



Graeme Townsend, *Monarto savannah* in *Enjoy the Silence* at Beaver Galleries and, right, *Team primate*.

Cryptic images of the absurd

Graeme Townsend: *Enjoy the silence*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until November 3. Reviewer: **Sasha Grishin**

Graeme Townsend mastered at an early age a hyperrealist style, through which he could replicate convincingly the texture of fur and feathers, the glow of a transparent globe, floating clouds, moonscapes and many of the trompe-l'oeil techniques of painting.

He trained at the realist Julian Ashton School in Sydney and subsequently taught there the techniques of painting with acrylics. He is also an artist whose painting practice intersects with his activities as a professional photographer, where he has travelled throughout the world on photographic expeditions. He applies his "photographic realism" not to produce mimetic copies of reality, but to make slightly comical, surreal compositions, where the world of man and the world of animals come together and interact. Animals can

play the role of wish fulfilment for people and seem to act out their aspirations, or quietly exploit foibles of the human species. In art he draws consciously on the work of the Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte and the Australian realist, Jeffrey Smart.

Nietzsche once famously stated that "man is a sick animal". The American philosopher of myth, Joseph Campbell, saw in Nietzsche's pronouncement a challenge and created a whole philosophy in which he argued that we needed to harmonise with the wisdom of nature and to reassert our brotherhood with animals, water and the sea. I see in Graeme Townsend's jewel-like paintings something resembling Aesopian fables in visual form concerning the endeavours of man being realised through the presence of animals.

The high degree of realism makes these fables appear plausible, almost as if an absurd dream is unexpectedly reflected in the mirror and appears distantly familiar, humorous, yet intellectually you know it is impossible and cannot exist. Like a

bunch of meerkats standing on an abandoned car in a paddock near a freeway in *Monarto savannah*, or a couple of primates, pausing at night and listening for extraterrestrial life in *Team primate*. In some ways these are images of the absurd, but they are painted with the highest possible degree of realism.

At times I find the artist's humour a little heavy-handed and a bit too obvious as a one-liner, in such paintings as *Messengers from the old empire* and *The orchard*. Joseph Campbell in his *Creative Mythology* presents a wonderful account of existence when he writes "Life is like arriving late for a movie, having to figure out what was going on without bothering everybody with a lot of questions, and then being unexpectedly called away before you find out how it ends."

Graeme Townsend achieves this sense of a perplexing enigmatic narrative, where we are supplied with a few clues and then are invited to seek a possible meaning, knowing before we start, that no definitive meaning can emerge.

