



Painting with technology

In 2008, Catherine Nelson made the great leap from working in visual effects to becoming a full-time artist. She immediately attracted the attention of prize juries and gallery owners and was soon holding shows from Sydney to Beijing and Paris to Korea.

WRITER
Heather Jacobs

After 12 years working as a composer on films including *Moulin Rouge*, *Australia* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Sydney native Catherine Nelson combined the techniques she'd learnt in visual effects with her classical training as a painter, and her hobby as a photographer, to develop a new artistic technique. The result is thousands of photos taken from nature including flowers, leaves, birds, clovers and trees, composited together seamlessly to create a digitally manipulated landscape.

"As a painter, when I look at a painting I am looking at not only the subject of what it is, but the painter and the painter's vision of that subject," she says. "That was my training and that never left me. So, when I take a photo it is a similar thing, and if I experience the landscape a photo never did it for me. My experience was always something different, so I wanted to play with perspective so I could play with points of view."

Nelson made her splash in 2010 when her first series, *Creation*, picked up the 2010 Royal Bank of Scotland Client Choice Award, which is one of the

Australia's biggest corporate art awards. That same year an artwork called *Source*, featuring hundreds of birds flying through a cloud, was exhibited as part of the Blake Director's Cut Exhibition, an annual prize recognising contemporary art and poetry exploring the themes of spirituality, religion and human justice.

This exposure helped Nelson catch the eye of the Australian Centre of Photography (ACP) and the Dominik Mersch Gallery in Waterloo where she has had several solo and group exhibitions. Former ACP director, Alasdair Foster, was at the Daegu Biennale in Korea last October showing Nelson's work to a friend on his iPad when Romain Degoul, who owns the popular Galerie Paris-Beijing happened to be looking over his shoulder.

Degoul was so impressed with her work he asked Nelson if he could represent her at his gallery in Paris and Beijing. She had a solo exhibition of her series, called *Future Memories*, in Paris in May and has a show coming up in November in Beijing. He also included her in a group show in Art Paris with the world-famous Chinese artist, Liu Bolin, ➤



- 01 Cloverdowns.
- 02 Portrait of Catherine Nelson by Bart Verraest.
- 03 Autumn Ghent.
- 04 First Freeze Bourgoyen Winter.
- 05 Snowy Mountains.
- 06 Ghent Lilies.
- 07 Mareeba Wet.
- 08 Mareeba.
- 09 Monet's Garden.

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known as the *Invisible Man*, because he poses in photographs after being painted to match the background.

The group show, *New Worlds*, at The Museum of Photography in Seoul from 28 August-26 September, was created by the ACP and timed to coincide with the Korea International Art Fair, as part of an exchange between the museum and ACP to mark the Year of Friendship between Australia and Korea.

Other artists involved are Polixeni Papapetrou, Bronck Kozka, Alexia Sinclair and the duo Gerard O’Connor and Marc Wasiak.

“I don’t know if [my achievements] are breakthroughs as much as great moments,” says Nelson, speaking from Ghent, Belgium, where she now lives. “It’s the work, it’s so positive it has really struck a chord with people. You don’t make work to be popular; as an artist you make work that is true to yourself and it is not always a popular thing. That’s not the motivation, but the response has been incredible.”

Nelson moved to Belgium to be with her partner, Bart Verraest, a film colourist, whom she met while working together in Iceland on the hit children’s series, *Lazytown*. She now lives between Belgium and Australia.

Part of the appeal is the proximity to the rest of Europe – with Germany, Paris, London and Amsterdam providing some great day trips. Then she returns to Ghent, where she feels productive and can focus on her work.

“I didn’t know how I would feel about living here,” says Nelson. “I have never lived in a small city before, but I just love it. It’s a very beautiful medieval city. I feel like I’m in the centre of everything but nothing ever happens, which is wonderful for me at this time in my life. Ten years ago I don’t know how I would have felt, but for me now it works.”

