

- Andrew McIlroy
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'A fairly indeterminate space': The art of Graeme Drendel

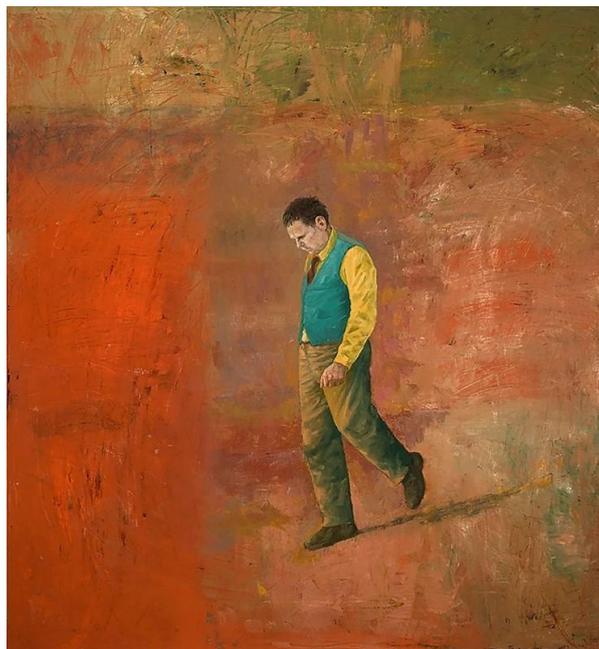


Artist Graeme Drendel has been a constant presence in Australian Art since his days as a student in the 1970's at Ballarat's Teachers' College and School of Mines, which after the decline of the region's goldmining established itself at the avant-garde of Australia's burgeoning art scene.

Spending my university days in and about inner Melbourne in the 1980s I recall passing by the iconic Australian Galleries, long the hothouse or haven of the best and the worst behaved of Australian's Bohemian and other artists.

Here, Drendel's large-scale emblematic paintings would often it seem leap from the display window of the gallery and onto Collingwood's Derby Street. I recall passing by, heading west, with Drendel's striding figures seemingly pushing against me in an easterly direction. They certainly took my attention.

On becoming acquainted with Drendel's work, the importance of this artist's presence became apparent.



Graeme Drendel, 'Trance' (2019) Source: Graeme Drendel

Caroline Field writing her seminal book 'Australian Galleries' (2019) sought out Drendel for his insights. As a young artist, Drendel witnessed the doyens of Australian art dealers, Tom and Anne Purves interact, entertain and rebuke many of the biggest names in Australian and international art. This milieu could only reinforce the young artist's desire to pursue his art career, and build on the trust placed in him.

This week, Drendel returns to Ballarat. "The Messengers" showcasing 12 large oil paintings and 6 smaller works is the artist's first solo exhibition in Ballarat since the 1970's, a period that saw many significant Australian artists learn their craft here.

The accompanying exhibition notes say of Drendel, "(He) has gained recognition for his highly accomplished hand in drawing and painting, and for his particularly intelligent observation and portrayal of life and the human condition.



Graeme Drendel, 'Lockstep - card carriers #2' (2019) Source: Australian Galleries

Following a successful solo exhibition at Melbourne's 'Australian Galleries' Drendel's new series is painted in his characteristic enigmatic style, revealing situations in which figures are removed from the larger group, isolated in the landscape, acting as if they're individually negotiating their actions and demonstrating what we as humans do. Alone or in pairs, Drendel's characters appear preoccupied, stilled within the vast open landscape surrounded by the darkness and emptiness beyond.

Says Drendel, "At the beginning of this year, I made a decision to concentrate primarily on single figure paintings and to situate the subjects in a fairly indeterminate space," Mr Drendel said.

Essentially this entailed foregoing the horizon line and creating random atmospheric effects that seemed to me to be demanded by the subjects.



