



FROM THE MUDBRICK HOUSE

DINO AND LOTTIE CONSALVO

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Dino Consalvo & Lottie Consavlo

Artists: Dino Consalvo, Lottie Consavlo
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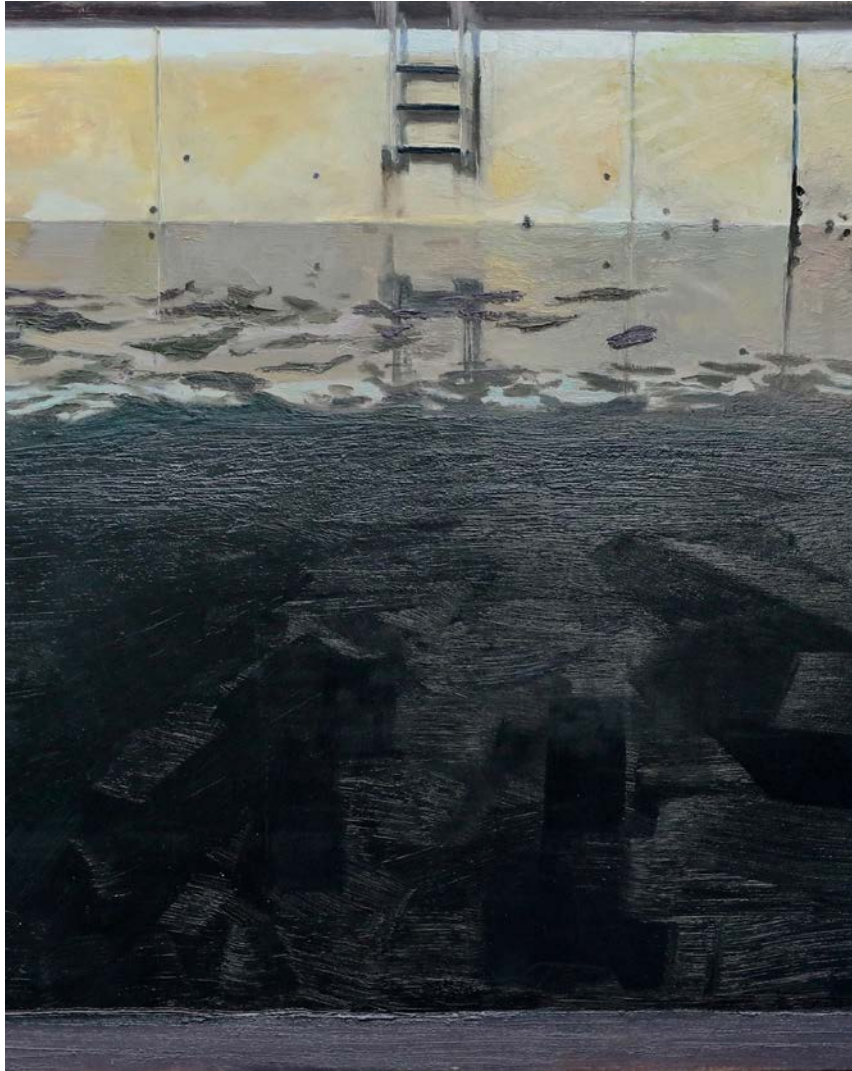
From the Mudbrick House is a curated exhibition that explores the art practices of Newcastle-based artists Dino and Lottie Consalvo, who are father and daughter.

From age two and a half to five years, Lottie lived with Dino in a small mud-brick house in country Victoria, in a little town called Briagolong. It was a simple existence that revolved around Dino painting in his studio (usually at night), teaching art at the local TAFE, working as a sign-writer, and raising Lottie as a single parent.

Much has been written on the affects in the early years of a child's life on the crucial role that learning and experience has in the development of a child's personality. Dino's art practice was the backdrop to Lottie's everyday life. In looking back across both artists' practices, spending this particular time together in the Mudbrick House has influenced not only their art, but also their relationship as father/daughter. It is evident that unintentional synergies have been created within their work.

