

# Metaphors for a greater reality

**Graeme Drendel: Contact**  
Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street,  
Deakin. Closes March 24, Tues-Sat  
10am-5pm, Sat-Sun 9am-5pm  
Reviewed by: Sasha Grishin

A few years ago Graeme Drendel held his first exhibition in Canberra. It was a large show of oil paintings, some on a monumental scale, accompanied by a number of etchings.

His new exhibition consists of 32 intimate watercolour drawings, which are presented as direct figure studies, without backgrounds, but frequently accompanied by shadows.

His art is preoccupied with what one could term the "awkwardness of being", where figures appear consciously staged, as if participants in a narrative whose content is never fully revealed to the viewer.

This narrative is frequently tinged with existentialist absurdity and bouts of simple humour in which deliberate actions are directed at non-responsive subjects. A young girl appears to be addressing a sheep, a boy embraces a huge model of a duck, a girl waves endlessly at something which is passing in the sky, a bird flies off with a man's tie, a man mounts a bull, while another contemplates a banana.

The Melbourne-based Drendel is a superb draughtsman, who has been a staunchly figurative artist for several decades.

A country boy from Ouyen, out in the Mallee in rural Victoria, much of Drendel's work seems to possess a slightly nostalgic yearning for childhood.

Many of the key participants in his work are modelled on images of himself and his wife. This self-referential dimension to his painting opens his work to more personal readings.

Are these little social vignettes



*The original.*

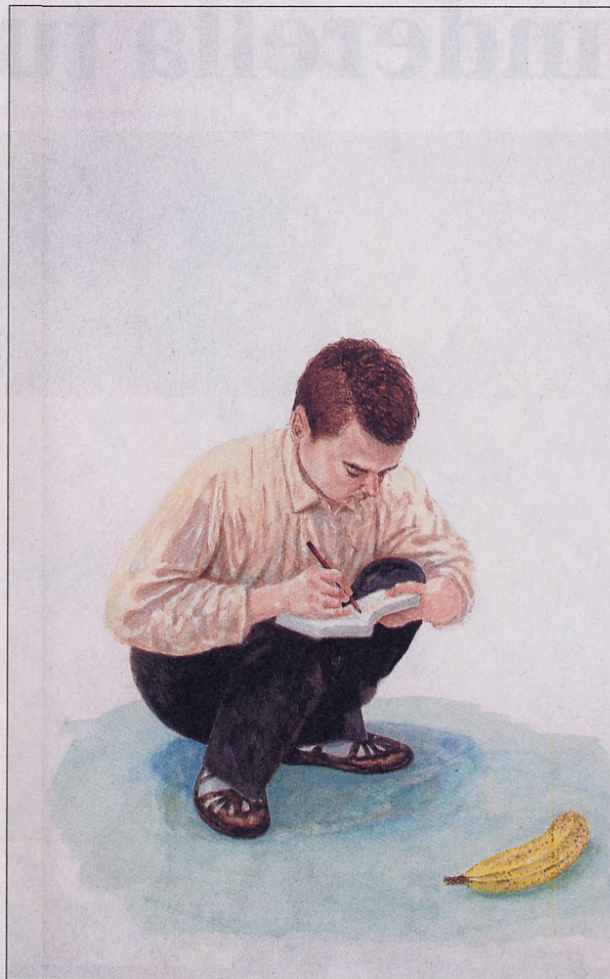
references to childhood memories or half forgotten daydreams? Are we encountering an enigma or is this an exercise in high farce?

In one of the more imposing drawings on display, titled *The original*, a man seated on a stool stares intently into a camera mounted on a tripod.

Is this a satirical image of how to make a selfie with old technology? Is the tension perceived in the hands of the figure denoting some sort of confrontation?

Is this an image of interrogation and why is he being interrogated and by whom?

The seriousness of the scene is



*The last still life.*

subverted by the absurdity of the situation as we are left grasping for explanations. In another scene, *The last still life*, a man crouches awkwardly as he intently observes a yellowing banana, while he records it in his notebook.

Why is it the last still life? Is it because the banana is rotting or has

the artist simply decided that he would draw no more still life compositions? We are not privy to an explanation and there are no clues provided for an authoritative reading of the situation.

In the years that I have followed Drendel's work I have come to think of his pictorial vignettes as



*The long goodbye.*

metaphors for some greater reality. There is something awkward and absurd in our situation as human beings and something which is not

immediately intelligible or easily verbalised. These small enigmatic parables may refer to this broader reality.