

The colour beyond the surface

Canberra artist Robert Boynes just wants people to pay attention

Sally Pryor

YOU hear it a lot about wide-reaching events and natural disasters, that we're all in the same boat.

Or rather, the same storm. The boats, in the case of the recent pandemic, varied wildly in size and shape, sea-worthiness and structural integrity.

And when it came to the arts, the storm was obliterating, a dark and existential presence, even now.

For Robert Boynes, an established artist with more than six decades of practice, and works in every major public collection in Australia, the pandemic caused a crisis of confidence the likes of which he'd never experienced.

When the first lockdown descended in 2020, Boynes had recently created four major paintings about displaced people - works that were physical expressions of a violent and distressing subject. He'd also just had surgery on both knees.

And, he says, lockdown made him hollow.

"I thought, are these the last pictures I'm going to make?" he says. "I just felt worn out."

There was a time when a blank canvas felt daunting to Boynes. Lurking in the corner of his studio, waiting to be filled. He never doubted it would, eventually, be transformed into something he was happy with.

But, having worked continuously for decades, nothing could ever have prepared him for the prospect that he might never paint again.

"I've never stopped, and that's why, because I stopped, I thought, how do I start again?" he says.

It was a full nine months before he was able to get back to it, and change his medium.

Boynes has had more than 60 solo exhibitions in his career, across Australia, the UK and America. And his entire life, both at work and at home in Canberra, where he has lived since 1978, has revolved around art. He studied at the South Australian School of Art in the early 1960s, spent time in London later that decade, and had a long stint at the

ANU School of Art, where he was head of painting for 27 years.

His children, Alexander and Laura, are both artists, his former wife, the late Mandy Martin, was an artist, and his current partner is the ceramicist Sarit Cohen.

Now 81, nothing has changed, notwithstanding his nine-month stasis. Today, he's surrounded by a series of newly-created works that look, in many ways, like the works he has always done. Gritty, fleeting impressions of human figures in urban environments, his paintings are never straightforward,

I'm finding colour behind the thinnest of black surfaces.

Robert Boynes

and often ambiguous. His representations often evoke memories, quick and ephemeral, lurking around the corners of something else you've seen. And these works are no different.

Except that they are, for him, surprisingly small.

Instead of large-scale canvases, his new works are on blocks wood. Thanks to the knee situation, he has

created them standing up, rather than spread out on the floor, where he had, in the past, become as fully and physically engaged with the canvas as possible.

"Here, the colour is sort of implied, and you can see ... the colour of the timber becomes a real factor there," he says.

"And the way in which I'm finding colour behind the

thinnest of black surfaces."

It's an apt metaphor for the process he has gone through to find his way back to his work, and revisit some of his recurring themes. The show's title is *Silver Thread*, which, he says, has assisted him "to deal with the weight of some works and the delicate nature of others".

He uses photographic images layered over and under washes of paint, using silk screen techniques and scraped-back textures. They are small - for him - but he says they still have scale.

"It's a pet thing of mine, the difference between scale and size," he says. "Scale seems to be a groovier word, and it's used more than 'size'."

Silver Thread opened last week at Beaver Galleries, to a large and appreciative crowd that, to his great relief, spent a good deal of time facing inwards at the works, rather than milling around chatting.

It was a reminder, he says, of the importance of having his work out in the world, for people to engage with.

"I think I've entered two or three art prizes in my life and never, never will I again," he says.

"Because they're saddening, in many ways, they're kind of humiliating, but the public at large want

to see how many prizes you've won. That's the kind of popular market. It's not necessarily the thinking people. They know how it's a pig in a poke and depends on who the judges are and where they're shown."

But he has recently begun donating some of his larger works to the Australian National University's Drill Hall Gallery, which now holds a significant collection.

"It's very important to me that the work is out there and owned and in public spaces that are good," he says.

"If they're just stored away, that can be sad, but in people's houses, people can look at them. I don't want to just make pictures and put them in my studio."

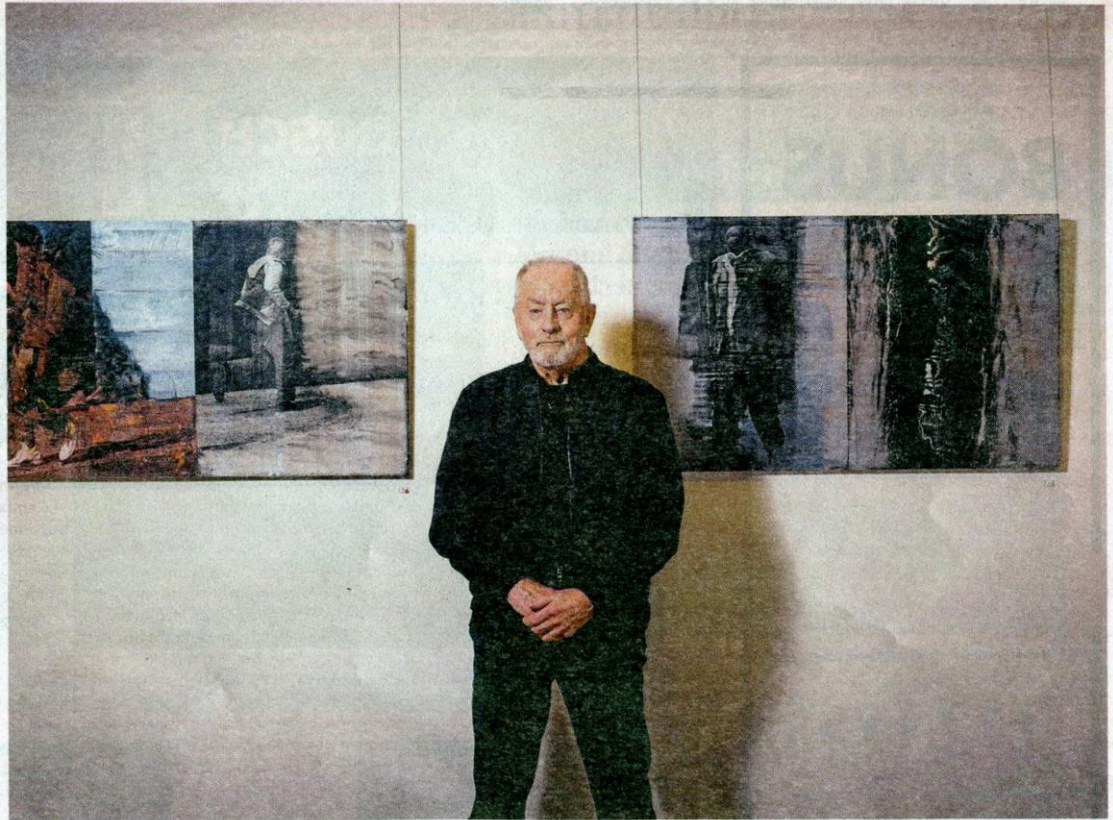
But seeing this new, petite collection hanging at Beaver Galleries, he feels he's come back from what, at one stage, felt like a brink of some kind.

"I felt that there were a lot of people looking at pictures and having dialogue and, and moving from one picture to another," he says.

"That's what an artist really wants to see.

"Any artist just wants people to actually pay attention."

■ *Silver Thread* by Robert Boynes is showing at Beaver Galleries until August 26.



Robert Boynes with two of his works from *Silver Thread* at Beaver Galleries. Picture by Elesa Kurtz. Below, his work *Mirage*