This is the first time 'the Consalvos' have exhibited together and as a consequence they have spent significant time reviewing each other's artworks. This process has elicited much debate and an intense review of works that they feel have the most innate resonance to the relationship, from both their own – and the other's – practice. This process was undertaken over many months and the result is in a part retrospective and part collaborative exhibition. It has been a journey for both and has forged a special bond as artist to artist, alongside the familial relationship of father and daughter. While both artists are on independent trajectories within their careers, this exhibition comments on family dynamics, the family home, and shared time and space, and how these elements influenced each artists' approach to making.

Ahn Wells
Curator



Dino Consalvo, *Full Pool II* 2016,
oil on board, 120 x 140 cm, detail



Lottie Consalvo, *I Put It Here So You Could Find It* 2018,
video still, single channel video, 2 min 35 sec, detail

Dino Consalvo and Lottie Consalvo

Working across a variety of mediums but with a strong grounding in painting, both Dino and Lottie Consalvo take a personal approach to art making. Since the end of the nineteenth century painting has been inextricable from the narrative of its perpetual cycle of deaths and rebirths in the face of photography, conceptual art, installation, digital technologies and the internet. But what has become clear since the painting revival of the 1980s is that painting cannot be solely defined in relation to the Modernist narrative of its progression towards abstraction, through which the medium is perceived to have exhausted itself. Not only has the opposition between abstraction and figurative representation been dramatically recast in contemporary painting, with each category increasingly put to use in the other, but painting today is more comfortable with representation – that inevitable trace of the familiar – than it was during the twentieth century.

Although Dino Consalvo has shifted between both abstract and figurative painting on occasion, his work sits primarily within a popular vein of contemporary Australian painting that is both representational and fundamentally concerned with the application of paint. With a keen eye for the everyday, Consalvo often grapples with depictions of the landscape, both natural and manmade. The point of all compelling contemporary landscape painting is not to produce a picturesque view, but to translate the experience of place in a deeper sense and it is certainly with this intention that Consalvo chooses to focus on his local environment and home town, Newcastle.

While personal experience and a commitment to en plein air painting may be his starting point, his work alludes to more profound connections between people and place, as well as the impact of industrial activity on the natural environment. His evocative suite of paintings *Working the Harbour*, 2014, shows



Dino Consalvo, *Harbour Hero*, 2014,
oil on hardboard, 80 x 213 cm

Newcastle's busy industrial port, the largest coal export port in the world. The sharp cropping and angular lines of the heavy container loaders depicted in the paintings declare a pronounced engagement with issues of composition, while scratchy mark making and deft, confident brushstrokes reveal Consalvo's preoccupation with painting as a medium that has a limitless set of visual problems that can be constantly reworked.

These visual problems include the impossibility of ever fully capturing the landscape in two dimensional form, due in part to the constantly shifting and mutating forms of the natural world, which is alluded to in Consalvo's treatment of light. By depicting his subjects at different times of day – rendering the bleached effects of the Australian mid-day sun, the elegiac tones of twilight, as well as the darkness of

night dotted only by electric lights – Consalvo gives his paintings their own unique emotional vitality.

Lottie Consalvo shares a commitment to painting based on personal experience, but her practice has an even more expanded approach to medium that incorporates performance, video and sculpture. She creates large scale abstract paintings with an earthy and restricted palette of black, white, brown and ochre. Her paintings have simple ghostly forms and their titles confirm an ambiguity – as if they were the middle of a sentence, pointing to a moment.

Working with abstract painting today inevitably raises questions concerning the work's position in relation to painting's history and theorisation within the twentieth century, such as the question of how we should connect contemporary abstract painting

with its recent history. One strand within the current debates on abstract painting leans towards an inversion of its valorisation within American Modernist discourse, presenting painting as fragmented, multiple and heterogeneous and without the unity of purpose it was once believed to have had in Greenberg's reductive medium specificity.

Consalvo's work taps into Modernist ideas of the artist's gesture as a revelation of direct psychic experience. Consistent with her exploration of memory, loss and desire, the work displays an interest in the psychological play between presence and absence. Although tied to Modernist concerns with personal expression, her paintings appear to be a kind of re-assemblage rather than purification, with forms and structures that connect, detach and reform.



