Stephen Bush: Steenhuffel
Curator: Kelly Gellatly

A Vizard Foundation Contemporary Artist Project

The University of Melbourne
27 March – 6 July 2014

Education resource

Col du Galibier 2003
oil on canvas
201 x 244 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Stephen Bush: Steenhuffel
Ian Potter Museum of Art

Steenhuffel brings together works produced over a period of more than thirty years by acclaimed Australian painter Stephen Bush. Like Bush’s painting practice, Steenhuffel is a playful and compelling exploration of the experience of the contemporary painter. The exhibition, which includes a series of new paintings, presents works that characteristically combine adroit figuration and visceral abstraction, and convey a sense of existential questioning, of friction, discipline, and the notion of the sublime. As intended, these works raise more questions than answers. The display of works with shared subject matter or treatment en masse—i.e. the log cabin, the beekeeper, the landscape, the predominant use of a particular colour—offers the audience the opportunity to reflect on the artist’s ongoing concerns, and observe nuance and development, as well as to appreciate the virtuosity within Bush’s oeuvre.

Stephen Bush was born in Colac, Victoria in 1958 and studied Fine Arts at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Since his graduation in 1978 he has built a prolific professional career, his work well recognised in both Australia and the USA.

Stephen Bush’s painting Col du Galibier (2003) assumes an almost talismanic presence in this exhibition. Spare, and somehow singular in the company of a gallery of paintings seemingly brought together because of a consistent yet loose interest in both the expressive and narrative possibilities of landscape that plays out across them, Col du Galibier is at once related to this quest but not of it. The glossy purple, blue and green globules in the work certainly resemble a mountainous mass, but this mass is formed by a rather precarious looking pile of paint that literally bears the physical marks of it being squeezed from the tube. Like the expectant blank screen that faces the twenty-first century author, Bush has captured the precious and anxious moment of beginning, the daunting task of making a start; painting a painting about the act of painting at the moment before the brush is loaded and that first mark is made.

At the heart of Stephen Bush’s practice is the constant, almost nagging question of what it means to be an artist and particularly, what it means to work in the most anachronistic of mediums: paint. Bush’s oeuvre is tantalisingly playful and confounding in its embrace of circularity and repetition, and never ceases to surprise in its creative re-use of an expansive back catalogue of subject matter and motifs. His paintings continue to be made within a variety of self-imposed and at times, performative frameworks—whether it be painting Babar the Elephant from memory in his ongoing The lure of Paris series (1992–); working monochromatically with a particular colour (sienna red, green, purple); introducing the use of paint as viscous liquid as a way of embracing chance and the accidental and as a means by which to interrupt an over-reliance on figuration; or populating the combination of ‘straight’ landscapes and psychedelic high-keyed vistas that have appeared across the years with the ever-stoic, hard-working presence of the beekeeper. However, the push-pull that reverberates across his work like a refrain is an ongoing fascination with the artist’s desire, or indeed, need to create, and a constant (almost self-deprecating) inquiry into just what this achieves. Through the tasks, tests, or games (it is never quite clear) that Stephen Bush sets himself, the act of painting is re-invigorated and remains a challenge; notions of the original and copy, high and low culture, authenticity and value become part of the conversation, and any sense of ‘progress’ or a clear trajectory informing the artist’s oeuvre is happily thwarted. The questions may be apparent here, but there are never straightforward answers. Indeed, the answers seem to throw up more questions, and we are somehow back at the beginning ... sort of, but not really.
This exhibition, *Steenhuffel*, is itself an astute embodiment of and response to the challenges and expectations inherent in making ‘new’ work. Commissioned as part of the Potter’s ongoing series of Vizard Foundation Contemporary Artist Projects designed to encourage artists to take risks and explore new directions in their practice, just what does this opportunity mean when you are Stephen Bush, a painter who will continue to paint? Falling somewhere between a project show and survey exhibition, the Vizard Foundation commission has enabled Bush to not only make new paintings to the brief, but through the creation of *Steenhuffel*, explore this notion within the context of the exhibition itself. As a result, the artist has pushed the parameters of both the display of his work and the exhibition experience, presenting three distinct but interrelated aspects of his practice across the different gallery spaces that comprise the exhibition: the landscape (with accompanying overlays of the sublime, the taming of nature, or of pioneering endeavour); the use of purple (which speaks, through their absence, of the other hues that have preoccupied him over time), and the recurring motif of the beekeeper. However, these ‘groups’ of works are in no way contained by the walls of the spaces that house them, and continue to remain in dialogue through the (re)appearance of various shared attributes—wonkily constructed log cabins, sweeping alpine vistas, modernist structures, and a cast of animals (often, the goat), to name but a few—that hover incongruously within swirling, apocalyptic landscapes of oil and enamel paint whose pooled surfaces and acidic palette are like the stuff of toxic waste; bringing in turn a new, more insidious inflection to the hooded figure of the beekeeper.

