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ON LIGHT AND SPACE — HELEN REDMOND

Words by Sarah Sivaraman • Photography by Nicholas Watt and Trevor Mein



Helen Redmond creates paintings that inspire stillness. Applying layer upon layer of oil paint to canvas, she depicts architectural spaces and the light that falls within them. This light feels at once present and transient, imbuing each painting – and the viewer – with a quiet sense of contemplation.



Inspired by the work of renowned architects, Helen's art making is a visceral means of expressing the physical effect an architectural space can have.

Echoing Helen's artwork, the gallery space introduces light in shards, slivers and soft diffusion to hold an atmosphere of intrigue and quiet.

Born and raised on a sheep farming property in southern Queensland, Helen's first encounter with a city was at the age of 12. Taking in the sandstone buildings of Sydney, she was enthralled by the architecture. "It didn't overwhelm me at all," Helen recalls. "I just got the sense of it being a very masculine space, and I remember thinking 'I wonder if women had designed this space it would be different?'" It was this intuitively critical approach to architecture that led Helen to study interior design and journalism. She then worked for *Vogue Living* for 25 years as Interiors Editor and Senior Editor, including 12 years as Melbourne Editor, where she honed her understanding of composition, space and light.

During her time at *Vogue Living*, Helen worked with several internationally accomplished Danish photographers. "If you've had anything to do with Denmark you know they grow up in the dark," she explains. "So how they look at light and space is quite different." She recalls arriving

to spaces ahead of a photoshoot with very low light "and [thinking] 'how are we going to deal with the light here?' and they just said, 'wait and let your eyes adjust,' and where the light fell is where we would photograph." This patience with and attention to light was formative for Helen. Working in this way over the years, she became competent at visually describing light, and in turn, "the mood of a space, and negative space – what's left unsaid." Helen refers to this intangible element as "the soul of the eye. It's hard to put your finger on what that quality is because you can find it in a tent, and you can find it in a palace – it's a quality." She likens this to artist Paul Klee's words, "one eye sees, the other feels."

The urge to find a more visceral means of expression for this phenomenon was strong. "I had visions in my head of so much that I wanted to express," Helen recalls. "I thought I need to go to art school, to find a way to give this a go." Whilst Helen had drawn and painted since childhood, attending the National Art School in Darlinghurst, Sydney,

marked the start of her professional practice as an artist. Ever drawn to the built environment, Helen's paintings over the years have explored architectural spaces, often inspired by the work of architects such as Tadao Ando, Peter Zumthor and Louis Kahn. In these paintings, she marries her keen awareness of the physical effect a built space can have with the Japanese concept of 'ma'. Helen explains that this word encompasses "a way of communication that is full of emptiness. Subjects of sentences are left unsaid. Clarity and words are not always necessary." This manifests as an abstraction of architecture in her work. "If you have no details, like doors or windows, the mind can wander around a room," Helen explains. "You're in a void. It's where you pause, where you're still."

Helen's most recent solo show, 'The Solidity of Fragile Things', at Otomys in Prahran, Melbourne, grappled with the paradoxical nature of her work. "What is fragile? It's time that passes. It's light that is there for half an hour and it's gone," Helen muses. "It's all the things that

are not permanent. But they are the most real things; they are the solid things." The exhibition is the first in the new Otomys space, designed by John Wardle Architects. The gallery has a two-storey void with a corner window that lets in a triangular shaft of light, a fitting space for a body of work such as this.

The paintings within 'The Solidity of Fragile Things' depict quiet corners and beckoning passageways, shafts of light, slivers of light, fading light. They hold a sense of intrigue, as if an invitation to the viewer to explore the spaces within them. As for how they might fare, and what they might find, Helen has faith in her audience. She believes that this felt sense, this wordless experience, is "something that is universal, something that I think is innate. The paintings are an invitation to silence in a sense."