The Long Run #2: Wendy Stavrianos on landscape, nature and gender barriers

art guide AUSTRALIA

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WENDY STAVRIANOS [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]
I've got to try to bring together thinking, feeling, heart, hand everything together. And that's a dance. It really is a spiritual dance, when you make art.

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]
Hello and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode is the second in our three-part series The Long Run, which looks at creating and evolving, where I talk with three artists who've each had careers spanning 60 years. This second episode is with Wendy Stavrianos.

Working from regional Victoria, Wendy is known for her densely layered landscape paintings and use of line in painting. Creating works that evoke different environments in ways that are beautiful and mysterious, since the 1960s she's been an integral part of landscape painting in Australia. We talk about Wendy's childhood and youth and how this set the scene for her to become an artist, the gender barriers she encountered as a female painter, how she came to landscape painting, her incredible empathy with the environment and nature, and how mortality and mystery infiltrate her work. And before we get started a very big thank you to our sponsor for this series, Leonard Joel Auctioneers and Valuers, who are based in Melbourne and Sydney.

TM
You went to art school in the late 50s and early 60s. And I'm interested in how you first became an artist. Did you come from an artistic family or have any exposure to an art world of any kind?

WS
Well, actually I had absolutely no exposure to the art world and I was never even taken to a gallery. I was born into a sort of show-business-type-father family—he was a TV and radio sort of star in the time. And he was sort of a character. So basically he and his mother—who had been my grandmother—who had prints of old masters on the wall, that was my only introduction to art, really, were those old masters: the Rembrandts that she had copies of. So they lived with me and they were the first things I headed to—when I went overseas—to see and probably be why I became a more tonal painter, because of the qualities in the Rembrandts, you know?

TM
So were your family, I mean, were they supportive when you decided to go to art school?

WS
Well, they were so busy that they really didn't probably notice what I doing. I was always somewhere alone, sort of dreaming some way, you know. And I can remember as a child rushing out together a very—after a holiday away in New South Wales by train—I remember going down to a news agent and buying this really long roll of paper, which I made a very big, long landscape on in pencil. So they were things I just did, you know, and basically to survive that hotel life that I was living in. Cause being in a pub in the 60s, you know, in the 50s it was then, it was a pretty rough environment, you know, and basically I wasn't exposed to any real art. It was just the dealing with the train shuffling past, looking through the network of power lines, which are all images I use in my work today. You know, so there was the shunting trains with the sheep at night—oh, it was quite depressing quite frankly. And I just got into my own little bubble and living for those holidays when I could see the landscape through the train window. A lot of beginnings of imagery came from those early times, my early days in St Kilda as a child, and then onto that the hotel years. So all those early images are dealing with figure and landscape and projecting, probably, my psychological state onto the landscape, I think began then.

TM
Yeah, but you wouldn't have been conscious of it at the time. I imagine that...

WS

Not at all. I was just sort of trying to cope with the change because we were taken from a place called East Brighton as children. And I was put into a taxi that night and I was sick. I can remember. Bundled up in blankets and carried by my father into a taxi one evening. And we took off across the city to this ugly place called Newmarket, which is right in the city, was an old pub. And it was quite a shock. And I think from going from this East Brighton paradise, playing in the garden and with the creek going through the backyard, you know, and being put into this incredibly different sort of, I suppose, it was the absolute duality. And I always talk about dualities in my work, but that fracture is what I think made me into an artist at that moment. You know, not consciously at all. It's later that you realise that that's what must have happened, you know, feelings of trying to cope with the changes, you know.

TM

Yeah. So I guess that's what was happening psychologically in your youth and adolescence that you felt was forming you into an artist—were you like at a practical level showing that you were good at drawing or good at painting?

WS

I did have drawing skills. I was always sort of scribbling and drawing everywhere. And I remember going into a small sort of prize in the city that was in a car sort of place, in the showroom. And I think I won a prize in that and that was encouraging. So there were those little moments, but there's nothing really big that stood out at all.

