

Scenes Revisited

Danielle Hatherley



Artist **Danielle Hatherley** takes us on a journey to the beginnings of her creative life, and tells how she has found new inspiration in revisiting familiar scenes.

I often have people ask me, “where do you get the ideas for your paintings?” My first thought normally is, “boy, where do I start?” because in many ways, every painting has been a part of a long, winding and interconnected road. If I look back to the start of that road, I can clearly see that my first true spark of inspiration for painting came about on the first day that I painted outdoors, in the landscape.

Prior to that I was a flakey art school student who was far from inspired in life drawing class.

So I had found my first love – the landscape! From there, after a few years of committed plein air painting, it became more and more evident that backlit scenes were of most interest to me. I loved late afternoon scenes of Balmoral Beach or Sydney Harbour that were flooded with light. As many artists do, I was taking reference photos often and I started



Photograph (1a)

to realise that I was being attracted by backlit scenes everywhere. I would see afternoon light through trees on a street in Leichhardt, where I lived for five years before moving to New York, and I would literally run home and grab my camera to take photos (this was before we all had cameras in our phones!) I understood more and more that it was the resonance of light against dark that was becoming my visual passion. I wanted a fluid subject matter with which to explore this and there it was – light filtering through trees.

Over the years, the photos I have taken and felt worth using as reference, have been printed and put in a basket, which I dig through periodically when I am thinking about my next painting. My photo basket is one of my most valued possessions because it has a selection of photos within that span across a twenty year period. Many of the photos have been with me through hours of painting agony and during moments of painting breakthroughs. And many of these dirty old photos are the basis for compositions that I have

revisited several times over. You may wonder; why paint the same thing again? Wouldn't that be boring? Wouldn't that be copying? And that would be "no" to the last two questions. As for the first question; when I revisit a composition, it is at a stage when I feel that there is something more for me to discover. In most instances the shapes within the photo serve as a starting point. Thereafter, the scene on the canvas should take on a life of its own, which is not hindered by an attachment to the original image.

Gosford Afternoon is the first example that I am using to show the stages involved in exploring my subject matter. In this instance I went from photograph, to drawing and three paintings over the past 10 years. It began one afternoon, about twelve years ago, when I was visiting a friend near Gosford, north of Sydney. As we were out for a walk I spotted some beautiful light filtering through trees and snapped a few photos. The photos sat in my photo basket for several years until one

