

01

David Fairbairn

Story Prue Gibson
Photography Tony Lopes

Using prints as the armature of painting.



02

- 01 Reclining Head C.S. 1.4.07, acrylic, gouache, ink & pastel on paper, 130 x 120cm
02 Reclining Head C.S. 11.5.07, acrylic, gouache, ink & pastel on paper, 110 x 120cm

DAVID FAIRBAIRN does not work exclusively with portraiture. Nevertheless, it is his dominant preoccupation. His methodical studies, repetitive prints and exhaustive portraits of each sitter are formidable in their focus. Fairbairn's thorough approach leaves little room for error and, over the 30 years he has practised as an artist, has led to more complex and empathetic work than ever before.

A vital influence on the intricacy of Fairbairn's portraits is his milieu: the dense bush of Wedderburn, south of Sydney. Just like the character layers of the models and family members he seeks to represent, his paintings are thick with multiple surfaces. Like geological stratifications, the cliffs and rock platforms of his environment appear in the cheekbone, the jaw line or the angle of the nose in a Fairbairn portrait.

The artist's home, built by hand with his artist wife Suzanne Archer, artist son Corrigan and friends, is set in scrubby bush close to a deep ravine, home to protected koalas, Giant Burrowing Frogs, Gang-gang Cockatoos, varieties of parrots and rock wallabies. A capillary tributary to the Georges River runs along the ravine bed. The lines and sculptural forms of bottlebrushes and gum trees, glimpsed through the studio windows, reflect the successive layering of his portraits.



03

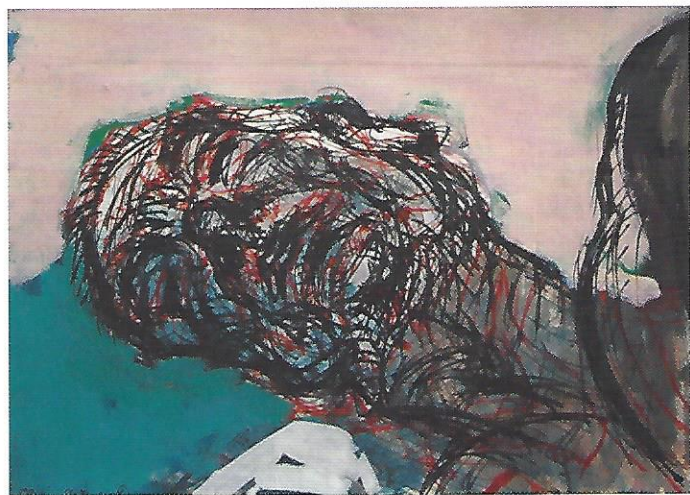
My drawings are a forensic mapping out of an energy field.

Fairbairn takes around sixteen months to complete a new series of work. In this time, he draws and photographs his sitter and fills a working diary with written notes. He chronicles his own progress with an obsessive quality, crucial to the process. He systematically makes monotypes using oil stick on copper plates, drypoint etchings or off-set prints, running them through his impressive printing press, a feature in his bush studio.

What many people do not realise on first viewing is that Fairbairn's paintings start with a completed print rather than with a white piece of paper. The prints are more than studies; they are the underlying structure of his paintings. 'It is a starting point rather than a resolution,' explains Fairbairn. 'It is a mechanism. Printmaking is a way in, which is exciting. I have less control but it is also about being environmental. There is no waste because I am recycling these etching proofs.' He adheres a patchwork of prints onto the surface and then the real construction work starts. 'When I paint and draw over the prints, resolution has to take place.'

While this attitude to beginning paintings may seem complicated and schematic rather than fresh and instinctual, it is really a question of allowing him access to a subject rather than controlling it. His approach is mirrored in the man-made platforms in the landscape outside. Over time, Fairbairn has built a series of platforms on the way down the ravine. Rather than an imposition on the natural land, these platforms or lookouts made of corrugated tin and wood, work with the landscape rather than against it. The same can be said for his artistic technique.

Better known as a draughtsman than a painter, Fairbairn has struggled with his identity in the past. It often been observed that he draws in paint but he now acknowledges a stronger interest in paint. Looking back, he says 'I struggled to paint in a way that's all my own. I felt I was up against other

