

Intimate portrayals coloured by interior dialogue



Still Life With Back Gammon Game, above, with its lattice and harlequin patterning and vertical pile-up of ambivalent forms, channels Braque's late studio paintings

VISUAL ART

Elisabeth Cummings

King Street Gallery on Burton, Sydney.
Until November 13.

THE success of Elisabeth Cummings, like all the best kinds of success, leaps over its own improbability. To the vast expanses and drenching light of the Australian landscape, she brings the methods of the French intimists — of artists such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, who painted small and undramatic domestic scenes in fin-de-siècle Paris.

It shouldn't work and there are times when it doesn't. But at 70, Cummings has a deserved reputation as one of Australia's most accomplished painters.

Her new show at Sydney's King Street Gallery on Burton shows that, unlike many of her senior male colleagues, she is not just consolidating her reputation with signature works; she is also becoming more sophisticated and taking more risks as she gets older.

Cummings, who lives in Wedderburn, near Campbelltown, on Sydney's south-western outskirts, has travelled widely since her previous show. She has been on an organised artists' trip to Elcho Island off the coast of east Arnhem Land, to the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, to the Pilbara region in Western Australia and to her family holiday house at Currumbin, Queensland.

Strange, then, that the best of the new works are interiors. One of them, *Summer Window, Currumbin*, shows a room with a window looking out on to land, sea and sky. It is vaguely reminiscent of Henri Matisse's early years in Nice. But in place of Matisse's thin, translucent colours applied in confident brushstrokes, Cummings applies her colour in thick layers of contrasting hue with an arsenal of twitchy brushstrokes that allow the ground colour to show through.

One could exhaust pages trying to



Lively: The huge, two-panelled *Journey Through the Studio* is inflected by related and clashing colours

describe all the different yellows in a landscape such as *After the Wet, Elcho Island*. But the exercise would be pointless, since it is all about each part's relation to the whole. Such is the complexity of Cummings's orchestration of mark and colour, of description and abstraction, that resolution becomes a dream and the eye never comes to rest.

In this sense, looking at Cummings's paintings is in every way the opposite of the vagueness that can set in before the fleeting, forgettable images of a television screen. Each picture draws you into an extended process of looking, rippling with the physical evidence of all its maker's decisions (not to mention many moments of fertile indecision).

The new interiors are large paintings. They are composed of roughly rectangular patches of flat colour that seem to expand upwards in a cubist space, like a

higgledy-piggledy house of playing cards.

Perhaps the most successful of them is *Still Life With Back Gammon Game*, painted this year. With its lattice and harlequin patterning and its vertical pile-up of ambivalent forms, the work channels Georges Braque's late studio paintings. Cummings, however, eschews Braque's clarity of form and his restraint with colour, opting instead for her evolving version of the trembling marks and the high-keyed, shifting palette of Bonnard. (As if to press home her loyalty to Bonnard and perhaps atone for her flirtation with Braque, the black outline of a dachshund — that shadowy, ubiquitous talisman in Bonnard's interiors — can be seen at the bottom of the painting, facing another dog curled up on a cushion.)

Everything shifts and wiggles in Cummings's paintings. They are full of incident.

A lot of the liveliness comes from her unconventional sense of colour. The huge, two-panelled *Journey Through the Studio*, for instance, is dominated by a single colour — red — that is inflected right across the canvas by related and clashing colours: an orange-inflected brown, a deep burgundy, a pinkish red. These clashes and harmonies are lent further sensory fizz by the extraordinary variety of Cummings's marks. These are not exactly hesitant but small-scale, slow, capricious, prone to revision and scraping back. The pictures take shape patch by patch, like a quilt, but without seeming to conform to any pre-ordained structure.

How all this close-up, nit-picky work translates into the large, coherent surfaces of Cummings's best paintings is difficult to say. Clearly it is not a risk-free business. I

have seen plenty of paintings by Cummings that slip out of control. The show contains one, *Arkaroola Landscape*, which, in struggling to get to grips with the rich reds of the Flinders Ranges landscape, ends up a clashing field of inchoate forms.

But there are many more that do succeed and something about the sense of hurdles overcome is exhilarating. Cummings is an artist confident enough in her own language to feel free to acknowledge her influences, even as she tries out new things. What is original about her remains intact. Its real source is her marvellous responsiveness to what is around and in front of her. All Cummings's effort goes into tuning those observations to the developing demands of each picture. Confronted with the finished product, you can nevertheless feel the whole process at work.

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