

Tim Allen

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For Tim Allen, working in the landscape – wielding charcoal, gouache, ink and other water-based media – is only one half of his practice. Working from his Blue Mountains studio, a large converted machinery shed with huge doors opening out to the surrounding bushland, Allen makes large works, mainly in oils; paintings which are an expansion and a distillation of his *plein air* works. He exploits the qualities of oil paint, whilst retaining the energy of his outdoor studies. Whether indoors or out, the influence of the natural world is always apparent in his work.

Your parents were highly motivated to appreciate wild landscapes – their beauty and adversity. Was that an important part of your life from an early age?

Well yes, when I was very young. My father was one of Australia's pioneering rock climbers and he was climbing at quite a high level until he had an accident in his late 50s and is now a paraplegic. He did the first ascent of Ball's Pyramid and many others in the early 1960s. My mum was a pioneering bush walker as well; she did one of the earliest traverses of the Western Arthurs in Tasmania. I was brought up into that and taken out into the wilderness for considerable lengths of time. The time I spent in my 20s and 30s out in wild places – rock climbing, skiing, walking – has become the source of everything I'm doing now. The current works, which are from the Snowy Mountains, are not about a particular view, they're taking everything my earlier wilderness experience has given me, a sense of being in a remote landscape.

How did that wilderness connection begin to show itself?

When I discovered the work of British artist Richard Long at art school it really chimed with me, particularly his 1970s works and

the whole notion of 'art made by walking in landscapes'. He didn't do this in a particularly romantic way – he'd walk spectacular places and banal places, sometimes he'd just walk in a straight line for days. But it was the idea that spending time in the landscape, especially by walking, navigating and mapping, was half the artwork.

That all combined with 'School of London' influences, Frank Auerbach and David Bomberg especially. Auerbach was one of the greatest influences on me, but one of his teachers was David Bomberg. As a student, I read his stories of going up into the wilderness of Scotland and painting all day in a blizzard. It was at that point the two different aspects of my life – the wilderness and the art making – combined. Going to art school didn't seem to have anything to do with what I'd done up until then, but Bomberg's work brought them together.

You seem to have made a commitment now to the *plein air* tradition, have you always worked in that way?

The *plein air* thing became very important from about 5 or 6 years ago and it's made a huge difference. Before that I'd been a landscape artist dealing with semi-abstract and quite minimal wilderness-inspired





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landscape paintings. For those years in the late 90s and early 2000s, it was very much about going out into the landscape and being there, but not sketching; just dealing with memory and emotion. I brought it to the studio then to try to remove any literal sense of the landscape, and that worked for a while.

And then there was a point where I just felt I had literally run out of marks. I felt as if I was just making the same marks over and over, and so there was a considered specific sense that I needed to bring new information in. Those feelings coincided with a very chaotic period in life when we moved house twice in the space of a year with a newborn child. For 6 months or so I didn't have a studio but I still had a deadline for a show! So all those things combined made me decide to paint *plein air*.

What challenges, or limitations, of *plein air* do you respond to?

I work fast enough and intensely enough and I have a sense of what I want to say, as well all that memory and emotion of being alive in the landscape. I can channel that into working faster and bolder. So all the stuff that makes *plein air* difficult and uncomfortable actually makes me work better, because of that experience and memory.

You live and work close to the bush. Is that sense of proximity a significant element in your art-making?

I think it is. The National Park is three metres that way and the lyre-birds are scratching right outside the door. And even though I'm not actually dealing with this landscape, it's the idea of bringing some wild landscape back to the studio. For me, it's an important continuity.

So the work is about your experience of being in a landscape, not just the view in front of you?

When I'm out in the landscape I'm not looking for a view, but I'm looking to understand how I will move into the landscape from where I am, to get a sense of how the angles and forms of the landscape work. I'm almost rehearsing it in my mind beforehand — you see climbers rehearsing their moves for sport climbing and sometimes I do the same with the landscapes forms.

I make sketches, rehearsing the energy and direction of the marks. It's *that* way... and then *that* way. I'm following the pathways in my mind — there's a structure that I can see to move around in and it's like a muscle memory keys me back into being a participant in the landscape. I remind myself of being part of the landscape, and the painting becomes about moving through that landscape.

How do these outdoor works feed into your larger studio paintings?

I find it's a similar process going from *plein air* works to the bigger paintings — they take something from the smaller drawings, but I don't start one until I know what the painting is — not exactly what it's going to look like but a feeling of the form and how to move through it. Then the marks can be loose, because I understand where they are going. If I'm trying too much to make the form itself, the marks can lose their energy.

What about the actual painting process, what's the methodology?

For me it comes back to drawing; my painting process is very much about paint and the materiality of paint, but at heart it is a drawing



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process with paint. The mark making is a natural thing for me – I always put down ink first, even on the oils at the moment. I like to have some of the initial spontaneous essence showing through. If I get rid of all the original surface and marks, it loses something for me.

I love *all* the things that paint can do, not just one thing, but I don’t paint thick or thin for the sake of it. There are thick marks and drawn marks – but wide marks too... and paint with stacks of medium or some raw canvas or underpainting. I like the first couple of marks to be totally committed, as they’re not going to change. The ink is the starting point of commitment and being there. I don’t get into this thing of doing flourishes – every one of my marks is genuinely finding the landscape. ■

Tim Allen is represented by Defiance Gallery, Sydney.

EXHIBITION
5 February to 1 March, 2014
Defiance Gallery

www.defiancegallery.com
www.timallenartist.com

01 Left: *Past Tense*, 2013, oil on linen, 136 x 183cm
Right: *Days Like These*, 2013, oil on linen, 136 x 183cm
02 *Holding Sway*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 145 x 225cm
Courtesy the artist and Defiance Gallery, Sydney.