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Review by Sasha Grishin

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## Local ways of looking: Derek O'Connor, Kirrily Humphries and the Canberra gaze

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Derek O'Connor's Capital Hill is part of an exhibition that examines the city's layers of history. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

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The German philosopher Theodor Adorno famously observed in 1949, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism”.

Today, we are once more living in a time gripped by apocalyptic madness and, at least for me, the exhibitions by Derek O'Connor and Kirrily Humphries echo some of this existential angst.

At 67, O'Connor is a veteran of the Canberra art scene. He is a meditative philosopher-artist who works within a tradition of slow art that invites a contemplative response.

He is not an illustrative or figurative artist but one who lays out his whole being onto the canvas before him in oil paint, which he subsequently progressively covers with fresh layers of paint. Small areas of the original

painted layer survive—like floating islands or thought adventures—and are then surrounded by further erasures.

Endless layers may be applied before the painting gains its independent existence.

While O'Connor may have been a 12-year-old child when he arrived in Australia from his native England and received his formal art training in Canberra and Tasmania, I have observed a number of English-born artists who have been drawn to this process of building up layers of paint and through a process of erasure creating a compositional structure.

Take, for example, Andrew Sibley's early work, which subsequently turned figurative. In Sibley's case, the process of erasure and revelation became something of a Jungian journey, at times deeply personal.



*Architectural Gardens, a National Feature* by Derek O'Connor. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

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O'Connor's method of work is an introverted process, where the artist reveals what he terms 'the village within' on the canvas. The shapes created through this constant painting of layers and their erasure suggest titles such as *Capital Hill*, *AFP hound*, *Architectural gardens*, *a National Feature*, *funeral procession*, and *only the sun*.

Having seen a number of his exhibitions, I find this one to have an unusually sombre mood. As is always the case with O'Connor's work, there is a balance between what you bring to the viewing experience and what is actually present in the paintings.

The structuring of the masses, the small areas of vivid colour surrounding larger forms, different surfaces and textures and the generous seas of green all contribute to the viewing experience.



Derek O'Connor, *AFP Hound*, draws on familiar Canberra landmarks. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

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If this is O'Connor's first exhibition at the Beaver Galleries, Kirrily Humphries, another Canberra-based artist and O'Connor's junior by 30 years, is an established artist in this gallery's stable.

If in O'Connor's paintings, the mood of brooding disaster is something that I infer, in Humphries's work, it is explicitly stated.

The title of her exhibition, *Colossal Wreck*, is taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley's wildly romantic poem 'Ozymandias'. In this famous poem, a traveller from an antique land speaks of the inevitable destruction of empires so that Ozymandias, King of Kings, is reduced to two vast and trunkless legs of stone standing in the desert.



Kirrily Humphries' work *the entrepreneur* is dense and precisely worked. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

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Humphries has produced a series of exquisite miniature pencil drawings. The drawings are heavily worked and need to be peered into for them to reveal their secrets. The titles are enigmatic – *Love of the common people*, *Capital*, *Case histories of American enterprise*, *The entrepreneur* and *Notes to myself* that the artist tells us “are drawn from graffiti, books, magazines, signs, paperwork, posters etc that are associated with each site”.

No further clues are provided to answer the viewer’s curiosity—we are invited to arrive at an understanding by contemplating the work itself.

They are tough, captivating drawings that need to be explored, examined and reimaged by the viewer. The visual clues provided and the suggestions made in the titles do not provide an explanation for the works but introduce us to a general field of contemplation. It is one about decay, the collapse of empires and the ephemerality of life.

Both exhibitions invite us to participate in a deeply immersive experience, one that is tinged with sadness and perhaps with a note of despair.

*Derek O’Connor: The Village Within and Kirrily Humphries: Colossal Wreck are both at Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin, until 13 April. Sasha Grishin is a Canberra critic and writer.*