

KIRSTY BUDGE: *IF YOU'RE GONNA SPEW, SPEW INTO THIS*

ESSAY BY NADIAH ABDULRAHIM

Last year, after returning to Melbourne from a month-long residency in Dunedin, Kirsty Budge didn't paint for six months – the longest period in a decade. This heralded a reckoning of sorts, the lull in creating art replaced with months of difficult personal excavation and, eventually, some relief.

In December 2019, Budge returned to painting – and life – with a newfound vigour, as if to make up for lost time. This year was to be the year of saying yes, of being open to new things, of sharing experiences. After spending 18 months indoors – firstly while working on *The Doing*, Budge's solo exhibition at this gallery in April 2019, followed with six months away from painting – Budge was ready for anything.

As it turned out, it was not to be for Budge, or indeed, for any of us. Instead, she spent most of this year painting in her home studio, creating a new body of work for *If you're gonna spew, spew into this*. During Melbourne's lockdown, she dedicated herself to one painting a day, rotating between a suite of them over several months, resulting in the seven in this exhibition.

These paintings are a non-linear, compressed memoir of a lifetime's worth of emotions and experiences. Painting a life lived is how she describes it. Within the confines of each frame, Budge communes with what has been and also what might or could be, learning more about herself – and becoming more comfortable with who that might be – through the process. Individually and collectively, these works are puzzles used by Budge to figure things out. They are puzzles for the viewer too.

What we see in these paintings in front of us may or may not have existed in reality. What we're really being offered is an insight into Budge's interior life, her hopes, her dreams. Here are retrieved memories and manifestations of joy, comfort, freedom, adventure, gratitude, pleasure and lightness – along with grief, sadness, and mourning – all furtively revealed through motifs and symbols borrowed from photographs that nearly cover her studio walls. These are personal photographs from Budge's trips to Gippsland, Dunedin, Paris, Rome, Barcelona and other European cities, alongside images of cemeteries, Roman architecture, nature, sunrises and sunsets. Amongst it all are

references to films, politics, pop culture, psychoanalysis, too. Nothing is off-limits or implausible in these paintings.

Budge has always used visuals from her life as references, but over the years, they have become increasingly personal. The Philip Guston quote, "we are image-makers, we are image-ridden", comes to mind.

One of the many pleasures of looking at Budge's work is trying to work through the rich lexicon within. What it means to me will ultimately be different to what it means to someone else, and of course, what it means to Budge herself. There are suggestions of what it may mean to her, but we can never be sure. These paintings warrant a generous, lingering look, in order for the reward to appear. And that in itself makes it all the more appealing.

In Budge's studio there's a copy of *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*. It's heavily bookmarked. She has been using it to try to decipher her dreams, parts of which have made it onto the canvas. Snakes, cats, birds, hands.

For any artist, there's a gulf of vulnerability somewhere between the process of creating and exhibiting art. When we view Budge's paintings, we're being let in on some secrets, and it's entirely up to us what we do with them. By this point, she's worked through the puzzles, and they have served their purpose. The paintings are free to mean what it means to us, they now belong as much to us as they do to her.

Budge always begins her paintings the same way: with a wash of colour, followed by an assessment of the canvas in search of tones, forms, textures and space before adding to it. Shapes and layers slowly emerge over the course of months, and sometimes, if things aren't quite right, they dissolve with barely a hint of their presence left behind. Only on closer inspection do you see these ghosts lurking in the shadows. The process of painting isn't precious and through it, Budge reminds us that nothing is ever really permanent. With time, there is change.

– Nadiah Abdulrahim