

The West Australian

Fight and flight of human spirit

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Behind the innocuous frontage of a small cottage, hidden away in a backstreet of Fremantle, artist Rachel Coad busily works her magic.

Painting upon large painting is stacked either side of a long hallway, leaving just enough room to walk through. In a front room, a canvas seemingly larger than the diminutive artist herself appears haphazardly taped to the wall. It's a work in progress, but undoubtedly bearing the hallmarks of her dreamy, figurative style.

Coad has not forsaken romanticism in *Scramble*, her third solo at Perth Galleries, but fans of her work will likely be surprised by her subject matter. A 6m-long painting of a Harrier jet commandeers the front windows of the gallery. Inside, Coad depicts a beautiful young woman going through the motions of bootcamp-style training. She suggests the unlikely match of the beautiful and the military is as unconventional as it is appealing. "I find a lot of people who used to follow my work early on find this series is a little bit heavy, or dark, for them. I don't think it is."

Having a father who was a former Cessna pilot, Coad says she was never afraid of flicking through aviation magazines. "They were always hanging around the house because my dad was interested in all types of aircraft. I used to draw a lot and the magazines were there. I guess that's why planes were in my life. I find them fascinating machines," she says. Harrier jet paper planes run down the centre of the exhibition, ever more sophisticated than the flimsy versions thrown around in the clumsiness of youth.

"They're like the paper planes you always wanted to create as a kid. I don't have brothers and it's a very masculine thing, I know," she says, adding she and her partner have signed up for flying lessons. "That will really open my brain up to new experiences and learning."

She says *Scramble* is very much about the fight, flight and drive of the human spirit and movement, but also a distillation of her own experience at the gym under the guidance of navy-trained instructors. But don't expect to see the same subject reappear in her work. "I start on a theme and think I'll never tire of it. I think this is it! This is what I'm going to do. But guaranteed, by the end of the year I've had enough of it and I need to move on. Next year it will be something completely different."

Fresh from an exhibition at Gallerysmith in Melbourne, the former illustrator and designer with *The West Australian* for nine years until 2003 says she had a gut feeling there was something else she was meant to be doing. "I thought it was time to have a crack at fine art and see what happened. Having a studio at Artsource in Fremantle really shifted my work, and being picked up by Perth Galleries was fantastic. These things change the course of where your career is going."

With the imminent closure of Perth Galleries in December, Coad says she hasn't thought beyond having a break after the show.

"I really enjoyed working at *The West*, though. I loved that whole deadline-rush thing. It was really exciting seeing the whole paper develop over a number of hours, but I just think now this is truly me. I don't think I'm there yet, but as my work progresses it becomes more me, and closer to my true style. It takes a while to bring that out I think."

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