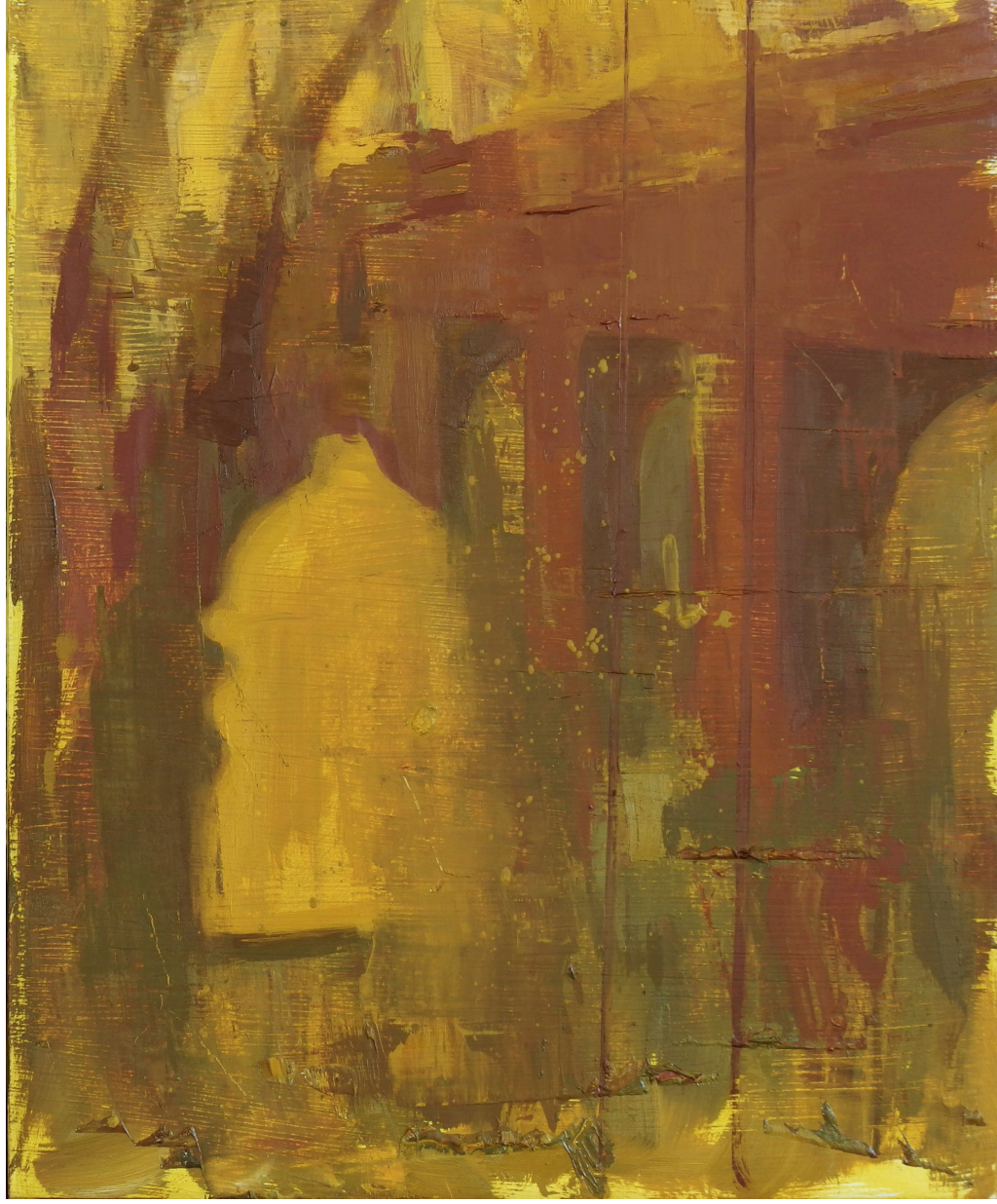




WINDOWS
& FORGETTING

Cemetery, 2021 - Oil on board



WINDOWS & FORGETTING

An Exhibition by Esther Deans

There are several themes at play in Esther Deans' exhibition *Windows and Forgetting*, held at the Aigantighe Art Gallery. Deans' paintings can be described as Neo-Romantic, in the sense that they are nostalgic, poetic, somber, emotionally charged and express inner turmoil. She communicates about the fragility of memory through the concept of a ruin that, left to time and the natural world, will deteriorate; Deans also conveys loss and uncertainty through evasive portraits of introspecting characters. However, the themes of her paintings also expand to include the constructed and controlled glazed views that we perceive the natural world through – a staged and repeated perspective which stems from traditional landscape painting. This selective survey exhibition begins with artworks from Deans' Master's submission and ends with some of her most recent paintings completed in 2022.

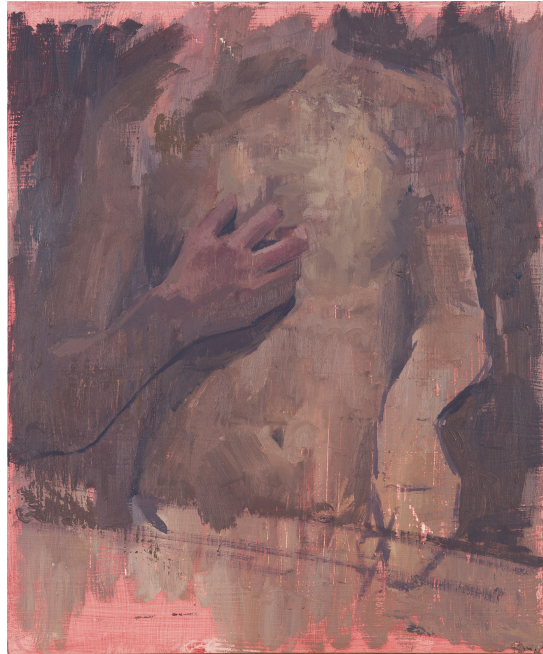
During her Master's in Fine Arts, Deans explored the idea of the 'ruin' as a metaphor – she explored the way in which architecture that is wasting away can become an image or symbol of nature enforcing itself upon something human-built, and an image that represents a period belonging to the past.¹ A building that had a profound influence on Deans was her family's homestead, Morven, in South Canterbury – built for her great grandfather, Alexander Deans – that was damaged in the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes. When Deans visited the historical home in 2016, she recalled that she “found the place, which was the source of many romantic and warm childhood memories, suddenly altered – empty, cold, decaying. It was familiar and yet eerily unfamiliar”.² In *Morven*, 2018, we see a darkened and abandoned architectural space. What was once lively and orderly is now dusty, disarrayed, static, and looks more like a storage room. There is a sense that life has left and what remains has been forgotten.

