

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The quiet achiever

Jenny Sages's latest exhibition suggests she should be seen as an artist of significance, writes Sasha Grishin



ON SHOW: *Church Door*, among 19 paintings and nine drawings on show.

JENNY SAGES is the quiet achiever on the Australian art scene. While she has been a frequent participant in Archibald and other portrait exhibitions and an artist whose *Emily Kame Ngwarreye with Lily* (1993) at the National Portrait Gallery has gained national prominence, Sages, who is now aged in her early 70s, has not really joined the big league of Australian art.

She is admired and respected as an artist's artist, but generally has kept out of the limelight. This large exhibition of her work at the Chapman Gallery makes a persuasive claim for the re-evaluation of her standing as a painter and suggests that she should be seen as one of national significance.

The 19 paintings and nine drawings are conceived as slices of reality, frozen moments in time, disarmingly honest in their struc-

ture and simple in their presentation. Sages notes about this series of work, "They are predellas. They are story boards. They are frames within frames. They are the subject of my fiercest attention and my worst nightmares."

Executed in an encaustic oil and pigment technique, the wax gives the surfaces of the paintings a certain density, betraying the presence of brush strokes. It is a technique which is quite different from usual oil painting and one which has become characteristic of Sages's work. It is not technique, however, which is Sages's most distinguishing feature, but the imagery and general sensibility of her art.

On one hand, the pictures appear like snapshots, casual and direct observations, but on the other hand they are remarkably compressed images. They are

intense observations where despite the apparent innocence there lurks a sinister tinge. In the painting *Too young to be so beautiful!* we are presented with the attractive face of a young woman, where only on further observation we notice that the surrounding heads betray a heightened and unhealthy degree of interest in her presence.

It is as if innocence is compromised by the circumstances of its exposure. Perhaps this is the most deliberate painting in the exhibition which is designed to expose this duality of vision.

In another painting, *Four years without rain*, there is an image of a young mother with her three children walking along a bush track painted in the best traditions of out-of-doors impressionist painting. One can almost feel the radiating heat as the young child walks barefooted on the bare earth.



But the atmosphere itself is one of melancholy. There is a perception of loss which is not illustrated or even hinted at in the imagery, but somehow evoked in the presentation of the figures.