

BETWEEN THINGS paintings by JOEL ARTHUR & DIONISIA SALAS



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## Between Things

Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Manuka  
Exhibition Opening 6pm Thursday 11 May  
12 - 21 May, 2023

Between Things extends an ongoing conversation between artists Joel Arthur and Dionisia Salas in relation to painting. Their verbal and unspoken partaking of ideas at its closest recognises a mutual love of colour; slippage of shape and imagery into thin, transparent layering or thick, waxy application; the buzz of a complementary vying for dominance; description that dips in and out of focus. At its most distant this conversation is a birds eye view of built structure, landscape and a wet grappling with something unspeakable, intangible and yet unambiguously related to the practice of painting.



Written by Emma Beer  
for you, the Viewer,  
and for Dioni and Joel.



**Joel Arthur** *Further In*, 2023. oil on linen. 81 x 71cm

Dear Viewer,

Dionisia Salas and Joel Arthur's painting practices are very similar, but different all at the same time. Have you seen the pointillism and that scumbling? Those dry surfaces that very occasionally glisten if you catch them in the right line of sight? It is bold and gentle at once. Dusty. Scratchy and misty. Hovering. Cloud like. Quivering and fluid. Sometimes, non-committal comes to mind. Yet insistent. Direct lines with a slippage and blurred edges.

Viewer, have you seen the colours? High chroma. Opaque yet loose. Washy and resistant. The use of colour like nothing I've seen around here.

The restraint is plausible. The relaxed confidence; control and trust in mark making and placement of lines is impressive. It stands out in both painters' works. Please look around.

In these paintings there is an oscillation between thin washy lines and more defined counterparts that can be seen as graphic illustration. I hesitate to use this word 'illustration' to describe what I see but can't shy away from it. Please don't hold this against me or the paintings we are looking at.

Do you spot the limbs, and/or bums? Eyes, noses, ears? Hair, long. Stubble. Leaves. Mushrooms. Trip, hop, scotch. Trees, skylines, footpaths, suns and moons?

Do you get lost searching for these things, something tangible to hang onto? Or do you, like me, try hard to avoid these, skipping past them, to find the more subtle but juicier bit? What do you think about those ellipses and lozenges? They don't seem to allow my eye to rest. On the surface we find flatness, gaps, unnameable forms rendered with precision but without a need to pin or hinge them to a place in the picture plane.

I see narrative and dreamlike sequences. Stopped in motion. Drifting away and returning. Perspectives flip and are from a higher point of view. Am I floating? Do you feel it too? Or have you not spent enough time looking?

Am I the only one who thinks this way when looking at these paintings? Or am I missing the point? Possibly. These paintings, push me to ask so many questions. Questions about painting construction and what is in the recipe that makes a successful composition.

Are these paintings unhinged? There is a sense of both the painters letting go - of conventions and things they were taught. And then a return to all the things they know.

When we talk about painting, we get lost in the most minor and subtle details. Like how a particular pigment slips or slides on a particular surface and then doesn't on another ground. I honestly love both these painters, not just their paintings but how they think



**Dionisia Salas** *D0121*, 2023. gouache and ink on paper. 42 x 29.5cm





**Joel Arthur** *Pavilion*, 2023. oil on canvas. 123 x 153cm

and talk about painting. But more so by the way that we can go down any rabbit hole and come out the other side feeling wiser and more conscious.

Reading and thinking about other stuff all at once. Do you do this? Unconscious and uncritical pairings. Like false attachment when deciphering objects laid out for a still life, as you draw. Making comparisons and deciphering differences around the room.

We are looking at process-oriented abstraction, with representational elements. These paintings cannot be placed within either history neatly. Do you think about the process and not so much about the results when looking at these paintings? Potential vs resolution? Realism and promise. There is an urgency here, although slower and more contemplative.

I'd love to know what you think and see.

Warmest Regards,  
Emma Beer



**Dionisia Salas** D0117, 2023. gouache and ink on paper 42 x 29.5cm

Dionisia,

It's been a while. I try to imagine you on the road in that little black car. Missing those hub caps like I miss you. Living your best life, with those beautiful boys and that fresh air.