Created over extended periods and returned to and re-worked time and again, these paintings, drawn from across the decades, similarly embody a respect for process and hard work that is ultimately subsumed by both the ‘doing’ and the end result. Many of Bush’s paintings are replete with the ‘stuff’ of making art and of things in progress—landscapes formed from clay squeezed and moulded by the artist’s hands (*I have come to the creek* and *Lampre*, both 2003); the introduction of lens flare as otherworldly incursion within these strange environments, and even the appearance of the artist as performer, in a constant state of willing adaptation. Bush’s lingering interest in ‘the journey’ also resonates in his decades-long engagement with the ‘persistent redundancy’ of life on the land—think of the role assumed by the humble tractor in his work of 1980s; the heroic elevation of produce in *Corn scene* or *Rubbing doesn’t help* (both 1997); or the recurrence of the twee ‘country idyll’ in works such as *Lady Campbell Weed: William of Orange* (2011) and *Quino Lichthafel* (2009)—which is, like painting, built on a core of repetitive labour at once seemingly futile, yet fundamental to the final product. Bush however, knowingly short-circuits these immediate connections through a continuous re-mix of technique, subject matter and approach. The ‘Lady Campbell Weed’ of various titles for example, is another name for Paterson’s Curse, celebrated by apiarists, but the scourge of Australian farming; its resplendent purple flower similarly reflected in the nauseatingly sumptuous palette in which these paintings are made. But where does this lead us? Such correspondences between works wriggle from one’s grasp when almost caught—becoming, as a result, all the more circuitous and difficult to pin down. While the paintings brought together in the ‘purple gallery’ in *Steenhuffel* showcase a continuation ‘in some conceptual form’ of the Venetian red paintings from 1995 and the later use of green in Bush’s *Pomme de terre* series (1998), they also point more tangentially to the fluctuations of fashion and taste throughout European and American history, as well as, on a more prosaic level, those of the art world itself. As Bush expounds:

... Purple has several roles in history. Originally due to its rarity and expense, it was reserved for royalty and held an air of opulence and ceremony. But mixed with this, is how colour (like the work of particular artists) flows in and out of currency with time. Purple had a big hit in the 20s and 30s and then again in the late 60s and early 70s, only to fall into cliché and parody years later. When painting *I have come to the creek*, several tubes of purple were purchased in the attempt to find the most vibrant possible; with all that purple, it was bound to re-occur in other works years later.

... Rather than pinpoint any particular source, I will say these works (*Lady Campbell Weed: William of Orange* and *Groninger Koek*) come from an interest in fluctuations in European and American history that relate to cultural shifts; more specifically, how artists’ careers ebb and flow with time. Once-successful salon painters in their day can, in the eyes of the art world, almost disappear (some not without reason). A good example is Clement Greenberg naming Jules Olitski the greatest painter of our time. History as it runs out hasn’t revered Olitski in that light, not at this stage anyway.

As an artist who has lived and continued to paint through the endless ‘deaths’ and revivals of painting decreed across the decades, Bush remains ever-conscious of the irony of his own position. On one level, the perilous pick-up-sticks wooden structures, strange heraldic forms, and vast array of log cabins thatfloat within Bush’s paintings are an ode to the unknown maker, raising questions of authorship, taste, value and ‘signature style’ that play against and within his own instantly recognisable images. The artist’s recent body of gouaches, *Saunders Cuthbert* (2013–14), for example, both depict and venerate the chook shed. Encompassing a catalogue of different shed styles—from simple wooden enclosures,
shrunken replicas of North American farmhouses to streamlined modernist factories—this series presents the viewer with a suite of extraordinary structures whose imaginative design extends far beyond the everyday practicalities and demands of their use. Disconcertingly ‘out of time’—neither of the present or the past—their sepia palette nevertheless evokes a sense of history and of memory (with all its ‘tricks’ of accuracy, re-writing and subsequent fabrication).

