

## ARTS

Art review Sasha Grishin

## An explorer at the peak of his power

PEOPLE AND PLACES:  
PAINTINGS AND WORKS  
ON PAPERBy Graham Fransella, Beaver  
Galleries, 81 Denison Street,  
Deakin. Until August 6.

**G**raham Fransella is a printmaker who also paints. One of the finest etchers in the country, he has sufficiently mastered technique to be comfortable to surrender to the process and to allow chance to play a major role in his art making.

There is a general misconception that printmaking is something very technical and mechanical. In fact, the opposite is true. Etching, which involves the artist marking in various ways a metal plate that is then immersed in acid, is to a certain extent, a distancing technique. The artist does not have complete or total control over the medium and there are myriad uncontrollable possible variations that stem from the pressure of the press, the extent to which the acid bites into the metal, and the spread of the inks on the surface of the paper.

A printmaker beginning to work with etching generally tries to totally control the technique and impose his or her will. A master printmaker collaborates with the technique, allowing it to have its own voice and direction so that what is exposed when the sheet of paper is peeled away from the metal plate after passing through the



Chance plays a major role in the art of Graham Fransella. Above: *Porcupine Ridge* in *People and Places* at Beaver Galleries. Below: *Figures*.

press appears as a surprise – even a revelation – to the artist.

This exhibition is punctuated by a number of brilliant and exciting prints that include the strange vertical etching *Seated Figure*, printed on two sheets of paper. Here the colour palette is restricted, the dancing black line articulates the figure, while the subtle ochres, creams and beige tones form the background. Fransella creates an exciting surface fabric for his etchings that carries the scars and marks resulting from the birth of the image.

Another of the major pieces is *Six Figures*, a large, almost two-



metre-high etching spread over four sheets, where the blocked-out forms of the figures are memorably balanced with bold masses of intense red. The surface appears

literally walked over with tread marks, nicks and bruises. Figures emerge out of this battle-like encounter to proclaim their identity.

Fransella once mentioned to me that he thought of his paintings as studies for his prints or at least as some sort of experimental laboratory where he worked on his ideas, which may later appear in his etchings.

The large sprawling watercolour *Porcupine Ridge* is one of the virtuoso pieces in the show. The landscape appears to grow organically with splodges, splashes and eruptions of colour. There is an intensity of shape and colour, a

wonderful surface tension but also a great lyricism and flowing gestural freedom. Chromatically, this very rich, colour-saturated piece seems to vibrate when you view it.

Fransella has usually been a very consistent artist who, having devised his pictorial language rather early in his career, has since been engaged in a general process of refinement and exploration. Boldness, experimental freedom and a daringness to push forms further than before makes this exhibition quite a radical departure from his previous practice.

This is a very strong exhibition by a wonderful artist who is now working at the peak of his powers.