

Pleasing paintings lovingly observed

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CRISPIN Akerman: *Paintings*. Beaver Galleries. Until April 9. beavergalleries.com.au.

Why have Australian art audiences over the past few decades developed such a love affair with finely crafted still life paintings? Such paintings frequently punctuate amateur Rotary-style shows as well as the very professional commercial marketplaces for art including the major city art fairs in Melbourne and Sydney.

One historical explanation is that in times of stress and uncertainty, people frequently cling to the security of a representational still life or a flower painting, something that evokes a stability that has been tried and tested. It is a stable tradition that goes back for centuries to antiquity and one that has attracted some of the greatest names in art throughout history.

Crispin Akerman, ever since he started exhibiting at the Beaver Galleries in 1995, has become a rusted-on name in this gallery's roster with about 13 solo shows to his credit. The skill level in most of these exhibitions has been persistently high, the subject matter has been consistently the still life, and the work has proven popular with Canberra clients.

They are generally feel-good paintings that are not particularly taxing on the imagination or the eye. Of the 22 paintings on display, 13 contain floral elements, while fruit is the next most popular element. In this body of work, Akerman is more pre-occupied with perspectival games than in some of his earlier exhibitions.

He has adopted a low viewpoint in several paintings, so that the still life composition is seen from below and is skewed and somewhat abstracted when viewed against the tablecloth or wallpaper setting. A copper bowl full of sunflowers is viewed from below and the birds on the English country garden tablecloth illusionistically enter a dialogue with the flowers. Flowering eucalyptus is thrown against a floral background setting,



Crispin Akerman, Coffee pot, jug and pear. Picture: Supplied

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while a rose is cast against a Victorian-style floral wallpaper pattern. All is very tasteful, restrained and wonderfully decorative.

As I have mentioned in my past reviews of

this artist's work, Akerman has a reasonable skill set for painting in oils, but too frequently leaves the painting simply as a pleasing decorative vignette. On occasion, in most of his exhibitions, one or two of the paintings push the conceptual conceits a little further.

In this show, the medium size oil, *Spring*, is such a painting. Here a bunch of spring blossoms appear in a decorative blue and white oriental vase that stands on a wooden table and is viewed against a mainly blue and white cloth floral backdrop. In an ingenious manner, the celebration of the rites of spring spreads from the floral tribute to the birds and foliage on the vase and to the deep sonorous blues of the background

cloth with its vegetation and birds in flight. It is a clever and busy composition where there are several possible ways of reading the painting.

Another of the more successful pictures at the exhibition is the rectangular canvas *Coffee pot, jug and pear*. There is a certain precariousness in the composition as we look up at the arrangement perched on a thick cloth with autumnal leaf patterns. The pear appears to overhang the edge and there is a play with mysterious shadows cast by some objects but not by others.

This is an exhibition of pleasing paintings of still life compositions in domestic settings that are lovingly observed, lit and painted.