

Sarah Ballam – Artist Biography

Sarah Ballam is a South African visual artist whose practice explores the expressive possibilities of water, the human figure and, more recently, classical mythology. Working primarily in oil, she has developed a distinctive visual language that combines technical precision with an intuitive exploration of memory, emotion and transformation.

Ballam completed a Master's degree in Fine Art at Rhodes University in 1992 before lecturing in the University's Fine Art Department. Her academic foundation continues to inform a practice characterised by rigorous observation, painterly sensitivity and a sustained engagement with the traditions of figurative painting.

Water has remained the central thread throughout Ballam's career. For her, it is both subject and metaphor: a fluid medium through which expression and abstraction coexist. Reflective and refractive, water simultaneously conceals and reveals, distorts and clarifies. Its shifting surfaces dissolve and reform the human figure through rhythms of ripples, currents and light, creating a continual dialogue between transparency and opacity, stillness and movement.

Over the course of three decades, this investigation has evolved from figures immersed in baths to swimmers in pools, figures in open water, reflections on water and reinterpretations of historical paintings seen through watery surfaces. More recently, the figure has gradually receded, allowing the sea itself to become the subject. Living beside the ocean has marked a literal and artistic sea change, inspiring a growing body of seascapes that explore atmosphere, scale and immersion.

Whether depicting the sea or the human figure, Ballam creates paintings that invite an immediate, visceral response rather than an intellectual one. Often working on a life-size scale, she seeks to immerse the viewer physically and emotionally, allowing rhythm, movement and form to speak directly to the subconscious. Her paintings are not intended simply to be observed, but to be experienced.

With a career spanning more than three decades, Sarah Ballam has established a body of work distinguished by technical mastery, emotional depth and a singular exploration of water as both material presence and enduring metaphor.