This interest in the traditional use of images as recording tools, instruments of learning and as conveyors of information is also apparent in the, it must be said, rather whacky group of works from the University Art Collection that Stephen Bush has included within the exhibition. Described by the artist as a kind of ‘mad uncle art’, the selection of objects ranges from prints by celebrated colonial artists such as Nicholas Chevalier, ST Gill and John Gould’s work (one cannot help but imagine that Bush’s selection of Gould was at least partly informed by childhood memories of the ubiquitous Gould League of Victoria’s flora and fauna posters of the 1960s and 70s); watercolours and botanical illustrations by unknown artists; drawings by Melbourne-based architect Lloyd Orton; a pair of carved wooden panels, and a wonderfully naïve and charming series of ink drawings of birds on wooden panels from a grand Victorian house in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. Displayed in the same gallery as the artist’s purple paintings, these works together raise often unspoken questions about the politics, hidden stories and idiosyncrasies of institutional collecting, just as their very presence within the exhibition space cannot help but suggest a relationship to Stephen Bush’s own practice (possible areas of influence, confluence and interest?). True to historical form however, this sense of possible connection to Bush’s work remains nothing but a whisper; a cheeky and indeterminate suggestion that oscillates, and ultimately, refuses to settle.

Related issues of authority, authorship and intent similarly ripple around Coppersmith (2014), the painted wall mural adjacent to the large group of beekeeper works that are displayed en masse in the Potter’s level one gallery. A deliberate translation or schematic of an intricate (and mass produced) paisley design sourced by Bush, the execution of Coppersmith by a group of students from the Victorian College of the Arts’ Painting program informally mirrors the traditional atelier model, in which the artist assumes the position of both mentor and director. While its explosive areas of bold, clashing colour gleefully amplifies the celebratory chorus of Bush’s own work, its presence, along with the collection works displayed in the gallery below, similarly encourages us to ponder the complex web of issues and value judgements that separate the artist from the artisan, and the craft of simply making something well, from art. In the end, this exhibition is, of course, both an acknowledgement and celebration of the ongoing contribution and work of Stephen Bush, painter; but the work itself, with all its twists, turns and dead ends, never allows us to assume this position easily or lightly.

Kelly Gellatly, Stephen Bush: Steenhuffel, catalogue essay, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2014.

Notes

1. With its related notions of ‘ownership’ and, within an Australian context, the ongoing legacy of colonisation.
2. Liza Statton, ‘No consolation prizes’, Stephen Bush: Gelderland (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2007), 17. Statton also notes a biographical connection here, as Bush grew up on his family’s farm in Pennyroyal, near Colac, in rural Victoria.
3. Email correspondence with the author, 17 February 2014.
Teacher notes

This resource presents suggested tasks and reflective questions to support students’ research and inquiry into the exhibition Stephen Bush: Steenhuffel.

This exhibition offers students of VCE Studio Arts an opportunity to engage in and explore the methods and considerations involved in the presentation of Stephen Bush’s artworks. Specific characteristics of this exhibition offer students a rich experience to engage with key knowledge and skills of VCE Studio Arts Unit 4: Art industry contexts.

Suggested approaches are provided for teachers to inform the development of tasks relevant to this area of study.

Further tasks have been designed to address key knowledge and skills of VCE Studio Arts in Areas of Study 2 and 3 of Units 1, 2 and 3. Whilst the tasks have been identified as relevant to specific areas of study through the use of headings, aspects can be reorganised according to the needs of students and teachers.

Teachers of VCE Art Units 1–4 may choose to adapt the visual analysis tasks to support an understanding of aspects of the Analytical Frameworks.

Further classroom discussions and tasks to be led by teachers may also offer students the opportunity to reflect upon and evaluate their own art making explorations undertaken in Unit 1 and their progress through the individual design process of Unit 3.

Reflective written tasks to be undertaken within the gallery are identified with this icon.

Reflective tasks for students’ practical artmaking processes are identified with this icon.

Classroom tasks are identified with this icon.

Teachers can use the reflection questions to support classroom discussions to assist students’ practice in the use of appropriate art language and terminology applicable to the study. Collaborative classroom discussions can offer a rich resource for students to draw upon when annotating their own working practice. This practice supports students to develop concepts and assist their responses to reflective tasks.

