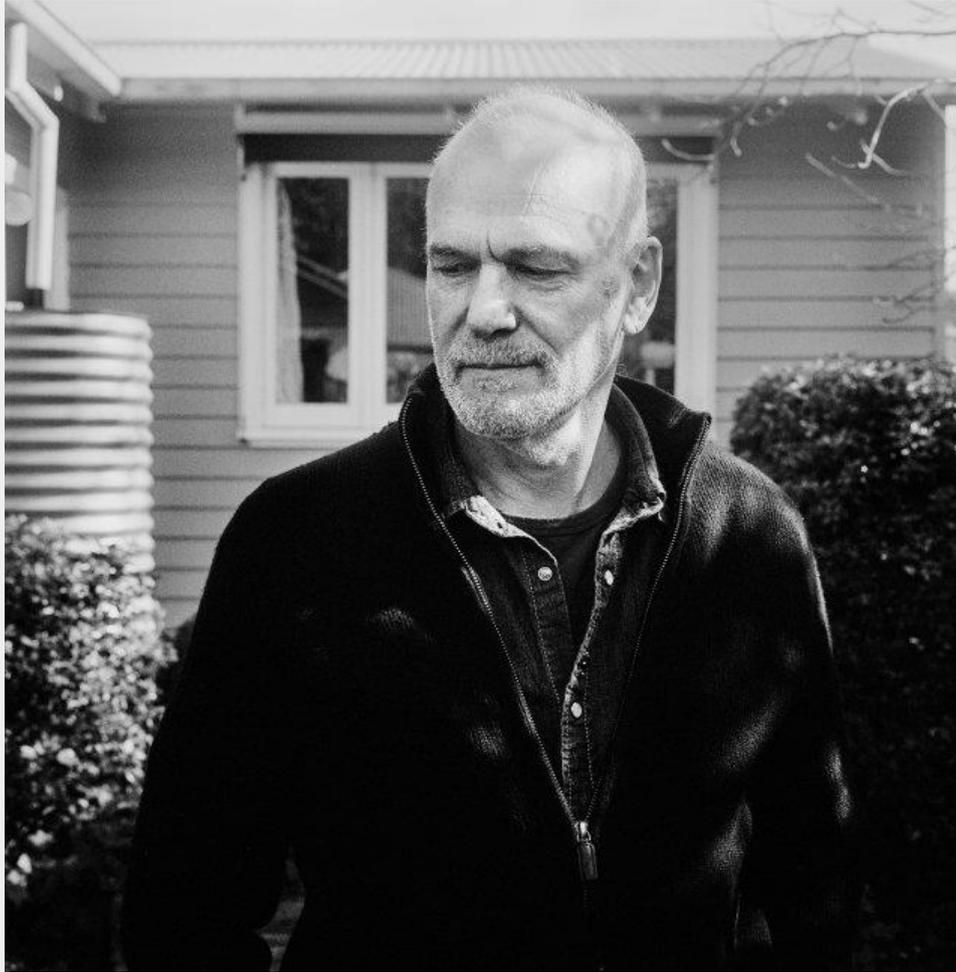


## Explore The Popular Pet Show

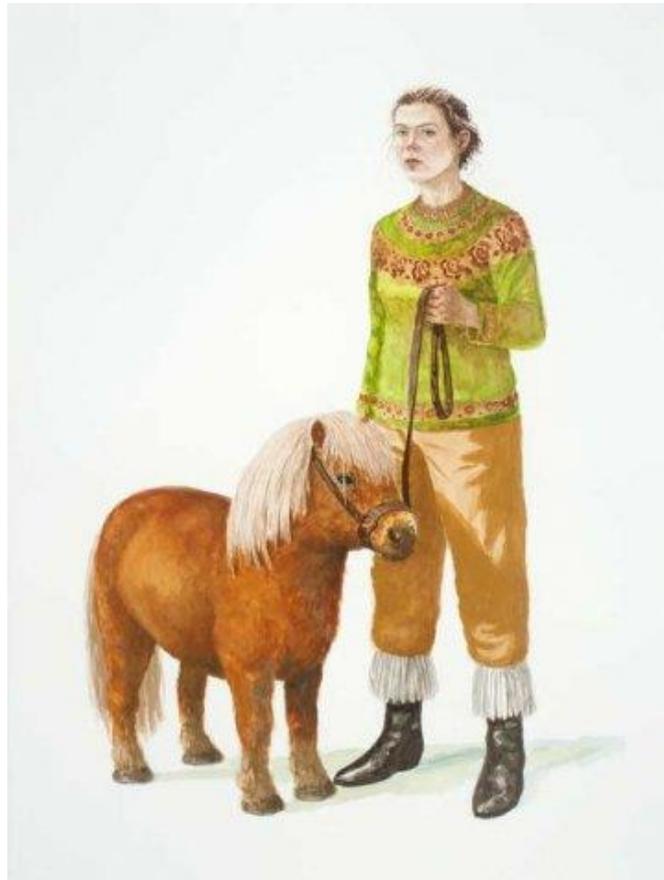


Graeme Drendel, 2016 by Mark Mohell

On canvas, the brown-and-white dog's seen her share of outlandish events over the years. She's snoozed belly-up with office workers dancing round her in a conga line. She's dozed beside wrestlers competing for male kewpies. She's posed with a group of three chaps, one in a green and lilac skeleton costume teamed with brown moccasins, one in big yellow trunks and one in a Superman outfit. She's licked the face of a man in purple at a party under the stars, not far from another man in a Fair Isle jumper and a skirt made of peapods. She's never fazed.

There is nothing zany about Graeme Drendel himself. He's a handsome down-to-earth husband and father who spent his childhood on a farm in the Mallee in Victoria, then moved to Melbourne to qualify as an art and craft teacher. For decades, now,

he's been working in the same studio, behind his yellow weatherboard house at the end of a quiet street of Coburg in Melbourne. It's stacked with paintings he's made over the years, hung from floor to ceiling with works he's getting ready for sale, crowded with easels, piled with books, full of wooden filing cabinets, shelves and old plan drawers crammed with sketchbooks. The warm brick step of the studio isn't far from the laundry door; every day, he takes the twenty-nine paces from house to studio feeling apprehensive. Graeme's equally attractive partner, Wendy, grows the flowers and vegetables in their cottage garden, sprinkled with unusual plants like the blood lilies his mother gave her. As well as spending a lot of time improving her soil, Wendy's the artist's muse and adviser, plus his accountant, and often poses for the figures in his paintings; he says she both is, and isn't, all of the females, and a lot of the males. They have a small dog: a furry, shaggy little terrier called Pippie; for many years, she was basketmates with a lookalike animal, Lucy. Pippie looks like the dog in the paintings, but that's their late dog, Billie. She was smoother, so nicer to paint.



