

Small drawings of intensity and power



Detail, Kirrily Humphries, Notes to Myself – pencil on paper

*Visual Arts / Colossal Wreck, drawings by Kirrily Humphries. At Beaver Galleries until April 6. Reviewed by **KERRY-ANNE COUSINS**.*

If you are interested in archaeology, you will know that on ancient sites, the evidence of human habitation can be revealed by the various layers of human activity found in the trenches of an archaeological dig.

Kirrily Humphries is interested in these trace elements of life and the confronting question of what will remain of us and our existence.

The title of the exhibition – Colossal Wreck – is a quote from the poem Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The poet muses on the fact that only a crumbling sculpture (the colossal wreck) in the sand remains of the once powerful King of Kings, Ozymandias.

Kirrily Humphries is a Canberra artist. Her previous art exhibitions have included small paintings and drawings of the interiors of derelict buildings that document in a poetic and atmospheric manner the passage of time. There are no human inhabitants shown in these interiors of rooms except for scant belongings left behind. They function both as study of the known reality as suggested by what we can see and the unknown realm as supplied by our imagination.

In this exhibition Humphries has used pencil on paper in a series of very small and intimate monochromatic works that explore the question – what physical and spiritual presence remains of the former inhabitants of these derelict structures? Is it even possible to recreate a link with the past existence of the life of such a building?

Using the window as a pictorial and symbolic device, Humphries has drawn small images of intensity and power. The window has been used in visual language by artists in many ways. It can be a way of framing a view or to contrast intimate space and exterior space; as a light source into a painting or a view to the outside world. Humphries's windows are emblematic, drawing us into their orbit. Mostly simple wooden structures, but drawn in incredible detail, they belong to abandoned domestic dwellings – although in one work the windows are more elaborate with three gothic style arches while yet in another a galvanised roof of a farmhouse veranda can be seen through the window.

In a work titled Capital – a departure from the domestic sphere, the artist draws what is perhaps a public amenities block, a self-contained structure that is eerily shut and deserted. The artist uses titles for the works taken from printed ephemera associated with each site.

These solitary windows float against an empty background suggesting that the intimacy of what happened in the interior domestic space in front of the window has now disappeared. Only small isolated items – a fallen metal chair in one work, a light switch and a wall lamp in another – hint of former inhabitants while graffiti seen through a window, broken glass and a brick reveal the fate of abandoned buildings.

In the work titled Over 4.5 Million Readers, the artist's drawing skill is demonstrated in her rendering of the dirty smeared glass of windows open to the foliage outside. In the work titled Case Histories of American Enterprise, this outside world also intrudes to suggest the ultimate fate of these buildings as tendrils of vines climb through broken and missing panes of glass and the suffocating intensity of the foliage (each tiny leaf meticulously rendered) outside the window suggests nature has returned to take possession.

Each exquisite small work presents a narrative much larger than itself, a story to imagine, an invitation to ponder on the effect of time, change, neglect and decay and to ask ourselves the disturbing question – will anything remain as evidence of our life?

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