Unit 4: Art industry contexts

Founded in 1972, the Ian Potter Museum of Art is the University of Melbourne’s art museum and is the largest university-based museum in Australia. The Potter manages the University art collection, a rich resource of art and artefacts spanning Neolithic to contemporary.

The Potter displays art from the University collection as well as from public and private collections from around Australia and the world. Working with living artists, the Potter participates directly in the development and promotion of contemporary art. Public programs such as gallery floor talks and lectures, professional development for teachers, publications and social media encourage engagement, learning and the exchange of ideas.

The Potter is both a cultural and educational facility, serving the University of Melbourne’s campus community and the general public.

The Potter collects, preserves, displays, interprets and engages with contemporary and historical works of art thereby advancing appreciation of Australia’s cultural heritage on a local, national and international level, and supporting the University of Melbourne as a leading teaching and research institution.

Task:

Before visiting the exhibition students can browse the gallery website www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

To support the understanding of the role and purpose of the public gallery, students can respond to the following key knowledge questions.

• What is the role and purpose of the Ian Potter Museum of Art?
• How does the Potter’s mission support Australian culture and contemporary arts?
• What methods does the Potter use to promote and market art?
Reviewing curatorial considerations and exhibition design

The Vizard Foundation Contemporary Artist Project has allowed Stephen Bush to ‘push the parameters of both the display of his work and the exhibition experience’ (Gellatly, 2014: 20).

The exhibition presents three distinct but interrelated aspects of his practice across the different gallery spaces; the landscape, the use of purple hues and the recurring beekeeper motif.

Task:

As you move through the exhibition notice how the groupings of art works connect to each other.

...these groups of works are no way contained by the walls of the spaces that house them, and continue to remain in dialogue through the reappearance of various shared attributes... (Gellatly, 2014: 21).

Make notes on how you perceive the placement of art works support the curator’s description.

Alongside the series of purple paintings, Stephen Bush has also included a selection of historical artworks and objects made by other artists, some known and celebrated, and others, unknown. Bush has selected the artefacts from the University art collection and the group ranges from prints, carved wooden panels and botanical illustrations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist unknown</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Untitled (Two decorative panels) date unknown (detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 x 52.1 x 2.1 cm, 53 x 50.4 x 2.3 cm</td>
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<tr>
<td>The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973.0744.001</td>
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<td>1973.0744.002</td>
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<tr>
<th>Bluff 1990–01</th>
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<tr>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
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<tr>
<td>171.5 x 141 cm</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Cbus Collection of Australian Art</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Describe your viewing experience of the deliberate placement of artefacts alongside Stephen Bush’s paintings.

Reflect upon the selection of the collected works and artefacts from the University art collection and the subject matter of Stephen Bush’s paintings.

How does the inclusion of these artefacts contribute toward another layer of meaning for the viewer about Bush’s work?

Alongside Bush’s ‘beekeeper’ series is a mural, Coppersmith (2014), a translation of a mass-produced paisley design sourced by Bush. This mural was painted by a group of students from the Victorian College of the Arts’ Painting program.

Stephen Bush was both the director and mentor of this student work.

Reflect on the visual elements of the mural as a complement to the ‘beekeeper’ paintings and consider the act of production, the artist as director and the group of students as the producers.

How does the mural Coppersmith reinforce the themes of the ‘beekeeper’ series of paintings both visually and conceptually?

Additional classroom discussion topics

- What are some of the issues that arise when artists employ artisans to produce artworks?
- What makes Stephen Bush’s direction of the student mural different to how other artists may have employed artisans? Reference other contemporary artists who have employed this practice such as Australian artist Patricia Piccinini and British artist, Damien Hirst.
- What are some of the considerations an artist may need to review when appropriating design or the work of another artist?

While its explosive areas of bold, clashing colour gleefully amplifies the celebratory chorus of Bush’s own work, its presence, along with the collection works displayed in the gallery below, similarly encourages us to ponder the complex web of issues and value judgements that separate the artist from the artisan, and the craft of simply making something well, from art (Gellatly, 2014: 22).
Task:

Write a review that details the distinctive characteristics of this exhibition. Refer to the following for support:

• The Commission of the Vizard Foundation Contemporary Artist Project;
• Themes throughout the exhibition;
• The presentation of artworks;
• The involvement of the artist in the curatorial process;
• The inclusion of other art works and objects made by other artists and craft workers in the exhibition;
• Your own interpretation of the exhibition.
Looking at the work

Stephen Bush’s paintings offer students a rich resource to examine diverse painting applications and processes along with his conceptual ideas and themes related to history.

