surf. The location in that work is unidentified or unreal (Meere never went to the beach), but its thrusting posers, one of whom is ready to whack a beach ball, must be somewhere on the coast. The honed, white physiques of Meere's formalist figures are cryptic, even sinister (they have been called the "iconic example of 'Aryan' hedonism in Australian life"), and the subsequent attempts to subvert it have often reproduced it, with varying doses of irony and multiculturalism.

At Redleaf is a different counterweight to healthy minds and healthy bodies. This is the territory of the night swim and the skinny dip, the come down and the after party. As Ollie started to paint this series, friends shared their own secrets. Redleaf was a favourite Tinder date spot for many. There were stories, queer and straight, of liaisons on the pontoons and in the sand. One night-time gathering ended with a search party when a reveller went missing leaving only his clothes left behind. Feared drowned, he was found huddled in the doorway of his Potts Point apartment, after walking up William Street naked.

One man recounted his first date with the woman who would become his wife. They walked down the hill in the dark and to the water's edge, where he pissed in the pool to stir up the phosphorescence and draw it to the surface. It's a distinct analogy for the paintings, and the same kind of pleasure.

Richard Cooke, 2023

Writer based in Sydney, Australia. Writes for press, radio and television.

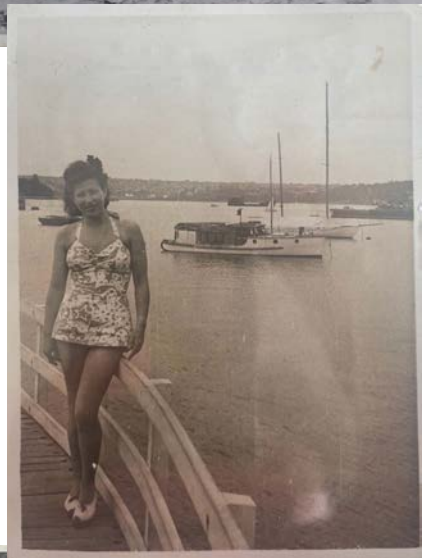
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OLIVER'S GRANDPARENTS AT REDLEAF, 1948-49



