



TRUE NORTH AND DEEP BLUE

an interview with Emily Ferretti

by Naima Morelli

Those who think that pure painters are almost extinct in the contemporary art landscape should meet Emily Ferretti. This young artist ignores the prophets of doom who proclaim the death of painting, working relentlessly in her shared warehouse studio in Northcote, Melbourne.

The magic of Ferretti's paintings is that they seem delicate and fragile at first glance, but with time and further observation they develop strong and imminent qualities. In some canvases the landscape and objects depicted within it look very defined. In other paintings the subjects are closer to abstraction. Despite Ferretti's Italian heritage, her work seems to belong to some cold and meditative North European clime.

Emily's frosty palette and her predilection for the colour blue go beyond her art. The first thing people notice about her are probably her bright blue eyes, matching a very white skin and raven hair. When I visited her studio she almost deliberately wore a blue petroleum jumper. The studio, *ça va sans dire*, had a blue and icy hue.

As with many Australian artists, Emily Ferretti began her career by exhibiting in artist run spaces prior to being chosen by a commercial gallery. In Emily's case, that gallery was Sophie Gannon. It meant acceptance in the commercial art environment, which was a wonderful thing, but how might she also continue challenging herself and her practice? Ferretti's answer was to stay connected to her roots via other means. There are not many "pure painters" who could make it on the board of the ultra-conceptual WestSpace, for example, but Emily is one of them. Similarly, few could blend so perfectly into that contemporary art temple up on Gertrude Street (Gertrude Contemporary) where Emily had her studio for a while. Such venues are the staple traditions of inner Melbourne's emerging art culture. I wondered, from where did this penchant for all things grass roots spring ...

Were you born in the countryside?

E.F. In the countryside, yeah. I was born in a place called Gisborne, which is about an hour from Melbourne. It's north west, near the mountains. I grew up there until I was twenty and then I moved to the city to attend TAFE, and then VCA [Victorian College of Arts].

Do you think your childhood is still part of your work?

E.F. For sure. We were on a very isolated farm, so that's a reason why I like the work of folk artists so much. I feel I have an insight into their art. The country must stay with you subconsciously. I'm also drawn to things that have a lot of patterns. Leaves and plants have a lot of room to make them abstract, compared to very rigid like buildings. I feel that I can play with organic things a lot more. I pick things where there is a bit of pattern involved and I pull that stuff out.

When did you realize you wanted to be an artist?

E.F. I was always making things as a kid. I can't say I was one of those people who wanted to be an artist since they were five, not at all. In high school I was always quite creative though. I liked art subjects. In year eleven I went to a TAFE college for an open day and I saw the artist studios. I loved the idea that someone had a space just to make art. Being a very sheltered girl from the country and coming to Melbourne I was thrilled by the local art scene. The artists all had the cool hats and the cool jumpers and I was like: "That's amazing!" I was excited by their lifestyle and their art and I wanted to be one of them. Then I realized that painting didn't come so easily and I had to work quite hard. I was not a great drawer, but I think I did improve quickly. The more I looked at art the more I got into it. The more I got into it the more I felt in love with it.

What has been your experience with art school?

E.F. TAFE taught me everything I know, it really matured my skills. We did drawing sessions, three, four drawings every day, lots of paintings and technical stuff. The teachers were there all the time, and they were really into making paintings. A lot people studying at TAFE became really confident painters. After that I went to VCA, which was good but more theoretical. We didn't have any drawing classes because they expected us to be up to that level already. We did art history and a lot of conceptual art, video, new media subjects. They also taught us about practice and how to make a living as an artist after art school.

Does your current work look similar to the work at the beginning of your career?

E.F. My old work looked much lighter. I used very light washes. Now it's a little bit denser, especially the work with a lot of blue and a lot of deep colour. It's slightly more abstract now compared to what it used to be. But the themes have always been the same, they have always been domestic objects and sport. That's my world. No humans, I don't have any portraits. Just scenes and objects. They say what I want to say more than humans do. Although usually I pick most of the objects from my house, so you can tell someone has been there. There are people around but they are not in the paintings.

Did you start with painting or did you experiment with other media in the past?

E.F. I did more sculpture early on, actually. At TAFE I was into sculpture. I think I'm better at painting though. I do a lot of drawings but I never take them as seriously as I do painting. I think painting does what I want to do. I have tried some installations with pictures, and building things, but I always feel like I'm forcing something and that's not coming out. I'd rather just make a picture.

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I see some photos on the table – do you often start painting from photographs?

E.F. A few years ago all of my work was based on photos, but now it's just imagination. I'm more confident now, and I can paint without pictures, but the initial idea is drawn out by looking at a lot of images, to get me thinking about what I want to do. I start to visualize an image in my mind. My process is the same for all the paintings. I usually have to think about the size of the painting and it takes me sometimes many days. When I start working on a piece, the idea for the next painting often springs up halfway through it. The first picture will bounce something off for the next picture. Things flow. Then I usually try four or five different compositions. It may take a few months to come out. It just works along in my head for a while, but the actual painting process is quite quick.

