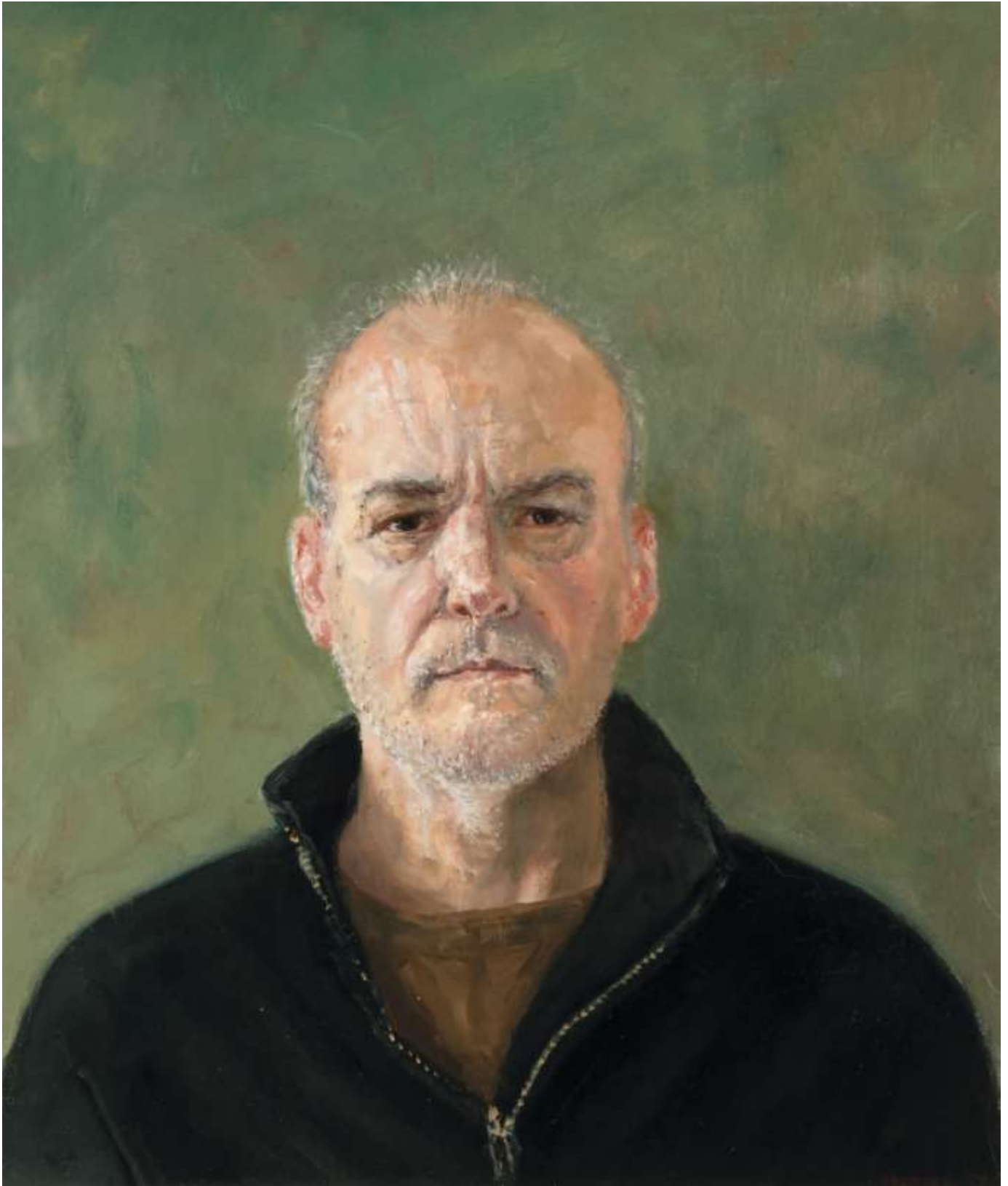


BE FRANK

by Dr Sarah Engledow, 20 January 2020



Self-portrait in black jumper, 2017 Graeme Drendel

Graeme Drendel is a seriously skilful portraitist, but it's only quite recently that he's taken to oil portraits with fervour.

