Blackwood skyline
Stephen Bush: work in progress #5

The **Work in progress** series at the Ian Potter Museum of Art commenced in 2001 in a spirit of advocacy; we wanted to share our interest in the achievement of artists we admired. In practice, the series has brought us closer to the artists involved. Staging the exhibitions has required careful discussions with artists about their projects, their careers and their ambitions for their art. Along the way, the word ‘work’ has taken on subtly different meanings. Initially, we wanted to emphasise the ongoing nature of an artist’s practice. Increasingly, the word directed us to something very simple: art was a matter of what artists do. This is not meant in a literal sense. Reducing art to a mere job of work is just as deceptive as the opposite pole – envisioning it as a mysterious, alchemical process. **Work in progress** has directed us to the ‘daily practice’ of art: the ongoing reflection on materials, making and meaning that emerges when artists work at their art.

Presenting the art of Stephen Bush triggers further resonances of that word ‘work’. His paintings depict sites at which work takes place, the tools and machinery used in the course of work, the products of various work practices, and even the aftermath of work. Certain of his strategies, such as repetition, evoke the forms of work peculiar to industrial economies, while others, in his history paintings, reflect on the conventions by which paintings ‘work’ as narrative or allegory. And throughout this exhibition, visitors are invited to meditate on the combination of mental and manual work peculiar to painting.

Art is often spoken of in ways that imply that it is a task involving immense sacrifice. We read romantic accounts of artists working in isolation, working obsessively or at the expense of their health. It’s been my pleasure to see Stephen Bush at work over many years; a pleasure heightened by the knowledge that he will have nothing of such myths. In Bush’s art I see purposeful, challenging work; work that is never fully left behind but which, in its everyday quality, is at the core of his life, rather than being at odds with it.

Dr Chris McAuliffe