In winter it gets under her skin, 2014 by Graeme Drendel



Ministrations of the shepherdess, 2014 by Graeme Drendel

Drendel may be a regular guy, but his figurative oils and watercolours flirt tantalisingly with the surreal. Surrealism's a style of art that grew up alongside and behind Sigmund Freud. Challenged to name a surrealist, now, most people would say Salvador Dalí or René Magritte, and only a churl would counter that neither man was there when the Surrealists signed their first 'manifesto' in 1924 (Dalí, whose pet was an ocelot, drew the frontispiece for the second manifesto in 1930, but by that time, Magritte, who had but a normal Pomeranian, was on the nose with the Parisians). In their quest to express the suppressed, surrealists often made meticulously painted images of items that exist, tangibly, in the world, but brought these things together so they'd never make sense in the world we think of as real. In our world there are trees and clocks, but clocks don't melt and drape over the branches of trees. There are giraffes on the veldt, but they're not on fire. There are women in evening dresses and there are tallboys, but women don't have drawers in their bodies. There are apples and

rooms, but an apple doesn't fill a room. Drendel's carefully constructed paintings, which are often rather erotic in a notably awkward way, don't go quite that far, but they do show enigmatic people and objects in queer conjunction in landscapes that seem to lack some vital element. The viewer strains to make sense of them. Maybe she feels uneasy about that, maybe she revels in it, in the same way that some people (including Drendel) like some novels by Haruki Murakami, and some don't.