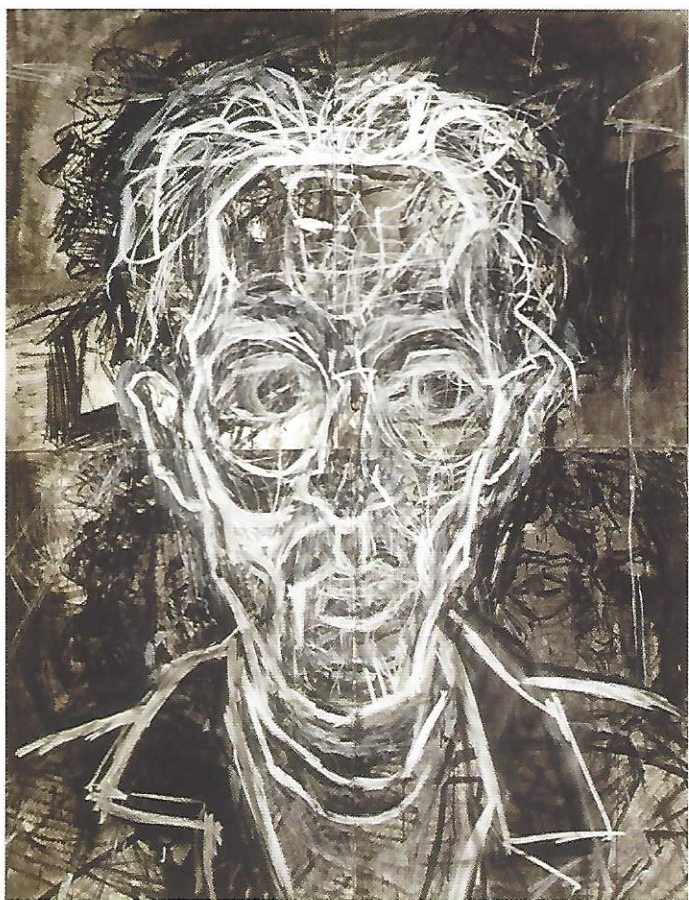


04

painters. I came to accept that the best line of attack was my aptitude as a draughtsman. Fifteen years ago I was a draughtsman rather than a painter. But I have become a hybrid.'

Perhaps as a consequence of intense reflection on his own mark-making, Fairbairn has allowed this hybrid identity – as printmaker, draughtsman and painter – to release him from his fears and actually contribute to the complexity of his work. 'For me the turning point was [in 2003] when I saw a ten year survey of the Dobell prize. My 1999 winning work [*Portrait of Tao Triebels*] was in that exhibition and you could see the print through the ink and pastel. It was emptied-out and edited and I had used the etching in a more skeletal way - you could see right through. That drawing was a culmination of making work that had a 'sound' to it. So that people could say, "that's a Fairbairn". Later works have become more painterly, paint has taken over.'

In more recent work, such as his *Marking Time* series based on portraits of sitter Clive Stanbridge (who died of pancreatic cancer during the course of the project), Fairbairn first photographed and then drew his sitter in pen and ink or gouache. 'Clive was a Jean Genet type – he was a professional model but had spent much of his life battling personal demons and living on society's fringe. I drew him in hospital. I'm drawn to old age and



06

- 06 **Portrait of Tao Triebels**, 1998, drypoint, charcoal, black ink, white chalk on four sheets of white wove paper, 142.7 x 110.5cm
- 07 **Father at 85 Study No 6**, 2007, acrylic, gouache, pen & ink on paper, 29 x 37cm
- 08 **W.C.F. No 6**, 2007, acrylic, gouache, pastel, ink & chinagraph on paper, 76 x 56cm



07



08

death. I hadn't thought about mortality until recently. It is the sense of pathos, like Munch or late Rembrandt works. Munch painted over 26 works of his family as they were dying.'

Since *Marking Time*, Fairbairn has been working on a series of works based on a local woman of Latvian descent, Vija Heinrich. Vija, now in her 70s, immigrated to Australia after World War II and was placed in a quarantined labour camp on arrival. In Germany she had been exposed to DDT powders that have since destroyed her sinuses. 'Older people have more for me to work with,' he says. In a similar manner to his response to Clive, Fairbairn seems drawn to the contortions of old age in Vija, the universal fears of imminent death. He makes monotypes that look like drawings but are 'forensic studies of the head'. He explains that 'getting the image to function is much harder [when working on top of a monotype print] because there is so much already on the surface. But then there is the complexity at the end. This last 10 year period has been the best work.'

There is another layer to David Fairbairn's life that contributes to the intricacy of his work and may explain the mild neurosis to which he alludes in conversation. Until he was nine years old, he lived in Uganda and Sierra Leone in West Africa, due to his father's mining engineer work. He was then sent to King's School, Canterbury in the English county of Kent. Although he travelled home for holidays, he never felt he knew his parents, in particular his distant father, and could never shake subsequent feelings of abandonment.

He has maintained a connection with the spiritual elements of African art. Mende masks from Sierra Leone pepper his walls and refer to a modern consciousness of the 'primitive'. Wooden puppets, wire toy sculptures from Zimbabwe and shields from Niger, which were given to his father during trips up-country, also adorn the rock and slip-cast concrete dwelling.

The artist's distinct association with the land achieves a dynamic link with the African art he was exposed to as a child and transfers well to the physicality of the human face. 'I am very conscious of the skeletal elements of the sitter's head. Black, white and grey – it all comes out of the environment.

Out of the window I see the same markings. It is a kinetic rhythm, a collusion of different elements that gives it strength. My drawings and paintings are a forensic mapping out of an energy field.'

In this way, Fairbairn has both inhabited and utilized the environment. His portraits are a subject but the 'abiding idea is to translate an equivalent of what I am looking at. I am interested in an improved sense of language. The question is how to interpret it more profoundly'. While portraiture may just be a subject, one tool in the process of making art, Fairbairn's portraits leave the viewer with an abiding sense of impermanence and with an empathetic understanding of the fragility of the human condition.

David Fairbairn
 Future Exhibition - August 2009
 Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney
 2 Danks St Waterloo, T +61 2 9319 1006