

An installation of Paintings by Stephen Bush

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REVIEW

Learning landscape geography tricks from the past masters

STEPHEN BUSH belongs to a generation of painters who are investigating the received traditions of Western art. Delving into the sometimes unrecognised conventions of visual representation, Bush effectively recycles the landscape and history painting movements of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Landscape pictures nowadays will often refer to specific places, however, this was not always the case. At least until last century the background or landscape components of major works of art were frequently not an objective record of physical locations, but instead were rather accomplished simulations. In fact, the painter's activity sometimes resembled that of the set designer, many a grand pictorial machine being compiled in the studio from an alphabet of visual props and abbreviations. Invoking these procedures (with a sideways glance to Victorian portrait photography), Bush assembles his own museological mock-ups of dramatic events, placing a heroic cast of 'Boy's Own' adventurers within his suitably bleak and rugged settings.

Admittedly the artist is not the most skilled of those who play about with this resuscitated genre (his drawing is slightly wanting), however, Bush is certainly the most inventive. Instead of sticking with just the one scene or idea which is repeated and refined over several canvases, he takes on and explores the entire visual discourse afresh with each new piece. Along the way Bush also taps those imagined and fantastic lands which feature in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino. Much as things are never quite as they seem for the travellers and inhabitants in the bizarre countries found within these authors' tales, so too Bush's characters are visualised while on strange and futile quests in somehow disquieting locales.

ART

Stephen Bush, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art until 17 March; **Sarah Faulkner**, Australian Galleries until 9 March; **Young Artists**, Flinders Lane Gallery until 9 March.

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Of course there is a topical edge to these figures and events, because it is the painter and his friends who appear in period dress throughout these works. Together they play at being tenacious frontiersmen, military generals, antipodean explorers, august gentlemen on their grand tour and, in one piece, mimic the flight into Egypt. Yet the artist isn't pompously aggrandising his circle, for there is a visible wit to these splendidly ripping yarns. Even self-mockery has a place, as we find when Bush and his double are seen bumbling around in desolate wastes, paraphrasing the activities of Vladimir and Estragon in 'Waiting for Godot'.

Beyond these stylistic and narrational concerns, the Bush display represents a remarkable first for a Melbourne public gallery. Through it ACCA demonstrates not only that it is developing a sense of humor, but actually lampoons its own past. The artist has been allowed to paint elaborate architectural bird-houses around the walls, these referring alternately to other buildings found around the gallery and, more to the point, the budgerigar nesting boxes installed at ACCA's previous exhibition. In enacting this *trompe l'oeil* send-up, Bush continues to affirm the place of contemporary theory in his art, while setting himself against those tired and outdated postures of the post-'70s conceptualism formerly associated with this institution.

SARAH FAULKNER, one of the original Roar pioneers of the early 1980s, is exhibiting a set of gouaches at Australian Galleries. Comprising several large studies of European rustics and North African figures, and a host of smaller Australian landscapes, this light-hearted show serves as an object lesson in the potential shortcomings of recent expressionism.

With their bright colors, Picasso geometry and flowing rhythms, several of Faulkner's works are indeed easy on the eye — but that is about all. One suspects that the painter has succumbed to the risk that is run by all would-be expressionists, spontaneous action having culminated in visual froth. In this respect the exhibition demonstrates that an artist's intentions, and particularly the vividness of his or her emotions, do not on their own result in a plausible work of art.

Julie Haas, one of six newcomers included in the 'Young Artists' group show at Flinders Lane Gallery, offers a more sustaining strand of expressionist art, her drypoints and sizeable charcoal drawings being anything but empty decorative vessels. These are not only compositionally superior, but have been patiently loaded with a rich narrative cargo.

Suggesting intense and troubling emotional intrigues, these images require lengthy inspection. The stylistic references are unmistakably to Max Beckmann, as Haas fills her darkened claustrophobic interiors with a sinister gathering of little trolls, sleazy nudes and bony gangsters. Violence constantly mingles with laughter throughout the drypoints, as we find in 'Crossed Circuit' (a couple are glimpsed in the process of electrocuting themselves) and 'Funeral for a Fish' (where fiendish children prepare a tasty morsel for their eager cat). These are marvellously "Grimm" images.