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Jude Rae: A patient touch

Over four decades, Jude Rae has established a formidable painting practice, earning her a reputation as one of Australia's most significant living artists.

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Photography: Jacquie Manning

SYDNEY-BASED PAINTER Jude Rae's practice is identified by a masterly handling of her chosen mediums. That, and an inexorable determination to interrogate the parameters of perception.

Rae spent her formative years observing the work of her father David Rae, a refined and sensitive figurative artist. As a child she was enrolled at the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney's The Rocks area and years later, these influences evolved into a tenacious work ethic.

That ethic has most recently earned Rae the prestigious Bulgari Art Award, in partnership with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and a major survey exhibition curated by Terence

Maloon at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra. This critical acclaim comes in the wake of 45 solo exhibitions held in galleries across Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Germany.

After completing an Art History major at the University of Sydney in the late 1970s, Rae shifted her academic focus to studio studies at the City Art Institute (now the University of New South Wales), later transferring to the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. It was during the 1990s, the decade spent in New Zealand, that Rae began her assiduous interrogation of what the traditional genres of painting might mean in the contemporary world.

In 2005, Rae won the Portia Geach Memorial Award with her work *Large Interior 173* (Micky Allan). She took out the award again in 2008 with *Self Portrait (The Year My Husband Left)*, a steely portrait of the artist in her Canberra studio where she was living at the time. Based on *Las Meninas* by Velasquez, in the painting she stands in her studio behind what appears to be a rain splattered window, palette at the ready and brush poised.

During this decade, Rae also became well-known for her object paintings. At first glance these could easily be described as akin to Giorgio Morandi, but the resemblance to the Italian master's work is superficial. While she too favours prosaic objects – often grouped in slightly different configurations in each painting to enable a focus on formal subtleties – Rae's work possesses none of the austerity of Morandi. Instead, her interest in perception plays out in a subtle counterpoint between painterly materiality and the illusions of realism.

Fascinated by contemporary architecture and curious to transport something of her experiments in still life to other genres, Rae began to bring the same rigorous approach to portraits and interiors. While many of her interiors do not include figures, a human presence is palpable in their absence. This sense of humanity remains paramount in all her work; most particularly in portraiture.

Whatever the genre, Rae strives to capture nuances that might otherwise be overlooked. "It is the task of portraiture not just to capture a likeness but to allude to what cannot be caught," she says. She approaches portraits as a collaboration with the subject, a process of intuitive interaction that arises from mutual trust and goodwill.

Earlier this year, Rae's portrait of Wiradjuri woman Linda Burney was unveiled at Parliament House, commemorating the election of the first female Indigenous member to the House of Representatives. It will hang near her 2015 portrait of Anna Burke, Speaker of the House of Representatives, the first portrait of a woman by a woman to enter the Parliament House Collection. Rae's 2017 portrait of Australia's first female Chief Justice Susan Kiefel was also the first painting by a female artist in the High Court collection.

All were completed in Rae's inner-city studio; a calm, ordered space where huge sweeping blinds filter an extravagance of natural light flooding in from Sydney's streets. When asked about other artists who have influenced her practice Rae wishes she could add more female names to her list, but the historical dominance of men in painting has tended to push women to excel in other mediums: "Paula Modersohn Becker and Gwen John are two, and Jesse Traill has taught me much in etching," says the artist.

“I work within the Western representational tradition and count many of its great painters as my historical mentors – Vermeer, Velázquez, Chardin, Cézanne, and Morandi, to name a few. But I have also been deeply influenced by abstraction and the increasingly hybrid practices that mark the second half of the 20th century. I have had the privilege of seeing my work alongside some great contemporaries, many so-called non-figurative: Europeans Callum Innes, Günter Umberg and Helmut Federle, as well as some closer to home such as Colin McCahon and Rover Thomas.”

This year, Rae holds her first solo show with Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane. The exhibition is built on Rae’s 40-year practice and made up primarily of recent still life paintings and interiors. The artist is characteristically modest when discussing her achievements, but about this show she seems quietly pleased: “It took me a long time to build confidence as an artist. I feel now my work has substance and meaning to me.”

So how does the fledgling collector approach Rae’s work? Look, and give time to the subtle marbling of muted colour and light, the nuances in the mark making. Discover that looking at these luminous works is itself a seductive journey into the artist’s world of seeing.

JUDE RAE SHOWS AT PHILIP BACON GALLERIES, BRISBANE, FROM 28 MAY TO 22 JUNE 2019.

JUSTIN PATON

Head curator, International Art, AGNSW

Justin Paton has been following Jude Rae’s work closely since the 1990s. In 2004 he wrote *Pressure Points*, the text for her first mono- graph, and in 2006 he invited her to take part in Dunedin Public Art Gallery’s International Artists Residence Program.

Of her most recent paintings, Paton says: “It’s hard to pin down what makes them so satisfying, because in a way so little has changed. Jude is still painting vessels, still using muted colour, still building her volumes with that patient touch. But the feeling of amplitude, of poetic pressure, increases with each work.

“I think it’s because she’s an artist who looks, and looking takes a long time. Peer at even the simplest thing and you realise how volatile our perceptions are. Jude stills those perceptions on her canvases, yet leaves room for tremors and doubts. They’re ‘empty’ works whose interiors hum with the presence of a questioning mind. And though the works don’t trade in obvious political content, doubt is where their currency lies. They remind us not to rush into judgement but to hold fire and open our eyes. Her paintings don’t just see the world afresh. They make seeing itself seem strange.”

PHILIP BACON

Director, Philip Bacon Galleries

Philip Bacon has operated his blue-ribbon Brisbane gallery for 45 years, exhibiting significant Australian artists including William Robinson, Rick Amor and Cressida Campbell.

“One of Jude Rae’s paintings was on exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. That’s when I first connected with the work,” says the gallerist. The relationship evolved when Bacon was sitting on the board of Opera Australia with Sydney arts patron Rowena Danziger. He’d go to her house after meetings, see Rae’s still life paintings on the walls, and in time invited Rae to visit his gallery.

“We’ve shown a few of her works in group shows now and they’ve sold,” says Bacon. “She’s getting a good response for an artist fairly unknown here in Brisbane. She’s an impressive artist. Everything is considered in her work and her life.”

Rae’s work in her first solo show with Bacon will sell at her current prices – approximately \$2,000 to \$4,000 for etchings and lithographs; smaller paintings at \$18,000 to \$20,000; and larger works from \$35,000. A few of her works have entered the secondary market, mainly in New Zealand, and done well. For example, an NZD \$30,000 smaller painting sold and that is equivalent to AUD \$26,000.

As for Bacon’s predictions: “There will be a museum show before too long I suspect. She gets stronger and stronger. Being a great portrait painter will also see her significantly grow in the market. And rightly so. Her work is quite beautiful, elegant.”

This article was originally published in Art Collector issue 88, APR – JUN 2019.



Jude Rae, *SL401*, 2019, oil on linen, 71 x 81cm

Courtesy: the artist and Phillip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane. Photo Felicity Jenkins



Jude Rae, *SL394*, 2018, oil on linen, 50 x 55cm
Courtesy: the artist and Phillip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane. Photo Felicity Jenkins



Jude Rae, *Interior 371 (Foyer II Liberty Place)*, 2017, oil on linen, 159 x 259cm,
Courtesy: the artist and Phillip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane. Photo Felicity Jenkins

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