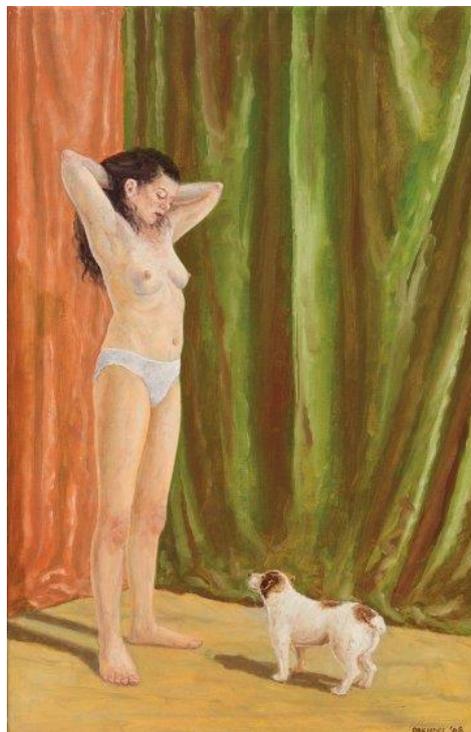


The faith healer, 2016 by Graeme Drendel

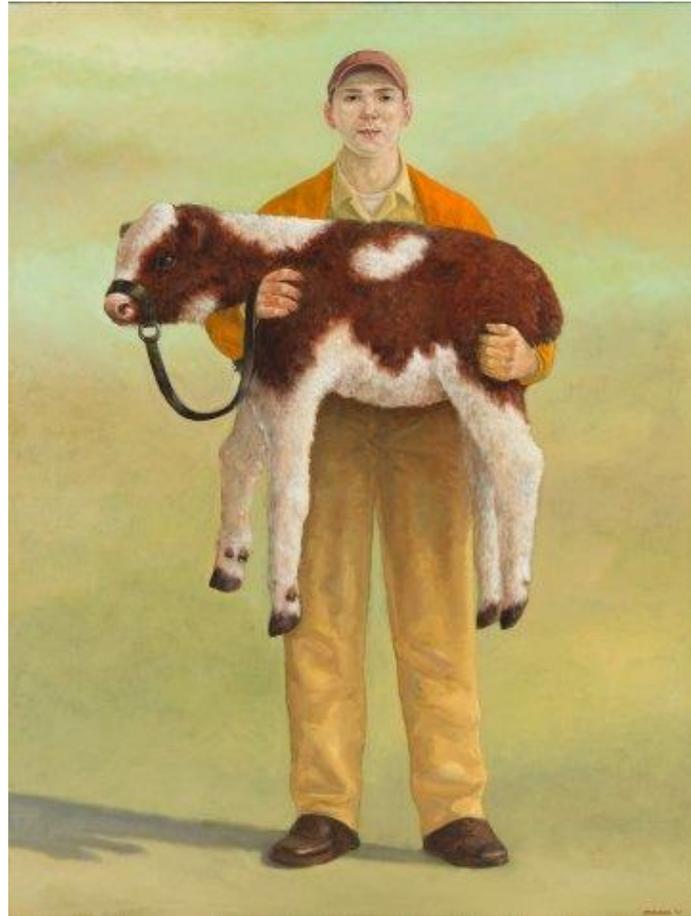
*The faith healer* is typical of Drendel's paintings in several ways. Some are plain to see. It's disconcerting, with a title that serves only to complicate things. Setting aside the fact that he seems to take adequate care of his dog (and that is, admittedly, significant), who amongst us would place faith in the healer? He looks both shifty and vulnerable in his cheap suit, pear-shaped, podgy, with a hairless face and a sexless mien, like a eunuch in a tale of a seraglio. What

the long table's doing on an endless flat plain is anyone's guess, but it might put some viewers in mind of that line from Lautréamont – tragic poet of ickiness – about the beauty of an umbrella and a sewing machine together on a dissecting table. So far, so characteristic.

But another common feature of this painting of Drendel's is concealed. Originally, there were several more figures, on the right. Now, they're trapped forever under painted grass, sandy soil, tablecloth and streaks of cloud. Many of Drendel's works on canvas teem with such pentimenti - elements the artist 'repented of', or came to see as undesirable and painted over. The background colour of *Billie* was once the blue of the sky in a Ladybird book, but now it's a Ladybird green. The dog sitting on its haunches in *Buskers* once had a visible left ear hanging, which made it look sadly craven, forced to do tricks. With the ear eliminated (not so easy, with watercolour) she looks proud of herself. An x-ray of *The faith healer* would show that it was well on the way toward becoming one of Drendel's characteristic 'conversation pieces', which is the art-historical term for paintings that depict gatherings of people.