TM

So you would have, I guess, just before you were 20, you would have enrolled in art school?

WS

I was 15, nearly 16. I left school early and headed for what I wanted to do, what I thought I wanted to do. Didn't have a clue really, but my father took me along at 16 into RMIT. So I had to sit for a sort of test and I was then pushed into that world, which was my happy time when I found—you know, high school wasn't my favorite place. And basically I found what I wanted to do when I was in RMIT. So that's where, you know, everything sort of started to burst out. But of course there were really bad attitudes like in, in that time, you know: why bother you're going to get married. That was the message, you know?

TM

In terms of gender, did you feel there were a lot of barriers as female painter?

WS

Well, I always felt anger. That was the only thing I could grapple with. There was this anger underneath, which I kept in control, sort of, I saw sort of things that worried me, you know? Wasn't allowed to express my femaleness in any way. There were sorta dogmas shoved at you, you know? And I, I can remember the feeling of when I got out of art school wanting to throw off the cloak of what had been put over me. I remember that feeling. It was, it was long after though, it was when I really shook it off was when I went to Darwin. That was ages afterward as I headed for overseas after I'd taught for a year. And basically that was a very important time, for me to be seeing paintings, the paintings I wanted to see and being so surprised at the real textures I was looking at—the paint qualities that, you know, I had never seen.

TM

Did you feel that you were taken less seriously because you were a female artist?

WS

I can't say that I was really conscious... I was conscious that the boys in the class got more interesting projects to do, but that was a message. I was told that, you know, well, you know, why should you bother, you know, you're, you'll get married. And that made me furious. I can remember. I mean, I of course did the predictable thing didn't I?

TM

You did get married! But you married an artist.

WS

You know, I've had two marriages. So those have influenced my work as well because putting yourself in art doesn't help your relationships, I'll tell you that. You drown yourself in your own passions and it's often conflicts with the partner you're with, you know.

TM

Were you immediately painting landscape paintings when you first started?

WS

Yes. I began with landscape but in art school it was more the body that became... I was interested in the idea of suspension of a figure. You know, I think a figure suspended or a figure being lifted out of this planet and into space. Parachute images, I did. Parachutes, falling clowns, all to do with some psychological state and always the landscape was part of it. And there was always this idea of the room, too. It was in the early works of the room. The window appeared in a very early painting of a figure in a room. I returned, of course, later to that in 2011. I did the Rooms of landscape memory and desire. So early on I started painting gumtrees, not painting as much as drawing: drawing was always what I loved so much. Just drawing from memory, mostly though. I did go out drawing, no it was painting I think—very early, I went out into the landscape and did a painting of this Gumtree.

WS

I remember the falling fragments of the bark was terribly important. And of course, became later my flying fragments in the landscape. So everything from early on had a big impact later on, and I've connected it back now, but I hadn't thought of it before really, but it's all like a circle. Of course, I didn't probably mention to you that when I was a small child, about 10 or around that age, I had a lovely little toy sewing machine given to me. And that's where I began making, looking at my own body and actually putting the—making these abstract cloth works to do with the folds of my body, making that crossover between my own body and the land, seeing them as small abstract landscapes of the body. That was crucial that cloth making for later on when I went to Darwin, which was then of course, picking up on a more female landscape, of one that maybe wouldn't last one that... You know, like life doesn't last, why should art? So that attitude then helped me to make the work I did in the 70s in Darwin.

TM

You've talked a couple of times about this female idea of capturing the landscape, or a female idea of painting. Could you sort of explain that, and maybe against I guess what you perceived as a male understanding of the landscape?

