

The enduring power of still life



SASHA GRISHIN

Crispin Akerman: Paintings

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison St, Deakin
Closes March 2, Tuesday-Friday 10am-5pm,
Saturday-Sunday, 9am-5pm.

Crispin Akerman is an artist who has built up a considerable local following, particularly since he commenced exhibiting regularly with the Beaver Galleries in 1995.

His chosen subject matter is the ubiquitous still life – with pots, jugs and fruit arranged on table cloths and shown against plain colour backgrounds. Occasionally books and leaves are introduced into the compositions for the sake of variety. They are honest, lyrical, well crafted and modestly priced paintings, but also somewhat predictable. Artistically and conceptually they are unchallenging. It is as if the artist has developed a competent



Crispin Akerman's *Lemons and Red Bowl*, above left, and *Two Pears* are on show at Beaver Galleries.

technique and a pleasing stylistic morphology, but is not yet prepared to push himself further or challenge the commercially successful niche which he now occupies.

Presently, there is almost a craze for still life art in Australia, which raises the question as to why it has

progressively become so popular with collectors, if not with art institutions. Although the origins of the still life go back to Egyptian art and to Classical antiquity, it achieved its grandest flowering in the 17th century in post-Reformation Europe. Here it was particularly popular with the

middle classes, who were attracted both by the detailed realism, which even the least enlightened soul could appreciate, and by the hidden symbolism and to such allusions as the transience of life and the passage of time. The next big revival of the still life occurred with the Post Impressionists and

the Modernists, who saw it as a vehicle through which to make a comment on the formal means of art making and the structure of pictorial space. Cézanne became the accepted yardstick.

Akerman's still life paintings exploit the pictorial formula devised by Cézanne, but in content are largely a throwback to Dutch 17th century painting exploiting a careful realism, while the chipped enamel jugs, withered leaves and old tattered books, can all be taken as a comment on the passing of time. In the finest of the paintings in the exhibition, including *Enamel jugs*, *Coffee pot*, *pears and lemons* and *Fish*, all of the elements are harmoniously brought together, the colour reflexes carefully observed and the colour harmonies beautifully balanced. They are elegant paintings with all of the connotations of frozen music, but somehow they do not go much further than restate the observable facts of the seen world.

Akerman has both the skill and the sensitivity to push his art further to explore the spiritual dimension inherent in his subject.