

# Disturbing surrealism

## Graeme Townsend: *Paintings and works on paper*

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes November 24, Tuesday to Friday, 10am-5pm, Saturday to Sunday, 9am-5pm

Reviewer: Sasha Grishin

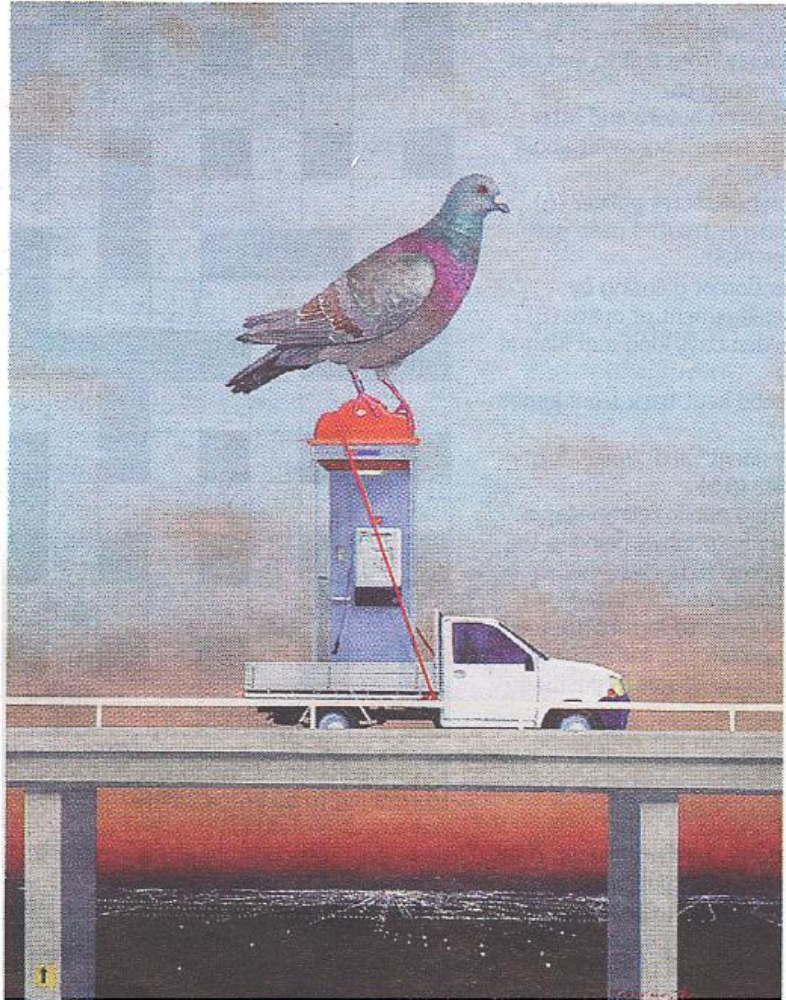
**G**raeme Townsend had his first solo exhibition at the age of 19, in 1973, and has been exhibiting frequently ever since.

He is a master craftsman who initially trained at the Julian Ashton School in Sydney and has mastered almost a form of photographic realism with a miniaturist technique in acrylic paints. It is highly accomplished artistic strategy with seductive surfaces and a bewildering degree of detail.

However, the effectiveness of his art depends on the use of this technique of exaggerated realism applied to slightly absurd, allegorical compositions where animal participants – especially rabbits, birds and fish – are invited to play roles in a broad drama of life. These creatures emerge as commentators on human endeavours. The term environmental art is somewhat nebulous and overused. Here the artist explains his most recent body of work in the following terms.

“The images in my paintings draw on the issues arising between the meeting of man and nature, man’s impact on the environment and how nature has responded to that impact. I use fantasy and surrealism to make what I think of as painted poems or short stories, it’s hard to explain because the images come to me in visions.”

One could describe Townsend’s paintings as lyrical environmental visions, where we are provided with clues to a narrative, but it is a narrative



*I saw yesteryear on the freeway downtrack*, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm.

which needs to be visually explored and emotionally felt, rather than a literary narrative which can be read and deciphered. Although he is happy to quote from the paintings of René Magritte and borrow artistic conventions from Caspar David Friedrich, ultimately his artistic language has become completely his own.

The most effective paintings at the exhibition are *The unanswerable question*, *The country that the rabbits ate*, *Commuterfish* and *Industrial prairie*, where there is a quality of the enigma and the surrealist juxtaposition

of unlikely elements which hint at an alternative reality. While there is an absurdist touch of humour in many of the paintings, ultimately they are quite disturbing works with menacing polluted skies, a parched environment with a note of apocalyptic finality.

On occasion surrealism uncovers personal nightmares with frequently sexual underpinnings. The surrealism of Townsend is concerned with a global nightmare where climate change has become a reality and the animal kingdom has come out with one final protest.