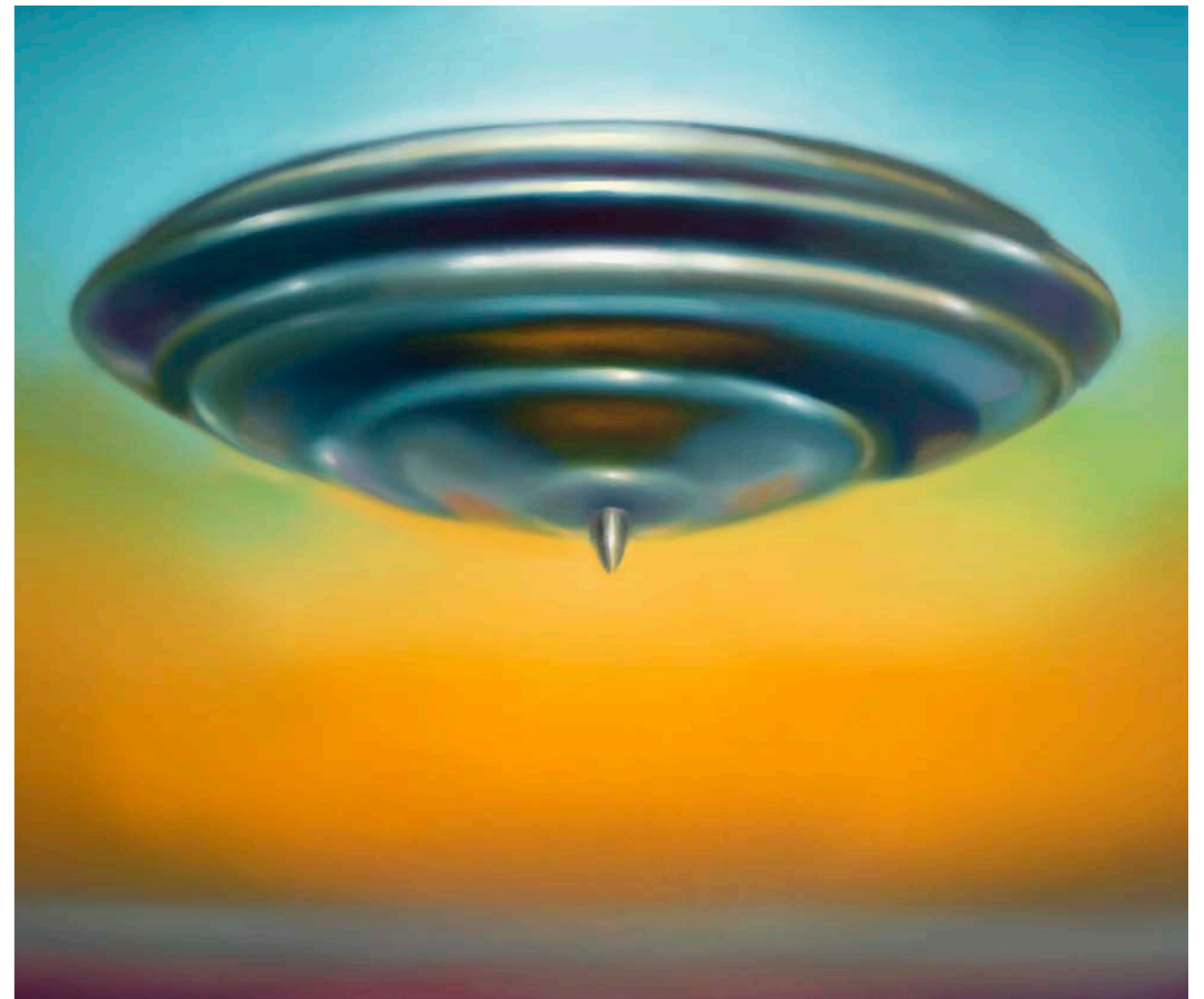


# Megan Walch

## UNCANNY

Text by **Judith Abell**



**P**lay. These days, education theory highly values play for children, and the application of play-based learning creeps, productively, further and further throughout early education. But then there is a cliff that we tend to drop off in the later years of childhood and we may never pick up this kind of thinking again. There are smatterings of its mention in the corporate world, but it's still not common. Unless we are an artist. But perhaps even as an artist, play is seen as a diversion from the real practice, rather than an essential methodological strand.

Megan Walch can perhaps associate her happiest times as a painter with times in which she gave herself permission to play. Her current body of work represents one of those moments.