Lottie Consalvo, *Ages and Ages* 2018,
private performance, video still, Heide Museum of
Modern Art, Melbourne.

Allusions to personal relationships, as well as an intense and palpable presence of the body – whether it be that of the artist or the forms that appear to meet in her paintings – provide Consalvo's paintings with emotional yet enigmatic clues to their intentionality. Layering one element over another, from broad, sweeping lines, barrier-like structures to more organic shapes, her use of form betrays a concern with connectivity, relation and interruption.

In contrast to her paintings, Consalvo's performances allow her to bring a different temporality into her work. This is because performance occurs over a period of time that will never be repeated. A performance can be re-performed but this repetition always marks it as different. For this reason, the idea of transience is fundamental to performance. Consalvo's performances take their inspiration

from memory and personal history, as well as the task-based and endurance performance central to Conceptual and post-Conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s. The idea of memory and the fragmentary and fragile way it asserts itself is central to Consalvo's work. Memory is offered up to us informing the present, the future and the imagined.

Another theme that runs through Consalvo's work is psychological shifts. In a performance *Compartmentalise*, 2012 Consalvo devised a strict set of instructions in which she would live with only minimal possessions for a year, and by removing the peripheries of the everyday, how this might alter psychological parameters.

Consalvo actively blurs the boundaries between different mediums to further investigate psychological

shifts. For her work *Ages and Ages*, 2018, created at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Consalvo created the work partly in situ, running a continuous white line across the surface of ten large panels that were custom made to fit Heide's Project Gallery. By doing so, she intentionally unhinged the clear boundaries between painting and performance – performing with no witness. Although each medium that Consalvo works with brings with it a unique set of concerns, by investigating her ideas across all of them and blurring their individual confines, she is able to expose their limitations and bring their distinct ontologies into conversation.



Interview with Dino Consalvo

Are there particular themes in your paintings that you find yourself returning to?

The first show I had at 16 was one of my best. In that, all of the work that I produced for that show was an unconscious attempt to try and understand myself. It was work that was very intimate and very honest. Art school made me aware of what I was doing and it gave me a different take on what to do. Although I was painting honestly, I think I stopped talking about myself. I see this as somewhat like a writer shifting from the first person to the third person. This didn't dampen the work; it was just coming from another place. After I had studied art I would do projects. I would pick things that interested me like Newcastle Harbour and I would throw myself at it in an intensely paced period and see what happened. I really enjoy working like that because the results can sometimes blow you away. It's a bit like eating a meal you made and being surprised by the taste. As I have gotten older, I seem to have reconnected to myself again. I am finding this a good thing. My last show in October, *The Lady in the Boat* was pretty intimate. I started working on the series as early as 2003 and it took that long to get it out. I think age makes a difference. I am more comfortable in my skin and I don't care what people think about what I am doing any more.

Dino Consalvo, *The Jake Painting*, 1980,
mixed media on board, 120 x 180 cm

Your painting spans both natural and urban landscapes. What is your connection to particular places and what ideas inform the subjects that you choose to paint?

I love going out to paint. It is so great to paint an environment that you have a connection to and a history with. I have been doing it since I was at high school and the excitement has never faded. I grew up in Newcastle and considered myself a city boy, but I have always been romantic about the countryside and the beach. In the early 80's I bought 230 acres of land in East Gippsland, Victoria. It was an isolated but truly beautiful part of the world. It is where Lottie was born. When we moved back to Melbourne, I would paint bridges, ships and industry, and then beaches as well. So that is what I continued to do when I came back to Newcastle. I think my connection to the local landscape is totally romantic and I really want to share that. Newcastle is very special to me. It was where I was born. My family home is still here.

Do you think that your daughter's art practice has had any impact on your own?

I think my daughters practice is fantastic. I love her honesty and her ability to work on such an emotional level. I can look at her work for a long time, but I don't think her art practice has influenced my work. I can see connection in other ways. For instance, the genetic thing that drives us. That's the thing that's under our skin. I see it in her children and back the other way in my mother. I see a connection with colour and some form but I think that's genetic as well as environmental.



