

Luke Sciberras: destination unknown

BARRY PEARCE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM March 17, 2017

There are two kinds of painters. One feels the constant beckoning of the so-called destination or eureka painting: that which summarises everything that came before. Such paintings, usually sought by museums, impart a certain grace to even the most disappointing, previously unresolved works, suddenly imbued with an unexpected evolutionary significance.

Jeffrey Smart, the least prolific of Australian artists, constantly sat in front of his easel wondering if this was it, the one he always dreamt would define his vision emphatically and make sense of everything he had done. Each composition was subject to a slow process of rational construction, and the prospect maybe of a little death at the search because the search was over.

Russell Drysdale, Smart's most revered Australian artist, may have felt the same finality of deliberation about so many of his masterpieces — for example *Sofala* — which could explain his prevailing reluctance to break the eternal stillness of the next blank canvas.

The other kind of painter rarely entertains such thoughts. Individuals of the alternative persuasion move ahead less sedately, driven by a more fluid instinct from one creation to the next. They stay on the move at varying pace pending the scale and complexity of their conceptions, dancing as best as they can to manage any self-doubt. Luke Sciberras belongs to this category.

Since his ambition to be a painter found fruition when studying at the National Art School in Sydney during the late 1990s, and haunting the studios of various artists with especial admiration for Elisabeth Cummings at Wedderburn, in Sydney's southwest, he has built up a consistent body of work suffused with gloriously sensual, open-minded ambiguity. Brush in hand, scooping colour from the tiny pillars of his Turner-like palette, he has pushed and dragged his pigment at the behest of his talent and amazingly diverse experiences of the Australia-wide *spiritus locus* and beyond.

It must be said, however, Sciberras's exciting method of layering does flirt with danger, where the shapes, not quite allowed to settle comfortably on the picture plane, are vulnerable to becoming destabilised and lost in uncertain textures and coefficients of deeper space. For he eschews — is maybe even afraid of — stasis, and any form of classical discipline.

Thus any effort to define a destination picture, one that calmly holds the fort and pulls the rest into line, is difficult. In any case Sciberras declares, rightly so, this is not really his business but clearly the role of the curator and critic.

Yet, when we look at paintings such as *Portsea*, with its dizzy slab of rocks and trees looking out and down across a splendid expanse of sky and sea; the burning red of *Rembrandt Hill*, its jagged dark contours colliding with shimmering hills of biblical fire against a pale sky almost leached of colour; *Behind the Stars*, when the conflagration of a desert day has been quelled by the cool blue-black of Goya and a brilliant night sky; and above all *Midday Sun*, *Wilcannia*, with its brave, ravishing slabs of pink, we can feel evidence of Sciberras's respect for earlier generations including Arthur Streeton, Sidney Nolan and John Olsen, to whom he has added his own special inflection of poetic energy.

There is no doubt he is aware how in the end reputations of painters settle on certain iconic moments; and to make those moments happen takes more reflection and hard work than may appear at first glance.

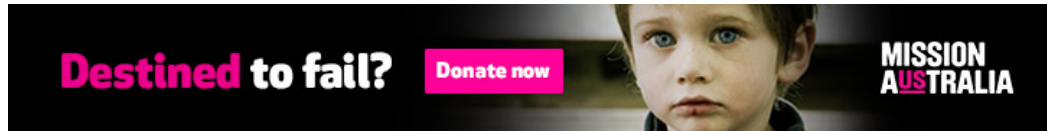
In the silent centre of his studio at Hill End, a deconsecrated Methodist church, it is reassuring to be aware that Sciberras paints with his easel in a precise position next to a window where daylight rakes left to right across the surface, picking out ridges and lumps like visual braille, and defining the tones with impeccable reliability. He may be submitting himself through unlikely elisions of awkwardness and elegance to an autonomous flux of nature, and even try to emulate nature itself, but under the watch of a mysterious order — daylight — which before the invention of electricity has been a commandant of painters and their evolution for time immemorial.

So, although unwilling perhaps to contemplate the idea of a eureka painting, Sciberras, despite himself, is unconsciously allowing us to glimpse it in the shards, shadows, accidents and luminous flashes of his instinctive

language.

He may not be interested consciously to seek such a phenomenon at this stage of his life, but through his deep love of painting and the landscape and people — including indigenous inhabitants — of his world, he doesn't need to. It will surely come and, at its own convenience, announce to him its arrival. Maybe it is already here.

Luke Sciberras: Out There opens at King Street Gallery on William, Sydney, March 28. Barry Pearce is emeritus curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of NSW.



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