

# Strength and humour in prints



**Graham Fransella: paintings, prints and sculptures**

Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes May 19. Open daily 10am-5pm.

**G**raham Fransella is one of Australia's most highly regarded artist etchers. He is primarily a printmaker, but one who also paints and sculpts.

Ever since he arrived in Australia in 1975 from his native Britain, Fransella has had a noticeable presence on the Australian art scene. One of his earliest jobs was working as a printer for Bea Maddock while she was in Canberra on a creative arts fellowship at the Australian National University in 1976. The following year he joined Maddock on the staff of the Victorian College of the Arts before he retired from teaching in 2000 to devote himself to full-time studio practice.

Fransella's prints thrive on ten-



sion and seeming contradiction, with his imagery direct, simple, confronting, even a spot aggressive, while the general impression of the prints is that of a meditative experience. They are built up through an endless layering of marks, surfaces and scratchy signs. It is this combination of the



Left, Graham Fransella's *Figure on red* four-panel colour etching, and, above, his *Standing Figure*.

immediacy, vibrancy and rawness of toilet graffiti, with the distilled sophistication of a beautifully resolved intaglio print, and the inevitable resulting internal tension, which gives his work its distinctive character.

As you enter the exhibition you are confronted with one of his

glorious monumental scale sugar lift etchings titled *Figure on red*. It is dramatic, confronting, yet also very subtle and beautifully resolved. His etching plates are heavily worked, so that they become a palimpsest of layers pentimento-like, somewhat reminiscent of cave paintings, where we have faded echoes of our forgotten ancestors and of their thoughts and endeavours. They are gone, but their traces remain as a ghostly echo beneath the later layers. It is an image of a red giant with a primeval strength and presence, yet one who maintains only a ghostly presence.

Another great print in the exhibition is his *Head in landscape*, again large in scale (88cm x 210cm) and dramatic in its resolution. The inclusion of footprints in the work seems to both indicate scale and to humanise the space. As is frequently the case with Fransella's art, the serious intent of the work is to some extent subverted with a touch of whimsical humour, where nothing seems to be quite as it is shown.

The strength of this exhibition lies in the prints, both in the huge bold statements and the delightful smaller anecdotal studies. It is a very strong exhibition by a major artist.