Graeme Drendel, 'Women' (2019) Source: Post Office Gallery

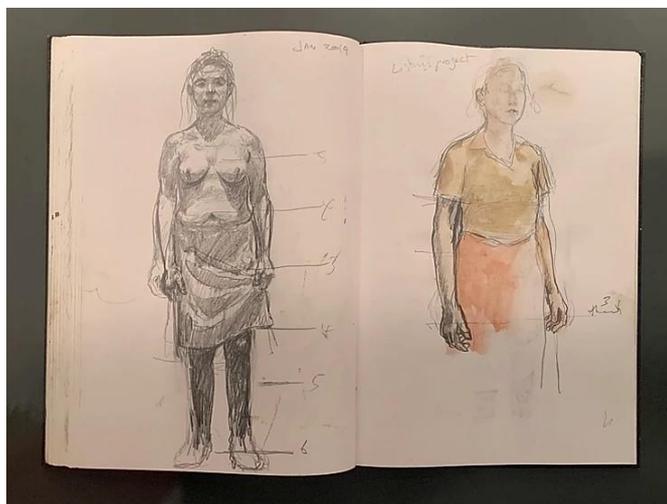


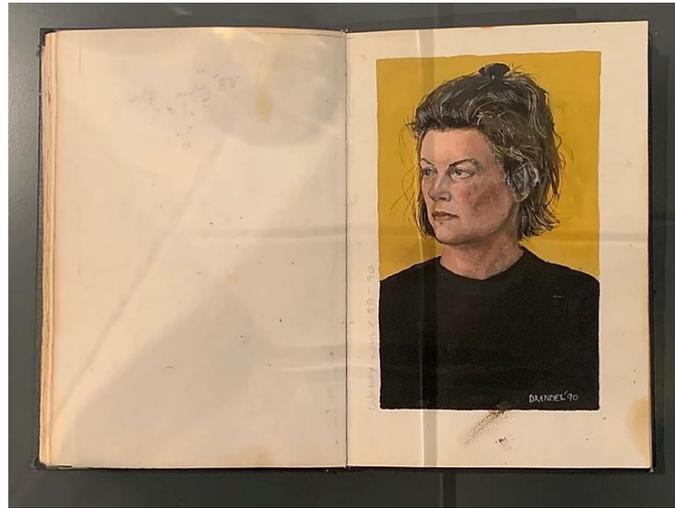
Graham Drendel, 'The Messenger' (2019) Source: Post Office Gallery

I quite like to think the 'characters' are psychologically charged and probably 'types' that anyone can identify with, or not."

Drendel's choice of Ballarat to host this exhibition is significant. Not unlike many of his contemporaries, Drendel acknowledges the influence of Ballarat on his artistic career. Although this commonality among artists during their formative years has not coalesced into a recognisable art movement *per se*, there has emerged a style of painting, sculpture and ceramics of bold experimentation and innovation.

Today, the art world is rich with former teachers and students that have passed through Ballarat at some point in their careers - Gareth Sansom, Jill Orr, and Peter Pilven just to name a few - to be held in high esteem for having pushed against orthodoxy and theory-driven representational art.





Graeme Drendel focuses on single figure paintings Source: Post Office Gallery

Drendel's exhibition places him squarely at the heart of this tradition. The artist has not approached each canvas here, determined to push his paint to form some predetermined composition. The steady, trained drawing is clearly evident, but so too is an energy in the backgrounds painting that has the effect of tilting the otherwise weighted figures tantalisingly towards the viewer. It is in this process of intuitive painting that artist is intimately engaged with his subject. The effect is to similarly now engage the viewer.

Each face so beautifully rendered by Drendel, with his use of advancing reds and cool greens bring a sense of intimacy, and immediacy between the subject and the viewer. One cannot resist the temptation to lean into the painting, to admire the textured finished features, only to recoil as if we have encroached too far into the lone figure's intimate space. Drendel's painting 'The Legal Secretary' (2020) captures just this moment exquisitely.

Drendel's return to Ballarat will no doubt be welcomed with open arms and a timely reminder of the city's and its noted alumni's important place in Australian art.



Graeme Drendel, 'The Legal Secretary' (2019) (detail) Source: Post Office Gallery



Graeme Drendel, 'The Unidentified' (detail) (2020) Source: Post Office Gallery

'The Messenger: New Paintings by Graeme Drendel' runs until 23 May 2020 at The Post Office Gallery, Cnr Sturt & Lydiard Street, Ballarat

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