

Below the Surface

by Alexandra Lawson

Below the surface is an exhibition that brings together artworks by Toowoomba based artists Rhi Johnson and Monica Usher. *Below the surface* explores the physical layering of paint and ink, and considers nuances of reality and imagination.

The initial conceptual development of this show was based on the way that these artists approach their work. Although both bodies of work have recognisable subject matter, both artists are 'practice led', whereby a process of understanding occurs through each act of making.

Usher is an oil painter, her interest is in the spaces that lie in-between her identifiable images. Usher's works draw elements from the garden to capture a sense of the mystery in those in-between spaces where multiple truths exist. The works in oil require long drying times between layers, and for Usher, the image and painting unfold intuitively through the dozens of layers of paint. As Usher develops objects in the foreground for the viewer to focus on, she allows the spaces behind to 'do their work on you'.

Johnson is a printmaker, her work is initially based on a scene or situation that evokes an emotional response, then, as the work is created, the original 'image' shifts, as it becomes based on her memory. Johnson in some ways has a similar process to Usher, as she draws and cuts into sheets of lino the image then becomes a hybrid of what is, and what could be. Johnson says the works map a duality between conscious and unconscious experience, and the simultaneous implications of what is known and unknown.

Both artists engage in highly laborious practices, and both artists' practices operate, to an extent, in the negative. Usher starts with the under-layers of the painting to create a sense of depth, and has to imagine, or give in to the process of building up additional layers of paint that add to the sense of space and depth, creating a dreamy environment. Usher gives over to the process of laying down paint in order to allow the painting to unfold. Johnson's process of making a reduction lino print is also in the negative, beginning with a piece of lino. She starts carving, leaving the areas she wants in contact with the paper (this is often one of 12 or so cutting sessions). Johnson rolls ink onto the lino, slightly wets the paper, lays it on the printing press, places the lino on top, covers it with a blanket and rolls it through the printing press. This happens 20 times (or as many as the number of prints in the edition). After this first layer is complete and the prints are drying, Johnson will again cut into the lino.

Both artists have articulated that their labour is an important aspect of what they do. In the same way that the process of making the work is slow, the work itself demands a slowness from the viewer, exploring the depth of the layers of both paint and ink.

The repetition of the process, the edition (or multiple) and layering of ideas and physical processes is an element that has also been explored through the installation of the exhibition. Multiple prints hang together, referencing their nature of existing as a multiple, framed reduction linocut prints appear in double, and a general layering in the approach to pairing the artists' works occurs throughout the installation.

This repetition is present in the layering of paint on the surface and appears in the layering of spaces in the images, which, in the artists' words, allude to everyday environments, concealed or partially revealed content and aspects of the human condition. The exhibition explores what can be seen and what is hidden, and through this conscious and unconscious experience in the creation and development of the work, the artists also take us, the viewer, on the same journey, a slow journey into perpetual discovery.