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The roughly finished painting... is more akin to an initiated conversation, a posed question, demanding an engaged response from the beholder. Rough artists deliberately expose the working processes of composition as a way of pulling the spectator further into the image.¹

What strikes immediately in Jude Rae's stunning still lifes is colour and light. Rae's richly broken colours smell of summer heat, eucalypt and earth; the shifting light effects sing, touching objects and surfaces glistening or matt, defining space and sculpting form while simultaneously blurring boundaries, readings, demanding we look again to really see. When is the lighting natural daylight, or carefully chosen artificial lights knowingly directed to enhance the provisional nature of space and form, of forms associating in space? When is colour 'real', attached to a surface, an object, and when is it a mirage, a trick of the light, reflection and the eye? And of course just paint on canvas, exquisitely handled.

Objects are meaningful, familiar, carefully chosen not merely for shape and colour, scale and resonance, but their *history* within the painter's life as well as her work. From the industrial to the domestic each has its story and brought together in differing configurations they speak to each other, both within each painting and between paintings. Scale is crucial too. The scale and shape of each canvas, the space each object inhabits and its judicious relation to other objects adjacent, overlapping, echoing, arguing – and in turn their relations to the space and canvas edges. Water in a transparent vessel breaks solid forms, refracts light and colour, challenging our visual perception thanks to the artist's skilled composition and painting technique. Layering is crucial too. We see the technical means subtly laid bare; white ground over linen, coloured lay-in thinly applied, its vertical brushstrokes or drips (as in the foreground of SL430) drawing our attention to the material flatness of the picture surface while reminding us of the painting's insistent verticals. Its Sienna red vibrates throughout and the emphatic linen weave gives unifying texture.

The inclusion in SL430 of a new object in the form of an industrial hydrant amps up the portentous anthropomorphism of the gas cylinders and fire extinguishers that have long populated Rae's compositions. The hydrant, retrieved by the artist from a local water main, is a reminder of the critical importance of water - its necessity and its misuse globally, but particularly in Australia. It appears again in SL440 together with the ubiquitous plastic water container and an oxygen tank, this time in a more compressed "lineup" that adds to the sense of urgency of the composition. Vegetation makes an appearance too, the spiky leaves of fern trapped in glass and an orchid, seemingly bleeding and wounded, nature the victim of domesticity.

The simplicity, too, is beguiling – apparently effortless – indeed, the depth of knowledge and skill which makes possible this simplicity is lightly worn. Increasingly now Rae invites the viewer into her process, opening up her working methods to our delight. In SL436 liquid dribbles lie beside stiffly applied paint, the chalky table-top colour revealing through its irregular brushwork the glowing red beneath. Witness here this underlying Sienna lay-in of the table edge spreading throughout to warm the applied paint-layer colours, resurfacing as intense vermilion opacity in the red gas-bottle and its reflections. These hot reds converse together across a canvas of cooler tints. The liquid drips again stress verticality, gravity, heightening the tensions between loose and tight, gesture and finish in this tautly gridded composition. Twin lights, front left and right, cast mirrored shadows which, countering the vertical reflections of Rae's objects, create a stabilising triangular base that delicately articulates the receding plane of the table-top.

¹ Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes*, 1999, 654

The luminous clarity of SL 436 stands in marked contrast to the daylit grandeur of SL435 with its yellow ochre underlay and cooler palette, or the muted *sfumato* daylight of SL438 with its mysterious deep Rembrandtesque shadows. Here the painting's somber hues and sensual forms resonate like late Beethoven quartets. Notice too, not just the novel intrusion of pattern here but its spatial dynamics. As in still lifes by the mature Cézanne, a subtly insistent surface design alerts the eye to the flat background plane which closes off and limits the pictorial space, just as the table edge – again in parallel to the picture plane – echoes in staccato its rhythmic pattern, asserting the front canvas edge and the painting's painterly abstraction.

At a distance Rae's work appears intently focused, each canvas wholly resolved and startling in its clarity. Look again, look closely: edges are rarely sharp, barely straight. Suddenly the certainty dissolves and our eye is beguiled by ambiguity, challenged to reconsider just what it is we see – just how we look, perceive and comprehend. At once this is reassuring still life painting and a disruptive formal experiment that fuses pleasure with unease, naturalism with formalist abstraction. Above all, Jude Rae's work re-educates the eye and mind. Her own bold and unrelenting painterly attention to her vision, to observation and its translation into oil paint on canvas is there for us to see, share and celebrate.

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