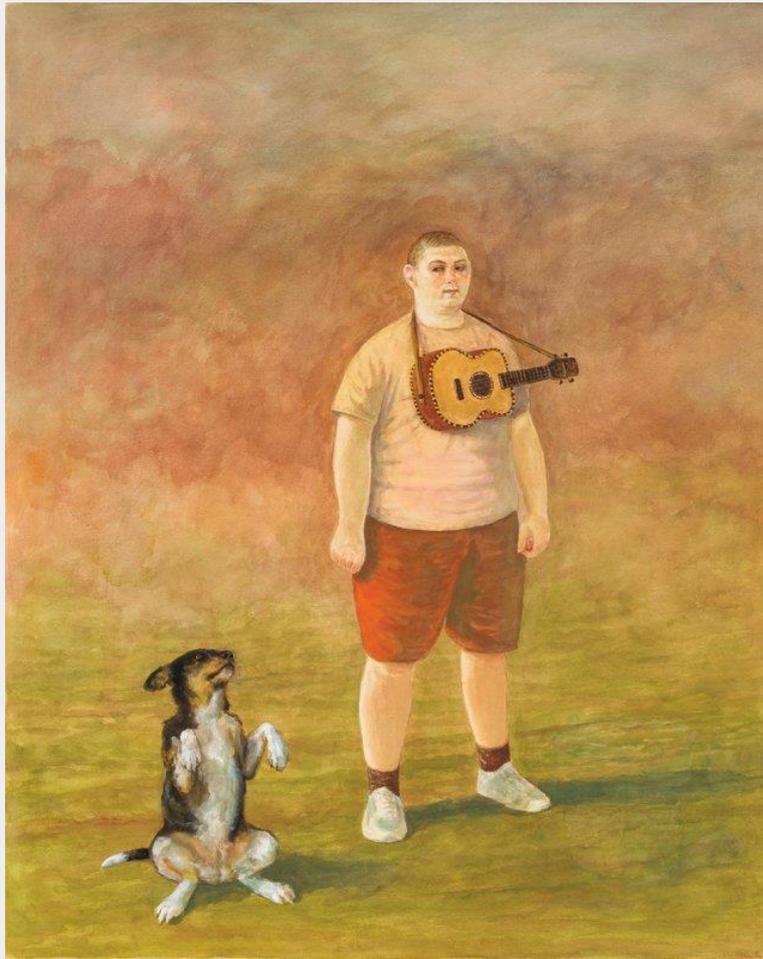


Study for "Puppy school", 2008 by Graeme Drendel



The prize, 2016 by Graeme Drendel

Drendel's a vehement non-believer, but quite often, thanks to periods he's spent poking into Italian churches, his pictures evoke a skewed kind of biblical-narrative mood. Figures in his groups look quite alike, with symmetrical, smooth faces; they resemble angels, saints or members of a tribe who don't marry outsiders. It's not unusual, either, for some of them to be gesturing, or declaiming. In colour and composition, they're a bit reminiscent of, say, Giotto's paintings of episodes like Christ talking with the doctors of law, washing someone's feet or enlivening the marriage feast at Cana. In a Drendel group picture there's often someone who seems to be *undergoing* – horrible word, connoting torture, initiation, religious conversion or an operation - something unspecified. In the context of Drendel's body of work, the title *The faith healer* implies either that the 'healing' is yet to begin, with participants yet to arrive; or is over, with the attendees dispersed and packdown nearly finished. Most disconcertingly of all, the healer who remains once had a monkey on his shoulders, and wore only a commodious pair of underpants.



Buskers, 2015 by Graeme Drendel

Drendel always draws, in a sketchbook, the human figures he plans to put in a painting, even if he's using a photograph as part of the process of working it up. (The painting *The prize*, for example, is based on a small black-and-white photograph the artist saw in an old encyclopaedia.) He determines the poses of his human figures from a model, customarily drawing Wendy or looking at himself in a mirror. Drendel puts it down to Wendy's natural, confident temperament that there are quite often partly-clothed women, like the one in *Study for 'Puppy school'*, in his pictures. There's a strong echo of Magritte's *La liberté de l'esprit* about them, too; and the title of Magritte's work, 'freedom of the spirit', is a very comfortable fit with Drendel's painted ladies. The woman in the *Puppy school* study looks enviably comfortable unclothed, as if she could walk around wearing nothing but her run-of-the-mill knickers all day. We're accustomed to associating partial nakedness with vulnerability, but even bareskinned, the women in Drendel's works

always look to have the upper hand over his perplexed, soft and naïve male figures. They're proud and composed, and their straight-backed postures - see the woman with the tiny pony, and the woman with the goshawk – are bold. So, in *Study for 'Puppy school'*, the dog isn't disconcerted by the woman's near-nakedness, as dogs never are. After all (at least outside of Tokyo, where dog clothes seem *de rigueur*), dogs run around in the nude *all the time*.

