



The Distance Between by Bronwen Vaughan-Evans is part of her exhibition 'Memento Mori' showing at the Bank Gallery in Durban.

ELEGIES FOR DREAMS PAST



FINE ART: Bronwen Vaughan-Evans's latest exhibition, 'Memento Mori', confronts death and loss with transcendent beauty, writes PETER MACHEN.

IN "Memento Mori", consummate painter Bronwen Vaughan-Evans returns to what has become her signature technique of sanding away white gesso to reveal a layer of black gesso beneath. Vaughan-Evans, who has more than proved herself in more traditional media, uses this method to remarkable effect, extracting careful detailing and intricacy from her medium while allowing the very technique to be a powerful metaphor for the work's structure of meaning.

This time, she has added pink to the mix, delicately painting over the sanded surface. It is the pink of dying dusk — not dawn — which will shortly give way to darkness. For "Memento Mori" is a reminder that all life is life before death. (the Latin phrase means "remember that you are mortal"). The artist talks about the death of her friend, musician and writer Richard Walne, how it affected her life, and how it pushed her to paint more portraits of her friends. But while the work deals with death and loss, it does so with a beauty that, while muted, is

nonetheless transcendent. Vaughan-Evans suggests that the work is about despair — "and hopefully this is the end of it", she says. I put it to her that the work isn't only about despair; it's also about hope, even if it is hope in the distance. (Barack Obama has just won the U.S. election as we speak). And the exhibition — both warm and stark — is, in a way, an elegy for Richard, for the world he left behind.

'The birds vacillate between sharpness and blur, as does our conception and experience of the world!'

In the past, Vaughan-Evans has used her sanded gesso technique to talk about excavation, exploring notions of surface and uncovering. The simple act of adding pink, which mixes with the combinations of white and black to produce an extraordinarily large palette, has given the work the soft-

ness of memory; memory which so often acts as counterbalance to the weight of things beneath the surface; memory which helps us to live.

The show, which opened at Bank Gallery on Thursday night, is composed of long, thin vertical and horizontal panels. The vertical panels, which are all contained in a single room facing a common centre, are hauntingly rendered life-size portraits of four of the artist's friends, life-size in that the canvas occupies the same physical dimensions as their subjects. The web of connections that exists between these people is re-expressed in the main gallery. Telephone lines, cityscapes and objects that exist as much in memory as in the world occupy a series of thin horizontal canvases in the main gallery.

Vaughan-Evans's work has always occupied a terrain midway between realism and idiom. Her collective body of work contains both a personal and collective bank of memories and meanings. And in "Memento Mori", the paintings begin to function as memories of

memories, as life layers itself upon itself with each new set of experiences and each new remembrance of old experiences. Objects function both as themselves and as memories of themselves. The tree I see every day as I reverse out of my garage and the tree that exists in my conception of the universe move ever closer together as time passes.

Vaughan-Evans points to a gorgeous elongated canvas on which a group of birds occupies a set of telephone lines. The birds vacillate between sharpness and blur, as does our conception and experience of the world. A world of constant, perfect focus would be too much to bear. We talk about the web of wireless connections that might make the physical web of the landline network obsolete; the sadness of a

world without these wires cutting across the sky — a world in which the physical connections have been replaced by intangible ones.

•"Memento Mori", at Bank Gallery until December 12. Open Monday to Friday, 10 am to 4 pm, and on Saturday from 10 am to 1 pm.