WS

It was about making my own psychological state part of the landscape and bringing that. I mean, often male painters don't want to know about the emotion, but that's not true always of course. But they're more interested in the formal elements, maybe. But also the materials used then, to use cloth... I remember I met up with James Mollison who was once that director, the director who's since died just recently. He was sort of in a way critical of the fact that it wasn't going to last. He said, "But it may not last, it hasn't got the lasting quality because it was made of cloth." That's when I said to him, "Well, life doesn't last why should art?" But I went on to still keep working with that cloth. And it was important to me that the idea of sewing fragments of my life together in the landscape—bringing together those fragments was an important aspect of that. So I suppose it's the more, they were like in a way, giant diaries.

TM

Yeah. Well, when you were painting those works, were you starting... Were people starting to take notice of you and your practice?

WS

Not really. I had some shows here and there, but I mean nothing much was really happening. I was just basically working. I was more of a bit of an outsider, really, in a sense that I wasn't part of a, sort of a group of people. Earlier on, I think it was in the 70s, I had gone to some meeting with a few feminists. I didn't even really understand what that was then. I was a bit of an unaware type person, locked in my own dreamworld. Not very flattering. I was a bit of a dreamboat!

TM

I mean, that sense of... I love that phrase of being a dreamboat, but that is what makes your painting so unique, I think.

WS

It's funny cause it was a criticism from my parents: "Oh Wendy, what a dreamboat you are." It was seen as something not very good, but I suppose it's what I've been doing ever since I've been a child looking out into the landscape and dreaming things. And I suppose I talked to landscape. I feel incredible identification with it. I think I feel closer to it than I do probably to people, which is terrible to say. People let me down, but the landscape never lets me down, if you know what I mean.

TM

That's a really strong relation to have to something. Can you kind of describe that relation? Like what happens when you look at a landscape, or you're in a landscape, or you feel it?

WS

I suppose it's something I can hardly sort of really... I suppose you can only see it through my paintings. I get so overwhelmed with it. Like, in the early days I could hardly contain the emotion while I was painting. I was sort of almost in agony because it was so felt, and I still feel those feelings now, but I've held them back so I can be able to function better if you know what I mean. Basically feelings have always been so powerful it's sometimes dominated, and that isn't when I do my best work when it overcomes me.

TM

What you're talking about it kind of reminds me of something that you said in an interview when you'd read Gaston Bachelard, and his ideas of the landscape and the room. But what I thought you found in his work was really interesting. You said, "Having always believed that there was something seriously wrong with the way I experienced the world, it made me connect at last to a world that was sympathetic to my own poetic imagination."

WS

Exactly.

TM

And I thought it was really interesting that for so long you thought that there was something wrong with the way you viewed the world?

WS

Oh, I always did. Because, well, I mean, at that point when I was given that book and basically it just opened me up to the fact that I wasn't this oddball person. I connected to some other way of thinking that I hadn't realised. Of course now I know it's phenomenology, was that movement of understanding phenomena. And I had always thought in that way and thought there was something really wrong. Yeah.

TM

And so from what I've read, it was your move to Darwin around the early 70s that seemed to be a very big turning point in your practice and you probably started...

WS

Incredibly. Well, it was also a new relationship. I had a divorce, I was moving to another place. It was highly charged time with the absolute excitement of a new landscape after having this urban backyard. And to be in this, to see this growth in front of my eyes, was just magical. And of course there were the tensions of life going on as well around that.

TM

Yeah. I feel like it would have been a really interesting time to be interested in landscape painting because the art world would have been so centered on conceptual art and minimalism and abstraction. Did that, did that seem like a bit of a barrier?

WS

I was so lucky. I used to avoid anything to do with those sorts of things. I still do. I've got to say the truth. I absolutely avoid. I see students... I've given talks way back before I left school, I left the school in '97. I used to give these talks and I will never forget how students would rush up to me and say, "Do you mean we can paint?" Because they'd been given all the theory. And I thought it was sad that they didn't have a chance to choose. They could do it maybe, but choose between the two. Why not? I mean, they've got young lives. If they wanted to paint, it was awful to hold them back on that, to shove the theory down their throat. Of course I know today: I mean, I can't even speak about it now, I know how dominant that it is. I was lucky: I lived in a time of innocence basically, I think.

TM

I feel like, I mean, especially for you, that type of conceptual sphere would have been sort of stifling because you're so interested in the medium of painting itself and you know, what you can do with paint.

WS

Well, of course, yes. I mean today of course your own personal thing's probably not that important, but the truth is I think the personal is more political. You know, it's got power, too. And I was interested in constructing a landscape. I am interested in formal qualities. I am interested in the paint qualities. And of course that can be criticised now as being a craft person. The word is you're sort of a craftie, if you do

that. Well, I still believe in that: the making is important as well.

TM

You once said that you're curious, and I quote, "how our minds are altered by our experiences in the landscape."

WS

Yeah, that was a very interesting question. And that is an interesting question that one. I believe that we are altered by experience. It comes through us, it flows through us, and changes us.

TM

How do you think it's changed you?

WS

All my symbols, my brain patterns, have been altered by experiences that I've had right from the early days. As I was saying to you before, that beginning with the power lines that I looked through from the hotel window as a child, next to the railway, they're all just locked into my brain. The patterns that were established then still are there, and all the walks I took and the landscape I experienced are all inside me. Definitely. I think we are changed by them, altered definitely, by them.

TM

Yeah. I wondered if there was even a further step of how paintings of landscapes can then alter our perception of how we encounter a landscape?

WS

I really do believe that's happened. I think that we do bring to real landscape our acquired brain patterns, but it may also alter our perception of how we experience real landscape. I definitely think that's true. And looking at paintings can change how your prejudice through the painting at what you're looking at too. I mean, the painting can bring something to your understanding of the landscape. It sort of reverses, doesn't it?

TM

It does, yeah. I know that your art has a tremendous ecological concern and a great empathy and advocacy for the environment. And I feel like this was a concern of yours long before climate change entered the mainstream dialogue. Was it common to be concerned about the environment and using that concern throughout the 70s and 80s and 90s.

WS

Well, I suppose it was just a natural thing. I never consciously thought, "Well, this is something that I'm doing that's different to anyone else." I thought everyone was concerned, but of course that's not true, is it? I mean, discovering as you lost your innocence and realise that there are a lot of people that really don't care. I mean, I've spent most of my days walking up Mount Gaspard here, when I have my walks in the morning and what do I find? That there's a big sign on our road, saying significant road. Cause it's got special plants and all sorts of things. And it's a wonderful road that goes right up the hill on the mountain. And basically all I see is rubbish and I'm picking up rubbish all the way along the road and just, there's just no care for the land, you know?

So I've always cared about things like that. I've always seen that the earth has been wounded, and that's why I've often call my work Wounded sea place for instance. When I was in the Canberra area and down the south coast, I called them wounded places because everything has been... Well like Rape of a Northern Land, that work I did up in Darwin. It was as a direct response to this scene I saw at a place called Rum Jungle where they'd been uranium mining and there were signs saying, "Do not swim, do not swim here." And it was this desolate place, ransacked basically, and destroyed. I found since then that it was an Aboriginal sacred site for women. And I, I only found that out in the last few years, but the response I had, I could feel the energy there was so negative in that country. And that was my first realisation that land could be used in a political way. I mean to be absolutely destroyed. So it was a moment, a very, very strong moment in my life when I saw that place. And of course that built into the work called Rape of a Northern Land. Oh, anyway, I get carried away when I think about that now. Still, it was so long ago, but it still has the impact that it had when I saw it.

TM

I mean, it sounds like it still makes you angry in a way.

WS

I'm still angry, but I am an angry person. You've got to know. I'm angry about a lot of

things, especially at the moment. I mean, there's still things that are so bad that we haven't dealt with, and I think that it's the young people that I have great hope for. They're magnificent, the way they're fighting for the environment.

TM

When you came out with Rape of a Northern Land in the late 70s, was it well-received or was it a bit different then to be pushing such a political agenda?

WS

I got a lot of criticism for some of those things. I can remember at the show, basically. I was never used to it. It was very hurtful, but I got toughened by it after a while. And I thought, "Well, this is who I am and this is what I have to do." But there was a work that I did make, that I've got a lot of criticism for, it was called Celebration of Woman. I was so down at the time that I cut it into little bits, and it was the week after that, or two weeks or a month, I can't remember, the South Australian film board rang me and said, "Could we include that work in a documentary?" They were making about something, and I had cut it up. So it was really a funny moment. I had to learn by that to go on believing rather than just destroying. Because I've had moments when I destroy a lot of things. I used to walk over my work and I've known, been known to burn it in absolute anger. It's terrible. I can't say that I've really learned to be calm about everything, I haven't yet.

TM

That sense of exploring your own femaleness. Was that enhanced or was that altered when you started having children? Did that make you think differently?

WS

Oh, yes. I had to adapt my art because I didn't want the children to be touching oil paint because it was so full of lead and so on, poisonous. That's how I adapted the pen and ink on a large scale. So I'd take reams of cloth and put it over my knee when I went off on trips into the bush, taking the kids with me, I could just sit watching them with my pen on my knee. So I adapted my art, and instead of sort of making excuses and saying, "Well, I can't make my art. I've got children now." I couldn't be without my work. I was a mess if I didn't make it, you know, so I basically just adapted that drawing on my knee. Like they were like giant Dürers you know, the German artist Dürer's work with a concentration on line. And I was recording what I was seeing in detail there. And that was an important thing for me to develop my own way of doing it. Not disturbing the kids in any way.

TM

That's interesting because as much as your painting I think evokes a very real empathy with the environment, there's also this very nervous, I feel, sense of death throughout the paintings.

WS

Oh definitely. Oh, well, yes that's been my main thing basically: life, death, birth rebirth, this just watching nature itself. And death is something that I have constantly in my mind. I've just always been like that. I've always seen death as a very realistic part of the whole idea of what we have to deal with. So I don't brush it away. I always bring it up. I always used to tell my students, you know, the dark black compost is where all the wonderful ideas are, but you've got to have the courage to dig down into it, to give birth to really good, lovely ideas that come from yourself. But yes, death is hovering there I'm afraid, especially at the moment because I'll be turning 80 next year. So it's a pretty frightening. I've come to terms with it, of course, but basically it's still there and I've got a lot to say and do still. I don't want to leave yet.

TM

So you're still, you're still painting?

WS

Oh yes, yes. I've got a whole lot of new work down there in my studio. I work in a shearing shed about, you know, a few hundred yards from the house. That's where my escape is.

TM

When I look at your works, I mean, I, I love them. Like, they're just so poetic and they're so layered and the use of colour and line is just so captivating and...

WS

Thank you for that. A lot of people are frightened of my work, so I think you're a very special person.

TM

They make me nervous, but in the best way.

WS

I'm glad they make you nervous because they've got to have some reaction. If they haven't got any reaction and you walk past, it means I've failed.

TM

I've wondered, where does a painting like that start?

WS

Well, I've always been a person to try to sort of not overthink that, because when I actually do overthink, I totally fail. Well, not always, but I've got to try to bring together thinking, feeling, heart, hand, everything together. And that's a dance. It really is a spiritual dance when you make art. So there's the poetic, you know. I started in those early works, I used to use the hose on the canvas, cause I had these huge bits of canvas. I'd go out with the hose outside and sprinkle them with water and then I'd start the staining into my work. So I've always done it in a funny way. You know, I've bought the poetic through first sometimes, then I looked at the form of later. I've had to go back and sew things together. At the moment I'm not doing any sewing at all in my work, but I'm still doing that staining process, which of course is a hit and miss. You can totally get it, or you just waste lots and lots of canvas, which you've got to paint over and start all over again. You know, so it's a constant re-constituting or re-constructing things and painting over and layering. And that's what you just said to me, the layering. It's interesting, you said that. I'm glad that you were aware of the layering in the work.

TM

Hugely. And it's the layering to me that really brings out the psychological aspect.

WS

Oh, that's interesting. Yes. Well, because in the battle you have with a painting, you are really entering the space of the painting. You live in the space of the painting. You're not only in the space of the studio that you're working in, but you're in the space of the painting. So your head's right inside that space and you live in, you dream inside that space. So it's a really, it's a battle. And you've got to battle with all your faults. And you know, impatience, and you've got to come to terms with a lot of things while you're working. And it is a battle and it's a layering of different emotions. So on a particular day, I could be working all day quietly. Then the next day, I just think I have failed totally. And I'm reworking the whole thing, you know. It can be turned out to be an absolutely new work. So I'm totally layering all the time and thinking and redoing it, and never being ever satisfied. In fact, it's very rare that I'm satisfied. It's only, I've got to be dragged away and let go at the end to really let go and see, really start seeing the work and maybe leaving it for a long time and turning it to the wall before I really know what the solution is.

TM

When you've been doing that for 60 years, I wonder does your practice change as the times change and as the decades change? Or do you feel that some things have really just remained so fundamental?

WS

I think it's fundamentally the same. And cause all you've got maybe two big ideas in your life that you keep thinking they're different. And then you realise, of course they're all connected. They're big ideas that you have. Like mine, you know, in the landscape, the idea of how I use line, you know, big ideas that you've put into work. But it's basically, it comes down to: you change maybe the way you're doing your compositions or you make changes like that, but really basically it's a timeless act. And it's essentially the same in a way, you know, except that, of course, as you get older, you're finding it harder even just to reach the top of the page if it's too big. And you're finding that it's willpower in the end. Whereas before it was your youthful energy. Well it's willpower that gets you down then to battle on that painting now, you know? So it, your body changes, I suppose, that changes. Your strength changes, but it's your mind, that's got to get stronger. So there is a timeless thing about creating art, yeah.

TM

You said once that it was essential to share truths in the work. And I wondered what kind of truths do you think you've shared?

WS

I suppose the truth about watching over the treasure we have of the earth, at gath-

ering up, not destroying. Truths in the work about the land and making a statement about the beauty and giving an honesty to the paintings. It's a truth to yourself, I suppose, and to your work. To make work with substance and weight, not in a fickle way. Keeping in the mystery, not explaining it or illustrating it, but keeping it intact in the work. It's hard to say anything about truth. It's slippery in a way, because truth is a strange thing, isn't it?

TM

That sense of mystery that you just mentioned: do you have to cultivate that in a painting or does that just come naturally for you?

WS

Well, I think it comes naturally for me because I love the idea of not revealing too much. You know, in the early days I'd probably illustrate something trying to get through. But it never had power when you over-explained it. I always felt to leave something in a poetic state, frozen in time, you know, cause it is in the end: a frozen image, a silent image, which of course is, you know, today is hard for people to look at because they're so used to moving screens. And the wonderful thing about painting is that it gives you a stillness. If you give it time and sit there and watch it, it will give you so much back because it's a still image and you've tracked something in there, and hopefully there's still the mystery to that. You said, you get nervous—well, maybe nervousness over the painting's a good thing because it might make you come back and find out why, you know. But to reveal it wouldn't matter anyway. I mean, basic thing is it's to wake us up, to awaken us to things, to the things we have that mean something. Meaning the most important thing that I think I have to work with meaning.

TM

And that was Wendy Stavrianos for the second episode of The Long Run. You can listen back to the first episode with Gareth Sansom and stay tuned for episode three. You can subscribe to the Art Guide podcast on iTunes and Spotify or otherwise listen at Art Guide online, where you can also keep up to date with art related features and interviews from across the country.