



AMANDA MARBURG

STORY **SASKIA BEUDEL**

Amanda Marburg's distinctive process translates 'found' photographs into clumsy plasticine models. Her paintings then carefully reproduce the endearing yet unsettling absurdity and macabre undertones of this plasticine world.



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OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES AMANDA MARBURG'S work has ranged from bar scenes in Western movies, to reinvented Dutch still lifes, '70s skin magazines, vignettes from Grimm fairy tales with their menacing violence, clay figurines modelled by children, Spanish tiles and surrealist lobsters. 'I paint from what I'm reading, looking at or where I am at the time,' Marburg says.

In her essay *Why I write*, Joan Didion explores the power of images that linger in one's memory – the 'greyed and obscurely sinister light' of oil refineries seen decades earlier through a bus window in San Francisco, a flowering pear tree outside a window, a young woman with long hair and a short white halter dress walking through a casino at one o'clock in the morning. 'What is going on in these pictures in my mind?' Didion asks. 'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means.'

Marburg's image-making process suggests a similar mix of enthrallment (held under the spell of an image) and interrogative curiosity. As MCA curator Rachel Kent points out, Marburg's paintings often 'begin with a mental picture that is sought out by the artist' these days through online searches, and earlier in her career in second-hand bookshops 'until the right image is eventually located'. Having located the desired image, she creates a model of it in plasticine, photographs the model, and reproduces the photo in paint. It is a curious process of filtering – approaching and reapproaching any given image, which is mediated and remediated across very different material properties. The blur and under- or over-exposure of inexpert photographs; malleable plasticine with its mock-cheerful



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01 Briar rose, 2016, oil on linen, 40 x 30 cm
 02 Amanda Marburg in her studio
 03 a root lifts its leg, 2017, oil on linen, 76 x 102 cm
 04 Tile 3 (pipe), 2017, oil on linen, 61 x 61 cm



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block colours crafted 'with a deliberate and wonderful appearance of naivety', as Ashley Crawford puts it, and fine layers of oil glazes 'painted with a sense of meticulous realism'.

Two years ago, Marburg moved from a studio in the Nicholas Building in Melbourne's CBD to one near Hanging Rock in country Victoria. When we meet, two recent plasticine models lie upon her workbench – Hanging Rock with a small red-roofed cottage at its foot, and a bay horse facing a dog based on a George Stubbs painting. I am struck by the diminutive size of the models. They are miniature worlds with a disposable air. Yet a painting in-progress of the same horse and dog model, propped on Marburg's easel, is around two metres long, a significant leap in scale.

I ask the obvious question: 'Why not stop at the models and exhibit those?'. 'I'm a painter,' she replies emphatically but also with humour. 'You can see I'm not a sculptor.' Without ceremony she handles the horse, which is in danger of falling over, legs bowing, propped by bamboo skewers.

'And why not skip the modelling and move straight from photograph to paint?' Pausing to think, Marburg replies, 'I've done it for so long. Before using plasticine, I painted from "bad" photos, the ones left in the box and not included in the photo album, the ones with a finger over the lens or out of focus. I taught myself to paint that way. I tried to get the paintings as close to the photos as possible. I'm a terrible photographer. I could go out and train myself to be a good photographer, but I don't want to.'

The models play a similar role in her work. It's where flaws, imperfections and deliberately inept handiwork can show, highlighting the artifice of the medium. If they weren't clumsy, she explains, they would look like claymation, an aesthetic she avoids. 'I don't want my hand to show in the finished paintings that can happen in the plasticine,' she says. In the finished works, her hand (and by implication, the artist herself) is both foregrounded and suppressed, creating a curious and disorienting tension in her work.

In her most recent exhibition at Sutton Gallery, 'Would you let me into your bed' (2018), she returned for the first time in many years to painting directly from photographs and film stills. A blurred profile of Hanging Rock in *The Rock* (2018) with a swathe of yellow and

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smear tree shadows in the foreground, as if taken from a moving car, is based on an internet search for images. 'I could have walked down the road and taken a better photo of Hanging Rock myself. When I have an image in mind I always turn to other sources, not my own,' Marburg says.

She taps into cultural repositories and detritus, imaginaries larger than the individual artist. The resulting landscape resists romanticisation, hinting at the seductive allure of Gerhard Richter's blurred scenes, but more sulphuric and 'ugly' in its palette. Other paintings include film stills of submerged dogs from *O Brother Where Art Thou* (2000). Three monochromatic blue paintings, *Water Dog I, II and III* show the underside of a muscular dog suspended vertically as it is swept away in a flood, vulnerable underparts showing, eyes staring, bubbles of precious air escaping from its nostrils.