Many professional artists make portraits as a sideline to their principal body of work – landscapes, still lifes, sometimes even abstracts. For Drendel, too, portraiture contrasts with his usual practice; yet his works almost always include human figures. Preparing a big painting for exhibition (he shows with Australian Galleries in Melbourne and Sydney and Beaver Galleries in Canberra) he typically starts with one whole figure. In time, others wander in, take up occupancy. One day even Santa, wary and jaded, sidled from the shadows of his imagination.

The artist acknowledges that many of the ‘people’ in his paintings are informed by the face and figure of his partner, muse and model, Wendy Horsburgh. Many resemble him, too. Their homogeneity is thoroughly deliberate, and what’s more, while some look almost alarmingly sincere, some a little sleazy, the smooth, regular faces of most are impassive, their expressions equivocal, their ages indeterminate or irrelevant. Those that drop into his paintings are distinctively ‘Drendel people’. But it’s Drendel’s people – those who drop into his house – whom we see in his candid, unaffected portraits.



1. *Ivy*, 2019. 2. *Mick*, 2019. Both Graeme Drendel.

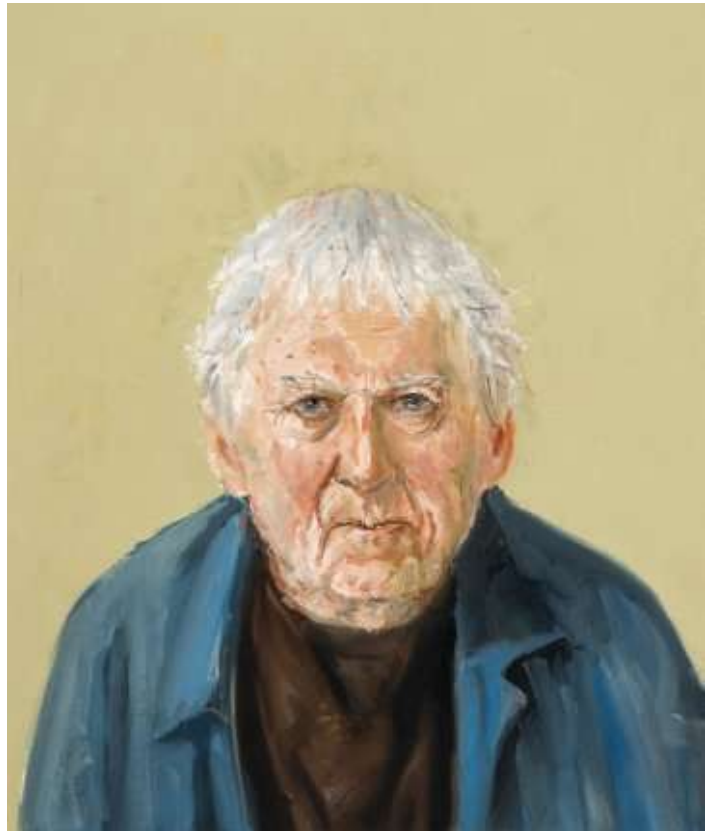
The paintings in the pages that follow reflect the artist’s inner circle. We meet his family; people he went to college with in the 1970s or played in a band with in the 1980s; and artists he got to know somewhere along the way, some well-known like Jan Senbergs, others less so, like the Mildura printmaker Robert Watson. Some of them look like they’ve copped the lot. As a bunch, they look humane. Intelligent. Unpretentious. Committed. They look like people who brew their own coffee, grow their own food, buy secondhand, go see live music. Comparing the portraits with Drendel’s broader body of work (much of it reproduced in *Graeme Drendel* by Gavin Fry) offers fascinating scope to debate the difference between a picture of a person, a depiction of the human situation, and a portrait – the latter, at least according to the popular imagination, suggesting something of a person’s experience and personality, or even, at a stretch, their ‘soul’.



