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Jude Rae: A space of measured light is on at ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Acton

- **Sasha Grishin**

Jude Rae is a Sydney-based artist whose still life paintings, painted interiors and portraits from the past two decades are featured in this extensive exhibition.

Rae was born in Sydney in 1956 into a family of painters, (with both parents trained at the Julian Ashton Art School), and received her early training at home and then at Julian Ashton's while still attending high school. She studied art history at the University of Sydney before embarking on a career of teaching and exhibiting in Australia, New Zealand and Europe. She was twice awarded the Portia Geach Memorial Prize for portraiture (for women artists) and more recently, in 2016, was awarded the high-profile and very competitive Bulgari Art Award.



Jude Rae SL 309, 2013, in A space of measured light at ANU Drill Hall Gallery. Private collection. Photo: supplied

Rae is an artist whose practice is anchored in tradition and the conviction that a painting, to some extent, is an image of something that has been observed in the outside world but, at the

same time, it is also a material object with its own intrinsic qualities. It is the game between the two – the illusion of the object depicted and the materiality of the object created – that she seems to enjoy most in her art. In many of the works she leaves the raw linen edges of the canvas exposed and allows us to witness the blobs of paint on the surface and the strong tones of the underpainting to stress the fact that we are encountering a constructed material object and not a seamless photographic or digital transcription of reality. For Rae, a painting is something that is made, not an image that is snapped.

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In her art there is superficial parallel with the paintings of Giorgio Morandi, the Italian great whose painted wonderful tonal images of bottles, pots and jars were painted with tragedy and humour and presented as a diary of being. Rae, especially in her earlier paintings, employs a similar repertoire of bottles and jars (until the gas bottles and fire extinguishers appear in about 2003), but the intent and feel of her paintings is completely different. Morandi has a private, privileged narrative in his paintings and operates on an allegorical level, while Rae is more obsessed by purely formal relationships accompanied by a cold reserve.

Titles in her paintings are deliberately neutral and unhelpful, such as *SL 315* (2013) or *Interior 371 (Foyer II)*, (2017): in other words, we are not provided with any additional information to that which can already be seen in the pictures of a still life or a foyer interior. The more successful paintings develop a sort of density, a focused concentration with jutting edges and luminous glowing surfaces that are not dependent on the intrinsic qualities of the objects depicted or even on the composition, but on the building up of tones and the creation of the vision of light.

I somehow doubt that Rae intends a symbolic narrative in her selection of still life objects and I recall the fuss made by journalists when she was awarded the Bulgari Art Award for her *SL359* (2016), which featured prominently gas cylinders and fire extinguishers on a table top. It was seen as a comment on global warming and the clash of new and old technologies whereas, more likely, the artist was attracted by the formal properties of the shapes and colours of her found objects.

What seems to matter in a Rae painting is the emotional resonance generated on a visual and spiritual level, rather than a deciphering of its iconography on an intellectual plane. Her art is the triumph of visual intelligence and the celebration of "slow art", where it is not the initial "wow" factor that matters – Andy Warhol's 15 minutes – but the slow release of visual elements that are allowed to work their magic.

The strength of this important exhibition lies in the smaller still life paintings and the crisp etchings with their gorgeous simplified masses. The larger interior foyer paintings, which seem to be a more recent development and dependent on photographic records, except through their sense of scale, say little more than is already apparent in the still life paintings. The portraits and the Beirut series appear almost like a footnote in the broader context of this exhibition.

It is strange how fashions change in the Australian art world. Whereas a few decades ago tonal still life paintings were being branded as an irrelevance in many Australian art schools, today, artists like Jude Rae have become once more flavour of the month. This said, Rae is not some sort of conservative tonalist reviving what was colloquially described as the

"horseshit and gravy" school of Sydney tonal painting of the 1930s but, having digested modernism, the American abstract expressionists and minimalists, she has reinvented the still life as part of the contemporary discourse on painting.

Jude Rae: A space of measured light is on at ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Kingsley Street, Acton, until October 15.