



Peter Boggs, **boboli #7**, 2009, oil on canvas on panel, 21 x 25cm.



The metaphysics of life

ASHA GRISHIN
gives an insider's
view of the distilled
compositions of a
maestro.

Peter Boggs is a figurative, tonalist painter who, in his carefully observed landscapes, street scenes and still life compositions, tries to instill a whole philosophy of being. The quality of impersonality is one of his distinguishing features — he appears as impersonal both in the choice of the subject matter and in its manner and technique of execution.

He is a New Zealand-born artist, who trained under Colin McCahon, and who has been working in Australia for over two decades. At least on the surface, over the two decades in which I have been observing his work, there have been no abrupt changes in his style or imagery, only a gradual progression and growing intensity. He seems to thrive on a very deliberate repertoire of motifs, all lovingly observed, which he gradually refines. While much can be made of Boggs' geometry, in his paintings he is very careful to subvert geometric severity, it is as if the forms found in nature have been reduced to their geometric essence and then given life — a human existence. His art is one of great subtlety and sophistication, while the palette is subdued and restricted, within its prescribed limits it is also quite rich and adventurous with tantalising essays in grey, ochres, beige and black. As one enters his world and closely observes his evolving singular vision, his aptitude for risk taking has increased with time and the mark making has become more decisive, the play with geometry more provocative and the sense of the enigma more profound.

As a painter, he is best characterised as a tonalist, where the most subtle modulations in tone are employed to suggest other realities beyond those which are immediately apparent to the eye. Giorgio de Chirico once famously observed: "Although the dream is a very strange phenomenon and an inexplicable mystery, far more inexplicable is the mystery and

aspect our minds confer on certain objects and aspects of life." Peter Boggs is an artist who discovers realities beyond those which first meet the eye — he celebrates in his art a mysterious otherness. He once commented: "I've always liked the idea of a painting containing something which the eye can't see. What's lurking outside the frame." To quote de Chirico again: "What we have to do is to discover, for by the act of discovery we make life possible."

Like other tonalist painters with whom a relevant parallel may be drawn, including Giorgio Morandi, Edward Hopper and such Macchiaioli painters as Giuseppe Abbati, Odoardo Borrani, Vito D'Ancona and Giovanni Fattori, Boggs explores a deliberately limited territory, focusing on a narrowing field of enquiry. It is a philosophy in which the limiting of the scope of the subject matter increases the depth of perception. Sometimes the most limited number of elements can be structured and restructured to reveal intimate secrets like a diary of pictorial truths.

His specificity of choice of subject matter may be of profound significance to the artist himself on a personal level; this privileged information is not shared with the viewer. Although he did once mention to me that as an adolescent growing up in New Zealand he recalls the big impression made on him by Stanley Kramer's film *On the beach* (1959) with scenes of deserted Melbourne streets, as the residents of Australia try to cope with the aftermath of a global nuclear war and the realisation that all life will shortly cease. When working with the Australian landscape he favours deserted towns and landscapes where nothing much on the surface happens, but the sense of anticipation is immense. Boggs is interested in this sense of mystery, the anticipation of things happening off stage and with that which is felt rather than seen.



Peter Boggs, *boboli #6*, 2009, oil on canvas on panel, 21 x 25cm.



Peter Boggs, *laneway view #2*, 2008, oil on canvas on panel, 30 x 40cm.



Peter Boggs, *boboli #4*, 2009, oil on canvas on panel, 21 x 25cm.

He has visited the abandoned towns of south-western Victoria — near Casterton, Coleraine and Merino — as well as some inner city settings. Location is both critically important and almost incidental. Boggs will spot a detail — it could be a doorway, light falling on a wall or a pattern of shadows — which will then form the germ of the idea for the work that will slowly and deliberately develop in

studies, sketches and then find expression in one or more paintings. In the final work, location has been absorbed into a certain universality and it becomes almost irrelevant exactly where the motif was originally located; what becomes important is the ambience of mystery which these elements evoke. Ultimately, he is concerned with the sense of the metaphysical which lies disguised in the everyday. Although his deliberate artistic strategies may include the mathematical 'golden section', the subdued palette and an obsession with the angle of vision, light and shadow, in his wonderful tonal paintings and subtle drawings he creates transfigured realities which breathe with a sense of otherness.

One of his long-term obsessive themes has been the Boboli Gardens, behind the Pitti Palace in Florence. These are amongst the most famous historic gardens in all of Europe — they sprawl over eleven acres and contain an outstanding collection of sculptures dating from the age of early Mannerism through to the Baroque and have been a magnet for artists throughout the ages. The *Giardino di Boboli* have, in a strange way, been his spiritual home and muse for many years and, as recently he noted, "Although this muse is 10,000 miles away, I know it intimately as though it were in front of me. I know each and every bend and I see it as clearly as though I was standing before it." If in some of his earlier works there was an exploration of space, where the drama of the shadows, unexpected perspectival angles and the truncated shapes implied

the existence of a mysterious otherness and of a metaphysical enigma, in his more recent paintings of the Boboli Gardens there is a heightened intensity and a strong sense of intimacy. It is as if we have been admitted to the artist's very private diary of observations, where one canvas speaks to the next, each revealing slightly more than its predecessor. Each work is beautifully distilled and resolved geometrically and tonally, and where within the subdued palette there is a magical glowing inner luminosity.

Boggs rhetorically states: "I've never liked the idea of 200 people seeing one of my pictures at the same time." Indeed, he generally works on a modest scale where you are invited to contemplate and meditate on an image. They are not paintings with what Andy Warhol called a high 'wow' factor. They don't scream at you from the walls, but if you pause and look into them the rewards are considerable. He is increasingly regarded as a 'painter's painter', which is basically code for saying that fellow artists regard him highly and will seek out his work. He has also established a following with a number of serious collectors and has a network of commercial galleries in Canberra, Brisbane, Sydney and Perth which exhibit his art.



Peter Boggs, *boboli #2 la cerchia*, oil on canvas on panel, 21 x 25cm.