1. *Tess*, 2017. 2. *Rick*, 2019. Both Graeme Drendel.

As a portraitist, Drendel shrinks not from the scruffy or the weathered. More audaciously, he's prepared to engage with the pure beauty of the young. The first sitters in what turned out to be this series were people he sees every day: Wendy and the couple's son, Gene, a postgraduate student. In this selection are also his granddaughters, Ivy and Tess, and his prized son-in-law Dave Wentworth. Enjoying his progress, in time, when someone arrived at the house, in the course of chat the artist began casually to ask if they'd be up for a portrait sitting – maximum of two hours, promised. If they agreed, Drendel, at least, knew that what they were in for would probably be the longest period in which anyone had looked at them for so long, so unremittingly and so evaluatively in their lives.

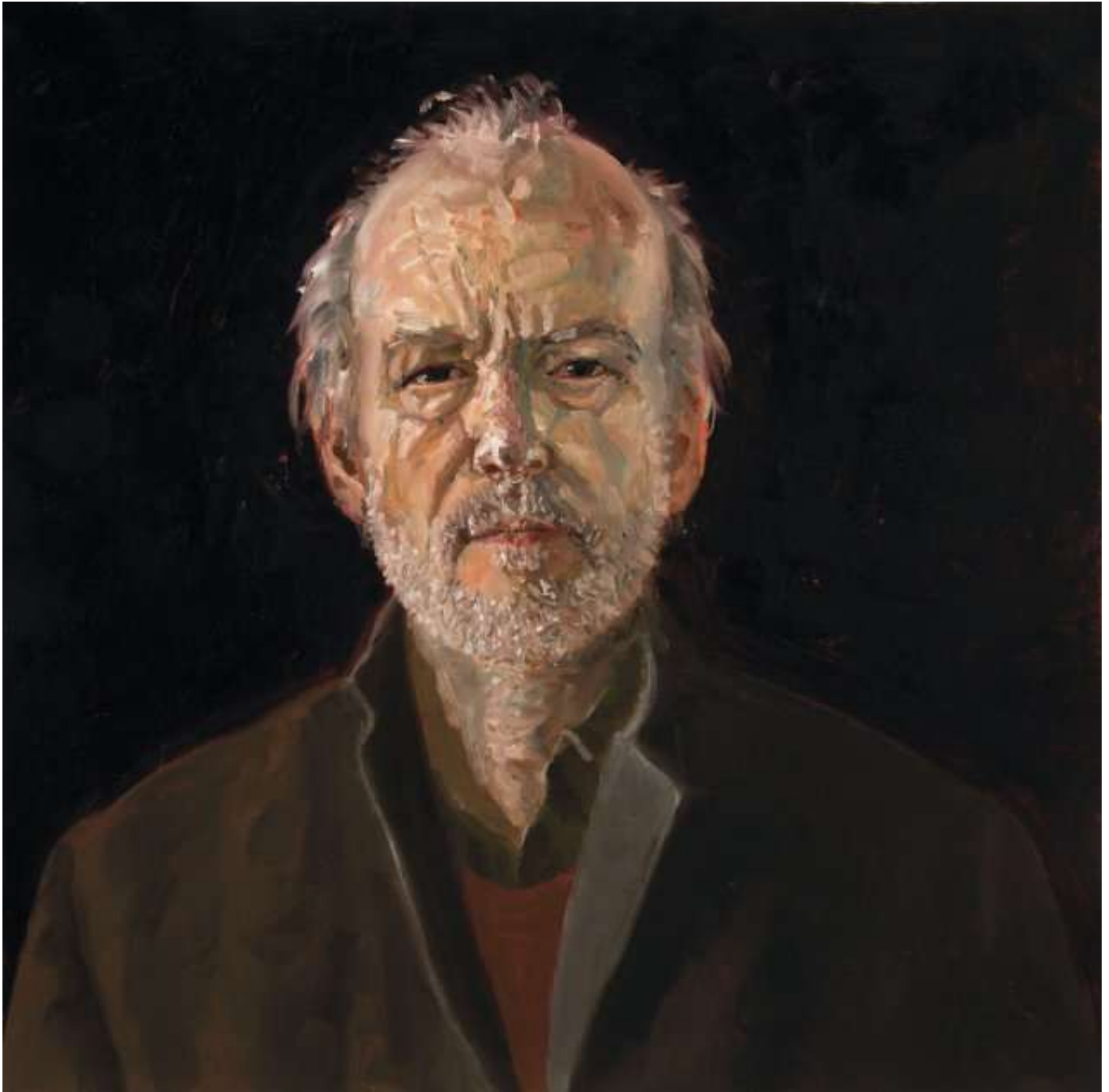
Wendy Horsburgh appears in the pages that follow both front-on, with eyes trustfully closed, and also – in an image of exquisite vulnerability – from behind, the nape of her neck and rounded jawline tenderly rendered. Gene Drendel's is the fine young face dominated by dark-framed glasses. Drendel has a genius for evoking the texture and inclination of hair, hanging stringily here, curling riotously there; bristling on the noble face of the artist Rick Amor, capping the head of his mother Joyce in a cottony floss, standing up in spikes on the distinguished performance artist Jill Orr, styled en brosse by the eminent folk musician and dandy Mick Slocum, whose latest album cover features a Drendel painting. Head and whisker hair can challenge even the best painters of faces (demonstrably, Tom Roberts was great at hair in pastel, but often bombed at it in paint). Yet a convincing likeness of a specific person depends on responsive, skilful representation of their hair. As across countries and cultures, to contend daily with hair is a good part of what it 'means to be human', and repeatedly to battle with it in paint is a good part of what it means to be a portraitist.



