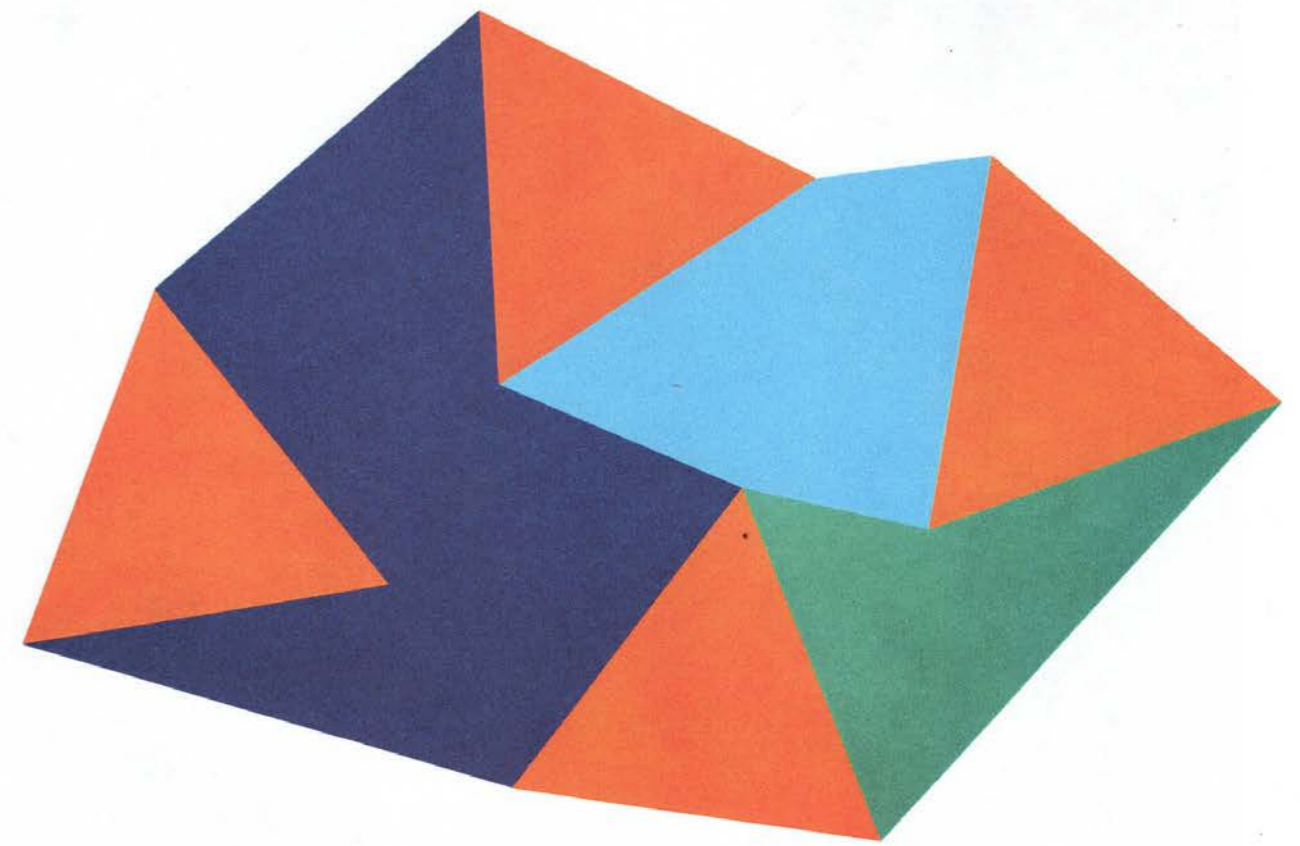


AHEAD OF A SURVEY EXHIBITION TRACING FORTY YEARS OF HER PRACTICE, HELEN EAGER TALKS TO SEBASTIAN GOLDSPIK ABOUT THE INFINITE NATURE OF AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY.