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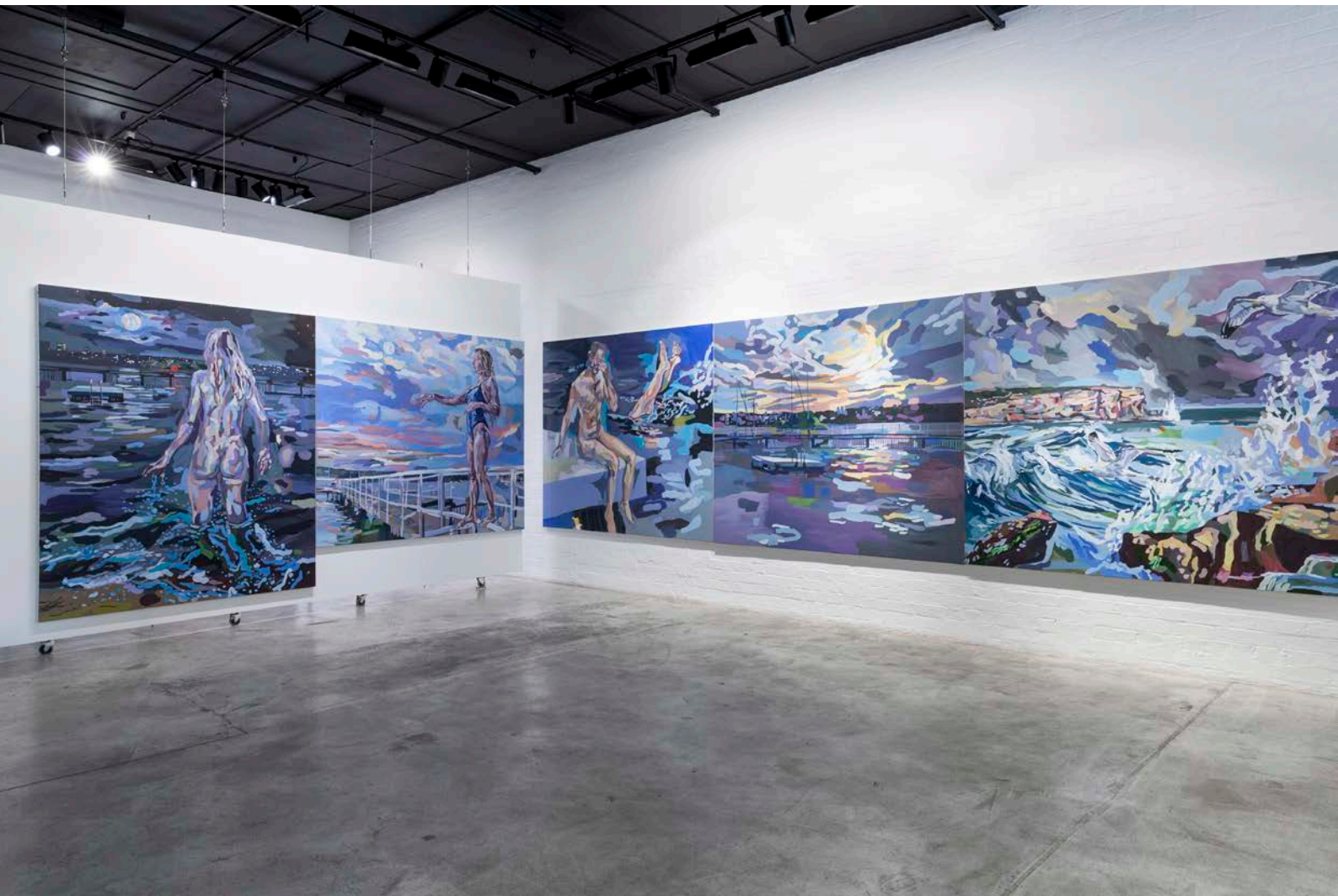
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BIO

Oliver Watts' paintings are rich in allusions from popular culture to the long history of painting and its various genres (portraiture, landscape, still life, etc). His images borrow, steal and reuse visual culture. His work is contemporary in the way everything is equivalent and brought into play. He often stages reenactments of literature or art history using actors and other collaborators. Permeating his works is the Australian landscape, the heat of the sun, the crunch of the forests and the deafening sound of cicadas. Watts' paintings are baroque, seductive, rich and complex.

Watts taught contemporary art at SCA, University of Sydney, between 2011-2017. He holds an MFA in painting and a Ph.D. in Art History, and jurisprudence from the University of Sydney. He has been a finalist in many prizes including the Archibald Prize and the Helen Lempriere Travelling Scholarship. His work is held in the National Museum of Australia, Artbank, and the Reserve Bank collections, among others.

