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The Mythen mountains from an Australian perspective

Lucienne Fontannaz-Howard, a Swiss artist living abroad, was invited to Lake Lucerne to paint the mountain landscape around Brunnen. She had previously produced 50 paintings of the same subject on canvas in Australia, where she has chosen to live – all from memory and based on photographs.

MARKO LEHTINEN

The scenery is idyllic. The artist's studio lies right on the Pacific Ocean. The sun is shining, and it is hot as usual. However, photographs and pictures that depict a very different mood hang on the wall. Green meadows, forests and mountain ranges can be seen instead of sea and beaches. The landscape around Brunnen on Lake Lucerne, dominated by the Grosser Mythen, is omnipresent in Lucienne Fontannaz's studio in Sydney. Here the 71-year-old dedicated herself entirely to this picture-book Switzerland and produced 50 small-sized paintings before setting off to paint the same scenery again in situ.

She has been invited to Lake Lucerne by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, the Galerie am Leewasser and the Foundation for the Area for the Swiss Abroad as an artist in residence – an inspiring experience, as the artist discovers.

Ms Fontannaz, you produced paintings of the same landscape in Sydney before visiting Brunnen for the first time. How did that come about?

Lucienne Fontannaz-Howard: I collected postcards, brochures and photos from books and the internet. In these photos the sky over Brunnen was always steely blue, as was the lake, so I drew inspiration from this mood. I think my initial interpretations of the landscape were rather imaginative – in anticipation of actually visiting the place myself.



Lucienne Fontannaz-Howard is originally from Bex in the canton of Vaud and has lived in Sydney, Australia, since 1976. She has a master's degree in art education, art administration and visual arts. She has taught art and worked as a curator, and her paintings and books have been exhibited in Canada, Australia, China and Switzerland. The main sources of inspiration for Fontannaz's art were and remain landscapes – the coast of the Pacific Ocean around Sydney and the Australian Outback, but also Swiss landscapes, such as the meadows in the Alpine foothills near Gruyères or views of the Alps themselves.

When you arrived in Brunnen, did you find the place inspiring?

Absolutely, I was overwhelmed by the view of the majestic mountains. I could see uniquely shaped peaks in every direction. There were green meadows stretching right up high and forests running to the shores of the lake. And the sky above this scenery was actually steely blue.

To what extent did the paintings you produced in Sydney reflect the reality in Brunnen?

In Australia, I consciously focused on a positive portrayal of the landscape based on the legends of the "Golden Age". Remarkably, the paintings reflected the reality that stood before me quite accurately.

You then painted in situ. How much did the paintings produced in Brunnen differ from those painted earlier?

The direct view of the landscape, the light at different times of the day and the colours that appeared in the evening before sunset allowed me to extend my palette and to explore new ways of applying colour. Observing the different shades of grass, foliage and trees was a wonderful experience. I soon had to buy additional greens to cover this colour spectrum. I also learned a great deal about Brunnen's history, for example, the fact that it was once a fishing village. This inspired me to produce paintings that reflected my first-hand experience of this special place.

As far back as the early 1990s you painted Swiss mountains on the other side of the world. Why is that?

I wanted to paint my own soul in a sense and to evoke the essence of the Swiss mountains and lakes. I had vivid recollections of them and missed them dearly. I still felt a close affinity with the mountains I had known. It was as though they were part of me and sometimes invitingly drew me back but they were also unpredictable and possessed a dark side. I wanted to explore and express these feelings in my art.

The motif of "mountains" has always stayed with you as a Swiss Abroad...

Yes, I miss the Alps, the mountain lakes and walking in these wonderful landscapes at different times of the year. When the cloud formations on the horizon over the Pacific Ocean turn into a distant mountain range, clearly present but unreachable, or when I'm swimming in the sea and I see tall waves with surfers riding them like skiers on powdered snow, the landscape of my childhood is everywhere.