

An exhibition at Straitjacket Art Space & Gallery
April 2023

Window on a City
Private Spaces; Shared Landscape

Paul Maher

STRAITJACKET

Window on a City

Artwork by Paul Maher

Writing by Chris Tucker, Belle Beasley, Ahn Wells

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I would like to acknowledge the Awabakal and Worimi people, the traditional custodians and first artists of the land on which I now live and work. I extend my respect to all Aboriginal people and recognise Elders past, present and emerging.

Foreword

I have known Paul Maher since I was at art school, over twenty years ago. I met him during a painting project he was involved in, and we stayed in touch. Over that time, he has been a dedicated drawer, painter and regular exhibitor. It was because of his commitment to his art practice that I asked him to be one of the first artists to exhibit in my previous gallery, Gallery 139. When Dino Consalvo and I started Straitjacket, Paul was quickly programmed into the exhibition calendar.

We have been looking forward to his exhibition over the past two years, watching Paul as he visited locations to draw and then paint in his studio. We are proud to be the gallery exhibiting in "Window on a City – private space-shared landscape" Gallery 1 from 29 April to 21 May 2023.

Ahn Wells

Director, Straitjacket



Contents

Foreword	<i>Ahn Wells</i>	3
Review	<i>Chris Tucker</i>	7
Notes on Looking/ Ways of Seeing	<i>Belle Beasley</i>	12-15
Biography of the artist		27

Cerulean harbour view
oil on canvas
75 x 68 cm



Lego desk and window
watercolour
38 x 28 cm

Chris Tucker

There's something quite intimate about a distant gaze that also brings into focus the things that are close, that we can reach out to, touch, and move about. Paul Maher's exhibition *Window on a City* dwells on this idea - where the near and far are at opposite ends of how we view the world, but yet tied together as dependents who aren't entirely sure what to make of the other. There's also a curious conversation between the landscape, that we observe at some distance to ourselves and have almost no control over, and those things so up-close and personal to us that we almost look right through them, not seeing them at all. A cup filled with pencils sits on a desk while the ocean crashes against a beach, like it has for thousands of years. As the eye shifts between the two, I'm not sure which has the better hand, is it here or there?

Window on a City invites us to imagine both the near and far at once, something that should be a common enough experience as we move about, but here on the walls, together in the same frame, and in equal enough ways, their tension becomes obvious. In reality, the near and the far aren't that different from each other - a far away place might at another time be quite near. It's not necessarily that they're made of different things, time just locates them as different places for us. It's the frame of the window that curates the distance for us. It keeps the near and far apart, defines their boundaries, and sets up a place where they can begin to tell their stories. The tension in framing these different worlds through the window is kept by the secrets each holds from the other - they have different stories to tell, and in conversation they only share what each can understand. The near is more comfortable with stories about my person, and those that make sense of my body; decorated cushions sit on a worn lounge, plants from the outside dutifully cared for in pots, artefacts with no meaning excepting their owners, and utensils scaled to fit a hand that's no longer in picture...they all remind us of how we make the world around us. In contrast, the far appears to scream a present made by others, while whispering the past, and those places that might yet come - what secrets do you hold?

Windows let the outside in. They bring light and air, but by posing the inside and outside together in the same scene, they also weave our different lives together from the comfort of a place we know well. *Window on a City* celebrates these worlds, reminding us that looking on to a window is an entirely different way of being in the world compared with looking into one.

Chris Tucker is an academic in Architecture at University of Newcastle and principal of Herd Architects.





Window on pacific street
oil on canvas
62 x 77 cm

Table set harbour view
oil on canvas
80 x 93 cm





Belle Beasley - Notes on Looking/Ways of Seeing

In the newly opened North Wing of the Art Gallery of NSW lies a quote: "If you paint everything but the figure, the figure will emerge." The quote pertains to a painting by the American artist Reggie Burrows Hodges, depicting two faceless figures surrounded by objects of their domestic life. The quote's suggestion, that the faces of the two ambiguous characters in his moody portrait are realised by virtue of their context, is relevant too in the survey of landscapes that Paul Maher has brought together for *Window on a City*.

Emphasising the constancy of the natural world against the fluctuating interiors of historical Hunter buildings, *Window on a City* explores the contrasting moods of interior and exterior, and grapples with tension between the natural and the man-made. However, also brought to the fore throughout the exhibition is a speculation of character. Whilst we feast our eyes upon sumptuous seascapes, richly adorned windows and busy domestic spaces, our gaze is simultaneously directed away from scenery and towards the person just out of view. We are prompted to delve into our imaginations and consider the histories, complexities, and mundanities of the lives lived behind the frame - the figures obscured from the canvas.

