



## Peculiar and absurd existentialism

### ART REVIEW

#### GRAEME DRENDEL: ON UNEVEN

**GROUND.** Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until September 23.

REVIEWED BY Sasha Grishin

In Albert Camus' worldview, life is absurd and has no meaning and the most absurd human activity is the quest to find a meaning.

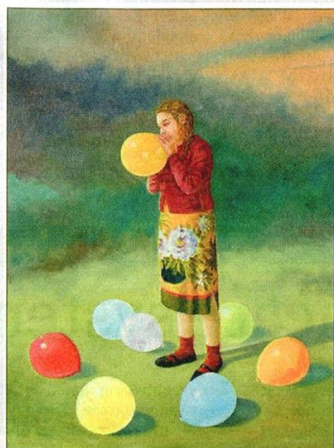
In Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), he draws a parallel with a figure from Greek myth that forever is condemned to repeat the meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll down again.

For Camus and his absurdist existentialism, the logical conclusion is not that life should end in suicide, but in revolt. It is only through our actions that we establish our identity.

The more I look at Graeme Drendel's work, the more I see this strand of absurdist existentialism in the enigmatic narrative vignettes that he creates in his paintings.

We are provided with a set of clues and then are invited to find a meaning in a work; a meaning that I suspect does not exist. This reminds me of Marcel Duchamp's famous quip: "There is no solution as there is no problem."

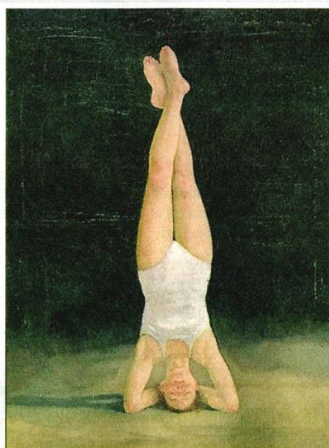
The major painting at Drendel's new exhibition at the Beaver Galleries, *Water games*, has two figures in boots, but somewhat formally even if awkwardly clad,



Top: *Water games*, the major painting at Graeme Drendel's exhibition at the Beaver Galleries; above: *The balloonist*, which is played out with singular serious-mindedness, and *Headstand*.

standing on a beach at low tide at sunset. The woman in her floral dress and cardigan top looks at the man in a white shirt and trousers, who does not return her gaze, but looks out towards the viewer. However, the whole scene is dominated by seven pairs of shoes placed, rather than scattered, in the foreground.

Shoes and sandals have long been a favourite theme in art, usually as an



indicator of absence, while piles of empty sandals may have the connotation of a massacre or a catastrophe where all that remains from a crowd of people is the empty shoes.

None of the shoes in Drendel's composition relates to beachwear, but are all fairly formal shoes inexplicably left in the water on the beach. Do they belong to people who have taken off their shoes and walked

out into the sea? Are we witnessing a tragedy or a farce?

The title, *Water games*, provides few clues through which to decipher the meaning of the painting. Nevertheless, it is a painting that is lovingly and carefully executed and seemingly exactly resolved. I imagine that Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, known as Balthus, is an artist close to Drendel's heart, who created some of the most enigmatic paintings in 20th-century art, which communicate visually through a non-verbal level of visual intelligence.

*The whole scene is dominated by seven pairs of shoes.*

This is a fairly conservative exhibition by Drendel, where the absurdist situational dramas, such as *The balloonist*, are played out with singular serious-mindedness.

The most experimental paintings are the two small *Headstand* canvases, where the world is literally shown upside down and a strange graffiti-like background is allowed to enter into some sort of conversation with the figure as a protagonist.

Gradually, over several decades, Drendel in his painstakingly exacting paintings and drawings has created his own peculiar and absurd existentialist vision with a touch of the surreal.