



Scents, by Elisabeth Kruger. The exhibition runs at Beaver Galleries until November 24. Picture: Supplied

## The inner musicality of flowers

### Art review

Sasha Grishin

**ELISABETH Kruger: *Scents: paintings*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 5pm. Until November 24.**

Whenever I see an exhibition of flower paintings a quotation from the Russian painter Marc Chagall comes to mind. He said, "Art is the unceasing effort to compete with the beauty of flowers - and never succeeding."

The art of the Canberra-based artist Elisabeth Kruger is a curious and complicated phenomenon. When she was 34, in 1989, she was awarded the \$50,000 Moët and Chandon Art Fellowship Prize and was

suddenly thrust into national prominence. Before that, she had been primarily known as a quilt maker - one in love with surfaces and combining a sense of design with a sensuous tactile quality. She was also in love with gardens and on her fellowship toured the historical landscape gardens of Europe, admiring not only the flowers but also the fruit trees and vegetable patches.

Now she has returned to the garden, especially the roses, and celebrates the joy and fecundity of the blooms, while never forgetting that all that blooms must eventually wither and die to make room for the next cycle of renewal. This garden is localised. Kruger writes in her artist's statement that this exhibi-

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tion represents, "A glimpse into my garden - mostly at the roses. Actually they are only a small part of the whole garden as there are big productive veggie beds and lots of fruit trees and the whole gamut of edibles as well as flowers, perennials, shrubs and hedges..."

It is a curious exhibition in that it brings together two potentially contradictory elements - a down-to-earth grounded "earthiness" with manure and mulch and an

unbridled soaring romanticism of the artist's temperament.

In *Scents*, one of the strongest paintings, we glimpse the whole cycle of the rose: the bud, the open flower in full bloom through to the withering blossom.

For me, the beauty of Kruger's flower pieces is that they go beyond the simple representational aspect and hint at this other spiritual dimension. They do this without resorting to the

somewhat heavy-handed symbolic "vanitas paintings" encountered in 17th-century Dutch art, studded with skulls and other emblems to stress that human life is transient.

In Kruger's paintings, transience of being is implied, rather than didactically illustrated. She emphatically states that her roses are not "those pampered, leggy long stemmed bunch of roses for the girlfriend types - these are the shrubs - tough stalwarts of the borders, repeating all summer and coping with all soils and light positions just because they need to live". Life is a struggle, even if death is the inevitable conclusion.

Kruger has been painting

flowers all of her life and has developed quite a toolbox of techniques through which to capture the nuances of the different textures or the illusion of light travelling through a glass vase.

In the painting *A sweet disorder* - possibly the most technically accomplished work in the exhibition - there is an observed perfection in every aspect of conveying this gorgeous bunch of roses presented in a glass of water.

The most precious aspect of this exhibition is not the rich explosion of floral blooms, or the incredible technical precision, but the quality of inner musicality - immense lyricism but tinged with melancholy, like a cloud passing over the summer sky.