Dogs are a recurrent motif in this body of work. Her dog Darcy, who follows us from the house to the studio in a large shed, and is now lying at our feet, appears at Sutton in a portrait that recalls George Stubbs' eighteenth-century naturalistic style of animal portraiture. However, instead of adopting Stubbs' allegiance to anatomical correctness, Marburg reproduces improbable blocky chunks of plasticine flesh positioned where muscles and ligaments would not be. In a companion portrait of her friend Colleen's recently deceased dog, Audrey, the animal appears to sport an extra joint in her foreleg, and her eyes are little round pellets. Despite their stilted appearance, *Darcy* and *Audrey* (2018) somehow manage to become heartfelt tributes to these animal companions. The title of the show, 'Would

05 Audrey, 2018, oil on board, 38.5 x 49.5 cm
 06 Darcy, 2018, oil on board, 38.5 x 49.5 cm



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you let me into your bed', alludes to the intense, wordless and shameless pleading of a dog to do just that.

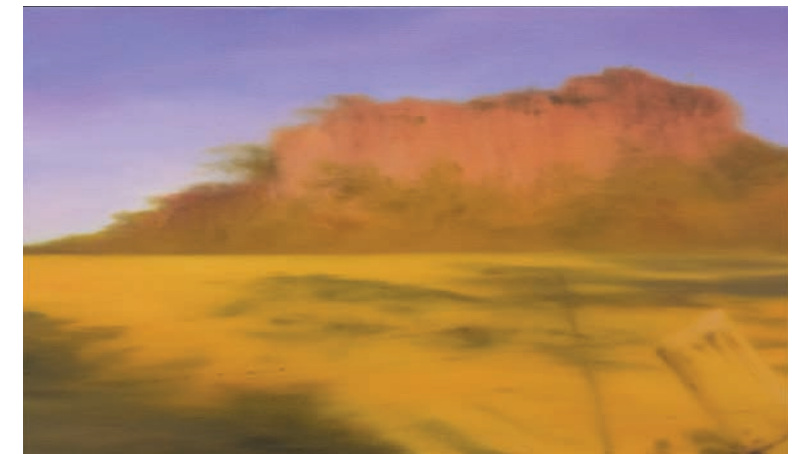
'For the first time I started an exhibition with no idea what would come next,' Marburg says. 'Usually I have everything worked out beforehand. This exhibition had more of me in it.' Marburg puts this down to her recent shift in surroundings. She handles the bay horse again. 'This is my partner's horse. It's dead now. He was very attached to it. And this is Sunny, his Kelpie.' The two animals face one another, nose proffered to nose.

For her exhibition 'How Some Children Played at Slaughtering' (Sutton Gallery, 2016), based on original Grimm fairytales full of tragic deals with the devil and incestuous urges, Marburg chose key, heightened moments to depict.

In *Maiden without hands* (2016) a girl in a white dress stares at the viewer with a clear, undisturbed gaze while her outstretched stumps of arms drip blood upon bright green, stylised foliage at her feet, set against a background of the forest around Marburg in Germany, which the artist had experienced firsthand.

She has held Australia Council studios in Barcelona and Rome. There, too, her surroundings influenced her work: she reproduced a series of quirky, figurative Spanish tiles for her exhibition 'And the doves eat cheese' at Olsen Gallery in 2017. *Tile 5 (pipe)* depicts a folksy roadside wanderer squatting to defecate while smoking a long tobacco pipe.

When we talk more broadly about the experience of being an Australian artist, she says, 'Since the Global Financial Crisis, I've had to go back to part-time work.' She's returned to her role as an artist's assistant and so inner-city Melbourne continues to draw her from the quiet country surroundings.



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As we leave her studio, I glance above the small red-roofed cottage where Marburg lives, and realise that iconic Hanging Rock is just above us. We can pick out climbers among the columns of rock. 'For the first time I'm going to set up an easel outdoors, just here,' she says, gesturing towards long, bleached summer grasses. Earlier we had leafed through a book published by the Macedon Ranges Shire Council of film stills and location shots from the original 1975 Peter Weir film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. 'Surely there's a series in there,' Marburg comments. It's just awaiting her distinctive, unsettling and poignant reinvention. ■

07 *Maiden without hands*, 2016, oil on linen, 92 x 122 cm

08 *Water dog 1*, 2018, oil on board, 28 x 46.5 cm

09 *The rock*, 2018, oil on board, 28 x 46.5 cm

Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Olsen Gallery, Sydney