

A PLACE TO STAND by Laura Koens

Sue Leeming speaks with Laura Koens about groundedness, loss, and connecting with culture through art.

Sue Leeming's body of work takes us on a journey of rediscovering beauty, curiosity and connection. What comes through in her work is her sense of disconnection and displacement after migrating to the Serpentine Jarrahdale region from Taranaki, New Zealand, and the way in which she has rebuilt her sense of belonging and connection, as a New Zealand woman of Māori, English and Scottish descent, now residing on Noongar boodjar with her husband and four children. One of Sue's earlier pieces stands out to me from the moment I enter her studio space, which she has set up in the garage of her home. Titled 'Tree of Life: Tihei Mauri Ora', this piece weaves together stories of heartbreak, hope, and homecoming in the most unlikely places.

After having made the move to Australia in the late nineties, Sue speaks about how she did not fully comprehend the loss that would take place inside of her at leaving her place of birth; the place with which she still feels such a strong cultural connection. Her body of work speaks to this - her abstract landscapes incorporate elements of what makes up home for her, and she and I speak at length about her feelings of cultural and physical displacement after having moved to Western Australia. She refers to this struggle as "an ongoing wrestle, with [her] heart being continually pulled toward home in New Zealand". Since having moved to Western Australia, Sue has lost both of her parents and her twin brother- losses that have marked her deeply; that have led her to consider her place in Western Australia in a different light. Sue's work breathes a hopeful and spiritual element that is very evocative- there is a groundedness and a simultaneous ethereal nature to it. Speaking to her about the spiritual dimension that her work displays, it becomes clear that Sue's strong faith in God, and God's hand in her life, infuses much of her work and life. Her work 'Tree of Life: Tihei Mauri Ora' especially speaks to this part of her journey. Sue explains how it became a part of a process "quite cathartic and almost meditative", through the use of ink to lay the foundation of the painting in a very fluid and uncontrolled way, allowing intuition to guide her choices in how the piece took form.

The Māori words 'Tihei Mauri Ora', Sue explains, can be translated as "sneeze (breath) of life; calling to claim the right to speak". These words reflect Sue's Christian faith journey,

and have given her hope in reclaiming her story and finding her own voice. Sue further speaks about a Māori word and concept Tūrangawaewae having influenced this piece. Tūrangawaewae is often literally translated as 'a place to stand'; (tūranga (standing place), waewae (feet)). She explains how this concept is a representation of her growing understanding of and groundedness in her Māori culture, and her journey towards finding home in Byford, Western Australia. Through her own personal journey, and particularly in the birth and life of her children, she speaks of an increasing sense of homecoming; "that underlying feeling [of being] a visitor (Māori: manuhiri) began to subside," she says. "This is the country of my children's birth; this is all they've ever known and is their place of belonging. They are Australian by birth, New Zealanders and English by inheritance." Although Sue's work seems to be autobiographical in nature, there is something to be understood for so many of us in the richness of her story, and in the beautiful way in which she shares it. Each of us carries a story of displacement in some way; of heartbreak, and of a search for healing; each of us has a propensity towards leaning into hope. And all of us are on our own journey towards homecoming; be that to ourselves, to one another, or to the very ground beneath our feet.