

# Through the looking glass

**Looking out - studio glass**  
By Ruth Oliphant

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin.  
Hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10am-5pm;  
Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm. On until July 3.

Reviewer: Kerry-Anne Cousins

**R**uth Oliphant is a young Canberra artist who graduated from the ANU Canberra School of Art in 2008. She is now working out of a studio at the Canberra Glassworks. This is her second exhibition at the Beaver Galleries - her first exhibition there in 2009 was the result of a graduate prize awarded to her by the gallery in 2008.

Oliphant's present work centres on her interest in architecture and how it defines a sense of time and place in poetic imagination and memory. In her earlier exhibition at the Beaver Galleries in 2009, her inspiration was the Paddington streetscapes of Sydney abstracted from their everyday life and extraneous detail. In this latest series called *Looking Out*, she has used images from her recent travels to Cairo in Egypt.

For those of us who live in Canberra, the streets of Cairo are indeed exotic with their narrow alleyways, overhanging balconies and vistas of the domes and minarets of neighbourhood mosques.

Oliphant has captured these vignettes of Cairo on glass in the manner of a magic peep show from an earlier age.

It is interesting to speculate how much this interest in drawing on glass and constructing a narrative in this particular way stems from the artist's training in traditional stained glass and lead lighting.

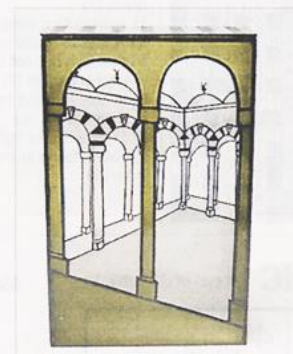
Oliphant's "viewing boxes" are constructed of layers of glass on which are drawn cityscapes of Cairo in sepia-coloured



Ruth Oliphant's enamelled and carved horizontal cityscape *Al Azhar*, above and *Looking Through I*, below.

monochrome only rarely enlivened by gold. The layers of glass, reinforced by the perspective of the drawings, achieve the illusion of architectural space. Are we the viewers *looking out* of a window towards a distant view or *into* the space created by the glass box? In many of the works such as *Coptic* and *Khan el-Khalili*, the impression of looking through an architectural frame is reinforced by Oliphant transcribing the architectural detailing of window frames, arches and columns onto the front of the top layer of glass.

In works such as *The Tent Makers* and *Khan el-Khalili*, the view is tall and narrow so that the effect is one of looking into an alleyway. Yet in two works *Al-Azad* and *City of the Dead*, a long horizontal band of arcaded columns allows more of a wide



panoramic view of the architectural complexity of the Cairo skyline and the City of the Dead. The work *Al-Azad* is a particularly effective use of this framing device.

In the other works, the arch

associated with Middle Eastern architecture becomes the dominant motif. In two works *Looking Through III* and *Looking Through IV*, the arch is used to delineate the spatial perspective of a narrow space. In other works such as *Looking Through I* and *Looking Through II* however, it is used to define more of an open architectural interior.

In Oliphant's earlier *Paddington* series, the glass panels were not enclosed as if in a box but left open-ended. This less controlled concept allowed a more mysterious element to add another dimension. In addition, the depiction of architectural features was more impressionistic and less defined.

The judicious use of flashes of colour allowed light to pick up the architectural planes of the buildings and allow the edges of

the buildings to seemingly melt into the glass.

In this series, however, the artist appears to be more concerned with the actual sense of a specific place. Yet in *Looking Through VI* where the drawing is less prescriptive and there is more of a sense of a distillation of an experience of architectural space, the work is more evocative. The black and gold stripes of the arches inside the work are carried through onto the frame. This makes a more visually successful integration of the actual box that holds the glass panels and the work itself.

There are lots of ideas in this exhibition - some successfully realised and others in need of more consideration and refinement. Indeed, developing and working through ideas is a process this artist has shown she is more than capable of doing.