

“ Responding to the awe and wonder of the landscape.”

## UNDARA PAINTINGS

01 SEPTEMBER – 28 OCTOBER 2023

Swiss-born, Cairns-based artist Claudine Marzik's research on Ewamian Country has fostered deep investigation of the ancient lava tubes and cavernous rock formations within Undara Volcanic National Park, located in the centre of lower Cape York, between Cairns and Normanton. The name Undara in local Aboriginal dialects means 'Long Way' referencing to a long way from Cairns and the elongated rivers of lava that meandered through the valley over 190,000 years ago.

Marzik's *Undara Paintings*, respond to the awe and wonder of this landscape, referencing the voids shaped by volcanic eruption, the pattern, deposition, graffiti and textures, appearing on the ceiling and the walls and speleothem continually accumulating. The layers of the canvas surface reworked and layered like strata.

Marzik has been making and exhibiting work inspired by the unique environment of Far North Queensland for more than three decades. *Undara Paintings* represents an important exhibition in the artist's career.

Left: Claudine Marzik, *Undara Paintings 68, (detail), 2023*, acrylic on canvas, 114 x 98 cm. Photo Michael Marzik

CLAUDE MARZIK



NORTH

SITE

MARZIK





Left: Claudine Marzik, *Undara Paintings 28*, 2023, acrylic on paper, 30 x 42 cm. Photo Michael Marzik

Below: Claudine Marzik, *Undara Paintings 2*, (detail), 2023, acrylic on canvas, 199 x 146 cm. Photo Michael Marzik

Bottom: Claudine Marzik, *Undara Paintings 4*, (detail), 2023, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 199 cm. Photo Michael Marzik

## Claudine Marzik's Undara Paintings

Words: Ross Searle

The opportunity to write about Claudine Marzik's impressive art practice is indeed a pleasure. On first seeing her work I was impressed by its refined but energetic gestural mark-making that appeared to contain a language that was both familiar but unique in the way that it responded to the particularities of the 'northern' seasonal environment. She is perhaps best known for a series of paintings relating to the seasons which reference the dynamics of seasonal and changing weather patterns from quite subtle shifts to extreme conditions that have major impacts on the land. The sense of 'familiarity' I first recognised in her painterly gesture in the early 1990s no doubt relates to the influences of 'gestural' abstraction that found its place in American and European painting after World War II. A process and not a movement, it continues to be shaped by European artists such as Gerhard Richter and Australians Aida Tomescu, Ildiko Kovacs and of course, Claudine Marzik.

Her capacity to encapsulate the intensity of the environment of northern Australia has been noted by writers Gavin Wilson who observed; 'her work reaches deep into her emotional reserves to construct images that suggests states of mind'<sup>1</sup> and Ingrid Hoffman who wrote about the impact of knowing the landscape that 'comes out of time spent discerning the morphology of plants and their distilled colour, their intricate prickliness, their smooth shapes, their grace and vulnerability.'<sup>2</sup> This ability to zoom in and out of the landscape to see it not only in terms of its parts but also as a system that communicates an emotional state is intriguing.

Recent projects include *The Body Language of Plants* which came about from working with materials collected as part of herbarium specimens. The science-art nexus continues with the current exhibition.

This new body of work relates to the Undara Volcanic National Park, a unique geological site she first visited in 2017. 'Undara' is an Aboriginal word meaning 'long way'. The park protects a system of 190,000-year-old lava tube caves, the longest in the world.

Located 264 km south-west of Cairns, they are the result of an eruption, spewing molten lava over the surrounding landscape. The lava flowed down dry riverbeds with the top, outer layer cooling and forming a crust, while the molten lava below drained outwards, leaving behind a series of hollow tubes.

An almost autonomous natural ecosystem, Claudine was captivated by the cave-system of the lava tubes and the depositions on the cave ceilings and walls. Drawing ideas from earlier visits and a recent residency supported by Discovery Holiday Parks through Undara Experience, resulted in a new series of work. With each visit she took photographs and did onsite drawings, made notes, and compiled a visual lexicon of the site – an iterative process that allowed her to hone her ideas and images. In recent years, artists like Claudine have adopted a profusion of methods, practices, and experiences to enhance the interface between the visual arts and environmental-scientific concerns. In Claudine's case, she has made an especial study of the morphology and topography of Undara.

The sensation of being in a submerged environment with its dark corners and surprising patches of light that break through the ceilings is manifested in the tonal gradients she employs in the paintings on canvas and paper for this exhibition. The palette she employs is influenced by the various minerals in the caves including basalt, iron oxide and calcium carbonate. The underlining minerals reveal tones of red, yellow, and green contrasting with the black rock basalt intrusions, the lighter toned calcium carbonate and richer iron oxide. A recurring compositional device that is used in several of the paintings is a doorway shape, as if looking out from the darkness of the cave into the light. We see this clearly in the large paintings which alternate between looking into the caves and out into the open. Claudine reflects that 'being inside the cave looking towards the exit which can be seen about 50 meters away, is a captivating view. It releases emotions (and) it's like a sensation of new life and hope. Back to safety, back to the known from the unknown, back to the light from the dark. Back from the cold to the warm.'<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition has been grouped to reinforce compositional ideas based on the geological forms, surface patterns, depositions, graffiti, and textures that appear on walls and ceilings. Far from being a static environment, natural formations from the speleothem deposits continue to accumulate to form subtle new layers not unlike some of the paintings which are worked and layered like strata. Some of the artworks are tightly framed views of the deposition of minerals on the tube walls and ceiling as if looking through a photographic lens which at once makes everything equally comparable without a reference point.

Undara is the perfect place for her to test new approaches to the landscape. In Claudine's hands her artworks possess a tight undulant pattern reminiscent of natural surfaces found in this unique landscape. The effect of this is to make the texture not only closer to that of the actual cave surfaces but also to overcome of what Gerhard Richter suggests is the over importance of edges and borders; to make everything equal and allow the viewer's brain to impose its own structure on the artwork.<sup>4</sup> Her way of working at Undara was to create sets of visual references and once in the studio this material was used to create this series of works that reference her macro-micro responses to surface textures, dramatic geological intrusions, and mineral accretions. Although some works contain a complex layering of paint pattern and form, in general there is a looseness in the shapes and forms and a more free, spontaneous approach.<sup>5</sup> It is a thrilling body of work.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gavin Wilson, Country and western landscape re-imagined, exhibition catalogue, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, 2015, p 40.

<sup>2</sup> Ingrid Hoffman, Seed to seed, exhibition catalogue, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Claudine Marzik email to author, 7 August 2023

<sup>4</sup> Misha Ketchell, Nature makes abstract visual art more captivating. The conversation, March 25, 2014

<sup>5</sup> Claudine Marzik, *ibid*



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