



The place where the sea meets the land and the land meets the sky is the natural habitat of Chris Langlois. VICTORIA HYNES explores his observations.

Chris Langlois and the Australian sublime



Hazy sea mists, brooding skies and an endless rolling ocean merging into a shimmering horizon — this typically characterises a work by the Sydney painter Chris Langlois. Attempts to find any focal point in Langlois' panoramic land and seascapes prove to be frustratingly elusive. Instead, distance and space are the features of his evocative, poetic compositions.

Langlois, a forty-year-old artist based on Sydney's northern beaches, has regularly said that his ephemeral paintings are "of anywhere and nowhere and everything and nothing". The artist is more interested in capturing atmospheric effects than in creating a sense of place. "It's about the space in between," says Langlois, "it's the subtle nuances that interest me."

As a young artist in the 1990s, when many of his contemporaries were lured by expressionism, conceptualism and experimental art forms, he resolutely explored the traditional genre of landscape painting, although he does admit to going through an 'Aida Tomescu' phase of abstract expressionism during his art school days.

Veering between naturalism and abstraction, his works have nevertheless always been drawn from the fundamental elements of land, sea and sky, conveyed through broad, amorphous forms. Referencing the great Romantic painters of the nineteenth century, such

as JMW Turner, his oeuvre has often been described as embodying the sublime. Langlois has little concern with identifiable locations or subjects; instead he is evoking an internalised visual experience. In this sense, the artist likens his work to music — it relates as much to an evocation of feeling as it does to a way of seeing.

Nevertheless, his paintings are also grounded in early Australian landscape traditions, as exemplified by artists such as Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts and William Lister Lister. Just as the Heidelberg painters of the late 1800s used small boards or cigar box lids to create small *plein air* oil sketches of Sydney Harbour and the bush, Langlois often makes loose landscape studies in situ, which he then fine tunes in his studio, such as *Sketch, Pumicestone Channel no 2*, 2009.

Most of his larger paintings, however, are worked from photographs, using them much like a visual sketchbook, as a starting point for his compositions. Like the German contemporary painter Gerhard Richter, Langlois chooses to work from photographs in which the landscape is deliberately ambiguous or blurred. At times, he also draws on a composite of photographs to produce the one work.

Unlike his sketches which are thick and painterly, his epic large-scale paintings are blended so finely that the brush marks are rarely visible. The artist explores tonalities of colour — multiple hues of green, blue and

Opposite page:

Top left: **Ocean (Bilgola Head) no 2**, 2009, oil on linen, 153 x 153cm.

Top right: **Landscape (Narrabeen Lake) no 4**, 2009, oil on linen, 72 x 72cm.

Bottom: **Sketch (Pumicestone Channel) no 2**, 2009, oil on board, 33 x 13cm.



Sketch (Mt Hallen) no 1, 2009, oil on board, 17 x 35cm.

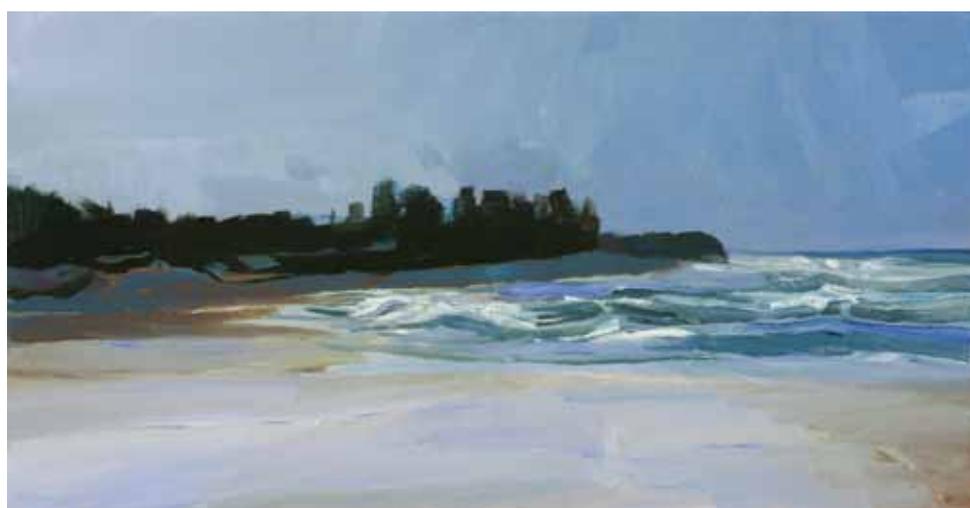
grey paint are so sheer and subtly applied, it is almost as though they are embedded in the canvas itself rather than applied with oils. To produce such delicate nuances in colour and texture, he will often work eight hours at a stretch, applying the semi-transparent colours to create the ground of his compositions, on top of which other layers are later applied.

Born and raised near Gosford, New South Wales, he studied painting and drawing at Newcastle University and now lives at Avalon Beach north of Sydney. Being a coastal dweller, always within reach of the eastern beaches, it was probably inevitable that the artist's subject matter tended towards seascapes.

However, in some recent compositions he has conveyed the bleached colours of the interior — often describing the Hunter Valley region where his parents live. Sometimes he depicts aerial views so that he can capture the vast, washed out plains of inland New South Wales. In some cases, he abandons any reference to the land at all — instead painting the translucent cloud formations, changing light and weather and brilliant sunsets, as if momentarily glimpsed from an overflying aircraft. Studying these works creates a sense in the viewer of having left the earthly plane altogether; akin to floating on air enveloped by earth's atmosphere.

Another strand to his recent work is his dark nocturnes, which seem to have done away with colour, opting for the infinite, subtle variations of monochromatic greys. In these works Langlois creates moody, dark compositions that cannot help but induce reverie and even perhaps a sense of melancholy in the viewer. In many ways, the artist could be described as a colourist, but instead of choosing the intense, sun-drenched colours of the Australian desert, he is drawn to the subtle grey palette of the Australian bush and sea.

In an interview with art dealer Brett Ballard in late 2007, Langlois commented that growing up in Australia and being part of that landscape, you could often take it for granted, "seeing it but not seeing it". Later, at art school, he suggested: "You find yourself looking at artists and then interpreting the way they look at landscape into the way you look at and interpret landscape ... You look at the ocean and you can't help but think of Turner, Lister or Richter. Look at the side of a hill and can't help but think of Williams, Boyd, Roberts or Gruner; look down a valley and think of Streeton ...



Sketch (Dickey Beach) no 2, 2009, oil on board, 18 x 35cm.



Sketch (Pumicestone Channel) no 2, 2009, oil on board, 19 x 32cm.

Whether consciously or not, our affinity to that history feeds into what we do as contemporary artists."

Driving home from viewing Chris Langlois's latest work in his Avalon studio, stormy weather briefly blows in across the southern ocean, creating dramatic effects in the sea and sky. Immediately I feel immersed in one of the artist's vast, limitless seascapes, as if his visual perception has seeped into my own consciousness. Perhaps Chris Langlois deserves a seat alongside that canon of Australian landscape painters in creating a singular vision for the Australian environment, one into which we can all momentarily feel transported. **JAR**