Bush’s paintings propose many questions about the post-colonial world through an existentialist philosophy. This approach focuses on the unique and individual experience of an indifferent and sometimes hostile society that may regard human existence as unexplainable. The ideas within Bush’s paintings evoke reflection and propose questions about how freedom of choice is met with questions of responsibility for possible consequences of one’s actions.

It can be valuable to support visual analysis through research of appropriate historical influences that impact the narrative of the work.

Exploring the interpretation of ideas

The influences upon Stephen Bush’s paintings are broad and varied. He was born in rural Victoria and his work evidences a fondness for old farm equipment, machinery and built structures. His figurative narratives employ a parody of historical references to create new questions for a contemporary world. The existential questions provoked by his narratives are supported by the styles in which he paints and the visual elements, metaphors and symbols he uses to present his ideas.

Shout on the hills of glory 2008
oil on canvas
200 x 300 cm
The Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne
Task:

Build a resource to be shared collectively in the classroom comprising of the influences on Stephen Bush’s work. Small student groups can conduct internet and library research to collect images of nineteenth-century European and American painting. In their research, students are encouraged to consider the dramatic landscapes of J.M.W. Turner, the romantic portraits of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, the sense of detachment and alienation in the figurative paintings of Édouard Manet, the dramatic terrain of John Martin’s landscapes, the Alpine landscapes of Henry Lewis, the monochromatic painting and psychedelic colour palette of Andy Warhol and Pop art.

The collection of images can be used in the classroom as evidence for reviewing, examining and discussing source references when students explore the recurring motifs and metaphors used in Bush’s paintings.

John Gould
Mycteria Australis c. 1840s
56.5 x 38.5 cm
The University of Melbourne Art Collection.
Gift of the Society of Collectors 1951
1951.0008
Interpreting art

The legacy of post colonialism is very much a part of contemporary Australian visual culture and Stephen Bush’s work resonates with this.

There is a consistent interplay between image and technique, and subject matter and content in Bush’s work. These visual and conceptual elements are often employed in contrast with each other, providing the opportunity to contemplate layers of meaning. Familiar imagery juxtaposed with ambiguous situations and odd contexts often create more questions for the viewer.

In his painting *Type cast* (1998), Bush references the 1930s storybook character Babar the elephant from the children’s book by Jean de Brunhoff. In the story, Babar travels to Paris from Africa, where he becomes ‘civilised’ by Western society. Having adopted Western cultural dress, customs, and behaviours, Babar returns to Africa to offer his fellow elephants a new ‘civilised’ approach to life.

Type cast creates a psychological tension for the viewer through the juxtaposition of ‘high art’ classicism in the romantic landscape, with a figure in an elephant costume that recalls Babar the elephant, a fictional and humorous ‘low art’ character.

In this painting, Bush presents two figures wearing elephant costumes against a dramatic, alpine landscape. The characters are positioned in a classical master and servant-type pose, perhaps knowledgeable teacher/guide and submissive student. The standing elephant wears a yellow toga and gestures toward the summit behind him, with his right hand. The other elephant, on bent knee, grasps the cloth, looking up at the draped elephant. In his organisation of elements, Bush has created a sense of elevation by positioning the figures higher in the shallow foreground.

**Task:** With reference to the painter’s positioning of figures, propose what ideas Bush is asking the viewer to contemplate? What questions does this painting raise?

**Task:** Study the painting *Type cast* and propose how the contrast of a classical majestic landscape and the ‘cartoon-like’ character of Babar could relate to the history of white settlement in Australia.

How could Babar be interpreted as a metaphor for colonisation?

Why do you think Bush has selected this particular fictional character as a metaphor?

How does the classic historical American style in which this dramatic landscape has been painted offer clues to the ideas within this painting?
Discuss how Bush uses visual elements and principles to reinforce ideas.

To support your response you may wish to refer to the composition of the painting; the scale of the figures in relation to the landscape; the position of the figures in relation to each other; the relationship between the figures and the landscape and the element of colour.