Story
**SEBASTIAN
GOLDSPIK**

Photography
**SASKIA
WILSON**

Helen Eager a Dance



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In the early days of the pandemic, Helen Eager works in a routine seemingly unaltered by a disruption that is tearing at the fabric of what many understand to be daily existence. From the beginning of this period of isolation, artists quipped that they had been preparing for social distancing their entire lives – the discipline of solitary work practices were already familiar to them; one might even say desirable.

In the midst of the upheaval, Eager maintains her daily practice of drawing and preparing works for upcoming exhibitions in a studio that houses the sketches and experiments of her life's work. The space is light and poised, ready for activity. A studio that incongruously exudes simultaneous warmth and industry. Visitors enter through an iron grill created in the signature geometric forms that the artist is best known for. At the threshold they are greeted by the sight of a small bird in a cage. The door of the cage is open, the bird – contented. Then they see the work. Towering canvases with an array of colourful forms. Works in various stages of completion hung on the studio's vast walls, vaulted towards generously high ceilings. Quietly, in the centre of this studio, Eager sits sketching with coloured pencils. Experimenting with texture through overlapping colours. Content.

The term 'practice', when referring to an artist, essentially has two potential and simultaneous meanings. The sum total of their work, and the daily manner in which they go about making that work. The micro of the day and the macro of the career. Some artists undergo fundamental changes in their practice, shifting styles and subjects or mediums. Others follow a through line or an area of interest that they expand upon in a career.

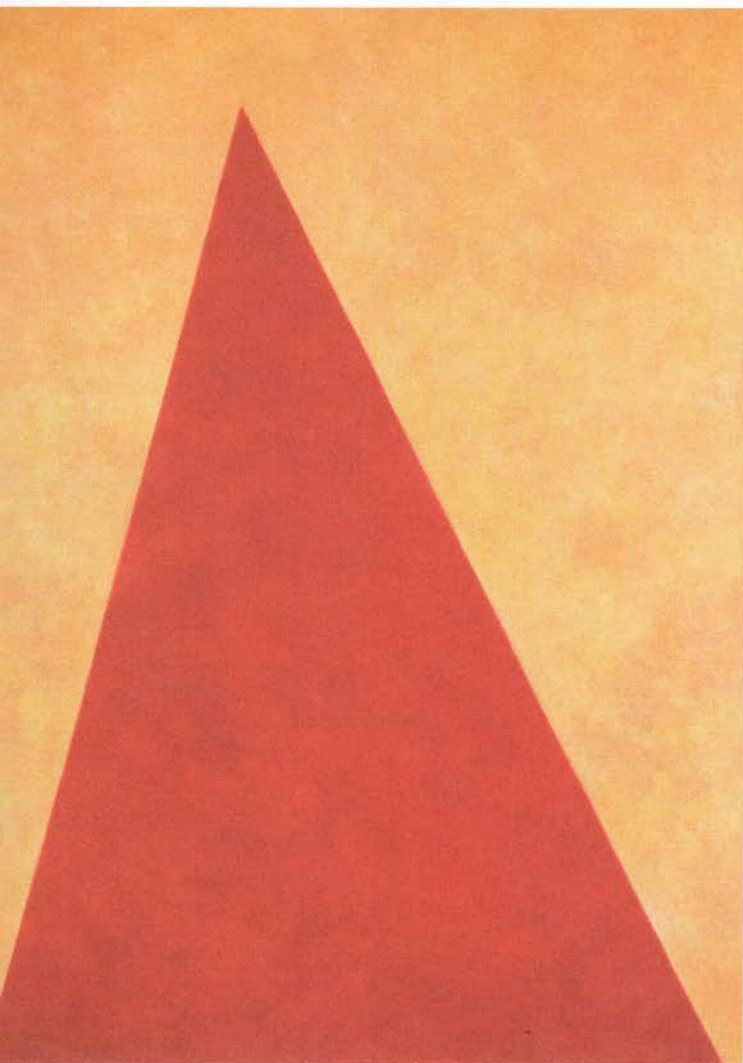
Eager is working towards two exhibitions at Utopia Art Sydney that encapsulate her trajectory from art school days in the 1970s to the present. 'Forty years of Colour and Light' will be a major survey of the artist's work (now postponed to 2021), and the exhibition which currently populates her studio is a new body of paintings and drawings entitled 'Duets'.