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OLIVER WATTS

At Redleaf, 2022

Installation View

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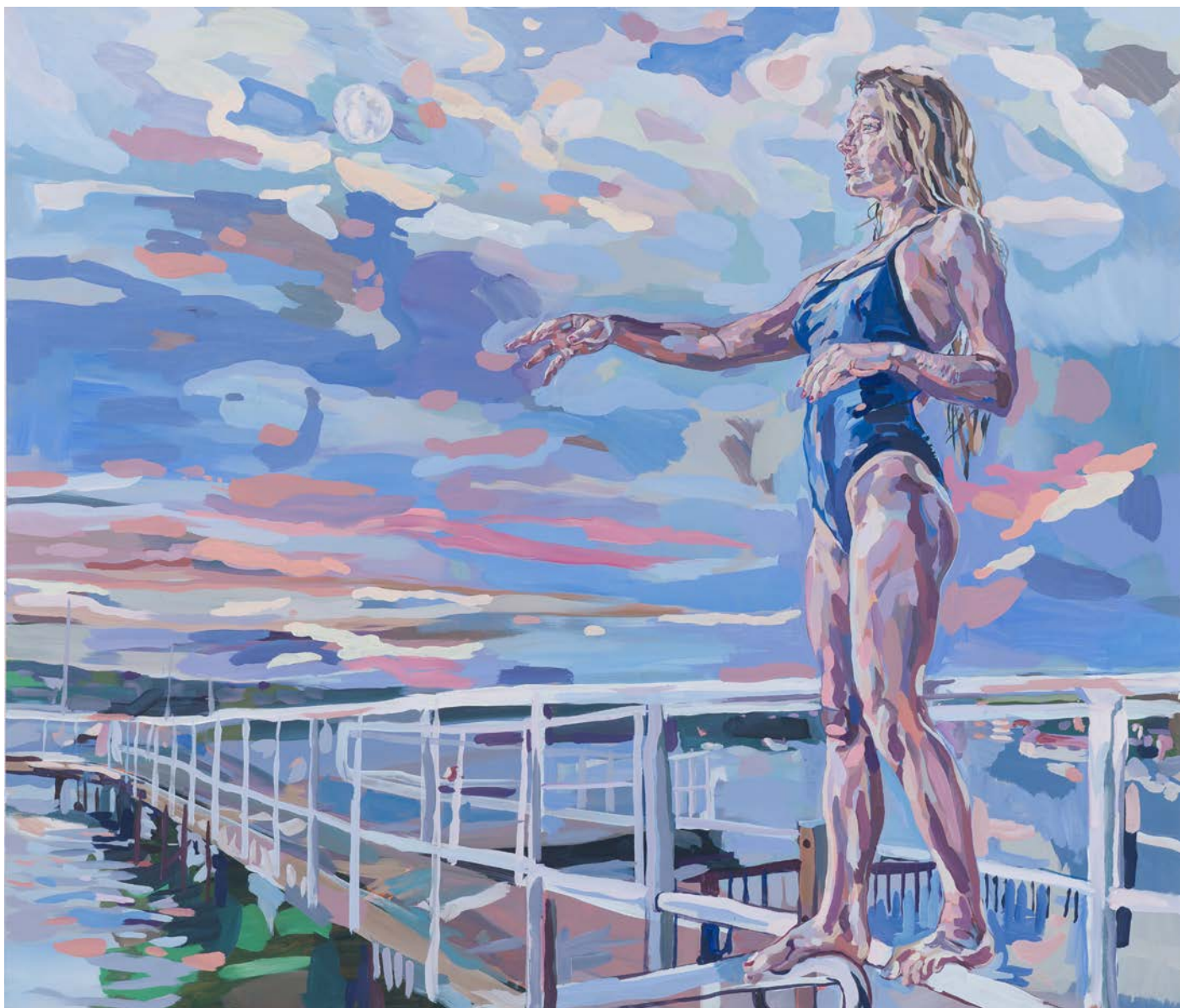
Photography: Janelle Low



OLIVER WATTS
Redleaf at Dusk, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
213 x 244 cm
\$20,000



OLIVER WATTS
The Fig Tree, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 213cm
\$16,000



OLIVER WATTS
Sappho on the Cliff at Redleaf, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 213cm
\$16,000



Oliver Watts, *Sappho on the Cliff at Redleaf*, 2022, (detail) Acrylic on canvas, 183 x 213 cm



