

Exhibition

No place like home

Paul Davies shuns people in his paintings to allow the viewer inside, writes ELISSA BLAKE.

There's something a little spooky about a Paul Davies painting. Using vivid block colours and hand-cut stencils, he paints the kind of sleek space-age houses beloved of Palm Springs millionaires: floating concrete slabs, hectares of glass, kidney-shaped swimming pools. Curtains waft invitingly around sliding doors. Palm trees reach for the sky. You can almost hear the tinkle of ice in a highball glass.

But there is no one home. The houses are dark and empty. With no one to swim in them, the pools are mirrors. The skies range from a baleful yellow to an irradiated pink or an ominous black.

"It's almost like something out of an Alfred Hitchcock film," Davies's gallerist, Tim Olsen, says. "There's suspense, a sense of drama when you look at these empty houses and empty pools. It makes you wonder, 'What just happened?'"

"Every show sells out," Olsen says. "Young collectors like his work because they are vibrant and sharp, and they lend themselves to contemporary interiors with a lot of very clean lines."

Davies, 30, is quietly spoken and clearly industrious, a man of regular work habits. At 8am each morning he is already in the Surry Hills studio he shares with a collective of artists, graphic and fashion designers, and the editors of *Vice* magazine. Skateboards and computers vie for space with canvases and paint pots. They're a diverse bunch but disciplined. They bounce ideas around constantly and phone each other if someone doesn't turn up for work.

Ensnconed in his corner of the room overlooking Central Station, Davies admits his paintings "can be eerie" but that it is not intentional. The lack of people in the paintings allows the viewers to step inside the house themselves, he says.

"As soon as you place a figure in a painting, you start making up a story around that person. They become the subject," he explains.

"I want the viewer to wander freely and stop at whatever takes their interest: maybe the pool railings, chairs, foliage or water reflections. It's a bit like Mondrian's early house paintings. They were ghostly and dark but still inviting."

Davies has spent the past seven years photographing and studying modernist architecture around the world. A recent research trip to the US included tours of mid-century modern icons: the Schindler House and the Eames House in Los Angeles; Richard Neutra's Kaufmann House in Palm Springs. While there, Davies dropped in on Frank Sinatra's infamous holiday retreat, Twin Palms, which was designed by Emerson Stewart Williams.

Closer to home, Davies's favourite subjects include the Rose Seidler House in Wahroonga and James Birrell's Centenary Pool in Spring Hill, Brisbane.

"I'm not just interested in the architecture, I'm interested in the art that inspired these buildings and the way they incorporated the landscape," Davies says. "All these architects were looking at new ways of experiencing the environment around them rather than just creating a box to shelter the occupant from the elements."

Born in Sydney, Davies's format-



"There's suspense, a sense of drama when you look at these empty houses and empty pools."

Inviting ... (clockwise from top) the artist in his Surry Hills studio; paintings from his new exhibition, *Empty Pool*; and *Snow Forest Reflection*. Main photo: Marco Del Grande

ive years were spent in New Zealand, Bristol and London before his family settled on the NSW central coast. His father is an ophthalmologist ("he uses the same scalpels I use to cut my stencils to cut eyes") and his mother is a nurse. The family home had no television. But they did have a small art collection including an urban landscape by Jeffrey Smart. It would prove to be a highly influential work for the young artist.

"My parents were scientists in their thinking but hippies at heart. It's a weird combination but I'm like that too," he says. "Everyone in my family is quite rigid and they value discipline and straight lines and logical thinking. That has really had

an effect on me. I find my creativity out of a sense of structure and order and discipline.

"But mum and dad also gave my sister and I a love of nature. They took us on treks around the mountains and lakes in New Zealand and we were always riding our bikes to the beach. I'm sure that's the reason why I want to paint landscapes."

Davies's drawing ability showed early. Aged seven, having demonstrated his flair for reproducing characters in Asterix comics, his father hired a one-on-one art teacher, Gosford landscape painter Kel Connell. "I ended up going to see him every Saturday for seven years," Davies recalls. "I even

turned up on his wedding day. I think that was the only time he ever turned me away.

"I wasn't loving art at school much, I just didn't really feel it there, but at Kel's house in the bush it was different. I could experiment and I learned to paint houses and landscapes and about colour.

"Sometimes we didn't paint at all, we just talked."

Davies's enigmatic yet colourful landscapes ("The brighter the better and the weirder the better, colour is the best way to invite anybody in," he says) are in demand. Asking prices have jumped from the high hundreds to about \$13,000 in less than five

years. He hopes commercial success will enable him to travel, deepen his research and enrich his work. "That's what I love about David Hockney and Peter Doig," Davies says of two of the artists who have influenced him most.

"They paint what's in front of them. I like the idea of making a travel journal of what you've done and what you've seen and that you can see that progression change over time. The more experiences you have, the more open you are to new experiences. Strange things start to come out."

Hanmer is at the Tim Olsen Gallery, Woollahra, until April 11.