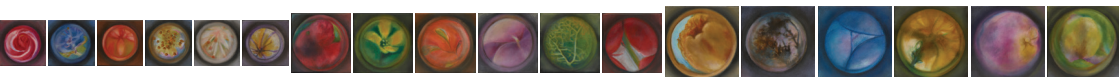




Jennifer Keeler–Milne

Close
FOCUS

17 February – 28 April 2024



Foreword

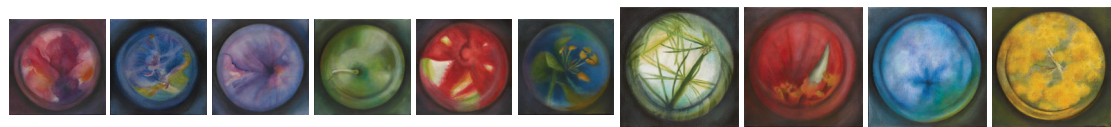
Grafton Regional Gallery is delighted to present *Jennifer Keeler-Milne: Close Focus* as part of its 2024 Artistic Program. This exhibition continues the gallery's commitment to celebrating contemporary Australian artists and presenting outstanding visual art experiences for the Clarence Valley community.

Close Focus explores Jennifer Keeler-Milne's fascination with documenting what is near and intimate. Comprising paintings, drawings and sculpture, each artwork explores one small aspect of nature. From the whip of feathers repeated a hundred-fold, to the flower gardens of her family home, Keeler Milne's works convey a sense of the universal contained within the minutiae, the enduring presence of beauty and mystery, and the fragile state of our natural world.

Sincere thanks to Jennifer Keeler-Milne for inviting us all to look closer, ponder, and wonder, and to Terence Maloon for his erudite words that so elegantly appraise the artist and her work.

Sarah Gurich
Director, Grafton Regional Gallery





Jennifer Keeler-Milne and the Mechanism of Focus

*On things aloof, aloft,
Bloom breathe, that one breath more
Earth is the fairer for.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

In the ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas (c 1500–1200 BC), the phenomenal world is said to be constituted of breath. The prime generator of *breath*, the prime mover of all things, is deemed to be an “author of condensations and dissipations”. Accordingly, the manifest world is understood to take form, to mutate, to decline and perish in much the way that clouds do. Brahma, the highest-ranking deity in the Vedas, is believed to be a sky god – a conviction that is held in common by all Indo-European religions – dwelling in the empyrean and eternally breathing the universe, or multiple universes into being.

These ancient metaphysics seem especially appropriate to Jennifer Keeler-Milne’s painting and drawing. Her cloud series (beginning in the 1990s and culminating in the *Conversations with Clouds* exhibition held in 2001) is an archetype for subsequent paintings and drawings: the phenomenology of “condensations and dissipations” has given rise to a long series of variants – whether these be circles of bobbing light, sea urchins, sponges, feathers, a blazing chandelier, moths, or various flowering plants. All of their shapes seem to have been breathed into existence. All appear to be mutations and metamorphoses of a common essence. Like clouds, their images have indeterminate edges – they are fuzzy, blurry, condensing and dissipating.

There is a gentle paradox that turns on Keeler-Milne’s stratagem of indistinctness. Precedents for it can be found – most famously – in works by Turner, Whistler, Monet and Seurat, as well as by pioneering photographers such as Henry Fox Talbot. In normal perception, when an object looms into focus, it seems to advance towards the viewer and differentiate itself from its surroundings. The art historian Yve-Alain Bois gives a classic account of this phenomenon:

“To perceive is first of all to perceive a figure against a ground (this is the basic definition of perception). But the ground is not a given: it is indeed what we must preconsciously construct differently each time we are solicited to perceive. If such is the structure of perception, how would it be possible to prevent a pictorial field from becoming a ground against which the figures will solidify as figures and which they will push back?”

This is a question artists have asked themselves time and again: how to avoid and overcome the selective, schismatic bias of normal perception? The gentle paradox of Jennifer Keeler-Milne’s images turns on the fact that it is not the ground but the figure that appears to have been *pushed back*. On close examination, the motifs in her charcoal drawings turn out to be gaps, blanks whose pale tonality allies them to the original whiteness of the paper. It is the build-up of darkness around them which *advances* and becomes an assertive, positive aspect of the drawings. Using the pointy end of a stick of willow charcoal, scrupulously avoiding smearing and smudging, she builds up a dense, gritty texture



flecked with motes of white – the white flecks being the exposed grain of the paper. Upon those scattered, glittering, sidereal points of light our gaze eventually settles.

By setting up a reversal of figure and field, solid and void, motif and medium, Keeler-Milne implicitly acknowledges a pictorial heritage which, in the twentieth century, defined its polarities in terms of abstraction and representation, or as modernism and the gamut of modernism's "pre-", "post-" and "anti-" modalities.