I'm curious to know where you start. It's clear that drawing is the start but there is only so far you can take a piece of paper. Brain farts. Time stopping and starting. From the kitchen table to the makeshift studio. Waiting for that dream studio. Your easel in the middle of that room with all those books and that small window. Your gentle touch and the sense of a meandering mind and hand. What are you thinking about? Tell me.

When I paint and draw, I try not to think. What about you? When I try or think about what I'm doing, everything gets tight and restricted. To me you've never had that problem. How is it that all your best work seems to be so sure of itself and so undefinable all at once.

What are you trying to say? Or trying not to say? Your trust in your hand and the surface is a calm one. The dissolving and consuming line agitates me in a way where I am challenged to take a deep breath and slow the fuck down. Thank you for pushing me into this place of welcome irritation.

I can't help but think of my body when looking at your paintings. But more directly, I think of you and your body. Not my relationship to your body but your relationship to your body. In a utilitarian way not a personal, sexy way. You are real and grounded about this stuff and don't seem to shy away from it like most would. Like I would. I didn't mean for this letter to arrive here. It's just where my mind went.

When we were looking at that unfinished painting. You said that painting was in trouble. The Medusa came to mind. Those snake-like lines. Creeping and crawling. The paint is coagulated. Bloody. Fluid. Limbs. Fleshy clouds. Eyeballs looking. Touching with your eyes. Me trying to decode the indescribable and you were getting lost in surface and structure.

Fuck. This is the stuff that we live for. Isn't it? These small pockets in time. The interactions that can't be forced, planned or fabricated. Even the uncomfortable bits, awkward and staggered. The waiting, the struggle, the long slow solo labour, that we share just by doing it. I'm forever grateful that I have you to shoot the shit with.

We are so lucky to have each other, and we don't even make the most of it. It's easy. As it should be.

The effect on others? The portrait of the mind. Thoughts, our dreams, desires and fears? That's what I think of when I look at these paintings of yours.

Fingers move, fingers smear. Moving colour on the glass across to the roughness of the painted surface, prepared in just a way. But how is it? Two coats or four. Is it slippery? It looks slippery. Are you conscious of that? Does it even matter? I see it. Yes, it matters.

Your drawings. Line as a viewfinder. The finder of composition. Composition as form. Gentle delicate marks acting as points of rest or intrigue. What keeps you coming back? The search. But the search for what?

It appears that you let yourself get loose and lose yourself. Pushing through the struggle. Finding your way through the mess and getting lost again softly wrestling, in the most truthful way. Realism is the missing but ever-present way finder through your paintings. The struggle is real, the resolve is real. The surrender. The openness to the obstacles is all there in that single image.

Looking at these paintings of yours reminds me of those times when I'm looking out for jumping fish. Thinking I hear them but can't see them. You know, when you know they are there and it's happening, yet you still miss them. It is a sense of knowing but you can't prove it in any solid way. Knowing that things connect without being able to put a finger on it.

I was recently reading an essay in a book I got from the bookstore Perimeter (do you know it?), in Melbourne, titled "dreaming of past possibilities" in Acts of Painting (on page. 14). There is this passage that says "...as such, the work seems to show nothing, or at least nothing, that we might expect, and at the same time everything is laid out before us... the key attributes to painting..." Reading this made me think of you and that painting we sat in front of and deliberated over the one you said was in trouble.

Where is that painting now?

Talk soon,  
Ems.



**Dionisia Salas** *with spent mouths*, 2023. oil on canvas. 94.6 x 94.6 cm

Hi Joel,

I don't know if you know or not, but I often see you on the bike path, me on my home from work and you leaving from a day in the studio, mid-week. Sometimes we say hi, sometimes you don't see me. I think your discipline is exemplary. I'm often jealous of this. I recognise your hair before I clock that it is you. You move effortlessly fast on your skinny-tired road bike. I'm on my mountain bike pushing those pedals in a tight high gear, slowly.

Thinking of your paintings. You take (transport) me to other places, under the sea and waters, places I've not been and can only imagine in my mind. But also, familiar backyards, lakes and mountains. Atmospheric, psychedelic, in wistful and in wishful daydreaming. Shadows, temperature, lawn, scrubs, trails, angles, velocity. Anchors, pictorially but also, in time, in a body of water or grounded in lush green grass or red dirt.

Looking at your paintings. Colour, jarring discomfort that pushes me into historical colour theory at times. Places where sometimes I'd rather not go. Ha. I hear you laughing at me both truthfully and uncomfortably. Awkward. How fantastical.

