

Arts

Profound contemplation in paintings

ART REVIEW

THORNTON WALKER: THE SEA AND THE FOLDED CLOTH

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin.

Until November 4.

BY Sasha Grishin

At 65, many in the workforce may contemplate retirement, but, for an artist, this is the age when they generally hit their stride. The techniques are in place; the conceptual framework has become a familiar playground and concerns over success and recognition retreat into the past.

In his 30s, Thornton Walker fell into economic success as a painter and received curatorial and critical acclaim. Subsequently he has built up a loyal base of collectors and, despite constantly reinventing himself thematically, and, to some extent, in technique over the decades, he has continued to occupy a recognisable niche in the Australian art world.

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He is a teller of stories, but his paintings and drawings lack a clear or explicit narrative. He is staunchly figurative, but he is frequently preoccupied with the formalist elements of the painting and his work belongs in the category of slow art with a profound contemplation and a Zen-like absorption into the fabric of the work.

Walker's new exhibition, at the age of 65, is a fairly cautious affair that continues with the theme of the coast, the sea and expanses of water. The whole experience is slightly tinged with melancholy and with commemorating the end of things and the closing of a chapter. Titles of the paintings, *The silence of the sea*, *Eventide with distant lights*, *Journey's end* and *The idea of emptiness*, seem to underline this wistful note. To some extent they are mood paintings that tap into an emotional twilight.

Technically all of the work is in oils on canvas and is as tough and as accomplished as any of his earlier paintings. In paintings



Thornton Walker's *Eventide with Distant Lights in The sea and the folded cloth* at Beaver Galleries.

such as *Headland and breaking waves* and the major showstopper *Eventide with distant lights*, the slippery liquid nature of water is beautifully handled, not in the heavy-handed manner of the hyper-realists, where the photographic qualities only go to stress how far this is from the real thing, nor the angst-ridden passion of the expressionists.

Walker captures the restless spirit of the sea by painting the essence and not only its external form, in a way following in the

footsteps of Whistler and his nocturnes and watery etchings. In an aphorism ascribed to Rumi, "Everyone sees the unseen in proportion to the clarity of their heart", the sea is the great unseen and Walker tries to visually and spiritually reveal it.

Of the smaller works, my favourite is *Journey's end*, where there seem to be no props, symbols or allegories to define the subject, but the image of waves gently reaching the shore and dissolving into the

rock pools. It is almost like a meditation on the Zen saying, "The wave is free when it realises it is part of the sea". This wave has run its course and its struggle and passage are seen in the marks in the sky. In this painting it has found peace and freedom in the realisation of the greater universe.

As always, one leaves a Walker exhibition with the feeling that one has experienced something greater than what one has seen with the eye.