Deans' paintings often use a narrow and dark tonal range – with her muted palette she places an atmospheric shroud over her subjects, giving a dream-like quality to her paintings. Inspired by the contemporary Romanian painter, Victor Man, Deans explains that this method gives a sense of “dusk – where objects become indeterminate and the light plays tricks. The dance between passages of definite, rendered detail and more abstract, ill-defined shapes, is unsettling, and reminds me of dream states or the shifting nature of memory”.³ We find this muted palette used throughout the exhibition, but, to return to *Morven* again as an example – the shadow-like tones make the space seem asleep, making it dormant as well as forgotten, and a place where degeneration looms.



Morven, 2018 - Oil on board

Rasool Awari, 2022 - Oil on board



Deans has also been influenced by contemporary American artist, Timothy Wilson, whose paintings she describes as “tend[ing] to disintegrate” before you, “[t]hey hover between something seen and experienced and something only felt, or only glimpsed at the point of forgetting”.⁴ Many of Deans’ paintings have swift and dry looking brushstrokes that leave part of the picture plane uncovered – this technique features on canvas edges or through backgrounds, giving a sense that the paintings are evaporating or beginning to disintegrate from the canvas before our eyes. Furthermore, in works such as Rasool Awari, 2022, or *Figure (After Diane Arbus)*, 2021, (named to acknowledge the photographers whose image is referenced), parts of the figures themselves are even missing or obscured.⁵ Deans uses paint (and its absence) to give us the sense that her images are emerging or disappearing before us, much like a dissipating and fragile memory.



