



Islands East to West

An exhibition by Lisa Iselin

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland
Gallery 1, 5

SUNDAY 22 APRIL – SUNDAY 27 MAY 2007



Cover: *Rottnest Island Dreaming* (detail) 2007,
oil and mixed media on canvas

Above: *West End, Strickland Bay* (detail) 2007,
oil and mixed media on canvas

Left to right:
Pandanus over Frenchman's Beach Lagoon (detail) 2007,
oil and mixed media on canvas

Deadman's Beach Banksia (detail) 2007,
oil and mixed media on canvas

Pittosporum Tree – Rottnest Island 2 (detail) 2007,
ink on watercolour paper



ISLANDS OFTEN FIGURE IN OUR IMAGINATION AS PLACES OF ESCAPE. FOR LISA ISELIN HOWEVER, THE ALLURE OF NORTH STRADBROKE ISLAND HAS PROVEN IRRESISTIBLE. AFTER 18 YEARS OF VISITING THE ISLAND TO PAINT AND DRAW, SHE AND HER FAMILY FINALLY MOVED THERE PERMANENTLY IN 2000. WHEN, IN 2006 THE POSSIBILITY OF A TWO-MONTH RESIDENCY ON ROTTNEST ISLAND AROSE, ISELIN SAW IN IT THE POTENTIAL TO EXPAND HER CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF ISLAND LANDSCAPES. *ISLANDS EAST TO WEST: AN EXHIBITION BY LISA ISELIN* REFLECTS HER ISLAND EXPERIENCES.

There are many similarities between Queensland's North Stradbroke Island and Western Australia's Rottneest Island, despite their geographical separation by the vast Australian continent. Each remains an important cultural site for its original inhabitants – the Noonuccal people of Stradbroke Island and Moreton Bay, and the Noongar people of the south-west corner of Western Australia. In addition, both were colonial settlements, and are popular tourist destinations today. But while these parallels are points of interest for Iselin, her abiding passion is for the natural beauty to be found in the landscapes of these two unique environments.

One island greets the sun and the other farewells it from Australia's furthest margins, and Iselin's drawings and paintings form a painstaking meditation of these two landscapes. For this artist, the appeal of Rottneest, only about one-twentieth of the size of North Stradbroke, is its harsh topography. During her residency there, sponsored by the Regional Arts Development Fund, Iselin was based at the convict-built Wadjemup Lighthouse, situated in untrammelled landscape well away from

the main settlement. Rottneest is a barren island despite nearly 200 years of settlement, because much of its native flora was cleared ahead of unsuccessful farming ventures. Its sparseness held immediate appeal for Iselin, drawn as she was by the sculptured forms of the trees that are shaped by the winter's relentless winds. The character of these trees, surviving olives from the farms and remnant native tea trees is highlighted by the simplicity of their surrounds. *Pittosporum Tree – Rottneest Island* demonstrates how, through her strong compositional sense, this artist makes these arresting forms a focal point in her work.

The clear, fine weather during Iselin's stay meant that the rough detail of the Rottneest landscape was etched out against the boundless turquoise of the sea and sky. Indeed it was these contrasting qualities that she found so inspiring – the distinctive textures of the barren, scrubby, scratchy ground and foliage against an unfolding backdrop of blue. Spending her days winding down roads and paths on bike or foot, visiting deserted bays, she used photography, and sketched with a pen *en plein aire*, to gather material for her work.

For the last five years Iselin has concentrated on drawing. By confining her use of media to black ink, graphite and bitumen, she has been able to focus on an exploration of line, form and texture. The benefits of this preoccupation are apparent in the pictures in this exhibition, which display a sureness and sensitivity of gesture and an ability to translate the immediacy of a captured moment onto the paper. Trees by the side of the road, for instance, are portrayed hunched around trunks twisted into improbable curves and filled with the wind's movement; and the tracks of bikes, lizards, and the native rat-like quokkers, which inspired Rottneest's ('rat nest') naming by Dutch sailors, are seen to crisscross the ground. In addition, Iselin utilises to great effect

the way in which the manipulation of scale can influence the experience of her work, through its ability to present the experience of a landscape as either intimate or overwhelming. The island's striking visual contrasts have also inspired her to reintroduce colour into her palette. In her smaller canvases – *Dolphin Point – Views of Salmon Bay, Rottneest Island* for instance – the sky and sea share the viscous energy imparted by a vibrant blue, which recedes in dramatic contrast to the raised lines of the black bitumen; and in the larger *West End, Strickland Bay*, she uses oil paints to further colour and animate her visual recordings. Through her repeated returns to sites, Iselin is able to bear witness to her personal experience of the natural rhythms and discreet patterning of elements as they emerge from a scene. In this way, she reveals the essence of this special place, and takes it to another plane of expression through her artwork.

Some three and a half thousand kilometres to the east, on North Stradbroke Island, Iselin's exploration of these themes continues. Here, the simple, sparse beauty of Rottneest Island is replaced by a much wider variety of vegetation. Missing too is the sense of wilderness and total isolation of the Western Australian location, because as North Stradbroke Island's population increases, isolation is becoming harder to find. The difference between the terrains is evident in Iselin's work. From Brown Lake's grasses, to the whispering casuarinas that fringe the stretch from Deadman's to Frenchman's beaches, to the graceful curves of the sand dunes, the finer detail of her North Stradbroke drawings reflects the need for a different technique to capture the island's more abundant and varied topography. In these images, human presence becomes more evident – summed up by the recurring motif of the small, beached rowboat. The drama of the west's textural contrasts gives way to an appreciation of the elegant and iconic



natural forms to be found in this eastern locale. Iselin's mangrove trees are poised delicately on their aerial roots, while her Cylinder Beach pandanus trees have firmly implanted themselves as if they were beach sentinels. Many of these ink drawings have been completed using a cut feather as a drawing implement. Her images show how this method provides an increased freedom of gestural interpretation, taking advantage of the hand's chance markings, and the intuitive scribbles of the subconscious mind.

Again, Iselin revisits favourite sites on North Stradbroke Island, because familiarity alerts her to subtle characteristics that reveal the feel of a place, and its spirituality. This is, after all, what she seeks from these island locations, and what she hopes to share. Island isolation offers a detachment from the hurly-burly of the 'real' world, and provides the opportunity for an intimate connection with nature. Islands like Rotttnest and North Stradbroke have a unique atmosphere that accompanies their watery dislocation – an opportunity to be with, and to be a part of, nature. Such opportunities, Lisa Iselin realises, are now rare. The representation of these special places as precious providers of a life force, and as sources of spiritual succour is, for this artist, the most important part of her work. Her pictures are testament to their value.

Susan Rothnie

March 2007

Below: *Tea Tree on Wadjemup* (detail) 2006, oil and mixed media on canvas

Images courtesy of the artist



Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets,
Cleveland Q 4163

Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm

Sunday 9am – 2pm

Admission free

Tel: (07) 3829 8899 or
gallery@redland.qld.gov.au
www.redland.qld.gov.au

*Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland Shire Council,
dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana*



*Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF):
A Queensland Government initiative
in partnership with Redland Shire Council*