

Fun trying to figure it all out

Graeme Drendel: Outsiders

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes March 20, Tues-Fri 10am-5pm, Sat-Sun 9am-5pm

Reviewer: Sasha Grishin

Graeme Drendel practises a form of “dysfunctional surrealism”, where his compositions are like painted tableaux with carefully posed characters who seem to be involved in some sort of ritual, the purpose and significance of which is never revealed to us.

Take his major painting at this exhibition, *The clinic*, where a woman seems to have passed out on the ground while some sort of ritual is being performed over her by a half-naked man holding two feathers. Four other witnesses, plus a dog, surround her. Inexplicably some of these witnesses carry rifles, others buckets.

The whole scene takes place outside under a stormy sky on a desolate windswept hillside. The figures are not consciously posed to take into account the position of the viewer, there is no eye contact and we are seeing the whole scene from a low viewpoint, such as that of the fallen woman. Is this a cult gathering, a grand spoof, the aftermath of a hunting accident or the recreation of a dream?

Drendel employs a subdued palette and although the figures are involved in serious and deliberate acts, their faces are almost completely devoid of emotion and they seem to perform as if in some sort of trance.

Drendel is a Melbourne-based painter whose practice relates to



Graeme Drendel's *The outsiders: beyond agriculture*, left, and *Strong man act* from the Beaver Galleries exhibition *Outsiders*.

other strong figurative Melbourne masters, including Rick Amor and Peter Churcher. Over the years that I have been following his work he has developed quite a distinctive language, one which owes as much a debt to Piero della Francesca as it does to Balthus. It is a language where all extraneous elements have been stripped away from the picture narrative and the formal elements are carefully arranged and re-arranged to

create an atmosphere of solemnity and gravitas.

He is one of the few Australian figurative painters who needs a sense of scale for his work to “sing” and to establish its sense of presence. The other major works at this exhibition, *The outsiders: beyond agriculture* and *The witnesses no. 4*, also possess this commanding enigmatic presence, where a number of assembled symbols send conflicting messages

as to the time, function and meaning of the scenes which we are called upon to witness. His brilliant draughtsmanship saves the work from overstated melodrama and the precision in technique imbues his canvases with a quiet dignity and reserve.

His etchings are a masterful display in draughtsmanship with strongly articulated figures with a virtuosity in technique. They also provide us with a clue that perhaps

we should not take everything we see in his work with a deadly seriousness, but that there is a bit of tongue-in-cheek wit and spicy irony. *Woman holding a goshawk*, *Suspended figure*, *The gunsmith* and *The piper* are among his strongest prints.

This is an exceptionally strong exhibition by an artist rapidly achieving a reputation as one of the more important figurative painters of his generation.