

Shameful lives of walled suburbia

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Smiley is banal but somehow appropriate in the context of the other works.

VISUAL ARTS Wall Anthony Muia Art Collective WA

Picturing the strangeness and foibles of humanity in all their varying layers of complexity is quite a feat.

But this is the project of local artist Anthony Muia, who has been working on the human figure and its gritty confrontations with existential realities for more than two decades.

His current exhibition at the Art Collective WA, titled Wall, demonstrates this. It features a series of new mixed-media works characteristic of Muia's idiosyncratic style.

It might be a surprise to find that, as the title of the show suggests, he has indeed built a literal stone wall in the centre of the gallery.

The wall is substantial and well built as a result of his trade as a stonemason and the collection of various rocks over a number of years.

The wall makes a strong physical as well as metaphorical statement.

Putting up walls is a psychological state of defence and walls between people hinder clear communication, belie intimacy and keep people apart.

They are symbols of protection and entrapment.

What does this mean in regard to the paintings encircling the wall and the various figures pictured within them?

Adjacent to the wall a large grid of small images provides an insight into the rest of the works.

Titled Wall of Shame, it features collaged and painted people and text. The figures painted or cut out are in various states, often naked, partying, debauched, meditating and fighting.

It is a picture of suburbia and the at times shameful lives lived behind suburban walls.

It does not present an attractive vision of humanity, but rather delves into the darker aspects of the suburban psyche.

Humans in all their states of vulnerability, excess and pathos are the characters that populate Muia's works.

The primarily watercolour portraits on the surrounding walls focus in on specific individuals, allowing us a glimpse of the artist's approach with greater intimacy. In the first painting, Pom Poms and Porcelain, a woman has fallen on pom poms on the floor of a garishly coloured interior wearing a brightly patterned dress. She grasps her head in her hands and closes her eyes as her face twists into a pained expression. Her pictured state is one of emotional collapse and inability to keep on going. She has hit a wall. The least garish work in the show is Soft Animal of Your Body. In this work pastel tones dominate and a mother is pictured feeding her baby.

While it should be a nurturing image, there is harshness to the baby's small piercing eye and the mottled flesh.

Seemingly at odds with the rest of the show, but connected to the first painting picturing pom poms, is a large circle of pink-and-red-toned pom poms. The shape of a smiley face is formed in its centre.

It is banal, but somehow appropriate in the context of the other works.

Overall, Muia's works are defined by strong use of colours to reflect strong themes and a messy style used to reflect messy human predicaments. They run across the wall in washes of pink, red, yellow and turquoise. The line work is fluid, the paintwork splatters and layers of the image are cut and built up on the surface of the canvas.

In all their excess and disarray, these paintings are highly consistent and clearly display a style that has been carefully crafted and refined over a long period of time. The exhibition runs until September 3.