Dino Consalvo, *Building Blocks*, 1988,
oil on canvas, 76 x 85 cm

Did you try to foster a creative environment for Lottie to grow up in and how important do you think creativity is to childhood experience?

I really don't think I tried at all. The studio was always there. Lottie was just there from the beginning. There was always paint and paper around and in the beginning there was a life drawing group once a week. I later ran a commercial art business and there was often a mural or paintings and sculptures happening at some feverish pace. I made sure not to force creativity upon her. There is always a danger that you can make someone hate it. Creativity enters your pores; it isn't rammed down your ear. It does of course help if you have grown up around art and I do believe that you learn through being present and not necessarily through making work or being taught a method.

Your paintings are quite gestural and painterly. Who do you see as the primary influences on your art practice?

If I am painting a show or doing a particular body of work, I find looking at other works very dangerous. I don't go to shows if I am in the thick of it and I don't go looking through art books. I have to make my way through the works on my own and resolve them myself. I do have favourite artists though. When I was in high school John Firth-Smith was my hero. I would drool over his work. At art school I liked Hockney, Bacon, Whitley and Bonnard. I was 12 when I started painting and I was working with oils. I had no idea what I was doing. By the time I was 15, I managed to develop my own style of paint application using oil paint on unprimed tempered masonite. The paint would turn to putty and I would buff it with my bare hands once the paint got tacky. All those paintings survived and the paint quality is still as good as the day they were painted. I have always loved painting method, although it can be a downfall at times. I love knowing stuff about paint. When I moved back to Newcastle a fellow artist called Peter Lankas introduced me to the oil painting methods of the Old Masters. It was like starting over again. It changed my painting style and I have really fallen in love with the quality of paint.

Can you tell us about the works in the exhibition? What was your initial idea or motivation for these works?

These works mean something to me. Some of the works are over forty years old and I preserved them because they have an emotional value to me. I have lost bodies of work through the shuffle of life and I have also sold work. You can't always drag the work around. It's not practical, so I would select one or two works from each significant period. I did this mainly as a reference for future work. I believe you have to be reminded of where you have been every now and then, just to be sure that the direction you are heading in is still ok.

There is a story attached to every work in the exhibition and most of them are of a personal nature. The dog painting for example, I painted in homage to a great companion. He was a truly remarkable animal. I can't live without this painting. Not because the painting is good or bad or I liked the texture. I need to have it around because I look at it every day and acknowledge how lucky I was to have had such a beautiful time with this friend. Paintings can be like music. They remind you of yourself in a particular time and place. They can give you a sense of self. The painting of Freestone Creek for example, represents the iconic country I lived in when Lottie was born. It stirs up more emotion and images than a photograph of the same stretch of creek.



Dino Consalvo, *The old lady in the boat*, 2018,
gouache on ply, 56 x 41 cm

What aspects of your work do you think have changed over the course of your career? Would you say that your approach to art making has been fairly consistent or have there been subtle transformations?

It was Robert Rauschenberg that said “Art is life and life is art”. I have always felt the need to make art and life is always changing. Things like technology and communication have changed the way we make, view and sell art. I have always worked with a number of mediums. Drawing and painting are now different because of the introduction of the iPad. I love drawing and painting on an iPad. It’s a great travel tool, it fits in your kit and it isn’t messy. At the same time, I’m happy using traditional methods, such as making up my oil mediums and preparing my own paint panels or stretched canvas. Last year I also started making ceramics. I joined a local group and am totally sucked in. I love it and can see myself making ceramic forms and painting in under-glaze forever. I have found the process fascinating and addictive.

When you paint en plein air, how much time might you spend on a particular painting?

