

# Robert Boynes: eternal observer turns to human race

**After five decades as an artist, Robert Boynes' focus has shifted from the urban landscape to the lives of ordinary people within it.**

There's a large roll of canvas leaning against the wall of Robert Boynes' studio. On a fairly regular basis, he will glance over at it and be struck by the reality that at some point, the canvas will need to be covered with something.

"I think, hell, I'm going to cover all that over the next year, somehow or other. That can be daunting," he says.



Robert Boynes in front of some of his large-scale 'multi-process' creations of evocative figures in urban environments on show at Beaver Galleries in Deakin.

*Photo: Jeffrey Chan*

But the realisation usually comes after he has stood back to survey his latest work, and realises he's nailed it. After five decades as an artist, and more than 60 shows, that feeling of triumph, he admits, never goes away.

But in order to keep his momentum, he has learnt that it helps to have overlapping shows, and several works on the go.

"It's like yoga, you know - you need to keep the culture developing. Or brewer's yeast or something like that," he says.

Brewer's yeast? It's not the first description that comes to mind when looking at Boynes' work. His latest exhibition has just opened at Beaver Galleries, a series of large-scale paintings of human figures in urban environments. There's nothing straightforward about these works; figures, captured photographically mid-step, are surrounded by "visual noise and clatter", atmospheric forms designed to evoke sound and movement. A group of teenagers huddle in a group, looking down, texting each other. A woman in heels strides down a city street. Faces are generally obscured, while legs and feet materialise from coloured hazes, reminding us that these images are moments in a time continuum. There's a grittiness there, but a sense of the fluidity of the urban space.

Boynes has never been interested in straight portraiture. It's an ethos he has been working with throughout his career, from his student days at the South Australian School of Art in the early 1960s, to his time in London later that decade, and his long and ongoing stint at the ANU School of Art, where he was head of painting for 27 years. Canberra has been his base since he first arrived in 1978, although he has travelled and exhibited widely.

And while there is a definite, unifying character to much of his work, and social issues have long been a theme, he says his preoccupations have changed markedly over the years.

"If you look at the oeuvre of a number of older artists who are either dead or not quite dead yet, you can say, yeah, that's by 'Artist Z' 20 years ago, and that's 'Artist Z' today - he or she has found their template and it goes on and on and on," he says. "Now, the investment market loves that, whereas I've got much more than one picture in me, and I develop and change."

Twenty years ago, for example, he was much more interested in evoking large urban spaces.

"I'd just been to the Chicago art fair - I'd shown there about three times and I was showing in St Louis. The huge city and architecture really impressed me. And I started by looking at these big cities that, in a way, particularly LA, shouldn't be there, because it doesn't have any water, it's on a desert. So that kind of environmental concern was in the work," he says.

"There are always social issues in the background of my work, and sometimes they're highly foregrounded, but I gradually came down and down and down to detail of the lives of ordinary people, and you can see that over a period in my work ... Now I'm dealing with people."

But it's not just people that interest him - it's people surrounded by other people. In this way, he is not judging the people he captures, but observing groups and placing them in an environment. He can frequently be seen sitting, for long stints, in a crowded cafe, photographing commuters crossing the street, or young skaters convening on corners or bounding down steps.

Does it matter whether his work has a discernible message?

"When that question comes, I think sometimes about whether you could apply that question to, say, artists at the turn of the century," he says. "Like, say, impressionists. What are you trying to say about those people sitting in the boat in the river Seine? What are you trying to say there? Well I'm observing and I'm looking at light. And I'm still looking at light but I'm also looking at all of the things that people wear, just like they did, and we're eternally interested and concerned and admiring of the human system around us, and in a sense, that's what I'm doing."

His medium has changed over the years, too. These days, his large paintings are multi-process creations, silkscreen prints of photographs which are manipulated using paint and water.

"You can see [the works] are not photographic in appearance, most of them, because I handwork so much," he says. "My camera is my sketchbook, really, and I modify and change a lot - not with Photoshop, I only balance with Photoshop. I do everything else in paint, by selectively using it."

During his time in London in the late 60s, and even later, he used magazine cuttings.

"I'd put them all together under a bit of glass with bulldogs clips around it and that's what I'd work from. I suppose that's very primitive," he says. "Now I don't trawl magazines ... I trawl the street. There are so many side influences if you work with

that kind of collage material - you need to be working directly or commenting on or being critical of or reflecting on the media. I'm not doing that in a direct and first-hand way, but I am looking at people as they live their lives on the street."

Like most full-time artists, work and life are inseparable, and he does envy, in some ways, the life of the amateur - those who use art as an outlet, a hobby, a source of enjoyment. But when he's not teaching art, he's creating it, and when he's not with art students, he's at the home he shares with his partner, the ceramicist Sarit Cohen. His son, Alexander, is also a visual artist, and keeps a studio in his childhood home, while his daughter, Laura, is a dancer living in Perth.

Boynes spends a surprising amount of time on the phone to Laura, talking about dance, but then, there was a time when he thought he might be dancer himself.

"I enjoyed it, watched it and danced a lot, freeform, and I played a lot of sport and all that kind of stuff. And at the age of about 22, I had to stop all that," he said.

"I stopped because of devotion and training ... You really can't be a part-timer doing this stuff any more. I think amateur practitioners probably have great fun, and it's social and they shift from one discipline to another or they do three or four at once when they feel like it, and you have to be in a particular economic position to do that, too."

When his children were growing up, he and his former partner, the artist Mandy Martin, had a rigorous work-work schedule. They both taught long hours, and alternated with equally long hours in the studio.

"I've always taught, but I've been in great teaching jobs and I've been the boss. My contract was three days hard teaching and then four days ... We expected one another to work very hard, but then the rewards are in the studio."

And in the gallery space, too, presumably. He's speaking in the centre of a room at Beaver Galleries that is freshly hung with his paintings, works he has created for this space. Although the casual observer can't tell, the images have been captured in a diverse array of urban settings - Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra - but it's the figures that matter.

"I'm dealing with types of people in a particular atmosphere with the noises that are around them, with light that bristles, and even evoking a sense of occasional tussle or frisson that might be between people is useful, and part of something."

One image contains a figure overlaid with a recurring pattern that could be tyre treading. Or it could be data. "You can't get each picture all at once - you can't get it straight away," he says. "I don't mean you have to work on it like a theorem, but that you allow it to keep coming to you and realising things about you that you didn't see straight off. So I want that kind of fragmentation, that kind of blur, that kind of shattering of the image to allow the viewer to enter."

■ ***Traffic*, by Robert Boynes, at Beaver Galleries, Deakin, until May 27.**