This was an unintentional layer of meaning for Paul. Throughout the process of cataloguing the view from different vantage points, the still-life scenes that bled into the frame revealed a richness. The



shape of the window, its ornamentations, its proximity to a seat, the style of furnishing, the genre of books strewn across the desk amidst all number of miscellaneous items – the figure inside, watching from the window, came alive through the recreation of the view.

He likens the layers of stories contained just out of reach by the limits of the canvas to an experience on the top floor of the old David Jones Building, now the QT, where he witnessed several layers of wallpaper being peeled back, a nod to the many revamps the space had gone through since its construction. Initially interested in capturing the landscape through the framing of the window, *Window on a City* has resulted in the observation of not just landscapes, but of lives.

*Building blocks, ocean
street*
oil on canvas
80 x 61 cm





Prism
oil on canvas
62 x 43 cm

The landscape, one of the oldest art historical genres, has been proven time and time again as a rich subject, compositional challenge, and mode of escapism for artists and audiences alike. Incorporating a window to frame the scenery tempers this daydream by encasing nature's daunting wilderness with a sense of safety. Positioned behind the glass, a viewer can be projected out into the sublime, bucolic pastures, while simultaneously remaining in their protective dwelling. Surrounded by creature comforts and going about their daily lives.

In selecting windows attached to historically significant buildings, Paul extrapolates on the varied existences from within these spaces, both real, and imagined. The ground floor of the old David Jones, where you shopped for your first respectable button-up for that big interview. The brutalist façade of the Newcastle Police Station, recalling a shameful run-in with the cops in your early twenties you'd rather not be reminded of. And the panoramic view of the Christchurch Cathedral Bell Tower, conjuring up visions of Newcastle's own Quasimodo-like character, dutifully climbing the stairwell every day. Each of the works in Maher's exhibition tells a story – one of the land, one of the building, and one of the life lived within the four walls. A meditation on the interwoven nature of these stories, Paul Maher's *Window on the City* reminds us that we glean as much from looking in, as we do from looking out.

*Belle Beasley is a dance artist, writer, and emerging curator
based in Newcastle / Muloobinba.*





watercolours

38 x 28 cm

opposite: Guitar and bookcase

top left: Shelf life

bottom left: Artist's palette and shelves

above: Bookshelf and Lenin bust



*Dustpan, brush and notecard,
watercolour
38x28cm*



Customs house palm tree
oil on canvas
61 x 43 cm



Ocular
oil on canvas
77 x 62cm

Melby

Bell wheel
oil on canvas
114 x 52 cm







Police station balcony
oil on canvas
78 x 94 cm



Arched window
oil on canvas
85 x 68 cm



Police station interior with lunch table
oil on canvas
76 x 78 cm



Paul Maher

About the Artist

Known for his gritty urban, coastal landscape depictions, Newcastle-based painter Paul Maher grew up in the burgeoning housing commission suburb of Rutherford in the Hunter Valley and has been enamoured with painting since his youth. The gift of a second-hand set of oil paints when he was a teenager, propelled him into painting. His first works depicted re-imagined surf magazine images using two-stroke mower fuel to mix the paint.



In 1983, Maher moved to the city to study art at the University of Newcastle. During this time, he lived in share houses in Cooks Hill and the East End and took studios in the Community Arts Centre and above the Lucky Country Hotel. Here he developed an interest in capturing the built environment and the interactions between people and landscape. After completing his postgraduate studies in 1985, Maher exhibited widely in Newcastle and Sydney galleries, featuring in both solo and group shows.

Maher's obsession with painting has bordered on the extreme, he once climbed into a condemned building after the 1989 Newcastle Earthquake to salvage his paints and brushes! He was a central

force in Newcastle's public art revitalisation after the Earthquake. Maher's work was exhibited in the commemorative Art Gallery of NSW Shifting Grounds exhibition.

A successful solo exhibition at Von Bertouch Galleries led to his work being purchased by then Assistant Director Nick Mitzevich for the Newcastle Art Gallery collection. The following year he took two exhibitions to Paris made possible by Jean-Paul and Monique Delamotte under the auspices of the Association Culturelle Franco-Australienne (ACFA).

Maher's art is highly regarded, and he has been a finalist in several awards, including the Len Fox Art Prize, Lake Macquarie Art Prize and the Kilgour Prize. He was also a beneficiary of a Mornington Peninsula Art residency.

Though primarily a painter, Maher's artistic practice spans mediums including watercolour, ceramics, digital drawing, and mosaics. Paul continues to exhibit across Newcastle and Sydney with Straitjacket Art Space in Newcastle and Saint Cloche Gallery Paddington. Maher now lives with his family in Hamilton East and works from a light-filled studio in his backyard..

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