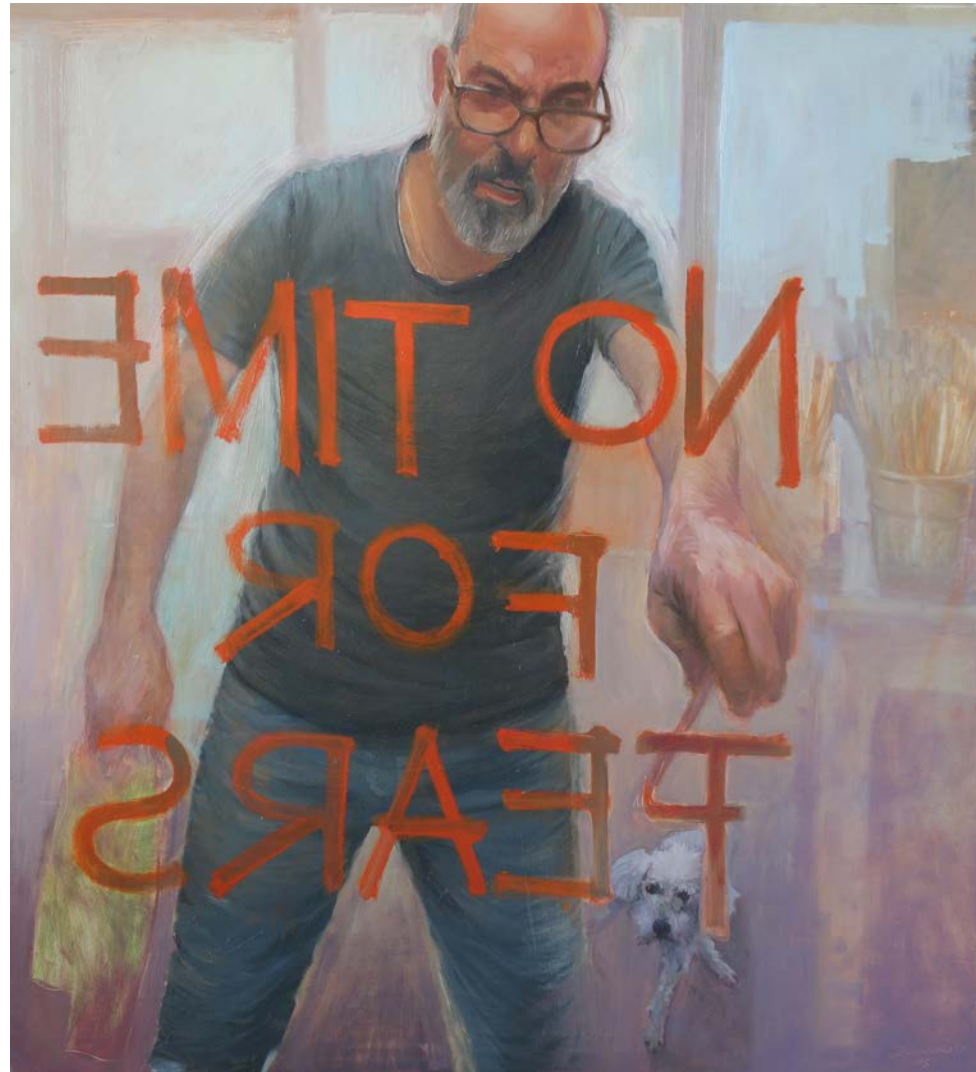
When I paint en plein air during the day, I rarely spend more than a couple of hours on a work and that is usually flat out. Working en plein air is a very special discipline. During the day it's a one hit wonder. You don't get a second chance at the subject, as every day is different, so there is no coming back tomorrow to fix it up. Light changes before you know it. You have to be quick to get the information down. Painting en plein air is a great way to keep up your skill set. I often look at it as a workout. It is a lot of fun. It's very engaging and you get to go to places you like. Painting en plein air at night is a different thing. Surprisingly though, light changes at night as well. Sometimes I have ended up painting a subject for an entire night. When I painted the Merewether Baths series, I would set my gear up in the middle of the empty or partially empty pool at about 10 pm and paint through till about 4 am in the morning, working on large panels.



Dino Consalvo, *Full Pool V*, 2016,
oil on board, 120 x 140 cm

Can you tell us about your initial motivation to become an artist? Is it something you have always been drawn to?

I have been involved in art since I can remember. When I was young I used art to escape, explore and to enjoy. Time would evaporate. I mainly drew or used poster paint until my mother bought me oils at the end of primary school. Oil paint was another world. I had no tuition and taught myself how to use them. I would paint street scapes, neighbours' houses and shops en plein air. I made up figurative work in my stinky bedroom studio. I have always felt the need to paint. I was not lucky enough to feed a family from it, but I was able to use my skills on more commercial jobs in order to make money to live on. In a way, I kind of think that was a better way for me. Financial pressure can some times kill the will. I am grateful that I am still doing it and that I still feel excited about what I am doing.



