

Gorgeous simplicity in signature themes

Graham Fransella: Figure and landscape

At Beaver Galleries, Deakin, until April 15.

Reviewer: Sasha Grishin

Graham Fransella is a Melbourne-based artist printmaker who has been exhibiting with the Beaver Galleries for more than two decades.

Although he has a strong following and has been represented in numerous national exhibitions, including the Wynne Prize, in which he was awarded the Trustees' Watercolour Prize on five occasions, he remains more of an artist's artist. In his art there are no concessions to popular taste, no gimmicky gestures or predictable colour combinations.

Fransella was trained in Britain, where he met Alberr Shomaly, the maverick Palestinian-Australian printmaker who encouraged him to visit Australia. He came, liked the place, and then worked at the Victorian College of the Arts for a quarter of a century. Since 2000 he has focused on his studio practice.

A feature of Fransella's art is that it has an immediate visual simplicity, sometimes possessing the lucidity of graffiti-like directness, but this is attained through the most complex and intricate means. The surface on which he works is the arena in which he performs with an endless layering of marks, surfaces and signs. It seems that he surrenders to an intuitive process, one in which chance serves as an active collaborator. Ultimately his practice engages with the theory of the artist's subconscious being allowed unbridled freedom of expression. This theory was first put into practice about a century ago by the Dada artists in Zurich, then it was passed on to the Surrealists, particularly the great printmaker Stanley William Hayter in Paris, and his disciples such as Anthony Gross in England and through him to students including Fransella.

The most challenging aspect in this type of practice is balancing chance with conscious control with the latter rescuing the work from potential chaos. It is the ability to retain spontaneity and freshness, but also to create a legibility and structure in a composition that is



ADVENTUROUS: Printmaker Graham Fransella's *Figure and water*.

the greatest challenge. After working on his art practice for 40 years, many of the decisions which Fransella arrives at in his mark-making have become intuitive, but it is a process based on experience and discipline.

In this exhibition the main themes of his art practice over the past few years, that of the figure and the landscape, have remained constant, but their resolution has become more challenging, sophisticated and at times, adventurous. The *Figure on sand*, is a grand "classical" Fransella statement, superbly resolved, while the *Long figure* etchings, are quite striking in their gorgeous simplicity and awkwardness. "Awkwardness" is an important feature of his art, an antidote to that which is facile or pretty, it is like a badge of honour for surviving through a long and arduous battle in the work's creation.

The large *River track* watercolour is the most striking and successful piece at the exhibition, full of unexpected magical passages of paint with a surprising lightness and humour. It cannot but leave you with a smile on your face. The smaller *Water track*, conceptually may be viewed as a study for the bigger work. Graham Fransella is an artist who has stuck to his guns and with time his art is becoming progressively stronger with a growing profundity in its resonance.