

## CATALOGUE ESSAY

Tender is an emotional expression and a contemporary exploration in painting, touch, and interpretation, focusing on the works of landscape artists Sue Leeming, Annette Peterson, and Nicole Steenhof. While it may seem ambiguous, Tender embodies a foundation of aesthetic and cathartic experiences through which these practiced oil painters navigate their unique styles and energy. In this exhibition, Tender signifies more than just a word; it is an exploration of the transcendental power of paint.

Steenhof has responded to the theme of Tender by exploring the sea through intimacy and touch. Isabelle Graw's discussion on the value of indexical effect of the hand in making has encouraged Nicole in her painting and sculpture practice, which are led by haptic qualities<sup>1</sup>. She has focused her attention on the composition of the Fibonacci spiral found in abalone shells, coupled with the chaos of iridescence on the apparent surface of sea and shell alike. Stretching beyond the understanding of surface as superficial, Nicole examines how the phenomenon of iridescence reveals a truer and more intimate surface by incorporating many layers of light, and mimics this in her oil painting. Steenhof also draws from the theoretical work of Tavi Meraud who describes surfaces not as boundaries, but as the site of the interplay between reality and appearance. Her curiosity with surfaces is also evident in her explorations of the sea - when is it the exterior surface, when is it the submersed tender interior of the sea?<sup>2</sup> Scale also plays an important part in her work; the size of the shells in both painting and sculptures draw one into a closer intimacy with the work, a nod to the tenderness of childhood.

During a residency at Mount Flora in Waterman's Bay in 2024, Peterson explored the idea of Tender as an affect generated by the conflicting forces of pain and comfort in the landscape. Initially, she produced a series of painting studies denoting her phenomenological experiences around the site's boundaries and peripheries to attune to the space. A pivotal moment for her was observing the wind blowing on some low tree branches, which affected the earth beneath them. The earth's response looked like it was providing comfort, as if embracing the intrusion. In this way, Tender, according to Peterson, denotes the tension that generates strength from vulnerability. Peterson found a similar phenomenon in the underlying limestone rising from beneath the site. The fossilised traces of ancient life, memories embedded in the stone seem foreign in the surrounding suburban landscape. Yet, unlike harder rocks that resist change, limestone is responsive to erosion of time and the forces of the natural world. It carries the affect, just as an embrace absorbs pain.

As an intuitive, organic, process-led maker, Leeming leads with silent reflection through the form of 'free verse' poetry, a stream of conscious reflecting her inner dialogue around belonging, loss and connection to home. She says silence, in some way, is as important as the work. Her actions of walking, meditating, praying, and listening feed like an umbilical cord connecting her internal landscapes, those memories that reside in a place beyond awareness to her external work. Leeming sits in the here and now, in the land of the living, this place she now calls home. Leeming's free verse is based on Hikoi, a Māori word and concept that carries deep cultural resonance meaning to walk or journey. In this way, Leeming intentions are to embody not just a physical act but a spiritual or emotional passage—a movement through life, grief, and hope. Leeming's work affirms a beautiful sadness in the acceptance of loss, as she endeavours to discover the eternal realities of loving with a whole-hearted love as a journey toward an inevitable separation. She says there is no avoiding this final farewell, whether that be loved ones or country, imagined futures and passions, it is a place we must all pass through. And as we bravely respond to the call of life... to move forward, we must do so with hope and faith in our hearts...to walk on. HIKO

---

<sup>1</sup> Graw, Isabelle, 2019, 'The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium', Sternberg Press

<sup>2</sup> Meraud, Tavi, 2015, 'Iridescence, Intimacies', e-flux journal no. 61, pp. 1-12.