

ARTS

Beautifully observed oils refreshing

Art

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CRISPIN Akerman: Paintings. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes July 7, Tues - Sun 10am - 5pm.

After about a dozen solo exhibitions held over 24 years at the Beaver Galleries, Crispin Akerman is a well-known artist in the Canberra art scene. Born in Dorset in England in 1960, Akerman arrived in Western Australia as a 16-year-old and embraced a career as a musician. He became a guitarist with the Eurogliders - an indie pop, new wave band best remembered for launching the career of the singer Grace Knight. By the early 1990s, Akerman had turned to art and developed a particular genre of the carefully observed still life paintings.

Over the years, Akerman's artistic vision has grown somewhat formulaic with a carefully presented arrangement of still life objects - jugs, pots, vases and bowls - accompanied by tastefully arranged flowers and fruit. Lighting is precisely observed and the backgrounds manipulated either as slightly moody, deliberately messy tonal arrangements, or a length of cloth or richly patterned, deeply coloured wallpaper, which adds to the luminosity of the foreground objects. This brings to mind the artistic strategies of the great Venetian colourists, such as Giovanni Bellini, who would introduce a wondrous length of deeply coloured drapery against which he would position the Virgin and Child.

Akerman's most successful paintings at this exhibition are also some of the largest to which he has devoted considerable effort to finely observe all of the visual nuances of his subject. Still life with Proteas, at 71 x 122 cm, is the largest and most elaborate painting in the show. The outstanding quality in the painting is the treatment of the brass surfaces of the jug and the bowl that are juxtaposed with the gleaming ceramic teapot. The fruit and the protea flower introduce an additional range of textures and surfaces supplemented by the wood of the table and



Crispin Akerman, Green glass vase and lemons.

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the white cloth. Within the artist's established framework of reference, this is quite a sophisticated painting where the verisimilitude in the treatment of the various surfaces and the beautifully observed nuances in the patterns of light create a subtle drama within this carefully observed microcosm.

Another major painting is *Proteas and two enamel jugs*, where, in the simplified composition, the flowers and jugs are positioned against an expanse of elaborate antique wallpaper. The chips in the enamel and the fallen leaves on the table may suggest the passage of time and, as in the tradition of Dutch still life painting, this could be a reference to mortality and the transience of

life. In Akerman's smaller square painting, *Green glass vase and lemons*, measuring 61 x 61 cm, there is again this subtle play of light on surfaces, careful observation of textures and the record of the traces of time. By restricting the variables, the artist has enabled himself to create little dramas of shape, light and colour within a tightly controlled composition. When so much contemporary art is characterised through 'deskilling' with crudely realised paintings with poor draughtsmanship and lack of understanding of colour and of painting technique, Akerman's carefully executed and beautifully observed oil paintings will always find a ready audience.