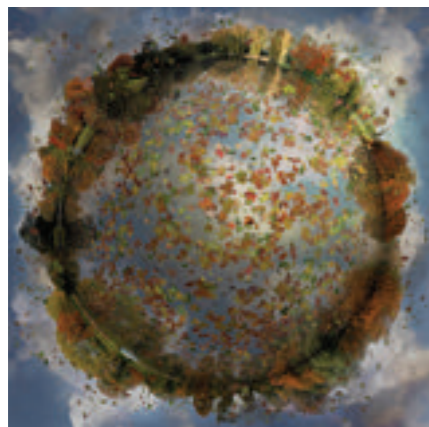
She’s always been a traveller, but claims she is no longer a nomad, saying she feels very settled “in my way”.

When she finished school, Nelson went to London and studied art before

returning home to finish her Fine Arts degree, which is when she first became interested in visual effects. On graduation she got a job at a now-defunct company called Conja working on television commercials before switching over to film. By 1999 she’d been offered a job in Milan working on films for the US market and then started working throughout Europe. She would return to Australia sporadically to work on Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* at Animal Logic, and *Australia* at Rising Sun.

Nelson’s work has been interpreted as a comment on the environment and the need to protect the earth’s precious resources, but she says she never set out with a message.

“If anything I was thinking about landscape painting, that’s where I saw my role in that continuum, the evolution of landscape. But when the series was completed, which was 20 works, people responded to it very much as an eco-message and I was very happy about that,” says Nelson. “If I can make people



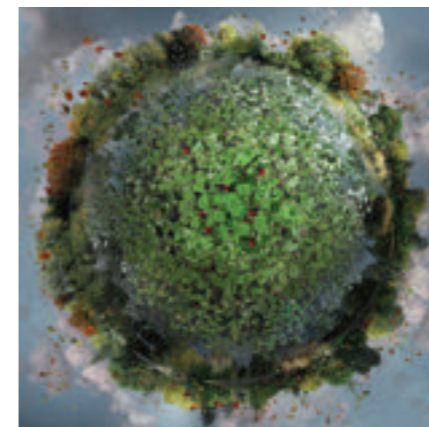
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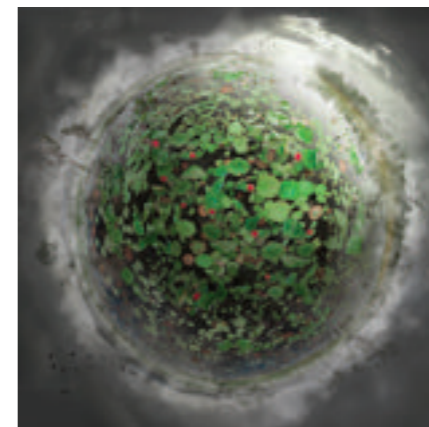
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think about what we have and treasure nature, that’s wonderful. I am thrilled that my work is interpreted in that way.”

There’s also a touch of the Impressionist artist in her influence – one of her works is called *Monet’s Garden* and is based on photos she took there. The influential French magazine, *Arts Magazine*, even did a photo essay comparing the two works.

Nelson considers herself more of a painter than a photographer. She says Verraest is a very good photographer and she can see the difference between the two of them when she takes a shot.

“I am thinking like a painter, I am not interested in the final shot but rather what I can get out of it. It’s like a dab of paint, that shot is going to end up somewhere in the work, but isn’t going to be the only thing. It is not going to be final framing and the final composition, it is going to be an element of a bigger work.”

Nelson’s next series will be based on photographs taken during a recent trip to Romania when she spent four days on the Danube Delta, where the river flows out to the Black Sea, taking thousands of photographs.

The setting for her work shifts between Europe and Australia, and she misses the wild nature of her birthplace.

“That affects my work enormously; it is about nature. And I think that wildness and those open spaces that you can get in Australia is in my work,” she says.

This includes three pieces set in the Snowy Mountains, which were based on the impact of seeing the trees stripped bare and dying after the devastating bushfires in 2003.

She also credits technology and digital cameras, which are making possible art forms that previously didn’t exist.

“You couldn’t do what I am doing 20 years ago because the technology wasn’t fast enough, and the quality of the cameras wasn’t strong enough,” she says. “You didn’t have enough space to store your stuff. I brought back 70 gigabyte of photos from my last trip and that will all fit very comfortably on my Mac. So I just honour that technology; it’s really, in some ways, dictated what I do. The more the technology offers the more artists and people will ask of it.”

Meanwhile, this Australian artist will continue to be at the cutting-edge of this new style of artwork as she continues to explore and challenge the technology to paint her vision of the world. ■