

Kelly Austin

Earth Standing Still

by D Wood

Richard Flanagan, who won the Booker Prize in 2014 for his novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, was born in Tasmania. His ancestors were illiterate Irish convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land (renamed Tasmania) where they joined fellow criminals and Aboriginal inhabitants. In addition to being an acclaimed novelist, Flanagan has written passionate essays, taking stands against the exploitation of his country and island, that reflect his outsider heritage.

Tasmania is the smallest and poorest state in the Australian commonwealth. Its primary industries are agriculture, forestry, mining, and fishing, with tourism boosting the economy in recent years. Flanagan has stated that “people here were brought up to chop things down or dig them up. If you wanted to be an artist or a writer you left the trajectory.”





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1 *Stilled Composition 118*, 35 in. (35 cm) in length, stoneware, porcelain, collected earthen materials, glaze, metal wire, timber, acrylic paint, 2022.

2 *Stilled Composition 101*, 52 in. (132 cm) in length, stoneware, collected earthen materials, glaze, timber, acrylic paint, 2022.

Despite the odds against pursuit of a career in the creative industries, Tasmania has a thriving arts community. The cost of housing, studio space, and land, relative to prices on the mainland, has been incentive for artists to move south but supplementing income by working in the service sector is the norm. This explains why Kelly Austin, an award-winning ceramic artist who lives in Lutruwita—the Aboriginal name for Tasmania—spends part of each week as a project manager for a design firm.

Austin was born in Canada and was lured to the transcendent natural beauty of Tasmania as an outdoor guide; meeting an Australian partner consolidated her long-term residency. The road that brought her to Lutruwita is one that is redolent of leaving the trajectory of societal and ceramic rules.

Still and All

One of the awards in Austin’s CV is for STILL: National Still Life Award from the Coffs Harbour [New South Wales] Regional Gallery. The gallery, renamed Yarrila Arts and Museum in 2023, describes the award as “a biennial, acquisitive award for an artwork in the still life genre. The award takes a fresh and contemporary approach to still life and its themes.” Austin’s winning entry in 2019, *Stilled Composition 43*, was chosen from 750 entries, 59 of which were finalists.

Many artists design works for themed exhibitions, but Austin didn’t assemble a ceramic still life specifically for the award. Her fascination with grouping objects began early in her making. She says, “I had a rudimentary attempt early on, maybe in my first or second year of learning how to work on the wheel. The idea of putting things together seemed a natural direction. I wasn’t inclined to work on a solitary object. I probably started that over ten years ago. And reflecting on that, sometimes I wonder if it was about composition, thinking from a compositional perspective.” The fact that *Stilled Composition 43* was the 43rd still life in Austin’s

portfolio gives an indication of the necessary dedication to a genre in order to win a major national prize.

Stilled Composition 43 consists of 8 disparate objects on a black shelf. The principles of design would dictate that an odd number of objects are required for balance, yet the colors and forms, placement and orientation, and size of the containers are sufficient to stabilize the composition. Cylinders and shapes in earth tones surround a focal point of a small burnt-orange form that is enclosed, symmetrical, waisted, and widens near each end. It peeks from behind a gray vessel. The control evident in the juxtaposition of like and unlike items demonstrates Austin’s ability to transcend mere still life into awesome stillness.

Conversely, Richard Flanagan disagrees about control. Asked whether he was in control when writing *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2002, he said: “No. Never. The moment I’m in control, it’s not worth reading. It has to be exciting for the writer. Journalism and historical writing move outward from yourself. But the fictional journey is in the opposite direction, but occasionally you might get in there, and that is a moment of transcendence.” Nevertheless, the control in *Stilled Composition 43* was recognized as transcendent by the STILL judges.

Still Photography

Austin credits her photographic background with her penchant for putting things together. She took photography and graphics during four years of high school in Vancouver, Canada, and a four-year degree at Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver) in which the first two years were as a photography major. The activities of assemblage and framing that constitute a successful photograph were a prelude to the final two years at Emily Carr, when she switched to ceramics and graduated in 2011. But in between high school and university, Austin took a two-year diploma at Capilano College in North Vancouver in Outdoor Recreation Management.

This qualification is what prompted the trip to Tassie, as Tasmania is colloquially known.