1. *Gene with glasses*, 2017. 2. *Jan*, 2019. Both Graeme Drendel.

The portraits Drendel's been working on lately are mostly oil paint on prepared Arches paper, about 31 x 26 cm in size. Having fairly prosaic materials on site means they're easy to start when opportunity knocks. The pace at which he works, and the short distance – about 150cm – between face of artist and face of sitter contribute palpable tension to the process. He's conscious that access is a privilege (and he never uses photographs). In the midst of the intensity, he says, there's always a moment when all seems to have gone wrong. If that happens when Drendel's painting an imagined figure the project can be abandoned, or the wayward one erased, but dealing with the real and dear, he has to persevere, correct his infelicities so as not to waste his sitter's time and let them down.

On calling time on a portrait, he says, 'one always hopes for at least a decent likeness, but it is a bit more than that, in that I hope it has embedded in it something of that intimate period of time spent looking at one another and chatting'. The notion of the portrait as an artefact of connection became reality recently. Having painted a friend called Phil whom he'd known for quite a long time, the artist was surprised to find that he'd arrived at the countenance of 'an old Greek guy'. Utterly unexpectedly, regarding his own face on the paper, Phil revealed that he'd only just found out he wasn't the son of the man he'd always called his father, but of a man his mother had met a lifetime ago on an enchanted holiday in Greece.



Self-portrait in winter, 2019 Graeme Drendel

Drendel's aware of a tendency to make his subjects look a bit older than they are, to be a little too honest about them. He's always apprehensive when they look at his finished painting. He says that usually the response is fairly muted, but suggests diffidently that sometimes, even often, the portrait 'kind of sneaks up on them over time'. As well it might – for while it may be discomfiting to be really looked at, to how many of us, in our time on earth, is it given to be seriously seen?





1. Mum, 2019. 2. Michel, 2018. 3. Wendy with eyes closed, 2017. 4. Dave, 2019. 5. Jill, 2019. 6. Wendy looking back, 2017. 7. Robert, 2017. 8. Santa in space, 2018. All Graeme Drendel.