OLIVER WATTS

At Redleaf, 2022

Installation View

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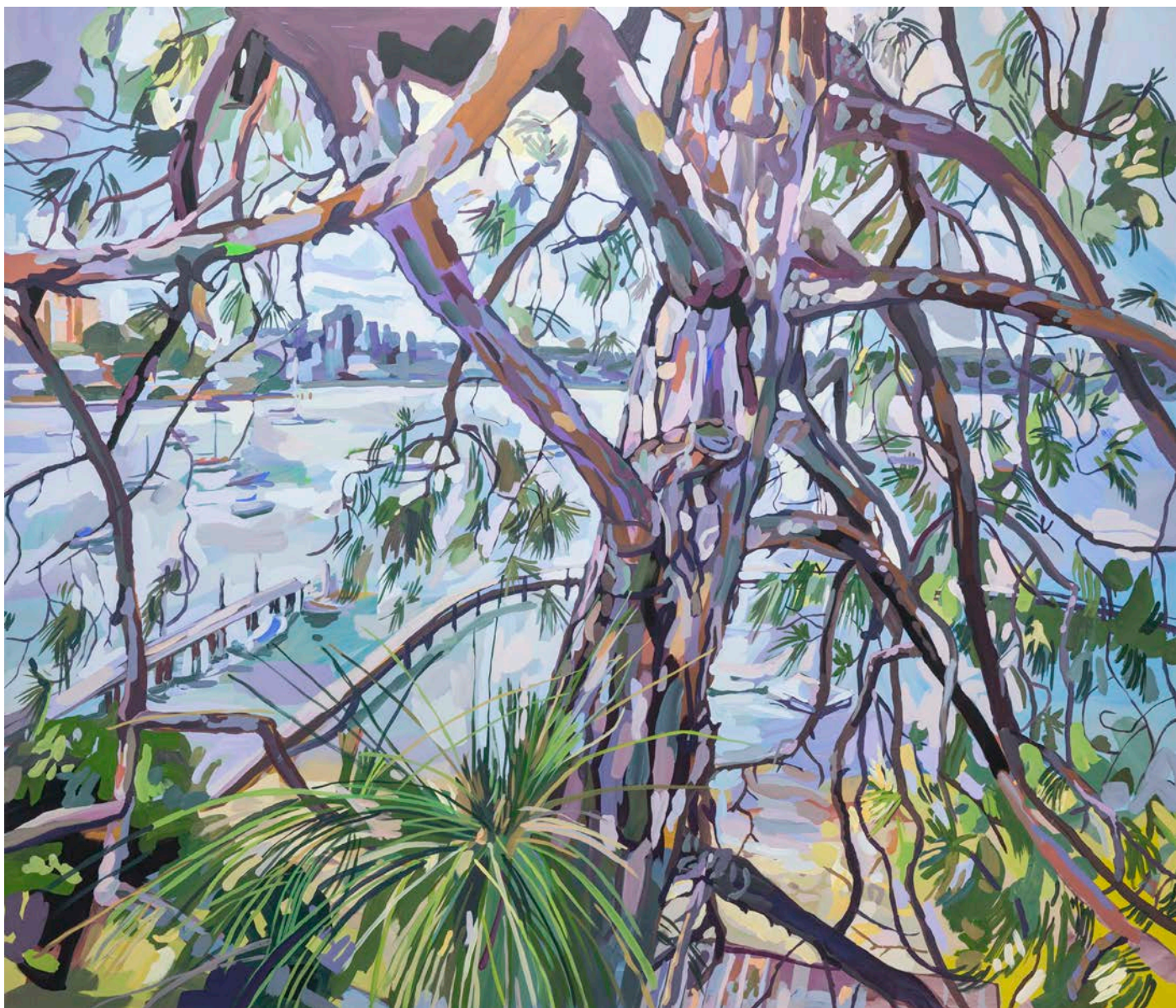
Photography: Janelle Low



