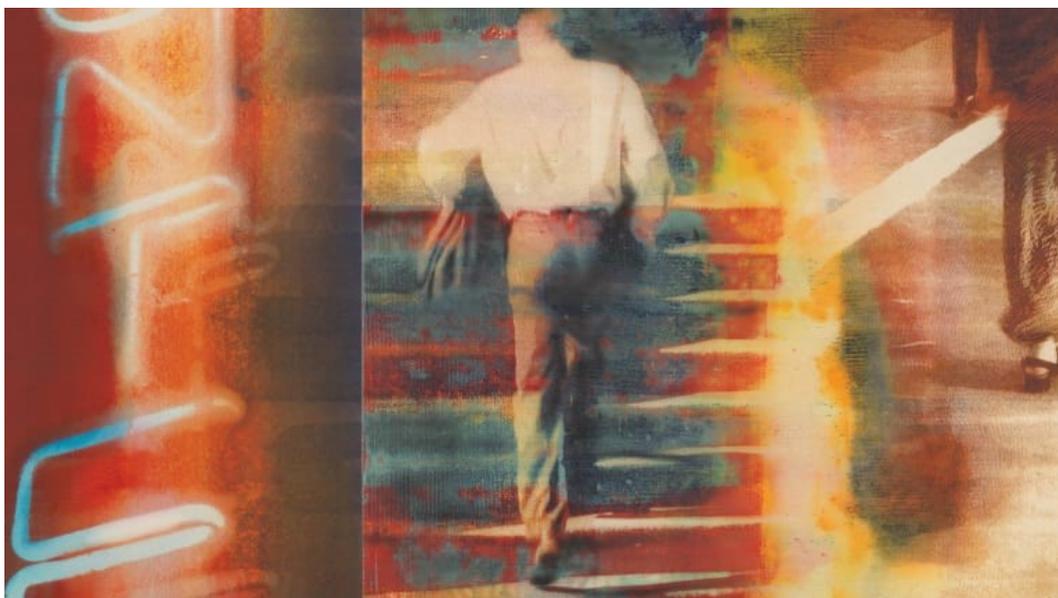


# Review: Robert Boynes, Modern Times, ANU Drill Hall Gallery

**Robert Boynes: Modern Times.**

**ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Kingsley Street, Acton. Closes August 13, 2017.  
Wed-Sun, 10am-5pm.**



Rendez-vous 2000

*Photo: Courtesy the artist, Beaver Galleries, Canberra and May Space, Sydney*

Robert Boynes came to Canberra from Adelaide about 40 years ago to take up the position as the inaugural head of the Painting Workshop at the newly established Canberra School of Art. It was a position that he held until his retirement in 2006.

This exhibition focuses on his paintings from the past two decades and I have never seen an exhibition of his work look so good. Boynes has always been a socially engaged artist, a commentator on life and society. In Adelaide, he had built up a reputation for making hard-hitting political graphics, mainly screenprints aimed at attacking capitalism and imperialism. On coming to Canberra, he worked on images of social displacement and urban alienation, creating strangely ambiguous images of vic-

tims discarded on the fringes of society – people sleeping rough with heads frequently covered with newspapers.

In the 1980s Boynes' work took a turn for the worse with messy, heavily worked oils, which drew together a host of influences seeking to make a universal statement about the apocalyptic predicament of humankind. Although they may have been necessary transitional paintings that to some extent reflected the inner turmoil that he experienced, they were not totally authentic paintings – he did not own the pictorial language that he was employing. There was an urgency in what he wanted to say, but not the adequate means to express it.

In the early 1990s Boynes abandoned working in oils, returned to acrylics and started to employ photo-screenprints as a foundation for his work. These became his classic images and his signature style and it is a series that in one sense or another continues through to the present and is the subject of this exhibition.

The source imagery of much of his work lies in photographs, some that he took himself, others from the media and the internet. The imagery is not transcribed literally, but is deliberately distanced and abstracted with thin layers of acrylic paint worked into the surface leaving stains and watery trails. He frequently adopts an aerial or elevated viewpoint so that we appear to be looking into crowds and patterns of social behaviour. Sometimes individual figures or motifs are picked out, but frequently shown from behind or depersonalised, stripped of their identity, but not of their humanity.

Boynes presents images of urban environments where there seem to be high levels of anxiety, where people appear to be targeted and lead a threatened existence. There are hints at brutality, surveillance, fleeing refugees, conflict and displacement. To heighten the sense of disorientation, unlike his rich colour-saturated oils of the 1980s, the acrylic paintings from the past couple of decades are generally painted in a restricted palette of red, yellow and black plus the white of the canvas. Sometimes, especially in the most recent work at the exhibition dealing with displacement and refugees, the painting becomes almost monochromatic – an intense and pulsating red. *Infinite Red 2* (2017), a sizeable diptych almost three metres across, it seems to be a scene of exodus or of boat arrivals, which has a pulsating heat and a screaming intensity.



Infinite Red 2.

*Photo: Courtesy the artist, Beaver Galleries, Canberra and May Space, Sydney*

Speaking of these works, Boynes notes, "the subject of the most recent group of work, in general terms, refers to displaced people in the world. I wanted to start with the trauma, and to suggest it through the traumatised canvas coming through the image and rupturing the surface. The image, as you can see, is very thin and is monochromatic in its redness – or seems monochromatic at first glance. The canvas was grounded three times, and each time I rolled it into a squashed shape, then flattened it out again, then re-ground it. Finally, when I applied the silkscreen, the image on the canvas bore little relationship to the image on the screen. I wanted there to be a dialogue of difficulty between the image and its support."

Boynes' paintings can be described as awkward, difficult and uncomfortable – they are enigmatic, haunting and perplexing images that are frequently unforgettable. Paintings including *Heatwave* (2014), *Rendez-vous* (2000) and *Grand Central Station* (2001) all deal with urban situations of turmoil and crisis. One peculiarity of his working method is to allow the white of the canvas to breathe and to have its own voice so that the images emerge as if washed out or echo in a halo-like effect and appear lit from behind. The images are sufficiently tangible and defined to bring the viewer within a broad understanding of their meaning, but also sufficiently abstracted so that each person is caught up within a web of ambiguity and will interpret the paintings differently.

The exhibition is about violence and the abuse of power, but also about coercion and excess, where man sets out not only to destroy fellowman, but also the global environment. We respond strongly to these paintings, seeing within them a universal agony and through this act of empathy we testify to the fact that there exists a common sense of morality and what is happening throughout the world and is applauded by many of our political leaders violates our understanding of decency and what it means to be human.

Bob Dylan's *Modern Times* (2006) brought together echoes of the past as a comment on the present; Bob Boynes' *Modern Times* also looks a long way beyond the horizon and presents a passionate and partisan plea for humankind to remember its humanity. It is a profound, beautiful and powerful exhibition.