VISUAL ART

Open gallery

EVERY ROSE HAS ITS THORN

From the first photo – a disembodied scalp of ultra-blonde hair – Petrina Hicks's work puts you on edge. Her images use the language of advertising – saturated colours, impeccably manicured female hands, gloss, perfect objects – but without a product to push and with some disturbing twists. A detail from *Fertile* is shown.
Stills Gallery, 36 Gosbell Street, Paddington, 9331 7775. Tue-Sat, 11am-6pm, until August 14.

QUIETUDE

Chris Langlois's big, meditative landscape paintings capture moments of unearthly stillness. His brushstrokes are virtually invisible, too, so the canvases seem as smooth as photos. In a series of smaller, energetic sketches of the lake, Langlois conjures landforms and buildings with just the finest wiggle of paint or dot of colour.
Rex Irwin Art Dealer, first floor, 38 Queen Street, Woollahra, 9363 3210. Tue-Sat, 10am-5.30pm, until July 24.

BLOOM

Artist Alasdair Macintyre's tiny clay after-egg, *Avicap*, takes issue with contemporary real-estate prices and much more in a series of cute, meticulously constructed tableaux in perspex boxes. The charm is in the detail.
Sullivan + Strumpf, 44 Gurner Street, Paddington, 9331 8344. Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm; Sat, 11am-5pm; Sun, 2-5pm, until July 25.

A brilliance that defies fashion

Mania for the new should not detract from fine works produced by artists with a long track record, writes JOHN McDONALD.

On those rare weekends when this column gets out of the museums and spends time in the commercial galleries, the competition for a mention is fierce. People are always asking: "What are you writing about next week?" If the answer is something like "Kevin Connor and Elisabeth Cummings", a standard comeback is: "Oh, why don't you write about somebody new?"

Therein lies the rub, as Hamlet said, for the mania for the new is one of the great blights on the contemporary art scene. An artist may be new but not necessarily good. Furthermore, what seems to be new is often nothing but a rehash of something that was done 50 years ago and conveniently forgotten. Rather than a triumph of art we celebrate a failure of short-term memory. Even a brilliant debut can be deceptive, for the history of art is littered with false starts and unfulfilled promise.

An obsession with newness, combined with an unwillingness to look conscientiously at paintings, has become characteristic of the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW in their choice of winners for the Archibald and Wynne prizes. After looking at their selections of recent years, any artist on the fine side of 50 might decide it is hardly worth entering these competitions any more.

Connor (born 1932) and Cummings (1934) are two artists who have most right to feel aggrieved about the judges' decisions, although neither would ever make a fuss. In Connor's case, he probably had the outstanding entry in this year's Wynne Prize, which was awarded to Sam Leach for a painting flagrantly in breach of the rules. Connor may even have been unlucky with his self-portrait in the Archibald – a withdrawn, introverted painting that kept getting better with each viewing.

At least Connor gets his work hung. On two occasions, in 2008 and 2009, Cummings has had a work rejected from the Wynne Prize, only to shine in the Salon des Refusés. In an embarrassing moment for the trustees, the first of these pictures, *Arkarooka Landscape*, was subsequently purchased for the collection of the AGNSW. For this, we may thank the insistence of curator Barry Pearce.

KEVIN CONNOR
Liverpool Street Gallery, until July 29
ELISABETH CUMMINGS: PAPER TRAIL: 30 YEARS
King Street Gallery on William, until July 24
EUAN MACLEOD: GLACIAL
Watters Gallery, until July 24

At a stage in their careers when each artists have nothing left to prove, they should be judged by the quality of their work, not by their position in an imaginary hierarchy of "who's hot and who's not". If we see art as a long-term proposition rather than a top 40, it's clear who has the greater claim on the viewer's – and the critic's – attention.

Connor's new exhibition at Liverpool Street carries a strange echo of Jeffrey Smart's show at Australian Galleries. While these artists have little in common stylistically, they have both given us images that hark back to a previous period in their careers. In the past few years, Connor has concentrated on large, dirty, expressionistic figure paintings. This time, he focuses on the urban landscape, in pictures that bear a striking resemblance to his works of the 1960s.

The figures are still there but it is the city scenes that dominate this show – views of George Street, East Sydney, Gladesville and Newcastle, melting and seething in a sickly light. There are mixed messages in these paintings, as if Connor saw the city as simultaneously dangerous and attractive. A picture such as *Evening Light, Riley Street*, depicts a lavender-pink sunset as an explosion in the centre of the canvas. Everything in the picture spins off this sun. In other works, George Street disappears in a mirror of fuzzy gold and deep, impenetrable shadow, while Taverners Hill rears up violently, as if in the grip of an earthquake.

Connor's cities have always reminded me of Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966), who made his name with a series of apocalyptic landscapes that anticipated the carnage of World War I. Although Connor's paintings are even more aggressive in their dissolution of forms, it would be wrong to see a comparable vision of doom and disaster. The expressionist aspect of these pictures is a strategy that allows Connor to get everything down quickly, while his impressions are still fresh. He avoids the kind of tidy perspective, any trace of sentimentality. It doesn't really matter if the painting resembles the designated location or not. He is pursuing some indefinable essence that refuses to hold a pose. His view of any place is partly what he sees today, partly what he remembers from earlier times.

