

## Helen S. Tiernan. Farming without Fences.

**29 November 2014 – 17 January 2015**

**GALLERY CLOSED 24 Dec – 06 JAN**

**FLOOR TALK Saturday 29 November (prior to Opening) 2.30–3.30pm with Q&A.** Free/Bookings recommended.

The Artist, Helen Tiernan, in discussion with Bill Gammage, Historian, Academic and Writer. (*The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 2012 [Reviewed in The Monthly Magazine, December 2011](#)).

**OPENING Saturday 29 November 4.00-6.00pm**

To be officially Opened by Bill Gammage, Historian, Academic and Writer. Margo Neale, Senior Curator National Museum of Australia and introduced by Adrian Newstead, Curator and Director, Cooee Gallery.



above. *Placement*, 2014. above r. Helen Tiernan in her studio. below r. *Colonial wallpapers*, 2014 (5 panels)

**Helen Tiernan's new body of work is inspired by beauty, landscape, her Aboriginal heritage** and the connection between things lost but not forgotten such as Aboriginal land management and traditional Western interior decoration, both of which inform Tiernan's work.

**The aesthetic link between these disparate ideas is the patterning** they have left on the environment, both external and internal environments. It is these designs that Tiernan returns to again and again in her recent paintings.

**Bill Gammage's ground-breaking book, *The Biggest Estate on Earth - How Aborigines made Australia*** (Allen & Unwin, 2012) was an early motivation and inspiration for this series. The paintings, like the book, explore the contrasting ways our ancient continent has been viewed and managed by 'new comers' and First Australians and how that practice has affected the people involved in it. As Gammage says in relation to Aboriginal land management, "... *this was no haphazard mosaic making, but a planned, precise, fine-grained local caring.*"

**Fire, grass, kangaroos, the forest's edge and human endeavour are focal points** in Indigenous and non-Indigenous land management and the disparity in understanding between these elements and practices reveals the space between black and white conceptions of this continent. It is the patterning of these components that have become the focus of Tiernan's new work.

**This patterning is most evident in the environmental mosaics** generated by the controlled distribution of cool and hot fires employed to optimise Aboriginal country. The Australian indigenous vision of beauty in landscape was related to the complex fire-shaped balance between habitats, resources and reduction of dangerous fuel loads. This contrasts with the Western, one-dimensional land management which views environment in terms of production,

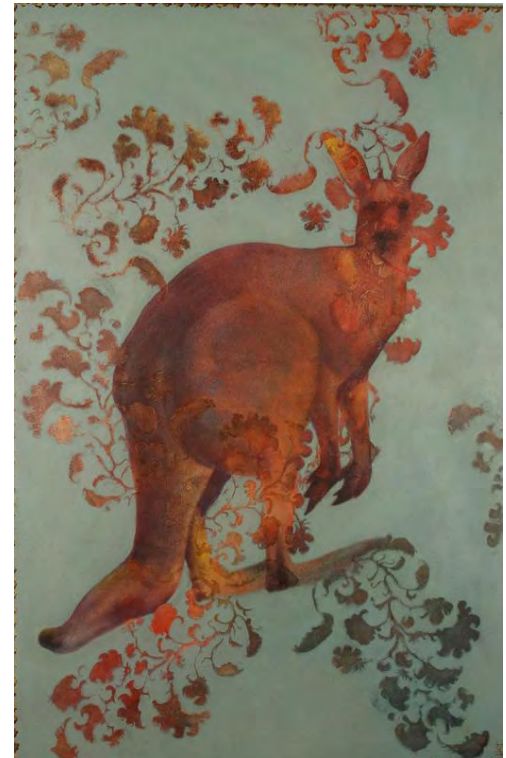
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recreation, wilderness or some similar metric, but rarely blends functions. It is the tension between these two imaginings that lends Tiernan's paintings the edge that makes them unforgettable.

**Tiernan uncovers the beauty in Western design ideals**, because she relates Aboriginal understanding of beauty in the land to western ideas of beauty in the household. For early settlers home was inside, their houses were the space they could control while for Aboriginals home was outside, in Country. At home both peoples desired balance.

**Beauty for a westerner could have been in wallpaper**, doilies or the pressed metal ceilings they invested in. It was something valued, similar to the gold edging Tiernan applies to her paintings. Many early wallpapers were scenes of new and recently explored lands – they were idyllic scenes, visionary interpretations of perfectly patterned worlds. The doilies and tin ceiling designs embossing Tiernan's works are the blueprints of balance, reinforcing the idea that symmetry could be created inside a house through the use of objects.

**Balance, beauty, and home – these universal concerns link and inspire Tiernan's work** creating a collection that is memorable and inspirational. Perhaps we can't see the effects of Aboriginal land management today. Rarely now do we see scenic wallpaper but these elements still exist subconsciously all around us. Tiernan's paintings reference that subliminal beauty, lost but not forgotten.



*Decoroo I*, 2014 120x79cm oil on canvas

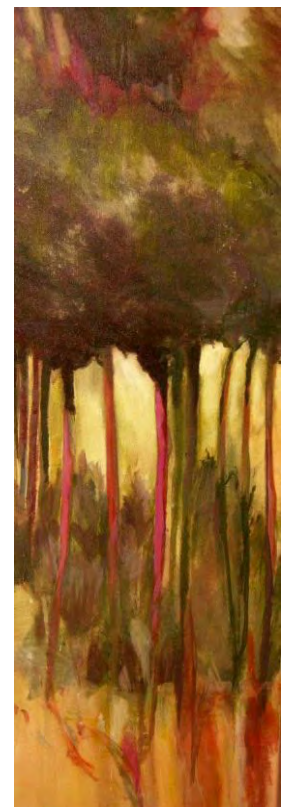
### ABOUT THE ARTIST Helen S. Tiernan [www.helenstiernan.com.au](http://www.helenstiernan.com.au)

**Helen Tiernan is a Canberra-based visual artist** who majored in painting at the Australian National University (ANU) Canberra School of Art, graduating with Honours in 2001. She has exhibited her work widely in the ACT as well as in Victoria and NSW. Helen's work is held in private, public and corporate collections in Australia, including the ANU Loans Collection and the National Museum of Australia, and in collections in the USA & UK. Helen has received a number of awards and grants. Her work deals with historical and contemporary events and issues affecting Aboriginal people, particularly marginalisation and cultural retrieval.

**Her focus has been on cross-cultural interactions and personal journeys**, including titles such as *Silent Generations*, *Songlines-journeys through Country* and *Shared Histories*. Mark making and patination, embossed and applied, feature strongly in her works. They refer to familiar patterns recalling a domestic past as well as an Indigenous one. Her paintings interrogate, challenge and explore the many contradictions that lie below the surface of society.

**Other works explore concerns in relation to the validation of feminine experience** and its transformation from craft to art and from the private to the public arena. Throughout each body of work she continues to indulge her fascination with exotic folds of fabric, drawing on the sensual surfaces of traditional seventeenth century Flemish and Edwardian artists and consulting the work of nineteenth century designer of wallpaper and textiles, William Morris.

**The idea of elevating the ordinary to the extraordinary** by giving it cultural and conceptual meaning - from nature to culture - informs her overall approach.  
(information from the artist's website).



*Undergrowth*, 2014  
80x30cm

**The Artist is available for interviews. Please contact the gallery or Pop-Up Publicity to assist in liaising with the artist.**  
**The Gallery will be closed 24 December 2014 – 06 January 2015.**