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An open door to Arkley's final work

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Arts editor

Howard Arkley's final painting, completed weeks before his death in 1999, will go on public display for the first time at the Melbourne Art Fair this month.

Best known for his vibrant and colourful depictions of Australian suburbia, the Melbourne artist died of a heroin overdose aged 48, soon after exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. *Untitled (House) 1999* had been completed only weeks earlier, but has been hidden away ever since.

"Alison [Burton], his wife, essentially packed up the studio and put everything into storage, including this work," says gallerist Kalli Rolfe. "I didn't know of its existence until last year when Alison told me that she had this painting – and that she was ready to release it."

Art historian John Gregory, a friend of Burton and Arkley, was aware of the painting but had until recently had only a few tantalising glimpses of the work through layers of bubble wrap. "I knew there was a painting there, having worked closely with Alison over the years, but she was – for various reasons – not keen to unwrap it," he says.

"When she finally decided it was time to release it, it was a revelation. It's like the culmination of a whole career."

Rolfe says: "I was absolutely overwhelmed. I was shocked with the vibrancy, the beauty, the control, the formalism. It shows all the skills that he had."

The painting shows a close-up view of a house, pared back to its most simple elements and reimagined in pink, blue, yellow and green. Arkley was an avid collector of real estate drawings, and used these as the basis for his suburban series.

"They're almost always specific houses – sometimes you can track

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Gallerist Kalli Rolfe with *Untitled (House) 1999*. Photo: Jason South

down the actual houses that these drawings are based on," says Gregory. He speaks from experience, having hunted down a few of them himself as part of his writing on Arkley's work.

Even if you can't pinpoint the exact address, "it brings a level of familiarity", says Rolfe. "People comment that 'this is just like my grandmother's house' ... and I think, perhaps, the popularity of his suburban paintings is because of that."

Rolfe will show the painting at the art fair as part of a survey of 20 of Arkley's works, spanning the minimalist black-and-white pieces he created in the early '70s through

to furniture installations and the kaleidoscopic and vibrant works of the '90s. Most of the pieces on display will be available for sale, including *Untitled (House) 1999*, which has a listed price of \$1.5 million.

Several of Arkley's works are held by major galleries around Australia. "It's the sort of picture that, really, you hope a museum would buy because it's got that heft, that weight to it," says Gregory. "I think wherever it goes it will be understood to be quite a significant work."

Arkley's great strength, Gregory and Rolfe agree, was that he documented what was around him,

showing the country and society as he saw it. "He riffs off John Brack at times," says Gregory. "Some people don't like the comparison, they feel Brack was a more serious painter, but I don't agree with that. I think he was somebody, like Brack, who thought that there was more to say about suburbia."

Rolfe says: "Instead of following the tradition of the landscape, he wanted to explore his current environment. He wasn't sending up suburbia, he was celebrating it."

The Melbourne Art Fair will be on at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre from February 22 to 25.