Figure (After Diane Arbus), 2021 - Oil on board

There is an unmistakable awkwardness in Deans' paintings of figures – a revealing or exposure of their inner turmoil. Influenced by the 20th century American painter, Edwin Dickinson, who was known for his psychologically charged portraits using muted colour palettes and unusual perspectives, Deans' human subjects relay a sense of unease.⁶ These are not traditional portraits – she presents us with people whose eyes predominantly don't meet ours, or when they do there is a distracted expression on their faces – they are evasive and absorbed with their private inner world. In these paintings Deans captures introspective moments, and these moments are placed before us, so we are privy to them – leaving us with an awkward feeling that we have witnessed a secret confusion, concern or doubt. Like Dickinson's paintings, there is a sense of melancholy and strangeness, these characters of Deans' are anti-heroes who don't provide us with answers, they only provoke questions.

In Deans' practice, the idea of nature enforcing itself upon architecture to create a 'ruin' later moves to themes of made structures that intrude upon and enclose nature. Deans produced a body of works last year for an exhibition titled *Glass Houses*. Paintings of elaborate glass enclosures bring to mind the Crystal Palace – a symbol of both the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution – but also speaks of the colonial desire to tame, control, and confine selected parts of the natural world. For example in *Window / Wall II*, 2021 we see what looks to be a section of a designed glass house that is filled with lush looking plants set ablaze with artificial light, this is contrasted with the outside and naturally dark forest setting that the glasshouse is depicted within. These human constructions don't only enclose, they intrude – in *The Un-thinkable World*, 2021, the focus of the painting is not the twilight maroon-coloured sky or the silhouetted trees, but the cold and angular glass structure that the scenery behind it is surveyed through. As the viewer, we are removed from nature to view it through this 'window', bringing to mind the well-known quote that "a painting is a window to the world". *The Un-thinkable World* acknowledges that a glazed view of nature is in fact a constructed and slightly obscured view of nature.



Window / Wall II, 2021 - Oil on board

Windows II, 2021 - Oil on Canvas



The expression of a painting's subject matter is completely orchestrated by the artist – the vista they present to us has been chosen and then composed. In both *Window I*, 2021, and *Windows II*, 2021, we are presented with a stage – complete with a curtain and painted backdrop or stage-set. These stages host several landscape paintings of different sizes leaning against the backdrop, which illustrate that Deans is pointedly acknowledging, in a poetic manner, that landscape paintings are contrived in perspective and composition – like the theatre, they are 'staged'.

Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, “*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players*”. In amongst architectural ruins, misty tones, and dusky evening landscapes, Esther Deans' characters of *Windows* and *Forgetting* perform an ambiguous and poetic tragedy. Deans has painted a theatre production, a silent psychological thriller that keeps us on the edge of our seats and has a plot ending that provides only more questions.