**Unit 2: Ideas and styles in artworks**  
**Unit 3: Professional art practices and styles**

**Task:**

- What storybook characters interested you as a child? What made them interesting to you?
- Do you have any childhood picture books or animations that could be used as metaphors to inform your current ideas?
- How might you employ parody and humour in your art making to draw attention to the communication of issues that concern you?
- Does your art reference any historical or cultural styles?
- How can your application of selected techniques offer a deeper insight into your communication of ideas?
Application of materials and techniques

Unit 2: Design exploration
Unit 3: Design processes

Bush’s painterly range is as varied and free-flowing as his subject matter, moving from figurative realism to lurid abstraction created with mixes of psychedelic colour.

In several of his ‘beekeeper’ paintings Bush has applied a viscous mix of enamel and oil paint that appears to be poured across the ground of the canvas. The shiny paint creates fluid shapes that seem to spread and melt into a landscape of mountains, grassland plains and valleys. It appears that the pools of paint have been applied in a spontaneous and automatic manner finding their own way to suggest more recognised forms to be further developed by the artist. Bush builds the story of the painting through the development and placement of figures and objects as suggested by the primary groundwork.
Task:

Review the beekeeper paintings and make notes about the visual elements that recur throughout them.

What effect does the fluorescent colour have on your eyes?

What meaning does this colour application provide for you?

Observe how Bush has used paint as a material in the ‘beekeeper’ works and examine his application of different techniques to produce a distinctive aesthetic and style.

Make notes on your observations; refer to his use of vibrant colour, the contrast of surface textures and realistic brushwork techniques.

Propose how the paint applications contribute to the meaning of the stories of the paintings.

What questions do the paintings raise for you?

Explore the contrast of the ‘beekeeper’ paintings with the monochromatic hues of paintings such as Lady Campbell Weed: Kenley Lass (2010).

Make simple notes about the visual qualities of these paintings. How are these paintings different again to Bush’s recent series of sepia gouaches depicting chook sheds? Refer to applications of paint and technical style.
Using a table, document the way Stephen Bush has employed materials, techniques and processes. Student notes can be used for further classroom tasks aimed at developing and expanding language used in discussing art.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Painting series</th>
<th>Materials and techniques</th>
<th>Aesthetic quality and style</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beekeeper series</td>
<td>For example, oil on canvas</td>
<td>For example, vibrant, psychedelic colour; fluid abstracted application of paint; and refined realism in figurative elements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple paintings</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monochromatic sepia art works</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interpretation of subject matter: Beekeeper series

Unit 1: Interpretation of materials and techniques
Unit 3: Art practices and styles

Bush is a prolific artist who often uses repetition of characters and scenes throughout his series of works. He seems to have a particular fondness for the beekeeper.

Created over extended periods and returned to and re-worked time and again, these paintings … embody a respect for process and hard work that is ultimately subsumed by both the ‘doing’ and the end result (Gellatly, 2014: 22).

Task:

Back in the classroom, research the profession of the beekeeper. What degree of commitment may be required to be an apiarist? What is the history of this profession? What would be some of the hazards of the job?

As an artist who has lived and continued to paint through endless ‘deaths’ and revivals of painting decried across the decades, Bush remains ever conscious of the irony of his own position (Gellatly, 2014: 22).

Reflect upon why Bush continues to represent the beekeeper in his paintings.

Compile a short writing piece that proposes how his beekeeper character may be somewhat autobiographical for the artist.

Unit 2: Ideas and styles
Unit 3: Professional art practices

Task:

Have you used paint in your art making processes?

Consider referencing Bush’s applications, his use of colour and the method of combining a contrast of techniques to produce different aesthetic effects to inspire your art making processes.

Reflect on how trialling contrasting applications could support the communication of your ideas outlined in your exploration proposal.
Sepia gouache on paper works

Unit 3: Design process

Disconcertingly ‘out of time’—neither of the present or the past—their sepia palette nevertheless evokes a sense of history and of memory (Gellatly, 2014: 22).

The artist’s recent body of monochromatic gouache paintings are of chook sheds, and present an array of sometimes odd wooden structures, including miniature replicas of North American farmhouses and some that resemble modernist factory design (Gellatly, 2014: 22).

Task:

Review Bush’s sepia gouaches and contemplate the artist’s birthplace and cultural context of being an Australian growing up in a rural area in the late 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Make notes about the subject matter of the sepia gouaches.

• How do the visual elements of these art works reinforce their subject matter?

• Propose why you think Bush wants us to contemplate history?

Contemplate what other meanings these art works may hold for the viewer.

Consider the following:

• Historical references

• The relationship between the rural landscape and farm culture

• The work of the designer, the maker and the builders of farm structures

• The demands of farming culture as a metaphor for Stephen Bush’s constant and prolific practice

• How the inclusion of these art works in the exhibition reinforces the theme of labour and discipline in art practice.
Unit 2: Ideas in artworks
Unit 3: Professional art practices

The purple gallery

In the exhibition there is a gallery that presents a series of paintings created with enamel and oil paint on canvas employing mainly purple monochromatic hues. Stephen Bush has used other colours, namely sienna red and green, in other series of monochromatic paintings.

Historically purple was the colour worn by Roman emperors, legal magistrates and Catholic bishops. In conversation with the curator, Bush has discussed his use of purple;

‘... Purple has several roles in history. Originally due to its rarity and expense, it was reserved for royalty and held an air of opulence and ceremony. But mixed with this, is how colour (like the work of particular artists) flows in and out of currency with time. Purple had a big hit in the 20s and 30s and then again in the late 60s and early 70s, only to fall into cliché and parody years later. When painting I have come to the creek, several tubes of purple were purchased in the attempt to find the most vibrant possible; with all that purple, it was bound to re-occur in other works years later’ (Gellatly, 2014: 21).

Task:

Reflect on your selection and use of colour in your own art making processes. Research the historical use of colours you have employed in your work. How can your selection of colours reinforce the ideas outlined in your exploration proposal?

Make authentic annotations in your design process journal that connect your research and practice with the use of colour.
Unit 3: Design process

In many of his paintings, Stephen Bush relates his subject matter to artists’ practice.

‘... Rather than pinpoint any particular source, I will say these works (Lady Campbell Weed: William of Orange and Groninger koek) come from an interest in fluctuations in European and American history that relate to cultural shifts: more specifically, how artists’ careers ebb and flow with time. Once-successful salon painters in their day can, in the eyes of the art world, almost disappear...’ (Gellatly, 2014: 21)

Bush has referenced ‘Lady Campbell Weed’ in the titles of a number of his paintings. Lady Campbell Weed, also known as Paterson’s curse, is a purple flowering plant that is considered a valuable resource for apiarists but toxic for farm grazing animals.

Task:

Consider Stephen Bush’s words in relation to artistic practice and the meaning of ‘Lady Campbell Weed’. Propose how Bush has used visual elements and titles to reinforce ideas in his paintings.
Unit 1: Interpretation of ideas
Unit 2: Ideas and styles

Task:

Investigate the working processes of Stephen Bush, starting with these websites:

http://www.stephenjbush.com/work


Produce a resource about the work of Stephen Bush by responding to the following questions:

• How does Stephen Bush consider himself as an artist?

• What thinking processes does he use to make his art?

• What does he make art about?

• What are the recurring motifs and metaphors in his paintings?

• What techniques does he use to make his paintings?

• What are the influences on his work?

• How do you relate to the ideas in Stephen Bush’s work?

A caretaker #3 1988
oil on canvas
71 x 60 cm
Collection of Michael Schwarz and David Clouston, Melbourne
Extended essay questions for teacher consideration

When students have completed their gallery visit and selected tasks they can draw on their knowledge to develop an extended writing piece. These tasks may also be considered for assessing key skills appropriate to the Unit 3: Professional art practices and styles.

• Considering your knowledge of Stephen Bush’s practice, propose why he may use recurring motifs in his work and sometimes appropriates his earlier work, repainting the same subject matter in new paintings.

• Analyse the aesthetic qualities and signature style of Stephen Bush’s paintings. Discuss with reference to the three separate galleries in the exhibition, Steenhuffel.

• Identify key themes present in the work of Stephen Bush. Consider these in relation to the artist’s influences, and the cultural context within which he works.

Extended responses may consider reference to the following content:

• Analysis of the ways selected paintings reflect subject matter

• Analysis of how the artist employs materials, techniques and processes in his work

• Reference to art elements including colour, texture, form and figure and discussion of how they contribute toward aesthetic qualities

• Analysis of how technical applications support meaning for Bush’s subject matter and contribute toward aesthetic qualities.

Tomintoul 2013
oil on canvas
145 x 198 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne