

## **“Tender” by Sue Leeming, Annette Peterson and Nicole Steenhof**

Before we begin let's reflect on the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this land where we meet today, the Binjareb\* and Whadjuk\*, Nyoongar\* peoples and their continuing connection to the land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all members of First Nations communities and their cultures; and to Elders past and present.

I am Dr Kevin Robertson; I am a figurative painter and currently a lecturer in drawing at Curtin College.

It is a great privilege to be invited to open this exhibition of 3 exciting artists, Sue Leeming, Nicole Steenhof and Annette Peterson entitled “Tender” here at the Rockingham Arts Centre.

The artists describe the exhibition this way: “*Tender* is an expression and an exploration in painting, touch, and interpretation. This exhibition that navigates the theme as an aesthetic and cathartic experience. Tender signifies more than the word; it explores the power of paint.”

Before we move on from the word (Tender) I would like to place it in a more poetic context and draw out some comparisons with this idea to each of the individual artists.

I am grateful to Dr Sally Quin for introducing me to the Ancient Roman account of the birth of the art of painting. According to this account, Pliny the Elder's encyclopaedic text the “National History” tells of paintings origins found in the tracing of a shadow.

Kora of Sicyon is credited with inventing portraiture when she traced the outline of her lover's shadow on the wall.

In this ultimate act of tenderness by recording her lover's shadow, something fleeting becomes fixed. Kora reaches out to the wall and by the act of touch she makes permanent the emotional state of love. Love becomes fixed in a material form – a new form of poetry is invented via the shadow of a feeling.

The components of this story are relevant here and now to this exhibition, namely touch, representation and emotion. All these elements are important in varying degrees to the artworks of Sue Leeming, Nicole Steenhof and Annette Peterson.

In thinking about this exhibition, I could not omit another association that adds to the complexity of the theme.

Tender Buttons is an album by the English electronic duo, Broadcast and the title is borrowed from a book of poetry by Gertrude Stein. Stein created poetry that was analogous to cubist painting (of which she was of course a great patron).

Stein's poetry makes you re-think the nature of language and of words in the way the cubist artists made you re-think objects and representation.

The book has 3 sections, Objects, Food and Rooms – all vital, but I think we can add landscape to that list with respect to this exhibition. Here is a bit of Gertrude Stein's poem from Tender Buttons titled A Substance in a Cushion.

“The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable.

Callous is something that hardening leaves behind

What will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men. Does this change. It shows dirt is clean when there is volume.”

To draw from Stein’s poem, dirt in volume is earth or Gaia and nature forms a big part of Sue Leeming’s interest, whether it be through earthy palettes overlaid with a clear atmosphere, reminiscent of her New Zealand heritage.

Sue Leeming’s painting veer towards abstraction with strong allusions to landscape that can be compared with Stein’s poem. Like Steins words, Sue Leeming’s Shapes of colour interact in ways that are both familiar and unfamiliar. The works display softness and sensitivity, but the ambiguity of the surfaces keeps your interest high in looking for recognisable elements in something that is also completely unrecognisable.

Nicole Steenhof’s work is as much about the subject (that of water and the ocean) as it is about representation and works effectively across both painting and sculpture.

In her own words:

"I am interested in the Indian Ocean as a site of intersection of fragmented experiences and a multiplicity of histories."

In this exhibition, her painting, *Skin Between Oceans* from 2025 the ocean is drenched in a strange champagne-like glow making you question what type of image you are viewing.

Her work is deeply reflective, integrating ideas and feelings for the nature of water into paintings that sparkle, shift, invert and transfer mass - as the ocean might do in a dream.

While nature can be Annette Peterson’s subject, she appears to be interested equally in the nature of representation itself. In works such as *Lingering Hold* from 2025, the quality and texture of the paint weighs in equally against the understanding of landscape. To quote Annette:

“I am motivated to document the movement of phenomenal experiences. I utilise a variety of media, including painting, photography, digital media, and textile media, to reflect the life around me.”

Her work does include media such as video and animation, she always seems to return to painting, like Kora from the ancient legend, she is fascinated by the tracing of the shadow itself that leaves an imprint of the feeling.

I have been watching the development the of all 3 artists over several years, and the opportunity to view their work together in this strong exhibition is really pleasing.

Nicole Steenhof, Sue Leeming and Annette Peterson distinguish themselves with developed individual styles, each of them has established completely unique painting practices.

Together these artists demonstrate the powerful combination of sharp artistic skills and highly innovative approaches to the practice of painting.

It is my great pleasure to be here and assist in the opening of this wonderful exhibition “Tender” at the Rockingham Arts Centre.

Dr Kevin Robertson, 2025