At the age of 19, Austin guided sea-kayaking trips on the east coast of the state. With its white sand beaches, abundant coves, and marine phenomena, Tasmania's east coast attracts sports people and tourists who are keen to explore pristine territory. For a guide, however, the idyllic work environment has its drawbacks. Austin recalls, "I got to a point where I was feeling that I was traveling to find work all the time. And I thought teaching might give me a bit more stability." She returned to Canada to undertake her degree at Emily Carr, and work part time at the Gallery of BC (British Columbia) Ceramics.

The four years in Vancouver with her Australian partner did not progress to the teaching stability Austin was aiming for: "I began my degree at Emily Carr thinking I might become a high school art teacher. What happened was I became more passionate about

making art than teaching art and undertaking a master's [program] enabled me to focus on making/continuing my development as an artist." Her choice of where to study for the master's degree favored Australia: "having Australian residency, I had an option for an international experience without the international difficulties of fees and language challenges, etc. We returned to Australia and I did a master's [graduating in 2014] at Australian National University in Canberra."

Her early thrill with connecting to material and manipulating form on the wheel established the basis for her progress in graduate school. But she wasn't satisfied solely with what the wheel was intended for. Austin says, "When I did my master's, I had a real shift in thinking around what the forms were about: why they were open; if they could be closed; and what happened when I thought of them being closed. It took me a while to stretch my head out of the tableware world."



3-5 *The Minor Fall and the Major Lift* (details and overall installation), 118 in. (300 cm) in length, stoneware, porcelain, collected earthen materials, glaze, metal wire, timber, acrylic paint, 2022.

Toying with open and closed is seen in *Stilled Composition 57*. An open beaker joins solid forms that vary in color, form, and finish. The salmon-toned silo shape is, itself, a contrast—domed at the top and level at the bottom. Its surface has shine and shadow compared to the overt beaker. A prone beet-red cylinder provides a strong visual backdrop at the same time as being reflected in the fourth item, a glazed white drum. Lighting is definitely a component of the still life along with the objects.

Distillation

The effort and sensibility to find harmony in the 120 still lifes Austin has created to date coincides with a quotation, provided by Austin, from the Finnish architect and designer, Alvar Aalto: “In every case one must achieve a simultaneous solution of opposites . . . Nearly every design task involved tens, often hundreds, sometimes thousands of different contradictory elements, which are forced into a functional harmony only by man’s will. This harmony cannot be achieved by any other means than those of art.” Austin believes that Aalto’s statement “reaches towards the essence of what I’m exploring.”

Aalto’s Finnish environment of forests, lakes, and topography inspired and imbued his designs. The same is true for Austin, with nature’s presence being in materials and texture. Attention to the raw and rugged arose in 2021 when she had an artist’s residency in Queenstown, Tasmania, a remote mountainous location dedicated to mining since the late 19th century. Gold, silver, and copper were extracted and smelted in Queenstown while surrounding forests were gutted for mine props and fuel. Fumes from the smelter killed vegetation, resulting in erosion, and the consequent lunar-like landscape has now become a tourist attraction.

Reflecting on her residency, Austin cited several outcomes, the first being holistic roughness: “I am influenced by the impure, irregular situation that wild places bring. I’m no longer solely interested in a highly refined result. Before the time in Queenstown, my work was quite tight and refined. Queenstown was what opened up my work.” Secondly, she dug her own clay and started incorporating minerals like dolerite. The coarse clay speaks of geography and heritage while the dolerite melts in the kiln producing pock marks in the glaze. “Looking at the landscape and at weathered objects in Queenstown, and seeing this weathering or patina or type of imperfection or cracking on the surface, inspired me to work in a new way.”

In addition to dolerite, Kelly uses perlite, coffee beans, or coffee grounds to achieve the idiosyncrasies that would normally be obtained through wood firing. In an electric kiln, these additives produce the desired effects on stoneware. Rather than the physical labor of wood firing, she’s working smart with electricity.

Queenstown’s third influence is an addition to the elements in her still lifes: “When I was there, where there’s a lot of mining, I often thought about ‘under the surface,’ because it’s where the materials come from and we don’t see it. And, I considered the shelf surface as having a horizontal line, with all the objects on this line. I thought, wouldn’t it be interesting if something broke that line like in the way we’re breaking the surface to get into the earth to find these materials?” The result was a strip of clay that hung over the lip of the shelf, breaking the horizontal and directing the viewer’s eye beneath it. The plain, unembellished strips become the focal point because they suggest languidity in an otherwise upright and frozen scene. Austin says that she felt liberated by the advent of this unorthodox interloper.



