

Graeme Drendel

By Katrina Noorbergen

Graeme Drendel's paintings are a surreal visual amalgamation of his childhood experiences growing up in regional Victoria, mixed with an intriguing cast of characters that reoccur within a vast, isolating landscape. There is something both humorous and unnerving in Drendel's work, a tension between the familiar and the absurd that speaks to the contradiction of being fundamentally alone, even when surrounded by others.

You have been continuously drawing and collecting characters in your sketchbooks ever since you were a child. Why have you remained dedicated to the figure?

Seeing the Italian painters and a major retrospective of Balthus in Paris made me realise that you could paint the human figure your whole life. I can hardly believe it now but I had the strength of character to stick with what I wanted to paint and ignore all the fashionable trends. I had a protected, fairly secure upbringing in a small country town and I wanted to shine a light on the Mallee – that forgotten part of the world. I can't paint other people's stories. I wanted to make something of my own experience.

There is a theatrical and cryptic staging in works such as *One Amongst the Many* (2006) and *The Social Engineers* (2008) – a collection of figures that are, as one art critic said, 'together but apart', existing side by side yet in their own distinct realities.

That's absolutely the heart of it really. I think we're all encased within our own bodies, brains, histories and the way we relate to people. Invariably, when we're in a crowd of people we're still very isolated. I do like the sense that the figures are vaguely connected but are very much lost in their own thoughts. The characters don't know what's going on themselves half the time – they are just as confused as we are. They are enclosed by the edge of a canvas, yet beyond, the vastness continues. It's unsettling, why are these people gathered in a group in the middle of nowhere? I love when people ask what kind of painting I do and I say 'figures in a landscape'. It's sort of laughable in a way. The roll of the eyes ...

Why has this vast landscape of earth, scrub and sky endured for you as a painter?

The landscape is a device that should invite the viewer to concentrate on the characters and the relationships between them. It comes from the Mallee where I grew up. I felt very isolated out there. I belonged to a simple farming family and was the only one that had an inkling about art. Another aspect that continues to feature in my paintings is water – sometimes very little, sometimes a lot, as can be seen in *Water Games* (2018). Our water supply came from channels and was very precious – often there were droughts and our dams would run dry.

I've also used fabrics like curtains, rugs and sheets as an attempt to civilise or soften this landscape, while also adding a sense of theatricality around the characters. This was only for a brief period because I didn't want to overcook that sense of the landscape being a stage, evident in paintings like *The Players* (2008).

Are your paintings compositionally premeditated or do the results often surprise you?

I attack the canvas intuitively. Years ago when I first started, I used to do drawing, gouache or watercolour studies, and then turn them into a large painting on canvas. I got really sick of doing that because the intrinsic magic of creating something happens when you've got the pencil in your hand and the initial work is being done. So for the last twenty years I almost exclusively walk up to a canvas and use a brush to draw up a figure without any reference. Once I know what the figure is doing I might pose for it or get my wife Wendy to pose. The first figure informs what I do next – it's like walking the tightrope. It's infuriating and frightening but also really exciting. I love coming in at the end of the day thinking 'Christ, I didn't know that was going to happen!' Sometimes I've spent a couple days on a figure but there's something not quite right about it and I'll get rid of it. It might even be the one I started with. You have to sacrifice some. I like that aspect – it's a bit like playing God in a way.

You've achieved a style and mood in your work that's distinctly yours.

There's a conscious humour in the paintings but also a lot of darkness. Those are the things that keep you interested. I think the familiarity is repetition more than anything. You're painting multiple figures and they just have a look about them that become your own eventually. People have often said how there's a sameness to the characters, about their faces and heads. I hadn't thought about this before but, coming from a small country town, you see the same figures every day when you walk down the street. Some people have commented that they look almost inbred, which was most impolite but I quite liked it.

There are times throughout your work where the absence of the figure is keenly felt. What's happening in paintings like *The Witnesses* (2008) and *Testimonial* (2013)?

I like to think of them as figurative paintings just that the figures aren't there, though they are in a sense. My own understanding of these paintings has changed. They started off quite frivolous in a way but have absorbed other meanings. They could be seen as a hedonistic scenario where these figures have cavorted off into the landscape with each other. *The Witnesses* is a bit more sinister – it obviously has a bit of reference to the Holocaust with those piles of scattered shoes. I was thinking about the incredible efficiency of the German war machine with that pristine tablecloth. This is only one interpretation though. It's that frustrating thing artists say – 'it's up to the viewer to interpret.'

A few years ago you completed a study of the former Mildura Base Hospital. What is the significance of this building for you?

It had a huge impact on me as a kid. I was in there a couple of times because I was quite sickly. It just accentuated the isolation – only being visited a couple times by my mother because of the distance. I found a little booklet about the hospital in Albury and it brought everything back, things I've carried with me my

whole life. During a residency, I was able to get in there and walk through this spooky, abandoned building. In Mildura, virtually everyone was either born there or had family members die there. It's a beautiful building.

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