

# Waves of colour

Lyn DiCiero | August 19, 2015, 11:11 am

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WA Focus artist Helen Smith. Picture: Christophe Canato.

## When Perth artist Helen Smith took a sneak peek at her exhibition installed at the Art Gallery of WA, her first reaction was: "Wow! I like it."

The second in the State gallery's WA Focus series after the recent Abdullah brothers exhibition, Smith's candy-coloured canvases immediately pack a punch before your eye is drawn to her optically charged patterns on canvas and minimalist photographs.

Smith says exhibiting at AGWA is a fantastic opportunity. "It's a really great program they've initiated here because it will benefit a lot of WA artists, particularly when so many galleries have closed," she says. "It gives you more exposure to an audience you might not have otherwise and attracts a different sort of demographic than a commercial gallery."

Smith's works are also in collections such as the National Gallery of Australia and Daimler in Berlin. She is a founding member of the Perth-based Australian Centre for Concrete Art (AC4CA), a collective of local and international artists whose works are painted directly on to walls.

Through a partnership between AGWA and the Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority, an AC4CA project by Smith and her partner, artist Jeremy Kirwan-Ward, runs in tangent with the exhibition in the Urban Orchard outside the gallery in the Perth Cultural Centre.

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Inside the gallery, the exhibition tracks Smith's work over the past 15 years since her graduation from Curtin University, with paintings and photographs held in the State Art Collection.

For the first time audiences will see the subtle relationship between these two streams of her practice. The selection includes her early Bordello series, where she gained after-hours access to brothels from Sydney and Kalgoorlie to Amsterdam.

Smith says her gender helped open doors. "Because I was a girl with a camera, I was allowed to go in. I wasn't interested in photographing the workers, I was just interested in photographing the space and the detritus that you could find."

The minimalist result is a hallmark of her output. "Because the works are not telling you the whole story, you have to engage with them, and every viewer does that differently," she says.

A pink monochrome painting, created at the same time as the Bordello series, reveals an early fascination with the psychological effects of colour, and pink has recurred in her work ever since.

"When you look at a colour like that, because there's nothing else to look at, what do you think of? How does it affect you? I'm interested in the cognitive and affective process, really."

Across the gallery, two works titled Blue Highway, named after a font, feature letters in bright orange and, again, pink.

A large-scale photograph taken from a fast train while in Spain, is a blur of colours. Small-scale photographs found at a flea market in Berlin, and spliced together in pairs, allude to a lingering East/West mentality with some, despite the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989.

Other photographs show a football game on television, distorted by generations of lenses and interruptions in reception.

Four works on canvas, featuring contracting and expanding patterned lines, are not at all what they seem.

Inspired by embroidered maps of the world by Alighiero e Boetti, shown with their corresponding flags, Smith's work blends the colours within each flag proportionately. Australia, for instance, with its mostly royal-blue flag, and smaller red and white components, appears as a purple stripe.

Each painting represents countries participating in a global alliance, such as the United Nations, UNESCO, or the Svalbard Global Seed Vault (in Norway), the curves of the pattern representing the push and pull present in any organisation.

Smith says her interest in social and cultural systems has provided material for many of the works. "I like to think of the canvas, wall or photograph as a container for these ideas," she says.

Gallery curator of contemporary Australian art Jenepher Duncan says the exhibition makes an even more emphatic statement because of the architecture of the space.

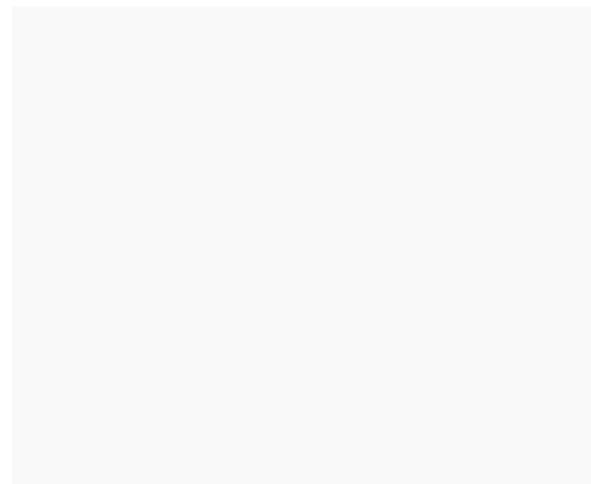
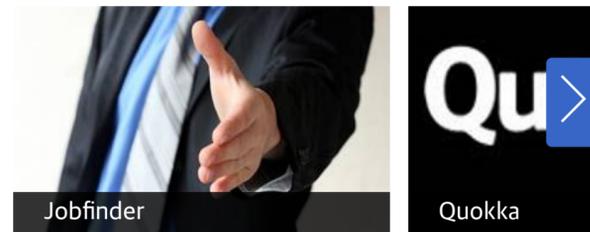
"The soaring height of the gallery space is fantastic – much higher than in the main galleries. It's the sort of wall scale contemporary practice needs."

**WA Focus: Helen Smith** is showing at the Art Gallery of WA until October 8. Book for a free artist talk on Saturday at 2pm. Details: [artgallery.wa.gov.au/events\\_programs](http://artgallery.wa.gov.au/events_programs).

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