Dino Consalvo, *No time for Tears*, 2014,
oil on hardboard, 122 x 112 cm



Dino Consalvo, *Back in 5*, 1980,
mixed media on canvas, 190 x 156 cm





Interview with Lottie Consalvo

You work across a range of different mediums. How do you see the ideas that you explore in your work working across different mediums? Are some mediums better at expressing particular ideas and what influences your choice to work with one medium over another?

The decision of what medium to use for what idea is a very liberal process or rather there is no process or a decision being made. I have ideas that present themselves in different mediums. Although, sometimes I find myself just desperate to make a performance and so I find an idea and I make it. I only make a couple of videos and or performances a year, so they are very special to me. I find being physically in an artwork very intense and confronting. I think that's why I have to make paintings. I can be very private in the studio, I like that intimacy when making work, that's why these days I generally make videos or private performances because I don't have to feel an audience watching me. It's more like making a painting, I like the mediums to blur into each other like that.

Lottie Consalvo, *in silence*, 2017,
acrylic on board, 180 x 366 cm

What influence did growing up in a creative environment have on your decision to become an artist? Is creativity something that you try to foster in your own children and how important do you think it is to childhood experience?

Now being a parent myself, I have a strong sense of the impact growing up with a father who was an artist had on me. Seeing a parent do something just for themselves. I guess it's like having a parent who likes cooking or surfing, but this 'interest' was different, it was another language that my father had created and it belonged to him only. He could be anywhere and it would be inside of him, it didn't matter that he was a husband or a father, this was just his and you could see that his art gave him something beyond the confines of existence. I have no strong desire for my children to be artists but I really encourage creative thinking. I like to play with language with my oldest child, I love to show him things and talk about them in ways that aren't how one might see things. I really encourage reading because reading is so wonderful for presenting new ideas to us. You can read something and ponder on it over and over and over and it can change you forever. I encourage my children to inquire and have wonder. Humour, the development of characters and role-playing are the most creative outlets for my son. He's got little interest in making physical things. I really admire that he is already carving his own creative

language. I think encouraging creative thinking is one of the most valuable things you can do for your children. It doesn't matter what they decide to do for a career, if they have a mind that excites them, then I think they can derive pleasure from almost anything.

Are there any particular theorists or writers who you are looking at in terms of your exploration of memory?

I intentionally do not read about the ideas I am exploring in my work at the time. This is because it can give me definitive theories which restrict me from creating my own. My initial concepts are derived from personal experience and then I start to play with these moments in time and manipulate them and abstract them and connect them with other ideas until they form these phantasmagorical scenes. I did a year long performance *Desire*, 2015-2016, where essentially I was spending a year searching for happiness. I had a life coach approach me asking if they could work with me on the project and guide me through it. I did not accept the offer as my work is an investigation into the psychological through an artistic approach. Nothing real or absolute has to come of it, in fact it's best if nothing certain comes of it. I am just playing with my thoughts and it's wonderful and infinite.



*When did you first start doing performance works?
Was there a particular idea or issue that sparked your
desire to do performance works that you felt couldn't be
expressed through painting?*

I started making performance in 2011 whilst living in Germany. I had seen the shooting paintings of the late French artist Niki de Saint Phalle and it just shifted my idea of what art can be. She would wear her white shooting suit and she would shoot at these white painted assemblages. The assemblages would have paint cans and other vessels that held paint and when she shot at them paint would come out all over the assemblage. She did these works with audiences in places such as the middle of the desert, in the middle of the city, in a gallery. She wasn't necessarily a performance artist, so the fact that she was a painter and sculptor helped me connect my painting practice with performance. Performance presented more tools to me.



Above: Lottie Consalvo, *A Constructed Remembering*, 2017,
video Still

Left: Lottie Consalvo, *You Found Me Under A Horse*, 2019,
video still, single channel video, Filmed by Jamieson Moore



Lottie Consalvo, *The Animal Vessel*, 2011,
oil on hardboard, 100 x 120 cm.