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6 *Spatial Object 5*, 13¾ in. (35 cm) in height, stoneware, collected earthen materials, glaze, metal wire, 2022. **7** *Stilled Composition 115*, 15 in. (38 cm) in width, stoneware, glaze, 2022. **8** *Stilled Composition 57*, 20 in. (51 cm) in width, stoneware, wood, acrylic paint, 2018.



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9 *Stilled Composition 109*, 30 in. (77 cm) in width, stoneware, collected earthen materials, glaze, glass, steel, leather, timber, acrylic paint, 2022. Photos: Peter Whyte.

Stilled Composition 101 demonstrates how an organic eclectic form can take center stage. The oatmeal-colored suspension over the shelf's edge demands attention because of its tone but also because of its difference from the glazed static forms that surround it. Vying for attention, too, is the pitted and speckled cylinder to the right of the shelf. Austin considers these "foreigners" philosophically: "I think I'm interested in this place where, in musical terms, it's a discord: where you've got three or four notes that are in harmony and one that's out. Or, one that's kind of odd. I wouldn't say I'm really comfortable with the idea of complete discord or chaos because I think there's something about the tension of feeling like they [the odd ones] are grounded through the balance in the work." Austin strives for balance and expects the viewer to engage with the intention/tension too.

Still Waters Run Deep

The aesthetic influences that she brings to the studio are many and more will be added to the mix as she explores her surroundings, medium, materials, process, and intellect. Yet it is important to conclude her story by looking outside the ceramic context.

Austin's immediate family make objects using craft materials: her mother creates in textiles and metal, and her father in wood. However, it is her maternal grandfather who warrants the most attention. He was passionate about mid-century modern design. "Mom had stories of him sitting outside shop windows and drawing things that he really liked. He made replicas of what he saw." As a component of his day job, her grandfather designed furniture for the Canadian Pacific Railway passenger ships that traveled the waterways of the coast of British Columbia. Austin grew up making things with her grandfather and being surrounded by the designs he made. One needs little persuasion to recognize the simplicity and minimalism of mid-century modern in the granddaughter's designs.

Life outside the studio, however, is not simple or minimal: it requires attention to practicalities. Austin is conscientious about applying for grants to fund her practice, and her teaching goal was fulfilled through occasional contracts at Tasmania's technical colleges. However, with the limited number of such positions

nearby, she was faced with the prospect of being a barista or waiter to ensure steady income. Instead, her solution was to enroll for a bachelor of architecture degree at the University of Tasmania. The training has brought employment and new perspectives on her work: "I think architecture really helped free me up massively from the constructs around ceramics. I considered using other materials in my work—glass or steel. I even thought about designing an element of one of the groupings and having that fabricated by someone else. Previously, I was caught up in the whole traditional idea of artistic integrity."

Austin feels that being in an architectural context, "you're at a bird's eye view a lot of the time, seeing a project from a very high conceptual level. And asking yourself, how do I execute that, how do I use materials in a way that helps describe the concepts of what I'm creating? It's not about putting in all of the screws yourself." Glass (provided by Merinda Young), steel (Peter Hodoniczky) and timber (Dave Flemming) elements have joined the ceramics on her shelves. Their corporeality, reflection and absorption of light, hue, and difference present new challenges in the harmonious art-making of which Aalto spoke.

When Richard Flanagan was asked to comment on the importance of Tasmania, he said he felt that it was an odd question: "It becomes a question when the place seems exotic. It's not a question when it's a place known by many. Writers write the greatest works in the most god-forsaken places. In the most barren of worlds, the most fecund and rich works are created." The Tasmanian still lifes of Kelly Austin prove his point.

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1 Sourced from the *New Yorker* www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-three-minute-life-flanagan-island-2015-01-28

2 Sourced from the *LA Times* www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-apr-14-bk-fourquestions14-story.html.

3 Alvar Aalto, "Art and Technology," lecture in the Academy of Finland, 1955, published in *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, edited and annotated by Göran Schildt (Helsinki: Otava Publishing Company, 1997), 174.