Her work maintains an unusually respectful, inclusive relationship with multiple genres and graphic disciplines which, on the face of it, may seem miles apart and incompatible. For example, the seriality and gridded installations typical of Minimal art are pressed into a rapport with botanical drawing and references to the classificatory systems used in natural history museums. Her recent oil paintings revive the layered glazing of sixteenth-century Venetian oil-painting, but with results that allude to the tenuous, "visionary" phenomena of Symbolist painting and the fuzzy apparitions of Georges Seurat, as well as to the continuous, even surfaces of minimalist monochromes. The heavy-grained canvas Keeler-Milne favours is equivalent to the heavy paper she uses for her drawings, with the build-up of glazes rubbed-back and the light of the primer allowed to breathe through the painted superstructure, functioning as a kind of back-lighting. Many paintings and drawings evidence Keeler-Milne's on-again, off-again attraction to a "photorealist" idiom, to which she harnesses her interest in the early history of photography, with its unstable and erratic recourse to the mechanism of focus.

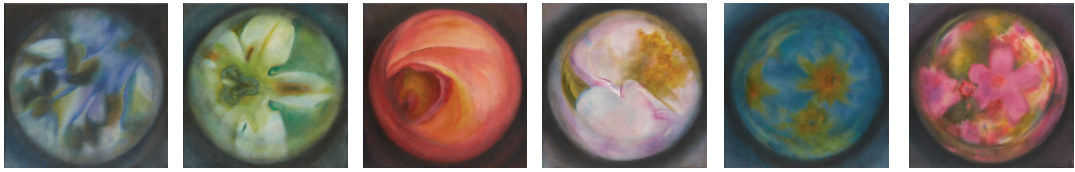
Tampering with the mechanism of focus, applying it selectively, haphazardly, or nullifying it in order to produce a bare silhouette – these are the artist's stratagems which prompt us to question the reality of an object and to re-examine our imaginative relation to it. Some philosophers have argued that our imaginative relation to objects is by no means as innocent and universal as we suppose, but is historically and culturally determined. An interesting example of this line of questioning comes from William Barrett, a New York intellectual who had witnessed at close range the resurgence of abstract painting following World War II. There were features of this art that disconcerted him:

"Our painting has detached itself from three-dimensional space, the arena of Western man's power and mobility; detached itself from the object, the supreme fixation of Western man's extroversion; and it has become subjective, contrary to the whole tenor of our Western life. Is this merely malaise and revolt, or prophecy of a different spirit to come?"

Fixated (yet so ambivalently) on the primacy of "the thing", Keeler-Milne's imagery therefore has resonances in the history of ideas. For Immanuel Kant the "thing in itself" (*Ding an sich*) was essentially unknowable:

"And we indeed, rightly considering objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself (*Ding an sich*), though we know not this thing as it is in itself, but only know its appearances – that is to say: the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something." (Kant: *Prolegomena* § 32)

Terence Maloon



Close Focus

Close: near, intimate, direct and within sight, searching and immediate

Focus: the quality of visual definition, to direct one's attention

Reflecting about the last few years of my practise, I realised that the perspective to which I'm constantly drawn is near and intimate. Each artwork explores one small aspect of the natural world. Within this smallness, I am trying to convey something of bigness too; the universal contained within the particular, along with the presence of beauty and mystery.

Close Focus is the title of one piece within this exhibition; 42 square oil paintings. They magnify from small to large and are spaced so you physically walk some distance alongside them. Perhaps like a stroll in a garden or an intriguing journey down a camera lens. The flowers and plants painted within the circles inside the squares are based on photographs I shot in my late parents' garden and other places. It's a homage both to my parents' love and our collective love of these spaces. Other paintings celebrate the colour and bounty found in the golden tones of Wattle and Beech trees, or the regal purples within the majestic Jacaranda tree that abound in Grafton.

There are also drawings. The most recent being *50 Elkhorn drawings* that were produced in Ubud, Bali. Deep in a tropical garden I discovered an Elkhorn fern plant, in various stages of growth with fragmenting leaves at its centre. Within this decay, I found great beauty. This was translated onto cotton paper with a metal dip pen and tones of black ink.

My materials are often simple. *100 Feathers* and other charcoal drawings were created on textured watercolour paper with natural willow charcoal. I save the white or the coloured background of the paper to draw the space around the subject. The black is the charcoal, full of void, full of mystery.

Beauty attracts me. It was an unfashionable objective when I attended art school, yet today it gives me great joy and inspiration which I'm driven to find. Beauty possesses this power and has the capability to transform and change us. Living in a time of great precariousness how can we act on the planet's behalf and protect it if we don't find it beautiful and compelling.

Come with me up Close and Focus. It's an invitation.

Jennifer Keeler-Milne

2024





Close Focus (E-IV) 2023, oil on canvas, 26 x 26cm.

Acknowledgement

Grafton Regional Gallery acknowledges the Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl people as the Traditional Owners of the land and waterways on which we live and work.

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AUSTRALIAN GALLERIES