I'm intrigued by the muted tones that you use in your painting? Are they connected to the Australian landscape? How do you see them as functioning in your work?

My restricted palette just happened to me. I used to use a lot more colour and then it just became further reduced. It is not connected to the Australian landscape as far as I'm aware. I don't find myself painting the landscape very often. The only answer that seems to come forward is that I am very interested in how form alters a viewer. I have subconsciously reduced my work further and further, in pattern and colour, so that it relies on form only. At the end of 2018 I was becoming frustrated with my hand always reaching for black or white. I didn't know what had happened to me. So I took myself to my favourite place, India, to look at colour. I walked the streets documenting colour. There were marigolds hanging against pale pink walls with turquoise pillars, there were fuschia pink pants drying on the bare concrete steps and there was so much motion. I came back to the studio and started to play with colour again. I needed there to be a reason to use colour again – and now I think I have found it.



Besides the colour of the landscape and urban environment in India, are there other aspects of that culture that you find influence your work?

India moves you in a way that shifts you at your core. Perhaps it's the heightened way of living or the energy that can reverberate from faith and spirituality. I saw a woman buying bangles from a man; he turned to the bangles and performed what looked like a blessing quicker than I had time to consider what he was doing. He then handed the woman the bangles. The back of my neck went soft. I'm not talking about organised religion, just faith. Taking moments everyday to look into another place that is beyond the limitations of reality. I don't have a faith but I try to enter the ocean everyday, it takes me beyond this place. My work speaks of these places we can go to in our minds and this country takes me there over and over in one day. I wouldn't say the paintings I am working on are paintings about India, but rather that being there has had input into my work for these reasons.

Lottie Consalvo, *Hollow stones fall from great heights*, 2016, acrylic on board, 180 x 120 cm



Lottie Consalvo, *Ages and Ages*, 2018,
acrylic on board, 180 x 1100 cm

The body is an integral part of performance art. Do you see it as having importance for your painting as well?

I really struggle painting medium sized paintings, to the point where I dread it and I am constantly tempted to just stop making them altogether. I like to paint large scale works because it involves the whole body. I have to walk, reach and climb. The physicality of making big paintings is something that I enjoy. Also, for the viewer there is something performative about looking at a large painting. You can enter it. It can enwrap you. I also love to paint tiny paintings but perhaps that's because I like the intimacy, it's like I am just drawing in my diary. It's familiar and comfortable and there is little in my practice that I find comfortable. I also play with performance within painting. Sometimes I will place myself within a memory and paint whilst I'm trying to hold myself in the past, like for my work *Ages and Ages*, 2018, at Heide Museum of Modern Art. It's not so the body in performance that I'm interested in, it's the mind. I can be somewhere else in my mind and I can make a painting while I'm in that distant place and the painting holds that place in the present and in reality. I play with presence and absence, as well as the past, present and future a lot in my work. I like when the audience has a space to imagine one part of the work.

Besides the physicality and materiality of painting are there any other themes or issues that you find yourself returning to in your work?

I never make paintings about painting. My paintings are as conceptual as my performances. The themes I explore all link back to an 'anchor', which for all my work, every single work I have ever made, is 'the intangible'.



*Some of your performance works deal with the domestic by featuring domestic elements, such as beds or the recalling of childhood memories. Additionally, your sculptural work, *The Hug*, 2018, alludes to notions of care, which is often perceived to be a female attribute and has recently been theorised through the concept of affective or emotional labour. Would you say that there is a feminist element to your work?*