PETRENA FISHBURN

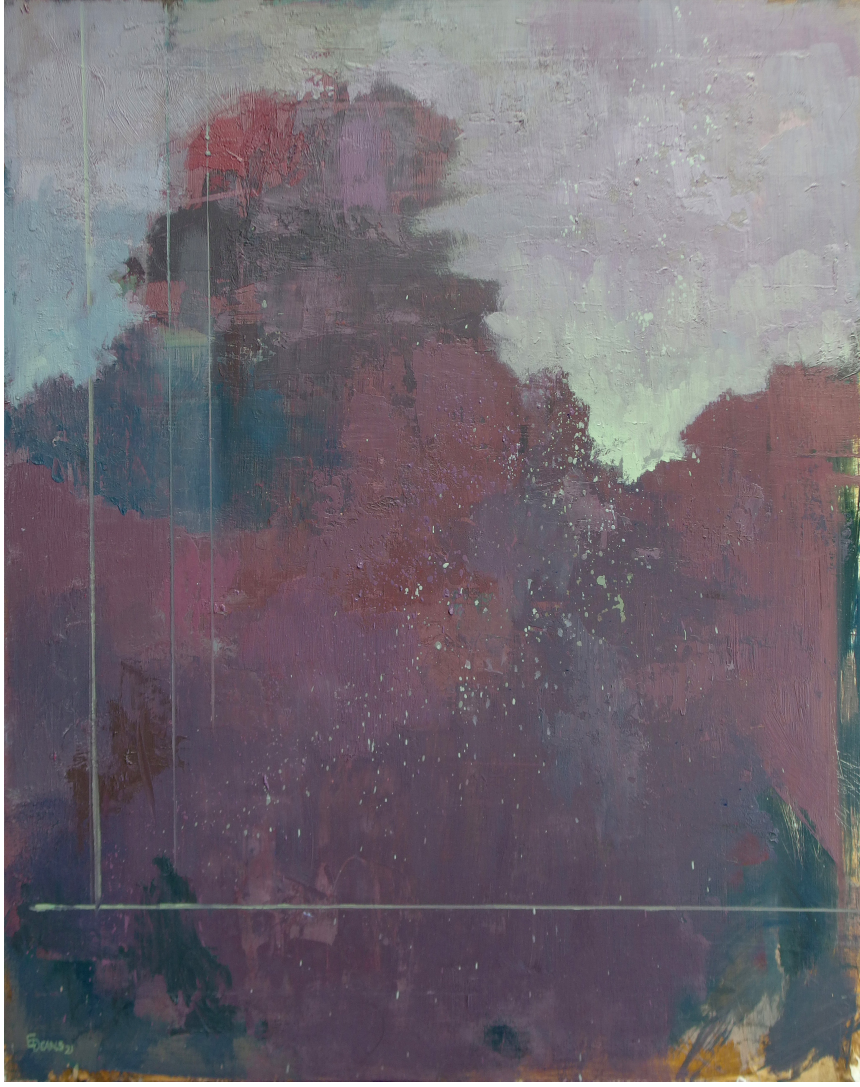
ESTHER DEANS

Granddaughter of Austen Deans and niece of Lindsay Crooks, Esther Deans recently returned to live in Peel Forrest, South Canterbury. She studied English and Philosophy at Victoria University, and then gained a Graduate Diploma of Teaching. She has a Master's Degree in Visual Arts (2020), and she is currently completing her PhD in Visual Arts at Auckland University of Technology. She has been a finalist in national art awards such as ZONTA 2022 in Ashburton, Craig's Aspiring Art Award in Wanaka in 2022, and the Walker and Hall Awards in Waiheke Island in 2021. Her recent solo exhibitions include 'Wise Blood' (2022) at St Paul Street Gallery in Auckland, 'Glass Houses' at Susan Badcock Gallery (2021) in Geraldine, 'Between Uncertainties' at Alta Gallery (2017) in Wellington, and 'Morven' at York Street Gallery (2016) in Timaru.



Self, 2022 - Oil on board

Screen, 2021 - Oil on board



NOTES

1. Esther Deans 'The Unknowability of Things,' Unpublished Master's Exegesis, 2020. Auckland University of Technology, p.10-11.
2. Ibid, p. 13.
3. Ibid, p. 19.
4. Ibid, p. 21.
5. Email to author from Esther Deans, 16 November 2022.
6. Douglas Dreishpoon, "Striking Memory" in *Edwin Dickinson: Dreams and Realities*, cited in Deans, Exegesis, p. 22.

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The logo for AIGANTIGHE ART GALLERY is centered at the bottom of the page. It features a small, stylized golden crown or floral emblem above the word "AIGANTIGHE" in a tall, thin, serif font. Below "AIGANTIGHE" is the phrase "ART GALLERY" in a smaller, simpler, all-caps sans-serif font.

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