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*A stillness had fallen, whether it was her mood, or the forest overhearing her thoughts. She watched the play of light dappling the trunks around her. The earth was damp, the memory of those trees that had already lived and died and fallen rich in the humus... The rustling and chirruping and gentle shift of the leaves smoothed her, until she was breathing with the forest. She was forest.*

- Inga Simpson, *Nest*, Hachette Australia, 2014: 224.

Place imprints each of us in unique ways. I think it is for that reason that Kym Barrett's *Gateway* takes me to eco-fiction, writing in which ecology is central. This evocative painting, which took out the *Flying Arts Art For Life / Spotlight Award* (2021), uses shades of green, changes of light, scribbled marks, ladders and vertical marks in black and colour, to create an abstraction of the forest around Barrett's home studio. It represents her journeying, physical and spiritual, through the forest and natural south-east Queensland environment in which she lives. What is so rewarding is its offering to the viewer: a gateway to pursue their own similar, singular journey.

That this contemplative painting, with its depth of surface and overarching quietitude, was chosen for the top award in a competition predicated on the theme 'Paint the Town' is gently subversive. Its choice was driven by the quality evident in *Gateway*'s technical execution; in this work our attention is turned away from the urban centre toward an environment and atmosphere that is quiet, meditative and nurturing.

*Gateway* has a waxy surface which emphasises the lines scribbled into its picture plane and the juxtaposition with strong, seemingly random, vertical and horizontal marks. The darkness in the top right segues into a brighter centre around which blue lines establish a conversational relationship. Although these are not necessarily present in Barrett's "open hilly bushland beside a rainforested creek", the black lines remind me of the burnt trunks in my own forested environment, the sooty memory that decades-old bush retains long after the fire has passed. The conflagration of green evokes new growth, the endless regenerative possibilities, while behind them densely overwritten layers peek through like the way memories of place jostle together over time.

Within Barrett's practice, this work (and the series from which it has emerged in recent years) marks a new phase of exposure. She writes, "During Covid-19 isolation I relished quiet time spent beside our creek in the bush, drawing with quick gestural marks, later tearing and reconstructing these drawings as collage. This led to the urge to allow the raw, bold, untidy and risky marks to be on the surface of my oil and cold wax paintings rather than covered up".<sup>1</sup> Its revelation of the layers from which it is built, her scribbled marks, and underpainting offers up possibilities physical, spiritual, temporal; this shift in her practice has seen her awarded both this *Art For Life / Spotlight Award* and Gladstone's *Martin Hanson Memorial Art Award* (for *Home, In A New Rhythm*) in 2021.

Judges for the *Art for Life Award* – Jan Manton, Carol McGregor and Chris Stannard – described Barrett's work as having:

captured a balance between softness and tranquillity with the vibrancy of being surrounded by the energy of living things. This work has a wonderful surface that displays purposeful integration of composition and mark making. The artist demonstrates that they are an expert in the colour palette and mastering the medium of wax, which is applied in a gestural and intuitive manner.

Prizes like this one have the potential to enhance an artist's opportunities and momentum is building for Barrett. After completing her studies in Fine Art at Brisbane

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kymbarrett.com/news>

College of Art and Kelvin Grove CAE, now QUT, in 1975-76, Barrett spent the majority of her career teaching in schools. However, in the last ten years she has practised as an artist full time, also leading twice-monthly workshops with other artists in her home town of Gympie, fostering a creative community with “like-minded people”.

Her paintings evolve, developing through their processes, oil paint mixed with cold wax medium, either on board or canvas. She starts by making marks, building the layers, adding, subtracting and changing their orientation. Each layer requires drying time, allowing Barrett to work on a few paintings at once, seeking out the balance between structure and freedom, “a tightrope walk” tethered obliquely to a visible landscape, but also an internal state. “As time goes on, the work starts to speak to me. What really happens is the painting comes to a point where I like what is going on. I am drawing intuitively. I try to let go of the thinking so that something deeper can emerge.” She defines success when her vulnerabilities “and my contradictions, in some way, are exposed through my work. I want paintings to have a vitality – not a wild, chaotic energy but an inner life force, a bit like a single green shoot emerging from the ground, embodying so much potential. But I also want a firm scaffolding and a sense of depth and mystery underpinning that immediacy.”

The title of the work, *Gateway*, is a marker to its ability to offer a portal to landscapes both inner and outer: in her creative space, or in the depths of this canvas, she offers up a link to “a quiet inner space that you could call God or the divine”. It seeks out a connection to the forest, nature, ecology in which urban realities may dissipate. In its holistic embrace of a green locale, Barrett depicts her palpable psychic investment in “forest”, a place where “our hard edges soften and our difficulties subside”.<sup>2</sup>

Louise Martin-Chew  
24 November 2021  
950 words

Unless otherwise noted all quotes from Kym Barrett in conversation with the author, 2021.

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<sup>2</sup> Artist Statement, *Gateway*, 2021.