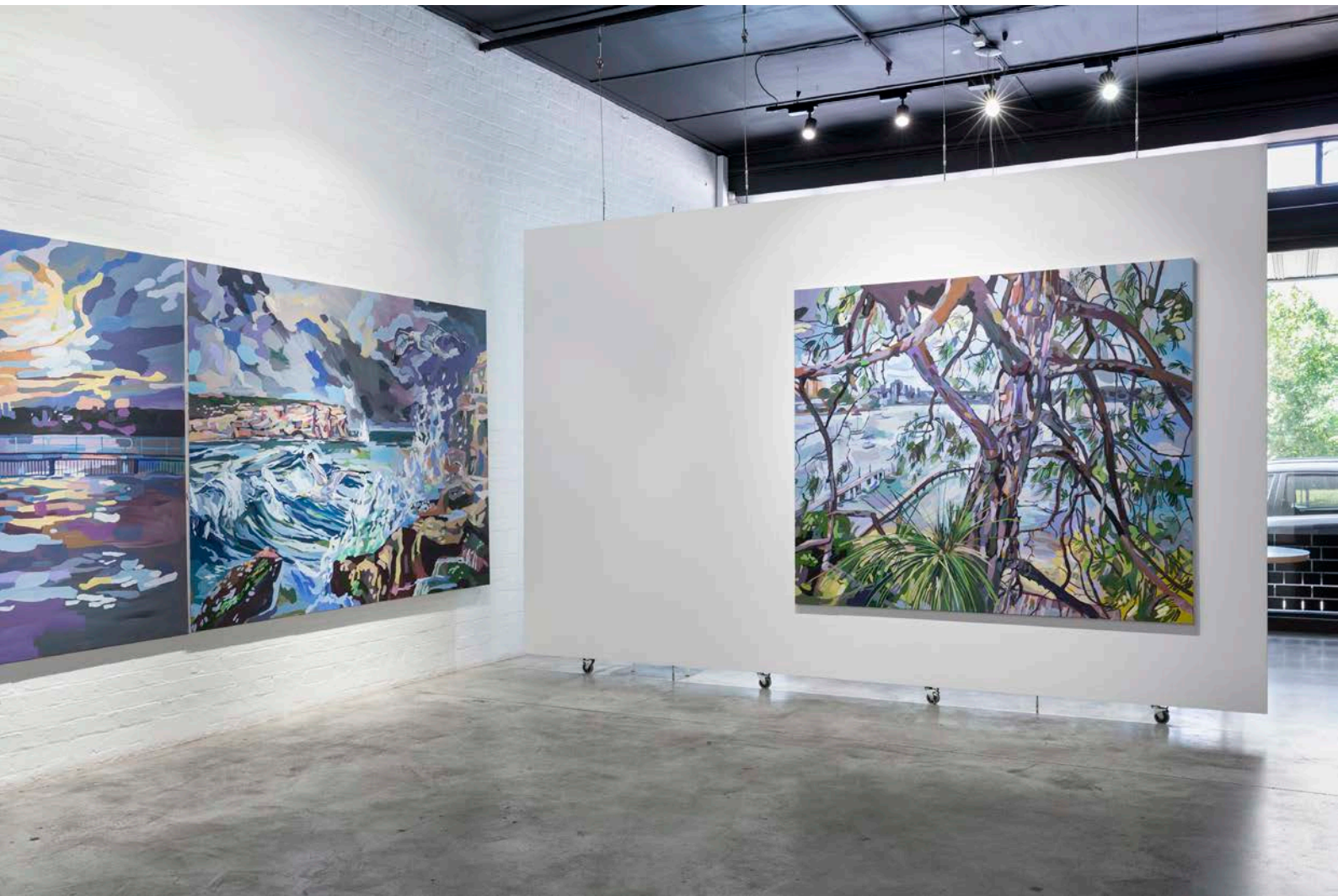
OLIVER WATTS
North Head (Boree) in a Storm after Conrad Martens, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
213 x 244 cm
\$20,000

Oliver Watts, *North Head (Boree) in a Storm after Conrad Martens*, 2022, (detail) Acrylic on canvas, 213 x 244 cm





OLIVER WATTS
Redleaf through a Pine Tree, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 213cm
\$16,000



