

## Katherine Hattam: Life and Other Stories

In Katherine Hattam's world, art and life go hand in hand. Since her first solo exhibition in the late 1970s her work has acted like a mirror, reflecting aspects of her life and times, documenting the people and places that have featured in it, as well as the everyday details of her domestic environment. While Hattam's paintings and distinctive drawn and collaged works on paper are strongly personal, they are never self-indulgent and instead, by inviting the viewer to share her experience and perception of a world that is at once familiar, but also particular to its creator, she offers us a new perspective enriched by references to art, literature and the history of place, and energised by a joyous celebration of colour and decorative detail.

Hattam's perspective is, inevitably, a female one and her experiences as a daughter, wife and mother have often been writ large in images that focus on domestic interior spaces. One such space is featured in *Encounter groups, my first phone number* (2019), which depicts many of the accoutrements of twenty-first century communication and technology but harks back to the time when telephones had dials and their numbers incorporated letters. Numerous book spines and cover details torn from collected paperbacks are collaged on to the surface of the work, their carefully-selected titles both intriguing and revealing – *My Oedipus complex and other stories*, *My mother's house*, *My family and other animals*. Paintings on the walls – on the left an abstract by the artist herself and on the right, a seascape by her father – in conjunction with the view glimpsed through a neighbouring window of a golden-haired family, are enough, perhaps, to point to this work as a personal reminiscence and meditation on the psychology of childhood and familial relationships.

*My Pantheon (After Guston)* (2017) presents a very similar interior with the same wooden chairs and table in the foreground, surrounded by a tangle of electrical cords and equipment, as well as other items that define the space as one inhabited by Hattam. But the focus here is on the pair of paintings that adorn the background walls and which, through their imitation and appropriation of a work by the American artist Philip Guston, propel this image beyond the personal and domestic and into the current (alas, eternal!) conversation about equality between the sexes. Alongside depictions of an abstracted easel and suspended lightbulb painted in his trademark cartoon-like style, Guston's 1973 artistic pantheon listed five greats, from Masaccio to Giorgio de Chirico – all so well known that only a first or surname was required to identify them and all men. Hattam's pantheon lists six female artists – (Joan) Mitchell, Agnes (Martin), (Louise) Bourgeois, (Rose) Wylie, Carmen Herrera and Hilma af Klimt – and makes its point clearly.

The depicted 'pantheon' later emerged as an actual painting and this was followed by *Another list* (2019) that highlights some of Australia's most significant female artists, including Margaret Preston, Rosalie Gascoigne and Emily Kame Kngwarreye. The idea is further explored in a pared back painting that features a multi-generational list of names of women artists from around the world. Despite the strength of its statement, Hattam's painting is, like the artist herself, very matter of fact and instead of indulging in any kind of grandstanding, with a powerful simplicity asserts the place of these artists (and the many others not named) in the company of Guston's revered figures, declaring via its title that it is 'Not so much a Pantheon but, more a list'.

It was in part, a similar apparent absence of women from the story of William Buckley, the convict who escaped from his prison ship in Port Phillip Bay in 1803 and lived among the local Indigenous

people for over thirty years, that inspired Hattam to make a series of paintings on the theme. Having lived on the coast beyond Geelong she was familiar with Wathaurong country where Buckley's presence is remembered at sites including Buckley's Cave at Point Lonsdale and Buckley's Falls at Fyansford, and, Hattam documented his journey in *Where William Buckley walked* (2019). But it was seeing contemporary depictions of Buckley which emphasised his masculinity and isolation that prompted her to wonder where the women were. (1) Although the historical record tells us that Buckley had an Indigenous wife and probably fathered a child (2), they do not appear in any of the images of him and instead, Buckley is typically presented as a towering figure – 'the wild white man', with a long, ragged beard and cloaked in animal skins, who exists in an uncomfortable space, permanently displaced between colonial European culture and that of his adopted Indigenous community.

The drawing, *Thinking about William Buckley* (2016), was Hattam's first major statement on the subject. Looking out beyond a view of her familiar work table, characteristically strewn with the tools of her trade, Hattam stitches together a dense patchwork of disparate images to elaborate on the legend. Framed by a patterned border and divided by horizontal bands that allude to Hokusai's famous woodcut of 'the great wave', the drawing describes trees and other indigenous flora – Ti-Tree and She-Oaks that Hattam observed at Barwon Heads – as well as fish swimming in the ocean and laid out in preparation for cooking. A bark shelter is surrounded by various woven baskets and an eel trap, functional everyday items that mirror those belonging to Hattam laid out on the table below. A signpost to Point Impossible Road (in Breamlea) reminds us of the immense challenges faced by European settlers in Australia who, often in vain, applied their traditions and practices to life in the new land – as well as providing an amusing reference to white man's names for distinctive geographical landmarks – a stark contrast to the experience of Buckley who respectfully learnt and adopted the language and traditions of the Wathaurong and successfully lived alongside them for decades.

These ideas are expanded in the recent painting, *He became a go between* (2019) that uses text to introduce key elements of Buckley's story, including the fact that he used his language skills and unique knowledge of Aboriginal culture to facilitate communication and actively encourage peaceful relations between Indigenous and settler groups. Elements of Hattam's life, including books recently read – several of which engage directly with the subject of race relations in Australia (*Capricornia*, *The tall man* and *Taboo*) – are again incorporated into the picture. Spear in hand, Buckley is depicted with pale skin and a long orange beard, and stands near a bark shelter in the company of several women, some of whom are gathering and preparing food. The baskets and eel traps feature too but it is the profusion of flora and fauna – especially the dazzling sea of spotted blue fish – all painted with a bold approach to colour and pattern, that prevails, emphasising the diversity and abundance that was available to those with the knowledge to access it. Emus, wombats and witchety grubs stand alongside kangaroos – one at the top of the picture echoing George Stubbs' famous depiction, the first by a European artist (3) – and black swans, so strange to the settlers and the artist's English-born mother, who had only ever seen white swans before coming to Australia.

In these 'history paintings' Katherine Hattam navigates numerous histories, starting with personal experience and stories and through them, connecting with others that resonate artistically, through meaningful literary references, a sense of place or political motivation. The feminist perspective that informs many of these works is not new – she has always been interested in the role of women in

the world – but in line with broader contemporary international conversations, it has been dialled up a notch or two and applied to subjects outside her immediate domain. A committed and passionate artist, Katherine Hattam engages with the past and the present in a way that captivates the eye and challenges the intellect, asking us to think about the things that are often unseen and unsaid.

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1. In 2001 Hattam saw the Geelong Gallery exhibition *William Buckley: Rediscovered* which included historical representations of ‘the wild white man’ as well as contemporary works by, among others, Jan Senbergs and Juan Davila. Davila’s depiction of Buckley as a naked woman (*Buckley’s return* (1999), National Gallery of Victoria) and Senbergs’ image of a top-hatted figure standing in a rocky coastal cave, stormy seas on one side and calm waters on the other (*Buckley’s cave* (1996), Geelong Gallery) were together, major catalysts for her work on the subject.
2. See Marjorie J. Tipping, 'Buckley, William (1780–1856)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/buckley-william-1844/text2133>, published first in hardcopy 1966, accessed online 5 March 2019.
3. See essay by Des Cowley in Alisa Bunbury, *This wondrous land: Colonial art on paper*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2011, p. 14.