

Barbara Tuck

b.1943

Diploma of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Barbara Tuck studied at Elam in the 1960s and has been painting for over 40 years. Her work has been characterised by critical reinvention and deep engagement with the issues and problems confronting expression in painting.

Tuck has moved across representational and abstract modes and could now be regarded as making complex paintings that delve into the area between these two historic poles. Her investigation over this period has been supported by continual experimentation with different scales, supports and means of applying paint.

Over the past decade, Tuck has developed a fascinating painterly terrain that taps into a particular local preoccupation with the subject of 'landscape' from an unexpected viewpoint. The landscape painting tradition, from its 19th century colonial origins to the work of 20th century practitioners like Rita Angus and Colin McCahon, has been aligned with assertions of national identity. Tuck's revisiting of this tradition has been the basis of a contemporary immersion in painting's perceptual and lyrical possibilities. In comparison to her earlier works, the current paintings are intimate oil on board works in a square format. Tuck has said that working on this scale allows her to focus on mental rather than physical exertion.

Tuck ventures out from her Auckland studio into wild places, the South Island in particular, to gather impetus for new paintings. *Vinci Sere Leaf Spectre* is an example of a work made after her trip to the West Coast in April 2005. Here, she encountered such things as the ancient kahikatea trees in fruit and responded to the incredibly waterlogged state of that part of New Zealand. More recently, she has travelled to Fiordland and taken in phenomena like Lake Wilkie in the Catlins, a bog lake receding since the last ice age. The resulting paintings are not literal representations of landscape as much as reconstructions of imaginative journeys. Forms hover and fluctuate. Fragments of familiar pictorial devices and the excitement of a bird's eye view combine. The works are awash with playful spatial confusions and luscious painterly passages. It is never exactly clear whether Tuck is summoning an experience of looking up through a canopy or down at the earth spread out like a map. She works at these paintings on

the flat and rotates them as she proceeds. The ambiguous point of view and 'turnability' of the square format contributes a dreamy, contemplative quality. The disruption of conventional perspective provides her with opportunities to identify elements she is visually interested in.

As well as being distillations of experiences of wild places, Tuck's paintings are a way of processing connections between poetry, fiction and contemporary scientific theory. *Vinci Sere Leaf Spectre* was exhibited in Tuck's 2006 exhibition, *Slow Degrees Of Ocean*. The title was taken from a Rilke poem and intended to make a loose connection to global warming. Tuck had recently become interested in scientific explanations of *Emiliana huxleyi*, an algae that produces white swirling patches that float on the world's oceans. Some scientists believe this heat-reflecting white organism may be part of the earth's mechanisms for maintaining its equilibrium.

Tuck is drawn to such theories about the chemistry that holds the natural world together. For her, they suggest connections with her first-hand experience of the balancing acts and attractions that sustain the practice of painting.

Anna Miles

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