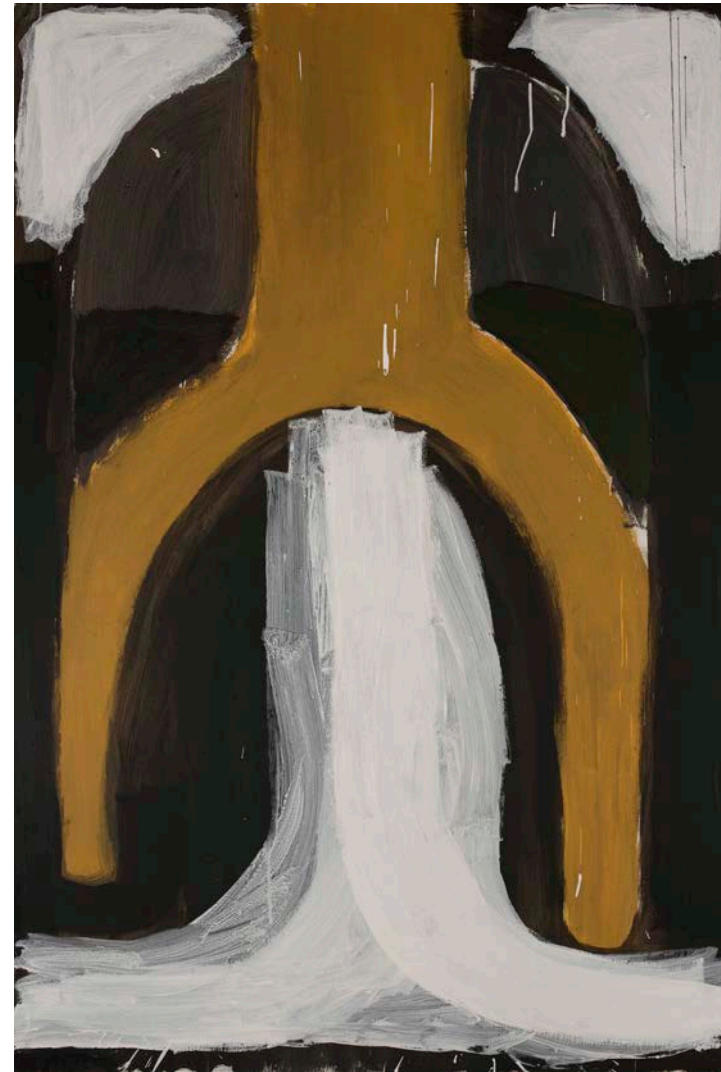
My work is autobiographical so ultimately domestic elements are present. I wouldn't say my work is 'feminist' or that I intentionally put feminist elements in my work but I would say it's 'romantic'. My husband makes work about intimacy and memory that refers to his children and wife, he refers to the kitchen table often and domesticity, yet he doesn't get put into any categories like a woman might. As an artist who is a 'woman', a 'wife' and a 'mother', my work is perceived within the social constructs that surround these roles. Once an audience knows you are one or all of these, it is difficult for them to perceive your work without these constructs. Although I don't intentionally make feminist work, I think by being a 'woman', a 'wife', a 'mother' and a practicing 'artist', I am perhaps already saying something.

Lottie Consalvo, *Self-portrait*, 2010, acrylic on card, 55 x 40 cm

Are there any particular artists whose work you are looking at the moment? Do you see your work as being inspired by or being in conversation with other artists and art works?

I'm inspired by artists that don't necessarily reflect the work I make. I've recently discovered the work of Kuwaiti artist, Monira Al Qadiri who had a stunning video work, *DIVER*, 2018 at GOMA at the Asia Pacific Triennial. The work of Claire Lambe, a Melbourne based artist has caught my interest of late also. I rarely discover new painters that I love. I discovered the now late British painter Howard Hodgkin a couple of years back. Initially, I didn't love his paintings (they are very colourful!). I started to watch some interviews with him and I was so intrigued by the similarities in our feelings towards making paintings, his process and what he painted about. He paints these seemingly abstract paintings that he often called 'still life'. They are from moments in time, a meal with a loved one, a conversation, or a sunset. I have a lot of anxiety around making art and he hated painting. He loved India and would spend months there in his apartment in Mumbai each year. I enjoy listening to him talk. I now love his paintings too.

Lottie Consalvo, *The sound of a heart falling*, 2016,
acrylic on board, 180 x 122 cm



Dino and Lottie Consalvo were in conversation with Benison Kilby
Newcastle, January 2019

Lottie Consalvo is represented by Dominik Mersch, Sydney
Dino Consalvo is represented by Gallery 139, Newcastle
All images courtesy of the artists.



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