

THE SATURDAY PAPER

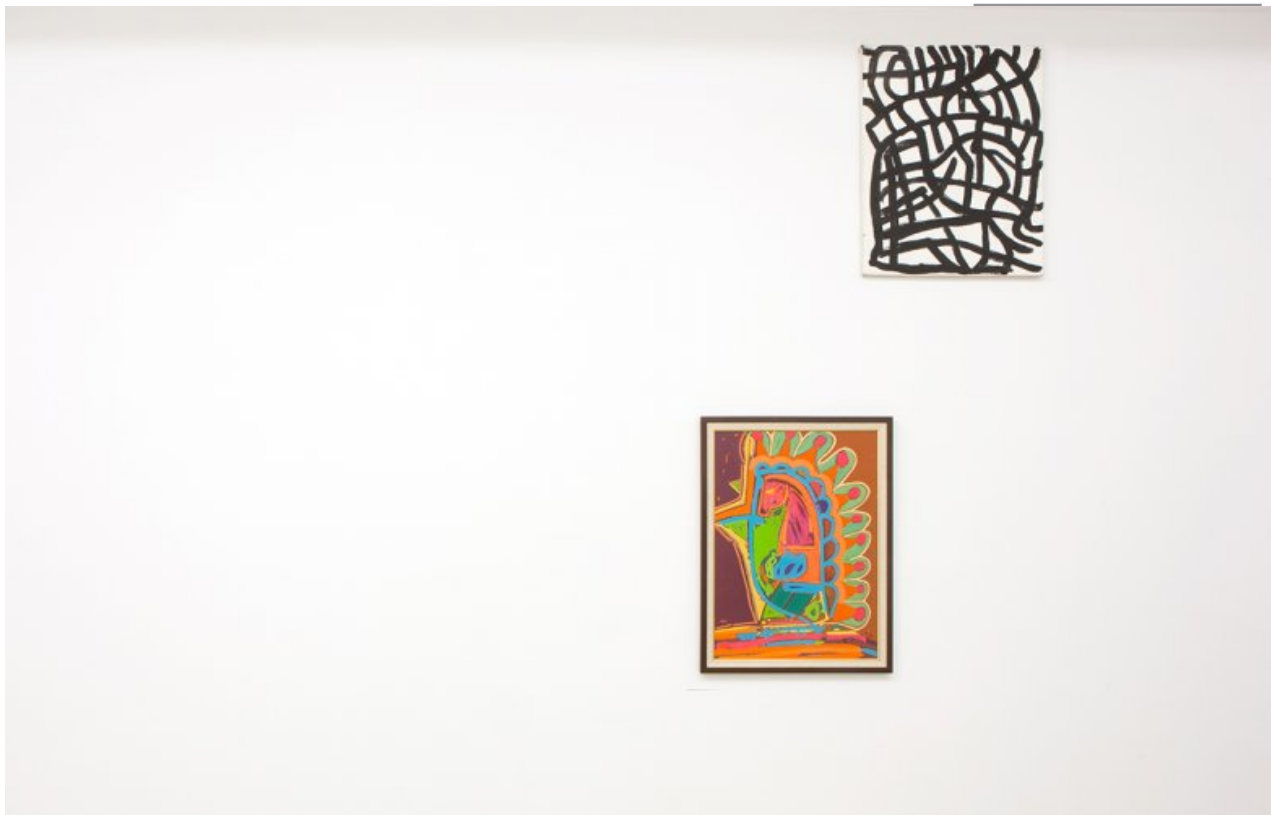
ART
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Moving pictures in Sydney galleries

A string of group shows at commercial galleries make a virtue of the conversations that can be had between paintings.



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Diena Georgetti's KNIGHT the LIGHTNING (above) and Emily Kame Kngwarreye's Untitled.

Jessica Maurer

My nine-month-old daughter is on the floor inspecting an intersection between a skirting board,

some floorboards and a rug. I've seen her focused on this area before: she peels the rug up, inspects the painted and polished timber before putting the rug back, tracing the geometric patterns of its pile with her fingers, before delightedly lifting the rug again. So begins a human fascination with surface.

I, too, have a passion for painted and patterned surfaces, and it seems like a timely moment to speak of the special and various ways they can have attention brought to them. Coming upon paintings in art galleries across town can be dull and depressing one month and supremely reassuring the next. Recent visits to some of Sydney's commercial art galleries – not all referred to here – produced the latter in abundance.

Reward comes for me in the form of individual artworks and the conversations they can open with life and other works. Against a background of internet speeds, art fairs and celebrity, the experience of standing and looking at tenderly conceived objects in quiet rooms is a privilege too easily taken for granted. One of the things that becomes apparent when visiting galleries now is that there is no longer a norm when it comes to selling and showing work: the forms adopted by art galleries promise to shift and mutate in all sorts of ways, not all pretty, according to the challenges relating to the equation of money and space.