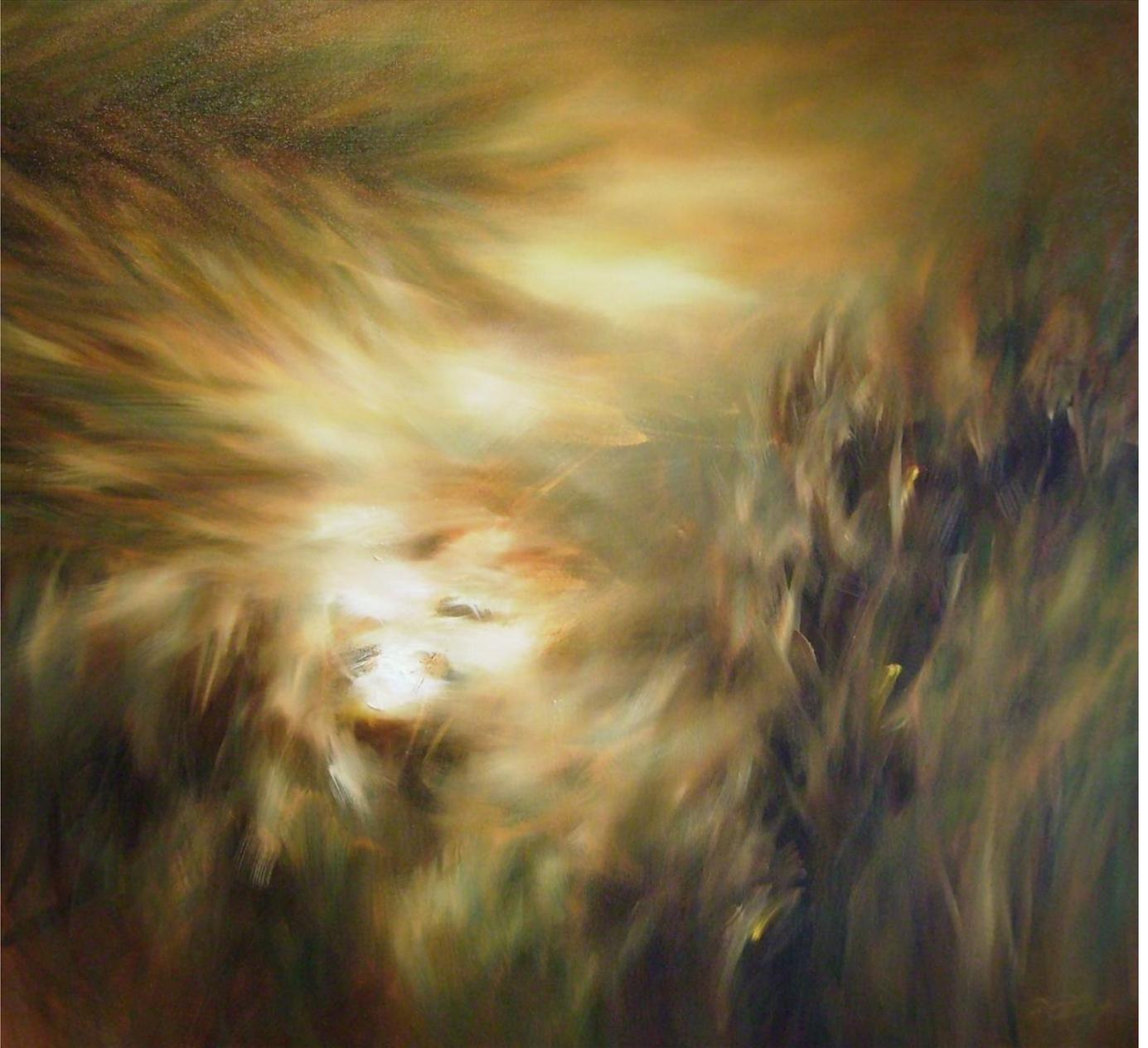


Drawing (1b)

afternoon I took my photographer's crayon and started looking at tiny cropped in sections of the photograph. In **photograph (1a)** you will see that I marked several shapes. I initially drew this vertically before making a landscape format sketch, as shown at **(1b)**

This drawing **(1b)** became the basis for my first painting of *Gosford Afternoon*. I destroyed that painting and have no photos to show of it. It wasn't a good painting, as not all of them are. I didn't paint *Gosford Afternoon* again for three or four years. I moved on to other paintings. Yet at a certain stage I ended up feeling that the time was right to look into *Gosford Afternoon* again.

I am not sure why it happens this way. It could be that after years have passed I sense that I have a better understanding of how to put down what I am trying to express, and that I can potentially get closer to that vision – so I optimistically dive in again! I feel that *Gosford Afternoon*, shown here at **(1c)** and created five years ago, was a turning point for my painting at that time. I was able to capture the movement and energy that I was after, without being overly attached to the original photograph.



Gosford Afternoon (1c)



Awakening – revisiting Gosford (1d)

An artist friend once said to me, that it's important to put the photograph away at a certain point. I get where he was coming from. The photograph can serve as a great starting point, yet to be too overly tied to it will only enforce limits and boundaries on the painting. I started another *Gosford Afternoon* two years ago, yet as I progressed it simply wasn't working, so I put the canvas away. Until, just a few weeks ago, when I was looking through my canvases and I decided that it was time to visit Gosford again. I pulled the canvas out and looked at

it. I didn't ponder or spend any time thinking. I didn't look at the original photo, drawing or previous paintings. I just did what I recall one of my favorite artists, **Lloyd Rees**, saying, and I 'attacked the canvas'. I knew that I had to take a risk and push outside of my comfort zone. At this time I am pretty happy with how *Awakening – revisiting Gosford* turned out (**1d**) Is it the painting of the century? That doesn't matter. It only matters that I pushed and took it further.



Photograph (2a)

On a trip to Italy about ten years ago, I was of course snapping the vast Tuscan landscape at every turn. Yet it was the simple shapes within the landscape that most attracted me. One photo I took was far from a great photo, yet I was mesmerized by the soft texture and tone of the olive trees pitched against the darker, more imposing cypress trees. Image (2a) shows the photo behind the start of *Olive and Cypress*.

After deciding on my cropped composition, I started with a charcoal and acrylic paint drawing (2b). In keeping with my exploration of light against dark, I created my own dramatized lighting. I was pretty happy with this drawing. It captured the essence of the light and texture in the scene, as well as the movement that I see in light. I did in fact see this drawing as so complete, that I didn't try painting it for a few years.



Drawing (2b)



Olive and Cypress (2c)

Then came *Olive and Cypress* the painting (2c). I struggled with this painting. It is overly detailed and confirms what I mentioned earlier, about the limitations of following reference photos too closely (this painting came some time before that wise revelation!) Hence I missed the essence of what I was trying to capture – and were it not for a more successful follow-up, I would not be showing it here!

A few years ago I decided that it was time to take another look at *Olive and Cypress*. As I considered my approach, it dawned on me that so much of the first composition was irrelevant, in so far as my focus on the resonance of light against dark. This brought

about the birth of *Cypress* shown at (2d). This was the painting that said everything I had hoped to say the first time around. I remain happy with this painting. Yet I do wonder, at what point I might grow restless and need to revisit *Cypress*...

Danielle Hatherley was born in Albury, Australia and raised in Sydney. She now lives and paints between studios in New York City and Boulder, Colorado.

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Cypress (2d)