If we see his beauty as a quality that generates pleasure or fascination, one could say there were beautiful passages in these works, but this requires a rearrangement of the way we view the world. There are rare, beautiful paintings by an artist who has never tried to please anybody but himself – the hardest task of all.

Cummings's *Paper Trail: 30 Years* is a makeshift survey of the artist's works on paper from 1980 to the present. The first piece, a charcoal drawing called *Interior* (1980), has the witty fluency we associate with a draughtsman such as Donald Friend. It reveals a natural graphic talent poised on the brink of illustration. The rest of this brilliant, busy collection shows Cummings working against that natural bent, making life more difficult for herself. This is precisely the process that artists such as Friend and Brett Whiteley were unable to sustain. Even John Olsen has been through periods when his graphic instincts have led him into areas where the pictures became easy and repetitive.

Maybe Cummings has maintained her edge because she has never been lured like her male counterparts, who are represented in every public collection. Maybe it is because she has always put the demands of her art before her career. The most certain reason is that she actually enjoys the difficulty of grappling with the problems that arise with any piece that leads into uncharted territory. This enjoyment, for both artist and viewer, should never be underestimated.

The result is a body of work that keeps asking questions, experimenting, shifting and evolving. Frequently these shifts have been in response to a different medium. Her etchings tend to be dense and multi-layered, while some of her works in pencil, ink wash and gouache barely graze the surface of the paper. The show is mainly landscape, with a selection of interiors and still lifes, but every piece has a strongly abstract dimension, as if the subject matter were only the starting point for a composition.

Every artist seeks his or her own truth, although a philosopher will tell you art has no truth-value per se. This is why an artist such as Cummings barely seems to recognise a dividing line between figuration and abstraction. What she is seeking cannot be summed up in a tidy proposition but its vagueness makes it feel no less real or close at hand.

Family Mars ... Euan Macleod's *Life Jacket* (2010); (far left) Connor's *Evening Light, Riley Street* (2006-10)

Euan Macleod (born 1956) is another painter whose work appears to be evolving in ways beyond his immediate control. His exhibition *Glacial*, at Watters Gallery, was inspired by a trip to Antarctica with fellow painter Neil Frazer and photographer Tim Cheung. While Frazer's paintings, shown recently at Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane, take a highly dramatic, panoramic approach to this landscape, Macleod has used the Antarctic as a stage set for his inner dramas.

The starkness of this frozen environment is perfectly suited to Macleod's rugged style of painting. The dark, anonymous figure that features in so many of his works seems right at home in a landscape of sea, sky, ice and gravel. In other hands, a lone figure would be reduced to insignificance by towering cliffs of blue-tinged ice. In Macleod's case, these shadowy monoliths seem only to reflect the greater darkness within the silhouette.

Having said that, the largest painting in the show, *Raped Tip*, fresh much less inspiring than some of the smaller works such as *Life Jacket* and *Figure and Boat*) in *Bay*. As the scale increases, there is a corresponding diminution of intensity.

This has been a tragic time at Watters Gallery, with the death on July 4 of gallerist Jasper Legge while on holiday in Italy. Legge was only 42 and his sudden, unexpected death has left everyone feeling shattered. There is some solace in the fact that Macleod's introspective, solemn paintings are well suited to the mood of the moment. The small row boat that Macleod has trailed through his pictures for the past few years is a symbol of loss that emerged after the death of his father. One sees it less often nowadays, but it is fitting that the boat has washed up on shore in at least two of these paintings. It is a symbol of a personal journey, to Antarctica and beyond.

Open gallery

MYTH & MEMORY

Rhett Brewer employs a bold, sometimes almost topographical painting style to explore historical moments, his own childhood memories and the faces of some of Sydney's early 20th-century criminals. *The Caravan Fire* is a standout.
Depot 6, 2 Danks Street, Waterloo. Tue-Sat, 11am-6pm; Sun, 10.30am-3.30pm, until July 24.

CARL PLATE

Plate died in 1976 but his work seems entirely of the moment. He was a painter who also made collage studies with pages from magazines, sometimes using solvent to work back the ink with gorgeous, mysterious results. A detail from *Sea Snow* is pictured below. Liam Power's paintings, in the Project Room, are also a must-see.
Damien Minton Gallery, 69-73 Great Buckingham Street, Redfern, 9319 7510. Wed-Sat, 11am-6pm, until July 24.

PLUS

Six artists working in various media.
Grandjoinie, 86 George Street, Redfern, 9699 9033. Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm; Sat, 11am-5pm, until July 24.

Paintings by Adam Hill.
Harrison Galleries, 294 Glenmore Road, Paddington, 9360 7600. Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm; Sat, 10am-5pm, until July 29.

Sculpture by Angela Macdougall.
Brenda May Gallery, 2 Danks Street Waterloo, 9318 9212. Tue-Fri, 11am-6pm; Sat, 10am-6pm; Sun, 11am-6pm, until August 1.

Lissa Christopher
spaugallery@ozemail.com.au.

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