On recently walking into The Hughes Gallery, now located on the top floor of its Devonshire Street premises, I was drawn towards a small painting like a metal shaving to a powerful magnet. The sparsely rendered portrait of a woman, in black oil on zinc, had a formidable emotional force among the hundred or so other small paintings in the room. There was nothing wrong with the other works – I would gladly live with many of them – but the portrait, a 1946 study by Max Beckmann, reified the singular capacity for good paintings to steal and grip our attention.

On the odd occasion during recent years I've experienced some teasing, edifying glimpses into the collection of Ray Hughes – a keenly observed and closely felt world of objects. I was therefore gratified by the news that the plethoric and idiosyncratic Hughes collection and library will soon be open to the public, offering Sydney – as university art departments get swallowed by bigger and more pragmatic ones – something along the lines of Cambridge's Kettle's Yard.

Later that afternoon I was in the largely different surrounds of Minerva, a new gallery in Potts Point, where – in the first instalment of a two-part painting exhibition; a show in which I should disclose I also have a work – I stood before an arresting, rather spooky piece by Diena Georgetti. As with the Beckmann, my compass needle was hijacked by *KNIGHT the LIGHTNING* (2015). The work is a luridly painted horse head – a chess knight – in a conservative 1950s-era frame. For reasons I will never fully understand, as it is with some works of art, I was perfectly struck. One thing I was sure of was its having been exquisitely paired with a similarly sized work – no more nor less than the truth of line – by Emily Kame Kngwarreye. To have more than one of these painting moments in a day can feel like absurd luck.

Moments are of the essence in exhibitions: an hour earlier, at Sarah Cottier Gallery, I'd enjoyed turning the corner, one way then the other, between, among other fitting works, John Nixon's *Block Painting* (1968) – a black enamel monochrome about the size of my hand – and Tim Bruniges's *Piano* (2014), its humble wooden panels surprising with a magnet-induced hum. It seems daft to point out such self-evident truths, but giving one's time over to the experiences enabled by scrupulously arranged paintings and objects can amount to significant phenomenological change in one's life.

Turning mental corners in art can also go both ways, the prudent contextualising of works of art having the ability to unsettle opinion. Last week I visited the Art Gallery of New South Wales where I re-encountered *Banks of the Marne* (c. 1888) by Cezanne, a painting I had described a couple of months ago as "mediocre" in terms of that artist's output. On this occasion, on a different wall, in a different wing, in the company of a Raoul Dufy, the painting – daubs of pigment and oil, light pressing behind trees, realised by that extraordinary force of a painter – was suddenly giving. Allowing the contact to occur, I gave myself over: a mild warmth rose in my cheeks as I gulped down the saliva of my previous conviction, smiled and moved on. A rug gets lifted to reveal something afresh.

Light behind trees is a feature of Idris Murphy's work, the artist currently showing at King Street Gallery on William. Murphy is a landscape painter capable of rare serendipitous feats of the brush. The surfaces of his paintings reveal a perpetual push and pull of material and subject in their attempts to find and fissure light. The repetition of simple natural forms, an unusual awareness of the substrate's corners and the incorporation of metallic pigments and collage, are some of his reliable tools in this search. There's no doubt that a painting by Murphy, big or small, would hold its own wall, yet standing among so many made me want to roll up my sleeves and disentangle the year's output to better appreciate certain works.

Small and medium-sized galleries do well in my mind to interrupt the custom of dishing out endless solo shows. Some of the more interesting moments I've had with art over recent years have occurred in commercial galleries initiating conversations between a handful of works by different artists who are not necessarily part of that gallery's stable. With space becoming something of a treasure in itself, there are interesting challenges facing new galleries – not least that of getting us off the web and into their physical sites.

The Commercial gallery in Redfern, until recently a garage, provided a sensual example of skill and restraint in its recent show: a carefully hung painting by Mitch Cairns, a picture-cum-object by Mary Teague and an object on a plinth by Robert Pulie, drawing out that ancient conversation between sculpture and painting. In such examples of humble but carefully utilised means, the noise of branding and identification tags can recede and give rise to chords more significant.

I suppose this clarifies what it is I visit galleries and museums in search of: exhilarating moments

facilitated by sensitively arranged individual works. We can find them in museums and solo presentations but we can also lose them, diluted as they become by the presence of too much. From where I'm standing, a possibly less than economically rational position – I don't know how many buyers care for such things – art galleries thrive on the close consideration of those objects of which they are the temporary custodians. In any case, it seems beyond any doubt that meaning and the real worth of a work can only be effectively released when properly cared for.

Call me old-fashioned, but I feel that the primary business of galleries dealing with physical objects should be one of contact. And the fact that these moments of intense contact and care are out there, against a backdrop of looming spatial and economic precariousness, is good reason for us all to hold these rooms dear. Anyone interested in art would do well this month to put a day aside and go in search of the change that objects of art bring.