

Elisabeth Kruger's *Spill*, 2007

# Symbolic narratives

**M**arc Chagall once famously noted "Art is the unceasing effort to compete with the beauty of flowers – and never succeeding."

Elisabeth Kruger would probably agree with Chagall and this exhibition records her struggle with the beauty of representational reality, especially flowers, for more than two decades. In some of her earliest works in the show, where she uses a combination of gouache and acrylics on panel and engages with the full repertoire of surrealist strategies, nature serves as a point of departure. In her most recent paintings, where she is heavily dependent on her own digital photographs and uses oils on canvas to achieve very literal transcriptions from nature, especially as encountered in the microcosm of her own garden, nature also serves as her point of arrival.

Whereas Chagall employed flowers in a hedonistic celebration of love and creation, Kruger follows more in the tradition of the Dutch still-life and flower painters of the 17th century who exploited the full range of *trompe l'oeil* strategies to paint encoded symbolic narratives, where, for example, a rose could stand for love, a lily for a female breast, a columbine for melancholy and the poppy for the sleep of death. However, the symbolic narrative in the case of Kruger's work, as the curator of the exhibition, Jenny McFarlane explains in her catalogue essay, is essentially an environmental one – a comment on our threatened environment and the impact made on it by people.

Elisabeth Kruger first came to national prominence when she was in her mid-30s and was awarded the 1989 Moët and Chandon Fellowship for her painting *The last of the cool skies*. It was a wildly Romantic, beautifully crafted painting, dazzling in its

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**Elisabeth Kruger: On Beauty**

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technical skill and reflecting her training as a printmaker and a quilt maker. It is a painting of beautiful surfaces in which she convincingly evoked a sense of mystery with her imagery, suggesting a slightly transfigured reality rich in its poetical and historical references.

Subsequently, although she continued to exhibit, she dropped out of the limelight. I did come across an impressive exhibition of her work at the Martin Browne Gallery in Sydney a couple of years ago and she was included in the *Slow Burn* exhibition held in Sydney last month, which commemorated the life and activities of the art dealer Eva Breuer, who had represented Kruger for many years. In this, this show is a very timely exhibition which charts her development over missing decades.

There is a consistency in her development – her art throughout has remained Romantic in its orientation, beautifully crafted and concerned with flowers in particular and nature in general. Where change has occurred it is in the general sensibility of the paintings, her art has become quieter and more modest in its aims, simply recording beauty and transience in nature, rather than developing and illustrating an argument. It has become less didactic, allowing the beholders to arrive at their own conclusions, rather than being guided by a deliberate agenda.