Paint, electric, straight from the tube? I know you know; you mix. The knowing is there. High in value. High in volume, in weight, in contrast, but also subtle and barely there. Opaque scumbled to pass through, in surface quality, not light. Is it hiding something or confident from the outset (onset)? Second guessing or strategic? Used as a device? Again, there is a knowing in these paintings. Do you ever feel like a fraud? But who even cares? Do you think about the effect of these paintings on others? Is there a self-consciousness I'm seeing?

These stage-like, theatrical and dramatic paintings beg me to call on my knowledge and old school understanding of painting. In the manner that you do. Always. At heart I love this. In practice, not so much. It's much easier for me to talk about this than to accomplish it. I get a sense that it is the other way around for you.

I have this strong sense that you are painting knowing what you want to accomplish. There is an emptiness that is balanced with a fullness of wisdom. Weightlessness and misplaced gravity. Dreamy-eyed. Romantic, hopeful and blissfully unaware. Precision in the hand, clumsiness in the mind? Or is it the other way around? Forget I said that, please.

Your paintings: buzzing, contrast, flickers, kaleidoscope, dusk, dawn, light filled, colour relations. There are door jams, lenses and filters. Pin it down and cut through. Threads, both in the textiles sense and the train of thought type. Slipping, disconnect, withhold, fog, blur, hand tools, smoke, sorbet. Is all that comes to mind.

It's not just painting that you're good at. You have a fine taste in music. You know that but do others who look at your paintings? Music. Mood, rhythm, time, pace, placement. Cut paper, stick, mix, overlaps, hide and discover. I squint, I wink, I think. Inspiration is a moving target.

Scaffolding, seeding trees and thoughts. Effortlessness, visualising a process. Mapping it out. Spelling it out. Plainly yet confidently with conviction. Draw a sword. Execute. Those paintings!

I try to work out what it is you are looking for. What's the catch? What makes it all fall into place for you? Am I missing something? Have you already told me, and I just haven't grasped or understood you, or just not remembered. Do tell me next time I see you.



**Joel Arthur** *Wood for the trees*, 2023. oil on linen. 81 x 71cm



I can't help but think of photography when thinking about your paintings. But not when I'm looking at your paintings. I once heard you say – 'when I get back, I just hope I have one good photo'. Painting from a photograph. So, you are looking for a painting while you're not painting? Through a lens. Thinking about painting while not painting. Interesting. Taking photos for painting. This is different to taking photos for memory. For later. For discovery. They are vices or signifiers. What are you looking for? Angles, pathways, not only for the foot, but also for the eye? A train of thought. A way through, the picture and its planes and other surfaces.

I try to know. I want to know. Puns. Quick thoughts. You. Funny. Smart. What's the difference between knowing the song and not. You don't have to know that song to like it. Or do you? You don't have to understand that painting to love it or want it. It's the vibe of the thing. You don't even have to name it for it to make a difference, to have an effect. Affect.

Slow down, look, listen, feel. That word in your mouth. The sound, that way you say it. That word sounds different when you say it, why is that? Is it because it means something different to you? Or is it simply an undetected accent? Your paintings are mystical and a bit weird. So are you (in the best possible way). It takes a long time to get to know you. It takes a long time to get to know your paintings.

Your paintings conjure a sense of walking and movement. Walking in the landscape. Through its wonder. Sometimes I feel like I'm slightly above the picture you have painted, levitating, with my feet no longer touching the ground. Is this because you are taller than me, looking through that lens? The colours push and pull in a Hoffmann-esque kind of way. But instead of just the eye being guided around the picture, it's my entire body. Not in an unsettling way, in a slightly floaty way. Back and forth.

I look forward to bumping into you again soon.  
Let's grab a beer and talk more about your paintings.

Cheers,  
Emma.



## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work and pay my respects to elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

The author would like to thank co-editors Bryan Foong and Kirsten Farrell for their sound advice and guidance, as well as both artists for their time and trust.

The artists would like to acknowledge Emma Beer for wanting to take precious time out of her studio to look closely and think generously about their paintings.

Joel would like to acknowledge the support of ArtsACT.

Dioni would like to thank her family for keeping her present, the Grandmas and Joel B for back-ing her studio time like nobody's business.

