

Sweet spot

Sweet spot presents the work of seven contemporary Australian artists who engage with decorative traditions and ideas about ornamentation. While they have different conceptual and material practices, the artists are united by a sensual engagement with media and form that privileges the notion of 'aesthetic pleasure'. This concept does not simply imply beauty, but also the idea of sensuous perception. The exhibition brings into focus contemporary aspects of the dynamic between a hedonistic revelling in ornamental excess (present in historical periods like the Rococo) and the ordered restraint offered by modernism.

Kevin Maritz produces refined minimalist sculptures that demonstrate a playful juxtaposition of naturalism and formalism. Resembling elegant oversized jewels, his 2002–03 series of large wall-mounted aluminium, steel and timber bead sculptures have erotic overtones. The artist's manipulation of scale amplifies the works' sumptuous qualities – sinuous forms and seductive tactile surfaces – and compels the viewer into a one-on-one spatial encounter that is designed to activate desire.

For close to two decades, **Elizabeth Pulie** has drawn on a variety of oriental and occidental decorative traditions in her painting practice. Pulie's recent works from 2006–08 continue this interest with the invention of an intricate personal iconography. The works' highly coloured arabesques, flowers, geometric patterns, swirls and flourishes avoid sentimentality or nostalgia, instead delighting in a sense of novelty that alludes to the playfulness of the Rococo tradition. The works' over-the-top decorative sensibility directs our attention to concepts of adornment, and is a provocative manoeuvre against contemporary trends to invest art with an ideological function.

Marie Hagerty's abstract paintings, both from 2008, are crammed with curvaceous hard-edge motifs. Colour is central to the artist's practice, and is used to build the perceptual and conceptual ambience of each painting. Within the exaggerated intimacy of the picture plane, the forms take on a voluptuous bodily presence. The wry absurdity of Hagerty's pristine, flat paintings is their voluminous three-dimensional effects – forms appear to bulge and shrink back in languid rhythm.

Two neon works and a major series of semi-figurative leadlight sculptures by the late **Neil Roberts** are featured in *Sweet spot*. Made using leadlight techniques popularised by the 19th century Arts and Crafts movement, Roberts' sculptures function like drawings, describing the highly-charged space between two boxing figures. Roberts' sophisticated approach to working with materials and objects produced poetic works with an elusive spiritual quality.

Tony Clark's recent paintings continue to explore the aesthetic histories of ornamentation and Classicism. The selected paintings, dated 2008, feature an interpretation of a figure from the Roman cameo glass vase the *Portland Vase*, Renaissance *putto* figures from the Medici Chapel, and a horse from Phaeton's Chariot falling from the heavens. Contradicting its high-art status, Clark deliberately introduces somewhat crude painterly qualities to Classical and Renaissance art, celebrating freedom and sensuality over intellectual and technical discipline.

Australian gum-trees feature in **Peter Kennedy's** 2007–08 large-scale drawings. Kennedy acknowledges the iconic presence of the gum-tree in Australian art history and recasts it with a heightened imaginative character, making it entirely of the present. Importantly, Kennedy takes great pleasure working in this hands-on traditional manner – using charcoal, watercolour, gouache and pastel – which he describes as a 'subterranean practice' that for over three decades has underscored his innovative conceptual art.

Adrienne Gaha's richly layered pictorial works present a complex mix of narrative references. Enacting the postmodern impulse to question assumptions about the meaning of images and their associations, Gaha's use of decorative and illusory devices draws on histories of western dominance in art, culture and society. Works from 2005–06 feature figures and drapery from the paintings of celebrated Rococo artist François Boucher juxtaposed with popular characters from our contemporary world. Gaha's eclectic content deliberately disrupts our usual expectations of image-making and cleverly questions the decorum of art.