

Rainforests – the forgotten landscapes of Australian art

While national parks have saved what little is left of our rainforests, research scientist turned professional artist Phil Ryan now wants to bring them into their rightful place in Australia's art world.

His latest exhibition of distinctive paintings called " Rainforests – Art's Forgotten Landscape" on show at Mawson Gallery features scenes from a number of NSW's diverse range of rainforests - from sub-tropical, warm temperate, cool temperate, and littoral rainforests of mainly northern NSW.

The exhibition will be opened by Professor Peter Kanowski, Professor of Forestry, Forest and environmental policy, forest genetics, forestry on 8 April.

Phil, a former Canberran, became a full time painter in 2005 after more than 25 years as a scientist with Forests NSW and CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products.

He now works from a studio in the old Kunama Public School house south of Batlow.

"Our rainforests just do not figure large in Australian art" says Phil.

"It's true that some of the early colonial paintings depicted the wet forests of Victoria, but compared to the impressionists' delight in old stately eucalypts and pastoral scenes, rainforests have not inspired Australia's landscape painters.

"There are some obvious reasons for this avoidance. Rainforests are inhospitable places for artists.

"They are dark, wet and humid with many irritations such as insects, ticks, leeches, stinging trees and lawyer vines that make open air painting inconvenient and impractical at best.

"The sheer amount and diversity of rainforest vegetation means there are few panoramic views where backgrounds are visible except in rare clearings or streams. You can only see short distances and there is a lot of foreground 'noise' such as vines, ferns and shrubs.

"At ground level, light is limited by the mass of vegetation in fierce competition through buttress roots, lianas, strangler figs and epiphytes."

Phil says another reason for neglect of rainforest in Australian landscape art could be their apparent lack of distinctive "Australian" landscape features.

"The nationalistic icons of the gum tree and desert mountain range are instantly identifiable as Australian whether painted by Streeton, Heysen, Namatjira, Nolan or Hart.

"But could you recognize a rainforest landscape as being Australian instead of Papuan or Indonesian or South American?"

Phil believes there are distinctive Australian rainforest features and he has explored them in this, his third solo show.

Phil has produced paintings using textural relief and partial 3D sculptural features to enhance perspective and capture various rainforest traits.

“I wanted to represent some of the unique features of rainforests that strike any visitor to these landscapes - their dense, diverse, multi-layered vegetation all competing for survival.

“Distinctive sculptural forms of buttress roots, aerial roots, lianas, vines, epiphytes and palm fronds produce unusual forms and textures.”

“I wanted to capture the feeling of claustrophobia and ominous resonances you sometimes get in rainforests,” he said.

“Rainforests – Art’s Forgotten Landscape” exhibition begins at MAWSON GALLERY, 63 Wilkins Street, Mawson on April 8 and runs until May 3. Opening hours are 10.30am – 5.30pm Wednesday to Sunday. Or by appointment anytime. Phone 6161 2177, mobile 0438 473 902. Website: www.mawsongallery.com

Photographs are available at www.mawsongallery.com

Further information about Phil Ryan and his art is available at: www.myopiclandscapes.com.au