Walch is a highly accomplished mid-career painter based in nipaluna/Hobart. Her practice as a painter stretches back to the late '80s when she finished a Bachelor in Fine Art from the University of Tasmania. Over the next few years she travelled, as Australians tend to do, but things really got interesting when she was successful in her application for a three-month internship at the Guggenheim Museum in Venice. Her time in Europe stretched to eighteen months and she describes this as the period in which she really learned to paint.

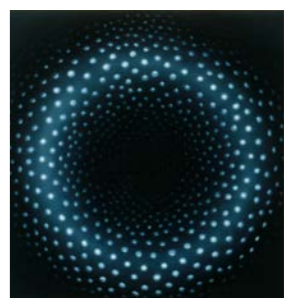
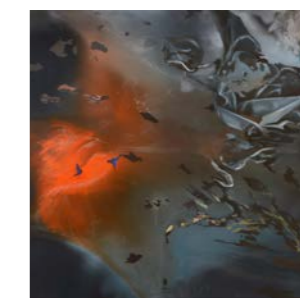
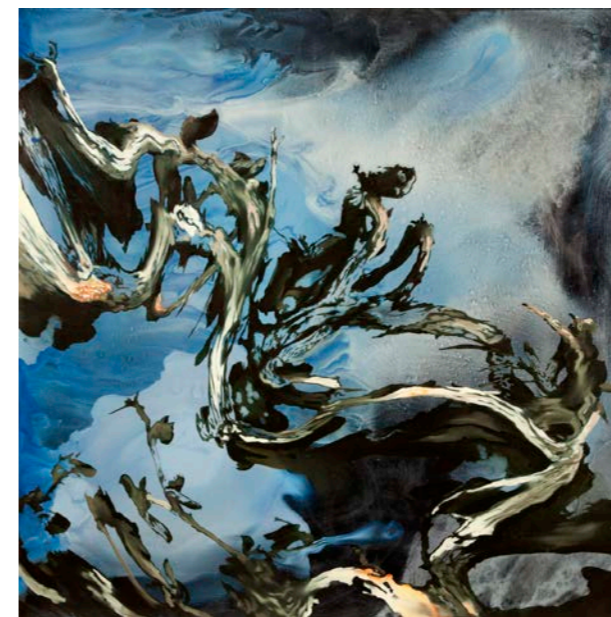
With winter having blissfully cleared the watery city of visitors, Walch started this period of work wandering through the narrow Venetian streets on her way to the museum, drinking espresso along the way and poking her nose into sites where large-scale restorations of frescos and oil paintings were taking

place. She then spent her working days up close and personal with the contemporary collection of the Guggenheim – Ernst, Pollock, Krasner – admitting with glee that she once committed the greatest invigilator's crime by touching Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. With just one finger.

But it was those frescos that really got under her skin. Up until this moment in Venice, Walch had learned about artworks like this via reproductions of reproductions and had believed that these artworks were sepia toned, as though nicotine stained. Revealed in their glory by the restorers, Walch saw vibrant pastels and wildly surreal scenes. Ascensions, descents, angels, demons, clouds, putti (winged boys). These kinds of works were so ever-present in her time in Venice, she even burned her risottos under a fresco in her apartment, with a light-fitting emerging from the nipple of one figure.

Returning to Tasmania, fuelled by new content, colour and perspectives, and perhaps the unselfconsciousness of youth, Megan played with paint. The resulting body of work won her the highly prestigious Anne and Gordon Samstag Scholarship, to complete a Master of Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute, all college fees and expenses paid. Here began a six-year period in the United States, in which Walch threw herself into the Masters program and every other decent opportunity that arose. As a result she also completed a residency at the acclaimed Skowhegan School in rural Maine – where she received advice from Anish Kapoor that she believes she is only just ready for now – and then an equally prestigious year-long residency at The Space Program (now called the Sharpe-Walentas Studio). There in New York she had a free studio in Tribeca for a year, where artists like Chuck Close and Philip Pearlstein were board members and intermittent visitors. While there she worked as a studio assistant (or 'sorcerer's apprentice' as she jokes) for plein air artist Rackstraw Downes. With a Yaddo residency in Saratoga Springs for good measure, it is clear that her time in the USA was rich with the makings of much work to come.

Seeing herself as very absorbent of or responsive to place in all of its machinations, it was here in the US that she began her distinctive process of working wet paint into wet paint with wide, flat brushes to create large, blended fields of colour. Initially, she saw this technique as a direct response to the speed and smog of west coast America, where her art school was located in a high-rise in the centre of the San Francisco. But perhaps it also hinted at the coloured skies of those frescos, now firmly lodged in her consciousness. Throughout her time in the US, Walch went against the grain, bucking the art trends





happening within these contexts, ignoring the often harsh criticism and tracking her own path.