All this talk of gender relations brings us to the young man with the ukulele in *The buskers*. How we long to lengthen the strap of that ridiculous instrument! That aside, it's a fun fact provided by the artist that this ungainly male figure is inspired by the figure of an adolescent girl in a conversation piece called *The screen porch* that was painted by an American artist, Fairfield Porter, in 1964.

Drendel's use of Porter's figure isn't copying, or 'appropriation'. Nor is it an instance of quotation or allusion, which is when an artist takes an element of another work and flagrantly inserts it into his own, calculating that the viewer's response to the current painting will incorporate consideration of, and comparison with, the earlier painting and the circumstances of the artist who made it.

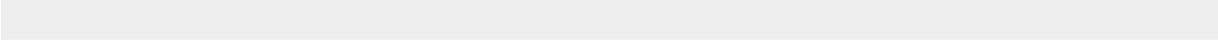


Billie, 2016 by Graeme Drendel

It couldn't be said that *The buskers* alludes to *The screen porch* because no one in the world would recognise the model for Drendel's busker if he hadn't mentioned it himself. The main things

we learn from Drendel's admission that he was inspired by the girl in Porter's painting are, first, that he looks avidly into art books; and secondly, a sympathetic instinct informs the artist's work. It was the gawkiness of Porter's daughter that got him. There in the book, stranded in 1964, she's of a difficult age, with small shoulders, slightly swelling breasts, a soft tummy, high-waisted shorts and socks and sneakers. Standing amongst her family, she looks at something the viewer cannot see, her expression at once inward and outward. Hers is nothing like the look, at once sly, controlling and complicit, as well as proud, perhaps, that Drendel's busker wears. In fact, the man in *Buskers* is looking at the dog while trying not to let the dog see him looking; he's stealing a glance at the dog, so as not to disrupt her trick pose with eye contact. The main thing these figures, girl and busker, have in common is that they're both far off on the out-side of the in-crowd.

An uninformed gallery-goer approaching the painting called *Billie* would almost certainly take the title to refer to the human subject. Some viewers understand the person to be a girl, and some a boy. In fact, the human subject started its canvas life as a mature woman. It got younger; and then, somehow, it became a young boy. It was a girlish boy; a boyish girl; both; neither. Assume nothing! That said, knowing a bit about the Drendels' history with pets, we know that *Billie* is a portrait of their dear late dog. The young human figure functions as a frame for Billie (it's a strange talent the painter has: the ability to put our own dogs into the arms of imaginary, enigmatic strangers isn't given to most of us). Even so, the fragility of the human subject is strongly expressed in this picture that comes very close to the greatest art taboo of all: sentimentality without discernible irony.





Drawn from life, 2014 by Graeme Drendel

In painting a fresh-faced young person and a cute dog, does Drendel *refer* to the art of Norman Rockwell - painter by appointment to the Boy Scouts of America - in an acceptable, knowing, postmodern idiom? Or does he *reprise* that art? Is the painting *Billie*, audaciously, *sincere*? Wait - is *The prize* sincere, too, with its ingenuous man and its adorable calf, glistening brown eye, dangling knobbly legs and all? These are worrying questions for anyone schooled in certain theories; but in fact, the 'new sincerity', sometimes called post-postmodernism, is a thing, with its own Wikipedia entry. Those who welcome the new sincerity can see, with no anxiety, that while the figure is there to support the animal, *Billie*, in turn, functions as a warm, breathing shield for the young person. She provides both physical and psychic protection. She provides both something to do with the hands, and something to conceal the body which feels, at that age, so bare - even when it's clothed and feels like the right body for the person, or soul, who's in it. *Billie* is the very embodiment of acceptance. As dogs are.

I like talking about Drendel's pictures as if they expressed dreams of my own.



Cadet with rabbit, 2009 by Graeme Drendel

So, I dreamed I was in a bright open landscape, it was snowy, and there was this soldier, he was young, it was like the Second World War and he might have been Polish maybe, he came right up to me, said nothing. His skin was very smooth, his lips were soft to touch, his shirt and jacket were done up but they had no buttons, he wore a belt. He was holding something against his body, it turned out to be a rabbit. It felt like he was offering me his heart.

**By Dr Sarah Engledow**