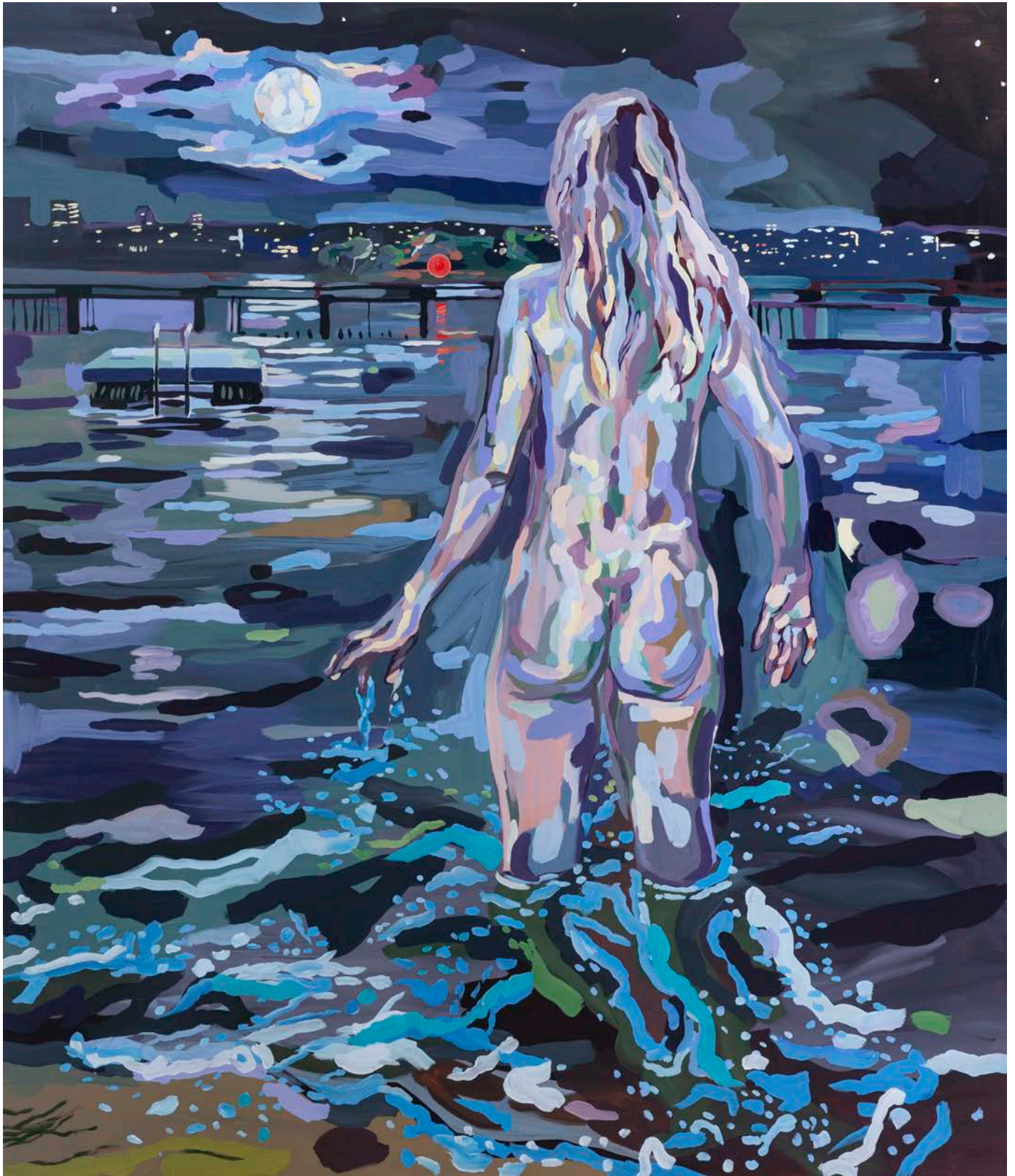
OLIVER WATTS

At Redleaf, 2022

Installation View

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Photography: Janelle Low



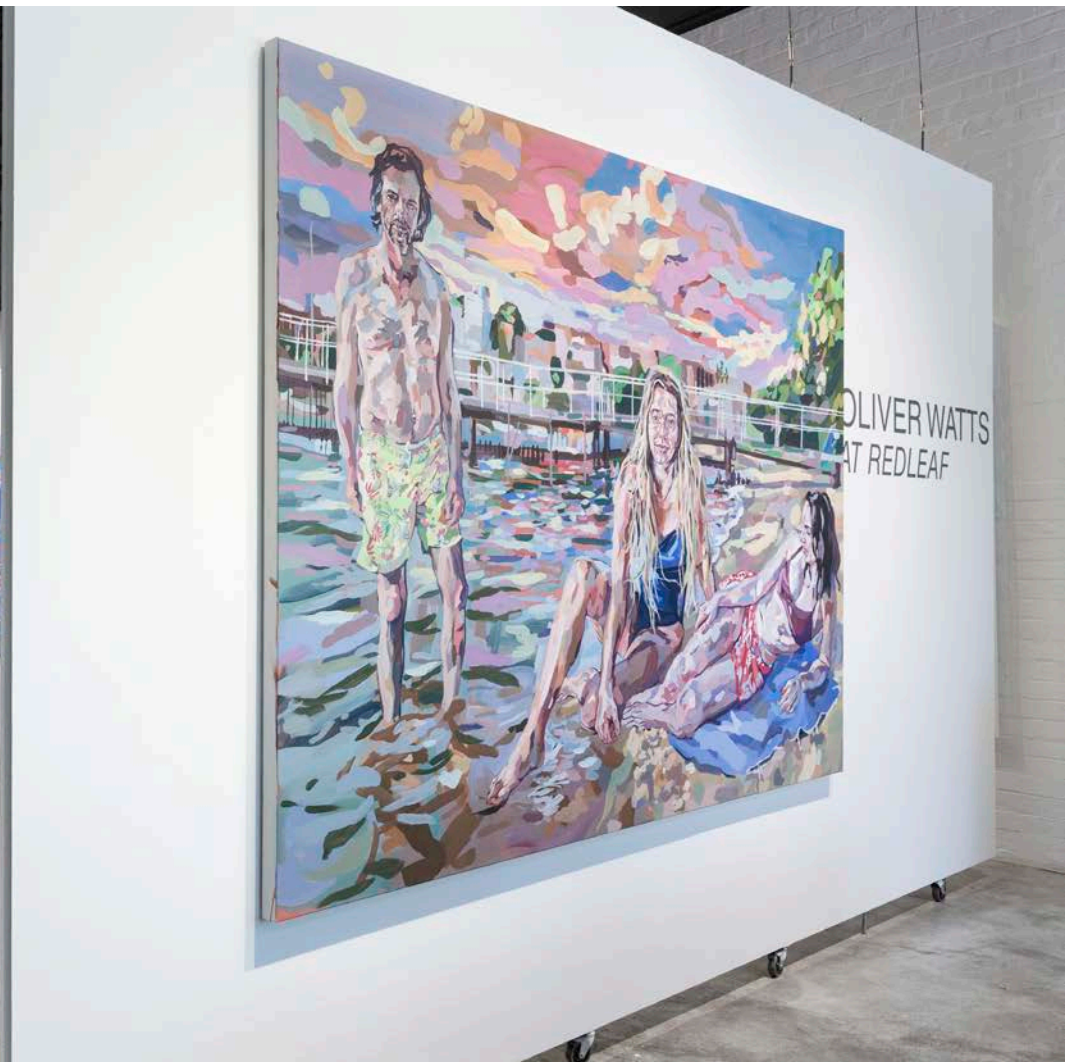
OLIVER WATTS
Phosphoresence [alt. Night Swim], 2022
Acrylic on canvas
213 x 183 cm
\$16,000



OLIVER WATTS
Daedalus on the Pontoon at Redleaf, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 213cm
\$16,000



OLIVER WATTS
The Pontoon at Night, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 213cm
\$16,000



OLIVER WATTS

At Redleaf, 2022

Installation View

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Photography: Janelle Low

OLIVER WATTS

CV

2017-18 Senior Lecturer, Head Performance Practices at NIDA
2003-14 Co-director, Chalk Horse Gallery and Half Dozen Projects
2001-17 Lecturer at the College of Arts, UNSW and Sydney University
1998-10 Founding member of Chaser Satirical Newspaper

QUALIFICATIONS

2016 MFA in Painting at Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle
2010 PhD Art History and Theory, Sydney University
2001 Bachelor of Law (Hons) Sydney University
1998 Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Sydney University Art History and Theory

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2023 At Redleaf, THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne
2022 Felling the Boundary Pines, Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney
2021 Sweet is the Swamp, THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne
2020 The Retreat, Chalk Horse, Sydney
2019 Autopilot Steering, Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney
2016 House Model, Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney
2015 Cordelia/Fool series, exhibited with Chalk Horse at Sydney Contemporary
and at the Sydney College of the Arts Postgraduate Exhibition, Sydney
2013 Stone Blue, Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne
2012 Kafka's Painter, Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne
2011 The Elevator's Song, Ecosse Gallery, Exeter
Wattle, The Space, Hong Kong
Commentary on the Royal Wedding, Gregory and Watts, Oxford Art Factory, Sydney
Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted, Chalk Horse, Sydney
2010 I am Tristan Tzara, Chalk Horse
Three Suns, Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne
2009 The Golden Probe, Chalk Horse, Sydney
Ps: Potential Spaces, with Neeson Murcutt Architects, Sydney
Horn of Plenty, Parasite Gallery, Hong Kong
Barres Trial, Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong
2008 Poo on Sticks, Next Wave Festival, Melbourne
Crimes Against Dada, Chalk Horse, Surry Hills
2006 Miniatures, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
2004 Driftwood (with Jasper Knight), MOP Projects
2003 Pioneers, MOP Projects, Sydney
Hairbrush, Gallery Wren, Sydney

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2013 Laugh Out Loud, La Trobe Regional Art Gallery, Gippsland
2012 Group Show, Helen Gory Galerie, Melbourne
2011 Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted, Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney
Wattle: Contemporary Art in China, The Space, Hong Kong
2010 Triplicated, Chalk Horse, Sydney
2009 Smoking Guns, Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong
Horn of Plenty (performance), curated by Dougal Philips, Para/Site, Hong Kong
2005 Frontier Photobooth (performance), 1/2 Doz. Festival, Blankspace Gallery, Sydney
Australia Day (performance), Museum of Sydney, Sydney

AWARDS I GRANTS

2021 The Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales (finalist)
2019 Doug Moran Portrait Prize (finalist)
2012 Doug Moran Portrait Prize (Semi-Finalist)
2002 Australian Post-Graduate Award
2005 NAVA Marketing Grant
2004 Finalist, Helen Lempriere Travelling Scholarship
1998 Mary Makinson Award Art History
1998 Noel Chettle Award Fine Arts

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CV

COLLECTIONS

Art Bank
National Museum of Australia
Sydney University Collection
The Reserve Bank of Australia

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 2021 Dr Joseph Brennan, 'Sweet is the Swamp' Art Almanac, June 2021
- 2020 Joseph Brennan, 'Real Made Strange', Art Collector, May 2020
- Nina Mial, 'Oliver Watts: The Retreat', Art Collector, May 2020
- 2017 Wes Hill, 'Around Town', Frieze, issue 186, April
- 2014 Sebastian Goldspink, 'Art School Confidential: The Rise of the Sydney Grad Show', Raven: A Platform for Contemporary Art and Events
- 2012 Robert Nelson, Kafka's Painter, Review, The Age, 29 Feb 2012
- 2010 Roger Boyce, Exhibition Review, Oliver Watts at Helen Gory Galerie, Art in America,
Online review, Pages Digital, <http://www.pagesdigital.com/oliver-watts-three-suns/>

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