Eager's journey from student to career survey begins in her hometown of Sydney. In 1967 the exhibition 'Two Decades of American Painting', organised by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, travelled to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Eager recalls visiting this exhibition as a teenager and it having a significant impact. She remembers spending a disproportionate amount of time transfixed by Ad Reinhardt's 'black square' works. This moment of inspiration fuelled a burgeoning wanderlust that propelled Eager throughout the world in ensuing years. She states, 'I grew up in Sydney and set out to travel the world, and I got as far as Adelaide. I had a passion for Lithography, and I started studying at the South Australian School of Art. This was in 1972. In that art school you had to do painting and drawing as well. My prints at this time were interiors, figurative and domestic. There was a lot of colour, I've always been interested in colour.' Having gained a multi-disciplinary foundation across mediums, Eager returned to Sydney and, following a fortuitous

01 *Astor Place*, 2015, oil on linen, 200 x 300 cm
02 *Akatsuki*, 2018, oil on linen, 122 x 182 cm

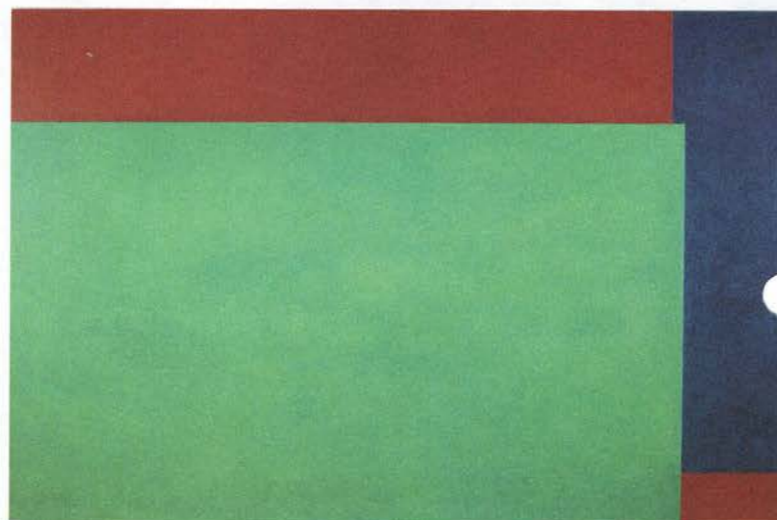


" I wanted to bring texture into the forms. The more I work on them the more I return to what I am. You can't escape it. "



03

“ A humanity encased in the seemingly rigid and austere ”



04

more abstract and geometrical. Honing in on the light. A piece of furniture in front of a window became the focus. When I returned, my practice became increasingly about these geometric shapes.

Throughout this period Eager's work evolved from the recognisably figurative to works that seek to capture atmosphere. She established a discipline in geometric forms that continues to occupy her practice today. The artist describes this transition as 'a move from the vaguely figurative into the vaguely geometric. I wanted to bring texture into the forms. The more I work on them the more I return to what I am. You can't escape it.'

Her exhibition 'Duets' features works that reduce this concept down to forms and texture, beginning as daily pencil sketches. 'I start off doing a lot of drawing with coloured pencils and I play around with colour quite randomly. I set rules for myself. Only four colours. I'm left with different forms and colours and I decide that I'll turn that into a painting. It's a discipline. I'd studied all that colour theory but essentially its more intuitive', Eager explains.

Her source sketches reveal this central idea of texture. The pencil colours overlap and blend, but one can also clearly see the work of the hand, the varying pressure of the pencil. At first glance the geometric forms, set against each other, appear to be blocks of colour, but closer viewing reveals the complexity of texture and irregularity of the line. A humanity encased in the seemingly rigid and austere.

