

Master of enigma explores our strange sense of alienation

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GRAEME Drendel: The first dance: paintings and works on paper. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Closes October 31. Online or by appointment. beaver-galleries.com.au.

Graeme Drendel is a master of the enigmatic narrative. In his paintings and drawings at this exhibition, he introduces us to a cast of characters - all seemingly involved in deliberate actions - but the purpose and intent of what they are doing are never quite spelt out. We are left wondering as to what exactly is transpiring and the significance of the strange ceremonies that we are witnessing.

Drendel is an exquisite and compulsive draughtsman, one who draws to make sense of the world around him. He generally works from the model with a

precision of observation and with an eye to explore the comic and anecdotal aspects of contemporary life. These drawn observations he assembles in a very deliberate manner into grand narratives of uncertain meaning.

Drendel, the country boy from Ouyen out in the Mallee in rural Victoria, is a staunchly figurative painter and printmaker who belongs in the company of other Melbourne-based figurative painters including Rick Amor, Peter Churcher and Peter Wegner.

Living in an inner Melbourne suburb, the lockdown did not particularly impact on his regular pattern of work - each day he walked to his backyard studio. Speaking of his present exhibition, he notes "many of the paintings are simply 'things' that happen in the studio, they are the result of a kind of stream

of consciousness process whereby 'anything' can and does happen".

The weirdness and the social disconnect that so many of us have experienced over the past couple of years brought upon us by the pandemic, in some ways have been pre-empted in Drendel's art over the past decade.

In much of his work there is the implication that society is essentially dysfunctional and that there is no ultimate purpose or meaning in life and trying to find such a meaning is an act of futility and an exercise in absurdity. When speaking of one of his earlier exhibitions, I noted a certain "awkwardness of being" as the prevailing mood in many of his compositions.

A major oil painting in this exhibition, "The first dance", shows a group of seven figures (roughly half life-size)



Graeme Drendel, The First Conversation (detail).

lined up like a procession of selected odd couples. Compositionally, it appears like a photographic snap with the end figures cut off by the frame of the camera. The setting is on sandy soil with a far horizon line and a stormy sky above.

Everything about this group is peculiar. Some are dressed in what could be called "smart casual", one

is in a kitchen apron, some have formal shoes, while another is in gym slacks and is bare-footed. There is a gap between each figure, like an emotional as well as a physical distance. There is also limited engagement in any sense and it is only in the shadows that they cast that they appear intertwined.

The title, "The first dance", provides us with few clues as

to the meaning of the painting. Is it like speed dating, where they are settling on partners? Or is this a dance of life, where people are thrown together into uneasy relationships from which they cannot withdraw?

Throughout the exhibition we are presented with individual watercolour studies of the pairs in this painting with titles like "Temptation" and "The first conversation".

In a glorious watercolour drawing, "The magician", a solitary figure is presented for our examination, while in another watercolour drawing, "Shooting star", a figure, seen from behind, contemplates a shooting star over a desolate, barren landscape.

As in his previous exhibitions, Drendel explores our sense of alienation in a bewildering world where things do not appear to make sense.