

Whimsy tinged with melancholy

Sasha Grishin

Judy Horacek: Joys: Spontaneous and contrived: watercolours. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until April 9. beavergalleries.com.au.

Judy Horacek - cartoonist, children's book illustrator, artist, and social commentator - has the unusual gift of creating a fantasy world that appears tangible and, for a moment, believable.

Known to Canberra audiences as a local, she has nevertheless for many years lived in an inner suburb of Melbourne where, through her wit and incisive imagery, she has become something of an institution. She has been omnipresent on Australia's cultural scene and has over 40 solo and group exhibitions to her credit.

In this exhibition, Horacek responds to the COVID years - with masks, lockdowns, little bubbles of joy and seas of gloom.

With her customary elegance, she explains: "On the one hand the pure joys: the bubbling up of things that make us happy to be alive and human - that's the 'spontaneous' of the title.

"But also the 'joys' that come from the deliberate efforts we have had to make to survive ... walking, being in or near water, imagination, nature, growing things from seed, birds, parks, looking at the sky..."

The exhibition consists of 29 quite small, intimate watercolour drawings that are whimsical, quirky, and wacky. Her technique of working the drawings is unusual. She has fabricated hand-cut rubber stamps that she prints on to wet watercolour backgrounds and allows the colours to run and merge to create something of a watery veil from which a slightly blurred image emerges.

It is a technique that introduces the element of chance as a creative force where the will of the artist is only one of the ingredients that goes into the making of the work. Horacek notes, "I love the quality of randomness that stamping in this way brings, the way it sidesteps my inner critic by presenting me



Judy Horacek, Beach Tumbling. Picture: Supplied

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with something I am not completely able to plan."

Some of these watercolours have a kaleidoscopic freedom as one of these small, stamped figures tumbles through a misty veil in *Beach tumbling*. I am always amazed by how little actual visual information is

provided in her drawings and the extent to which they provoke and inspire the imagination of the viewer to create their own personal narrative.

In a more deliberate watercolour drawing, *Flowering*, the cartoon-like character, with its half-moon like features, also doubles as a tree trunk from which sprouts a magnificent proliferation of blooms. I suppose that this is one of the "contrived joys" where the artist through a flight of the imagination sees herself as a great flowering tree. The joy is overstated - simple, pure and child-like.

Patchwork appears more like a watercolour drawing in search of a title. The tumbling joyous figure with its spiky Horacek-like hair

is suspended among dissolving blooms and blocks of colour that appear as if applied to the surface with a roller. It is a brilliant polychrome experience with heightened colours and heightened emotions.

All of these watercolours, when seen collectively as an exhibition, also evoke a tinge of melancholy. It is as if we are a witness to a happy facade, a colourful screensaver that conceals another reality that mocks the ephemerality of the assembled imagery.

Sometimes, when reality is grim, grey and seemingly endlessly oppressive, the imagination needs to burst out of its constraints and create a fantasy that for a brief moment we can enjoy and believe in its existence.