The interaction between the forms is grounded in the poetic and romantic. Eager contextualises 'Duets' simply: 'it's about interaction; a dance.' This idea of geometrical forms in



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meeting with the Watters Gallery, began honing her practice with a focus on printmaking. 'I showed my work to Geoffrey (Legge) and Frank (Watters) in 1976 and left the work with them. Luckily that afternoon the late James Mollison (then National Gallery of Australia Director) turned up and they showed him and he purchased the whole lot for the NGA. That was a nice start, and I had my first show at Watters Gallery in 1977.'

Following on from this time, Eager increasingly yearned to travel and received a grant in 1980 (Australia Council for the Arts, Visual Arts and Crafts Board) to attend printmaking workshops in Italy and Scotland, as well as an extraordinary visit behind the 'Iron Curtain' with the express view of visiting Moscow's Hermitage Museum. This journey ended with an impactful visit to New York, a city that would become a central artistic and situational influence in her career.

I fell in love with the city and visiting the Museum of Modern Art. I went quite a few times during the eighties but just for short visits, and then in 1988 I got a grant (Australia Council for the Arts, Visual Arts and Crafts Board) to go to the Greene Street Studios (New York) for four months. I did large figurative drawings of the studios. To begin with, they were of windows and the lounge, and then they gradually focused in on the light of the window, getting

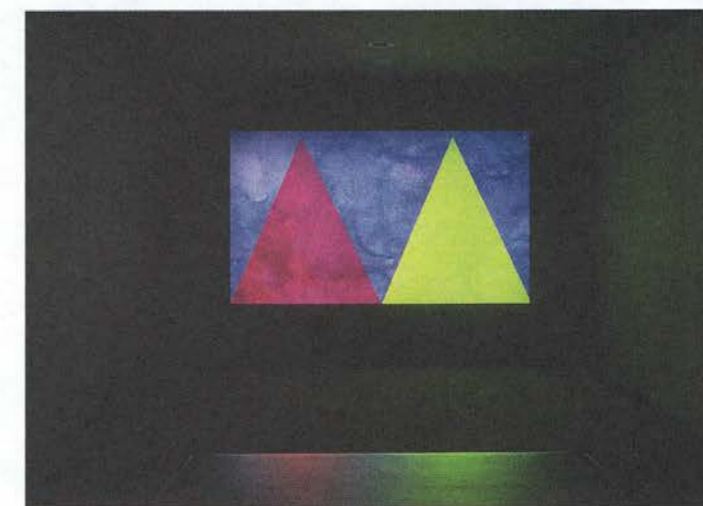
relationship, defined by differences in texture and colour, is encapsulated in one of Eager's most celebrated works *Tango* (2012), a major wall commission created for the opening on the new Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney. It featured a series of orange triangles cascading down the stairs that lead of the museum's Circular Quay entrance. She describes the work - 'it was orange, which was my favourite colour for a while. I worked on it for a long time. Lots of drawings, then I just honed it down from lots of colours and refined it. There's actually three different oranges, which is quite subtle.'

Moving into the future, Eager is interested in continuing to utilise technology to animate forms, leading on from earlier explorations through video such as *Precipice* (2006). What's clear is that a retrospective covering a forty-year career hasn't signalled a need to slow down. On the contrary, one feels that Eager is just getting started. ■

@helen_eager
heleneager.com

EXHIBITION

Duets
Until 30 May 2020
Utopia Art Sydney



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03 *Angle - Dhaulagiri*, 1998, oil on canvas, 142 x 106 cm

04 *NY Series - Green/Blue*, oil on canvas, 171 x 257 cm

05 *Tango*, 2012, synthetic polymer paint on wall, dimensions variable, Museum of Contemporary Art commission, purchased 2012

06 *Precipice*, 2006, single-channel digital video, colour, silent, 14:16 min, Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Helen Eager and Christopher Hodges, 2012

Courtesy the artist, Utopia Art Sydney and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney