

STEPHEN NOTHLING



Subject to Change Without Notice

2 May – 27 May 2017



The Delivery, Oil on board, 79.5 x 80 cm



Elizabeth Delivers, Oil on board, 80 x 80 cm



We're Having a Heatwave, Oil on board, 60 x 121 cm



Rhonda Kelly, Miss Queensland 1945,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Elaine Herrick, Miss Queensland 1947,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Dorothy Meyers, Miss Queensland 1949,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Maureen Kistle, Miss Queensland 1955,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Helen Wood, Miss Queensland 1957,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



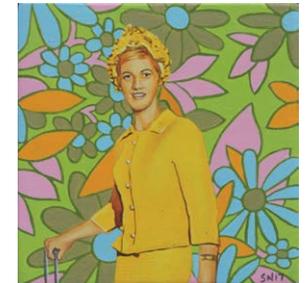
Nancy Knudsen, Miss Queensland 1959,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Maree Mollenhagen, Miss Queensland 1960,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Jan Taylor, Miss Queensland 1963,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Helen Newton, Miss Queensland 1967,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Lexie Barber, Miss Queensland 1969,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Suzanne Postle, Miss Queensland 1970,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm



Gay Walker, Miss Queensland 1972,
Oil on board, 20 x 20 cm

Subject to Change Without Notice

February 2017 in Stephen Nothling's backyard studio is hot. The harsh morning sun heats the tin roof of the partitioned garage and from the driveway you can hear the faint murmur of ABC Radio National through a small speaker. It's far from a glamorous workplace, but it's the backdrop of something a little bit special.

Inside, Stephen sits with his face centimetres from the canvas, his eyes squinted. He's working on a still life – a collection of roses, a pineapple and a soon-to-be painted passionfruit. It's going to be called '*We're Having a Heatwave*'. On the wall behind him, the old thermometer reads 37 degrees.

The agenda for Stephen's 2017 exhibition '*Subject to Change Without Notice*' is that there is no agenda. That's what he says anyway. This is not a series of paintings, but rather a collection of images that travel back and forth across the many and varied subject matter that has interested Stephen for decades.

Right now, the walls of Stephen's studio are adorned with paintings in various stages of completion. The rose paintings which helped shape his art career are there, but they're not alone. In the corner of the room, a young Queen Elizabeth rides a motorbike. A box of Surf washing powder is framed by cut-out tuna tins. A self-portrait transposed onto the body of Elvis Presley (entitled '*Half Albino Elvis*') croons into a microphone, his one blue eye and one pink eye glinting.

The centrepiece for the exhibition – if such a seemingly disparate collection of work could be described as having a centrepiece – is a suite of small paintings of Miss Queenslands from the 1940s through to the 1970s. The portraits were taken from photographs and newspaper articles found on the internet. In this sense, Stephen acts a record-keeper, documenting a fading history tinged with nostalgia with each colourful brushstroke.

The decision to paint local beauty queens harks back to the 1980s, when Stephen first sampled the "Miss Light Bulb" image in his paintings. The beaming young woman, who he affectionately calls Kitsy, became a muse for Stephen, appearing on and off in various contexts in his work over the past 30 years. The use of Miss Light Bulb, sourced from a dubious photography magazine from the early 60s, began as an ironic comment on the ridiculousness of her portrayal as a beauty icon. However much like Stephen's use of flowers, the statuesque model morphed to symbolise an underlying dignity and optimism.

His new series of Miss Queenslands recalls a more innocent era. Stephen can remember watching the Miss Queensland competition on television as a child, at a time when beauty contests were fundraising events and contestants were regular members of the community. Stephen's paintings and the past they represent couldn't be further from the state of modelling competitions today, with their polished glamour and uniform representations of beauty. This contrast appeals to Stephen. He has an affection for nostalgic idealism.

Writers are told to write what they know, and Stephen hasn't strayed far from this maxim. '*Subject to Change Without Notice*' is a celebration of all that is known to Stephen, from

the jacaranda tree that shrouds his studio in shade in the afternoon to the rose-patterned biscuit tin that sits atop his kitchen counter.

"I quite like the idea of just being a local painter," he says. "I'm not an internationalist. I just paint the domestic scenes that are around me."

"I thought I would give myself the liberty of just doing a whole lot of random pictures, but as you start painting I think things start establishing themselves in the process. So what was initially a non-thematic idea looks like something now. I'm just not quite sure what that is."

Perhaps it's his closeness to the art, both figuratively and literally (a visual impairment forces Stephen to paint just centimetres from the canvas), which inhibits Stephen's ability to see his paintings as a unified body of work. But take a step back and you'll find surprising threads running through this new exhibition.

The smorgasbord of images reference Stephen's experiences living in Queensland, but he's resolute in not taking himself too seriously. The roses, birds, Miss Queenslands and the '*Beauty Hint*' diptych play with the notion of beauty. Meanwhile the prawns, washing powder boxes and wonky self-portraits are the very antithesis of the aesthetic. Stephen breathes life into these highly domestic images. He says when you paint the ordinary, you shift the context by treating familiar objects with newfound respect. He never has a problem finding new material to paint.

Visually, the paintings are unified by a lighter colour palette than Stephen has traditionally been accustomed to. This was part of a conscious decision to "lighten up a bit". Indeed, the idea of radiance and illumination runs through the whole exhibition. The bright pop art branding of washing powder packaging has become an accidental motif.

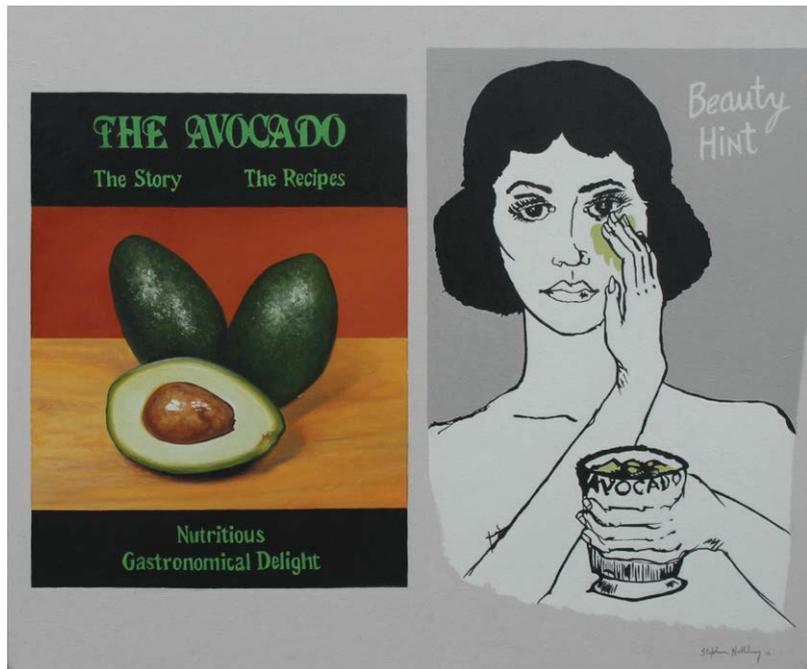
Categorising Stephen's work in an increasingly dense artistic milieu proves difficult. He is a realist but not a hyperrealist. While mostly dependent on photographic reference, he is not committed to the finesse of slavish reproduction. He wants his paintings to look painted.

"In lots of respects I feel like I'm really old-fashioned – and I probably am – because I don't embrace production techniques that other people use to make pictures," Stephen says. "I like my paintings to actually look like paintings, not mechanically produced things. There is an element of homemade-ness about what I do, and I don't think homemade-ness is necessarily something that contemporary art strives for."

"The most difficult question people ask me is 'what do you paint?' I paint my life, and it just seems so at odds with what happens in contemporary art. I find it difficult to even assume I would be a contemporary artist, but I suppose that's where I find myself."

If novelty is the driver of contemporary art practice in the 21st Century, Stephen is nothing if not novel.

Lily Nothling 2017



Beauty Hint No. 1, Oil on canvas, 71 x 85.5 cm



Beauty Hint No. 2, Oil on canvas, 71 x 85.5 cm



I Have a Calling,
Oil, mixed media on board, 39.5 x 40 cm



View from the Artist's Studio with lost cockatiel,
Oil on board, 40 x 40 cm



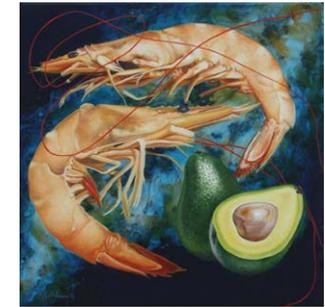
Sign of Light,
Oil on board, 39.5 x 40 cm



Satellite of Love,
Oil on board, 39.5 x 39.5 cm



The Zone (Under the Jacaranda Tree),
Oil on board, 39.5 x 39.5 cm



Salad Days,
Oil on board, 39.5 x 39.5 cm



Half Albino Elvis,
Oil on board, 39.5 x 39.5 cm



Weekend Near Point Cartwright
Oil, mixed media on board, 39.5 x 40 cm



Upon Reflection, Oil on canvas, 121 x 85.5 cm

Woolloongabba Art Gallery

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