Coming home just before the world felt the cataclysmic shake of 9/11, Walsh experienced an unexpectedly difficult re-entry into her Australian career. It showed the true isolation of Australia from the United States, with the prestige of Walsh's successes there not having quite the same leverage here, with the exception of Samstag. But, ever-responsive to the particularities of place, she began to explore imagery from the Pacific, and the tradition of Chinoiserie, also drawing on a significant period of her childhood spent with Tongan family in Fiji. The wet-on-wet remained, and the perspectival views reminiscent of frescos, but there were also decorative, branching elements that touch on East-West imagery.

Walch's relatively recent doctorate gave her the opportunity to analyse, describe and frame her practice and to understand that, at its very heart, it is material-based. She describes a love affair with paint that has lasted decades. Her PhD focused on three different aspects of the medium – fluidity, viscosity and plasticity – and the turbulent swirl of the final work represents the potential of these aspects. But she sees that her practice, and in fact her core way of thinking, happens *through* the material. It could be paint but it might also be soil, wood, plasticine.

It has taken another catalytic event for Walch to return to the place of play and create the body of work shown on the pages here. Last year she was diagnosed with breast cancer and, strangely, at about the same time that it was predicted the



cancer began, she started painting UFOs. Unidentified matter invading a system. She describes how 'it felt really naughty' to be painting this subject matter, which is often scoffed at and those who discuss it marginalised. She said that cancer gives you the licence to 'do whatever the f#@k you want'. And she has. To her it is pure, limitless play.

The work draws on typical imagery of UFOs, giving the flying objects wildly coloured empty skies, deserts or other ambiguous landscapes as backgrounds. They are joined by glowing strawberry moons, floating asteroids and black holes. A series of larger works are complemented by a large group of small paintings that will be displayed, salon-style, in the gallery – their arrangement making the eye continually zig zag across the

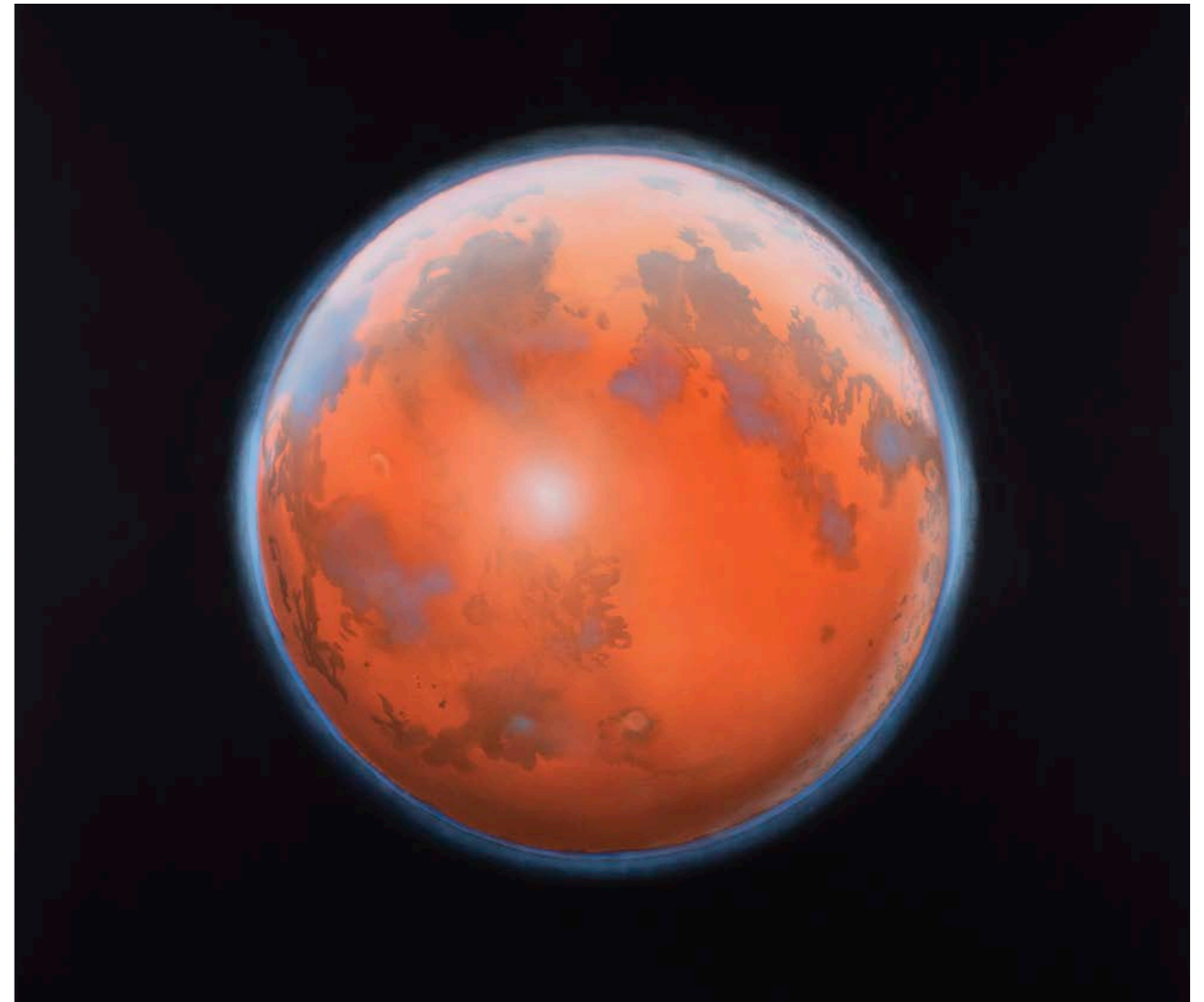
wall. Looking a little like the elegant recordings of an obsessed enthusiast, the arrangement stops just short of the red strings, pins and sightings map.

Walch has always painted discs and ellipses in her work, so there was a through-line in the content, but those glowing, wet-on-wet skies were also a perfect ground for foreign objects. She notes that Carl Jung talks about UFOs as a symbol of a psychological condition, of humanity in crisis. He claims that their rounded bodies are subconscious totems representing aspirations to unity or wholeness. And, as we all have experienced in one form or other over the past few years, we are unarguably at a point of crisis. With a longing for comprehensive solutions.



But, as Walch states, the UFOs are really just the surface. They are the fun, the escapism, the pure joy. The decoration supporting the core idea. What Walch continues to seek is to paint light. And she does so by working through material. She sets up a sense of transience in paint, which aligns with light. Searching for that sweet spot where the paint is the right combination of fluidity, viscosity and plasticity, as the colours blend. Ever aware that the smooth mix before her could turn into a muddy mess. Just like that. It is that quality she saw in the frescos, and was advised by Kapoor to explore to the exclusion of all other subject matter. Perhaps even what she also saw over the shoulder of Rackstraw Downes during her time as his assistant. She says, 'now I'm 55 and have had a brush with death, I can make that work about light.'

Walch has given herself permission to play and, as a result, is working prolifically. As I sat with her in the studio, she was surrounded by the completed work for her upcoming show, but she wasn't easing back. She will keep going. Even in terms of her canvas she has allowed for experimentation. She works with crisp, primed, ply-clad frames that can be sanded back repeatedly, whenever she is unhappy with the outcome. She describes this as a 'structure within which to create chaos'. So the play continues, and with such significant output, exploration, mistake-making, Walch opens herself up to the continually floating possibility of further breakthroughs. Or many. ▼



#### Images:

p 29: *WearEver*, 2022, oil on canvas, 127 x 168 cm

p 30: (top) *It's not you it's me*, 2000, 120 x 140 cm, a key work for Walch's Samstag submission;  
(bottom) *What Goes Up* (detail), 2011, oil and mixed media on wood panel, 70 x 180 cm, work completed upon return to Australia prior to PhD

p 31: (top left) *It's not you it's me*, 2000, 120 x 140 cm, work completed upon return to Australia prior to PhD;  
(bottom left) *Skullbone Plains*, 2014, oil and enamel on composite panel, 130 x 130 cm;  
(top right) the artist's travel journals after her time in Italy, prior to winning the Samstag Scholarship;  
(bottom right) *Alias*, 1998, oil on canvas, 182 x 182 cm, a key work for Walch's Samstag submission  
(bottom centre) *Eschatalogue*, 2016, oil and enamel on composite panel, 150 x 150 cm

p 32: *Clearing*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 112 cm

p 33: *Did the object change shape?* 2022, acrylic and oil on wood panel, 30 x 40 cm

p 34: *Oumuamua*, 2022, acrylic and oil on wood panel, 30 x 40 cm

p 35: *Strawberry Moon*, 2022, oil and black 3.0 on canvas, 153 x 168 cm

**Megan Walch** is represented by Bett Gallery. A number of these works featured in an exhibition in June–July 2022.

**Judith Abell** is a writer, designer and sculptor based in Hobart. She consistently works creatively in the undefined spaces between professions and is regularly involved in making unusual things happen. She currently works for the City of Hobart, commissioning public art, as a freelance writer, and in her role as the Arts Features Editor of *Island*.