So you don't make preparatory sketches...

E.F. Sometimes. They are very small, just to think about where to put things. Usually I start straight on the canvas, I like to take a bit of a risk. Often I do small versions of my idea using little canvases instead of paper. If they come out well I do a bigger version. Often these small ones work well because they are very spontaneous and they eventually become my work. I'd rather do that than do paper work and think of them as a mere step.

Do you do studies for the palette before starting to paint, or you experiment straight on canvas?

E.F. Colour for me is very intuitive. For most paintings I probably start with a pale colour and then I will move just slightly in different directions. I'm never bold, never very flat, never very intense. I like to be more natural. I think also the weather is influencing me sometimes. When it's bright and beautiful I feel more inclined to put more bright things on. In winter it's always these dark things coming out. Not consciously, but I'm not one of these artist who, without their palette ready they wouldn't begin to put the paint on. I will never be like that, so that's why I get colours that I can never replicate.





Gesture 5 (Keep), 2014, oil on linen board, 42x32 cm



Gesture 2 (Heart), 2014, oil on linen board, 42x32 cm

So your work is tending more and more toward abstraction?

E.F. Yeah I think so, I guess in ten years it will be just very abstract. I'm not going the other way. Things are not getting tighter, they are getting looser. Maybe it will look like Rothko or something, you never know!

What feedback do you usually get from your audience?

E.F. In general people say my paintings are beautiful and nice to look at. When I had the studio at Gertrude Contemporary I was surrounded by artists doing very conceptual work. They don't necessarily have a lot of people up there doing painting. Many artists are doing sculpture and installation. So I got a bit stuck in between the traditional and the contemporary. Some people react very well to my practice. Some other people maybe think it's a little bit boring and old fashioned. That's because at the moment they want to see paintings pushed beyond an image. I always feel pulled to be more innovative, but then I tell myself: don't worry, do what you want to do.

Do you think it's more difficult for an artist to work with painting nowadays, compared to the past?

E.F. Yes and no. I think that if you are doing paintings in the world of commercial galleries it's great, but if you want to be curated in a big show at the NGV and be given the ability to do something more innovative, then it's much better. So I'm always in between. I feel happy on one hand, and on the other hand I think I want more of the critical stuff. It's harder to be a painter and it's easier to be a painter. It depends on which world you want to fit into. If you want to fit into both I find it's very difficult. For me it was very good to get into Gertrude Contemporary, because that's a world that is very different from the traditional, so I was happy to have that.

Do you have a routine or special time during the day where you put all your energies into painting?

E.F. Well, I'm not doing any part time thing at the moment, my art is my main job. I've been trying to live for a few years as a full time artist, just to put all I can into the work. I'm working six days a week. 9.30, 10 o'clock usually I have a run before I get here. I do some running, do some sport, then get to the studio and do maybe three hours in a block, and after that I break because I don't work big hours, and then I do another three hours in the afternoon, maybe four o'clock, and then I go home. I don't like to work at night. I like to watch movies and relax. Usually the first thing I do is come to the studio and there will be a picture set up, half started. I look at it and I can see the fault, so I know straight away what the next step is. Usually it is just about seeing with fresh eyes again.

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Are you interested in exhibiting also outside of Australia?

E.F. For sure. It would be great to have a dealer overseas and go live somewhere else for a while and show my work over there, and get new influences. Also, if you make it abroad you are more desirable in Australia. The few big artists who went to America to live come back here as superstars. But there are not many Australian artists that go overseas and make it really big. Australia is so far away and I think it's very difficult for people here to take risks and go live somewhere else and make their work. It is also very expensive to send the work over. So everyone waits. We wait and wait. I'm not a good traveller, personally, I'm not very good at planes. I don't love moving around, and I get homesick. So it's challenging mentally to think of doing that. I need a reason. I did a residency a couple of years ago, which was good because I came back refreshed. But even then, I still painted pictures from my memory, rather than painting what I had in front of me. I didn't feel that the things I was seeing were linked to me. That makes sense to me in some way. ... Painting is a lot about home for me, and my home is here.

Emily Ferretti: *One To Another*, Chapter House Lane, 3 July – 3 August 2014.

Chapter House Lane is a non-profit, contemporary art gallery that hosts exhibitions in disused city spaces in Melbourne. Their primary location is a walk-by window space situated alongside Melbourne's St Paul's Cathedral - chapterhouselane.org.au

West Space - westspace.org.au | Gertrude Contemporary - gertrude.org.au
| Artist site - emily-ferretti.blogspot.it



Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.