

Deep themes given a light touch

REVIEW

Sasha Grishin

Graham Fransella: Paintings, works on paper and sculpture. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison St, Deakin. Extended to Sept 19 and online at beavergalleries.com.au.

Although English-born, Graham Fransella has lived in Melbourne for almost half a century and has spent about two decades teaching at the Victorian College of the Arts. He is part of Melbourne's respected art establishment and one of Australia's most admired artist printmakers.

He is particularly famous for his huge multi-plate etchings of strangely dislocated figures shown with bold simplified articulation against multilayered backgrounds that appear almost like battlefields with traces of many earlier existences.

He is a very consistent artist who has developed what could be termed a signature style, so that you can tell a Fransella from 20 paces.

Fransella has been exhibiting with the Beaver Galleries for almost three decades and has become a well-known presence in the Canberra art scene. Nevertheless, each exhibition invariably throws up surprises and this one is no different.

This show of 23 pieces is dominated by nine bronze sculptures on bulky wooden plinths. The bronze figures are generally shown in acrobatic poses and are closely related to those encountered in the etchings. Their simplified bulk and weightiness make them somewhat overstated and their whimsicality less subtle than in most of his works on paper. A touch of humour is their saving grace.

The show also includes several quite stunning etchings, including the very intense print, *Night*. It is smallish in the context of much of Fransella's other work, but at 30 centimetres by 35 centimetres it has a concentrated power and pulsating vibrancy. For an artist who is generally shy of intense colours, this etching possesses an enchanting subversive humour and a riot-



Inland by Graham Fransella invites the viewer to enter the work and to take a walk inside its picture space. **Picture: Supplied**

ous polychrome exuberance. Other classic Fransella etchings include *Circus*, *Roadway*, *Jump up*, *Figure and dog* and *Two figures*.

The highlight of the exhibition is the huge - over two metres across - gouache painting *Inland*. At first glance it appears like a rambling composition where the artist has quite literally taken a line for a walk across the landscape and in an anecdotal manner relates the different elements and incidents encountered. As you peer deeper into the painting, the pictorial elements assemble themselves into quite a tight compositional structure and seem to float above the surface of the paper.

The intense blues, in some places

punctuated with black, appear to anchor the composition and then it becomes as if an aerial view of the landscape observed from a high vantage point, as if from among the clouds. On another trajectory, we seem to be moving through the landscape observing things rather intimately and feeling the intense heat of the fields of ochre, yellow and brown, the mirage-like quality of the foliage and cool of the waterholes. There is air that flows around the individual pictorial elements.

Inland, as a painting, has sufficient scale to envelope the viewer and to invite you to enter the work and to take a walk inside its picture space.

One could draw a parallel with the sprawling landscape narratives of John Olsen, however, Fransella's are freer in their associations and more abstracted.

The artist is not too self-conscious or too serious and allows the elements to flow through him, setting off various resonances. I admire the tightrope balancing act that the artist performs in allowing free associations to flow through the work and treating each encounter with light-hearted humour without being seduced by the trivial or the trite.

There is a lightness that prevails throughout Fransella's exhibition as well as a hint that, on a more profound level, his works deal with questions of loss and absence.