

Julian, I Believe in Your Daughter's Sky

20 March – 19 April 2025
114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

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He picks up just after the second ring. I sink back into the throng of pillows behind my back and lift my iPhone to my face just as his appears on my screen.

Immediately, I smile.

Julian Meagher has an optimistic face. A kind face that smiles effortlessly. A face that radiates warmth, as if making another human feel good is its purpose.

"Where are you?" I ask him.

"At home in Paddington. And you?"

"I'm in a hotel in Prishtina."

I lean back into my pillows.

Seeing him like this, suspended in air above my knee, makes me think of balance. How we are sitting on opposing sides of the earth, in different seasons. I am ten hours ahead, waking to the cold European winter sun. He is sitting in a dimly lit room in the evening cool, hot off an Australian summer day. As I watch him speak, telling me about his day, I think that we're already somehow inside his world before we even start talking about his upcoming show at Ames Yavuz, his studio, his paintings and their realm of horizons, seas, and skies.

The sky has always meant something greater, but now, it's just something we seem to scroll past. Luckily, not Julian.

Julian doesn't take the sky for granted.

He still looks up, more frequently than most of us. His feeling for what he paints derives from love—sheer love, it seems, of what is up there, not just lore.

Listen to this.

For twenty-five years, Julian has taken the same road, a route that leads him to the hospital where he works as a surgical assistant once a week.

"It's always at about 5:15 a.m. to about 7 a.m.," he tells me.

THE SEA IS IN THE SKY

"I drive down the Princes Highway, through the National Park south of Sydney, looking out over the ocean. I normally see the sun come up and watch thousands of colours shift in the sky every few seconds. This is a ritualistic sunrise for me.

I spend all day operating in a windowless room—enclosed in a space of radical care—so this is often the only time I see the sun. And sometimes, I even catch the sunset on the drive back."

Repetition and ritual are closely related, but they are not the same. Repetition becomes a ritual when it gains significance—when it is performed with intention and emotion—when it's marked with a sense of purpose.

Artists who return to the same theme over and over—what are they searching for? Their work surpasses repetition, becoming ritual, then something more, because it evolves.

Julian paints portraits, too—carefully observed studies of people, their features rendered with sensitivity. But almost always, their eyes are closed. Most belong to Rapid Eye Movement, a lifelong project exploring dream states and inner worlds. And yet, he continuously returns to horizons, skies, and coastal scenes—skylscapes, as he likes to call them. I ask him why.

"A landscape is actually one of the nicest genres to work in because there's so much scope for abstraction," he tells me.

"Way more than still life and portraiture."

Like Claude Monet, Julian keeps returning to the same atmosphere. Like Julije Knifer, he is obsessed with a single motif—except his is made of shifting light, always in motion instead of one pattern. Knifer once said that after adopting the Meander in 1959, "everything became simple, patient, and directed."

Here's my question to Julian.

"What's it all about?" I ask him, point blank.

"Hope," he says, without overthinking his answer.

He paints hope.

No hesitation, no embellishment—just this word; so vast yet so simple.

Let me tell you a story.

His daughter saw it first.

They were waiting in the car outside the school gates. She was already in the backseat, but they were waiting for her brother. The afternoon humidity had eased, but only slightly; it was still hot. Outside, the air was thick with motion—children's voices rising and falling as they spilled from the building, parents ushering them toward the car park.

Julian watched a boy who was reluctant to leave. On the radio, soft rock murmured, barely audible over the racket outside. Suddenly, his daughter kicked her feet against the seat, her gaze fixed beyond the windshield.

"Look, Daddy," she said, her voice thrilled with discovery.

Julian glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

"What is it, bunny?" he said.

"Look!" She shifted forward in her seat and pointed upward.

"The sea is in the sky."

Julian followed her eyes.

Above them, the clouds were in motion—some hanging low and heavy, others racing, dissolving at their edges. There was something aquatic about the way they shifted, like currents colliding, pulling against one another.

He turned around and watched her for a moment—the way her face lit up, the way she saw the world as something fluid, full of wonder. Then he leaned back into his seat, letting the thought settle.

The sea is in the sky. He liked that.

This was six months ago.

A simple moment between a father and a daughter, but it sparked something. It became the starting point for this entire exhibition.

And yet, there's another connection.

"My mother is a huge influence on me," Julian confesses.

"She's a painter and a graphic designer and one of the main works in this series is a response to one of her landscapes, so I think it's a show of me sitting in the middle of my mum and my daughter."

I learn something here.

Julian only started painting landscapes seven years ago. It was during a residency, just as his first child was born.

"I think that was no coincidence," he says. "When I started looking at my place within everything and spending time in a national park and thinking about tides, cycles, new life arriving, it was a momentous period of my life."

In this short span of time, he was able to reach these depths in his work—depths that seem like they would've taken others decades to achieve.

Belief, I tell myself. *Believing is growing.*

"I was scared of painting nature and landscapes at first," he says.

"But I began to see them as paintings about love and hope and this changed everything. They became vehicles for other things—skylscapes, dreamscapes—they expressed feeling rather than physical, geographic places."

Let me confess.

I live with a Julian Meagher work in my apartment, a predecessor of this series. It is a painting of a flawless horizon. The bottom third of the canvas is a deep ocean blue, meeting a strip of pink hues at a perfect line—like a flat cloud. The colours dissolve upwards, slowly, into light blues.

Sunset or sunrise? I don't know. I have never asked Julian, nor do I plan to. My interpretation is more meaningful to me than the truth.

Here's some more truth.

The impressions of Julian Meagher's paintings don't dissolve from your mind when you depart from them—they stay with you. They vie for your continued attention, as if they know you need them.

Even the photographs he's sent me of his latest show—I look at them just once, and they remain with me, embedded like metadata in an image, leaving traces of hope, resilience and patience.

'The Sea is in the Sky #3'. Oil on linen. 183 x 152 cm. 2024.jpg

'The Sea is in the Sky #2'. Oil on linen. 183 x 152 cm. 2024.jpg

'Night Palace #5'. Oil on linen. 183 x 152 cm. 2024.jpg

'Rainbow #10'. Oil on linen. 183 x 152 cm. 2024.jpg

'Rainbow Fractal #1'. Oil on linen. 81 x 61cm. 2024.jpeg

I look at them again.

I cycle through them; one by one. In some of them, the darkness rises; in others, lightness sets, but in all of them, a lineage.

Julian Meagher's art cuts through the fat of time. This is why he says, I paint hope. Whether personal or collective, whether now or centuries ago, hope doesn't change—people, here or there, now or then, in whatever language, will always understand this universal longing. This is why we understand his paintings—because we understand hope.

The landscapes of this series offer refuge from the chaos of life, instilling a sense of calm and optimism—both aesthetically and emotionally. They connect the viewer with the timelessness of history. Whether one is an early human praying to sky deities or a writer looking up at the sky through a hotel room window in Prishtina, the intended meaning is understood.

On the other end of the line, Julian yawns.

It's late for him, early for me. We wave goodbye through the screen—mirrored, yet worlds apart.

I hang up.

Then I return to the backseat of Julian's car.

His daughter's innocent eyes, full of wonder, look out through the windshield. She notices something, dots connect in her young mind, and she can't contain her discovery.

"Look, Daddy," she says excitedly. "The sea is in the sky."

And she's right.

Ennis Ćehić