

# DRAWING OUT THE HIDDEN IMAGE

## LOU KLEPAC



Painting can be seen as a mining of the human soul. Artists create endless 'tunnels' in order to analyse the reality that obsesses them and is the preoccupation of their time. Those artists who succeed, establish new visions through which others can discover what the artist fought for and won through the mysterious act of the poetical imagination.

This process is a nobler and more dignified activity than just making attractive objects for which we can go shopping in the art supermarkets of the world. Art has never served so many and varied gods as today, but it is those works that are the flints from the cauldron of the imagination that will retain meaning when others fade.

W.B. Yeats said that the work of art is the one social act of an unsocial being. Like miners underground, artists spend their lives in the solitary seclusion of the studio. Only an obsession can take such a hold that artists are willing to sacrifice so much time spent in this solitary activity – solitary, even though their contemplation might be shared by a model.

One cannot help thinking of when Cézanne painted Vollard, who left an interesting account of the event. Vollard may have been in the same room as Cézanne, but Cézanne was alone within himself. And when poor Vollard, tired by the endless scrutiny of the silent and morose artist, succumbed to boredom and nodded off, almost tumbling off the stand on which he was posing, Cézanne rushed at him with anger: 'Can't you stand still; don't fidget; stand still like an apple'. Cézanne was not mining the psychological reality of his subject/sitter, but the volume that Vollard was displacing in the space of the room (like an object immersed in water). He watched how light and colour created this cubist solidity, which he transferred onto the canvas – put down brushstroke by brushstroke, at a snail's pace. A seemingly simple process from the outside, but inside explosions of considerations, possibilities, directions and intentions.

For some artists these explosions take place on the outside, directed by intense emotions that guide the activity through gesture. Arm and shoulder are enlisted to deposit these decisions, often with ferocious energy, on the canvas. And it stands to reason that the size of the canvas for this kind of action, needs to be of a considerable size. The 1970s was a period when such works reached a high point in British art.

David Fairbairn is a well-trained artist. He studied at the Royal Academy Schools in London in the mid-1970s and as a student he absorbed, as is natural, the preoccupations of those artists who were prominent at the time: painters such as Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. There was a world of large, imposing works created by intense, gestural activity. Compared to other



artists working at that time, it seemed as though only they were dealing with the metaphysics of painting. Their works exuded a charged psychological reality which was embedded in heavily applied thick paint, giving an added presence to their works.

In another country, in another hemisphere, David Fairbairn has carved out his own individual direction. His was not an overnight success, but the result of a persistent and determined effort. Talent is never enough; one needs intelligence and determination. To see an example of Fairbairn's determination, one only needs to look at the amazing house that David and his partner, Suzanne Archer, built in the bush at Wedderburn. It took them ten years to do it, but now, with several studios besides, they have the perfect and most congenial place to live in and work. The move to Wedderburn was an inspired escape from urban Sydney. It provided both artists with 'space' to develop and expand their work as artists in the isolation of the beautiful Australian bush.

The English artists Fairbairn had looked at as a student were predominantly painters (even though they drew and made etchings) and were concerned with the materials of paint in an extraordinarily tactile way. Fairbairn is different; he is predominantly a draughtsman. His art does not consist in making solid, substantial objects, by applying layer of paint over layer of paint. His works are on paper, they are intimate and intense and the result has the delicacy and vulnerability of butterfly wings.

Walter Sickert, who did not really approve of Cézanne, did concede that, although Cézanne worked on his canvases with endless applications, he retained an amazing freshness in the result. Equally with David Fairbairn, at the end of the process of creating his large heads, they are as fresh as a field of flowers.

To see how his process has evolved and how Fairbairn has progressed, one should examine his portrait of *Tao Triebels* 1998 (142 x 110.5 cm) which won the Dobell Drawing Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In this work Fairbairn discovered a means to create a sculptural three-dimensional space on a flat plane with spidery white webs. It looked impressive in 1998, but looking at it now it seems to be a means to something more profound. Art in the hands of a good artist is a process of progress.

Looking beyond the surface, Fairbairn endeavours to look into the sitter, like an x-ray, seeing what is inside the head, discovering what that personality reveals and what he can extract from it.





The final marks, which are nearest to us, because they have been put there last, are a transparent structure; a grid of lines that holds the image together. We see the surface grid first and then we are drawn in, layer by layer. If Fairbairn's heads were some kind of soft sculpture and we could put them into an acid bath to get rid of the 'flesh' inside, what would remain is a haunting wire-like grid, containing empty space. The soul would have disappeared, revealing a mysterious lost-wax impression of the final stage of Fairbairn's method of 'realising' one of his portrait heads.

Even though he makes smaller works, such as etchings and woodcuts, some of the most impressive and successful are works created on an immense scale. In front of one of these 'heads' one is drawn in by the succession of painterly grids that make up the work.

There are connections of this system of work with the architectural space grids of Giacometti or the gestural psychological delving of Munch – both connections have been alluded to by others. But what is original and different is the process – the artist entering into the 'presence' of the sitter, and transferring the soul from the person observed to the large sheets of paper glued to the board on which Fairbairn works.

Both Auerbach and Kossoff, with whose works Fairbairn has certain affinities, were 'exiles', as was their mentor David Bomberg. David Fairbairn, entrenched in the Australian bush, is also a kind of exile. He was born in Africa of English parents, and brought up in England at boarding school. He studied art in London but eventually escaped and found his place in Australia. Australia transformed what had been an abstract painter into a figurative one.

He has 'come home' at Wedderburn – the Australian bush is a kind of surrogate Africa. His special sensitivity is probably the reason why he has preferred to draw the elderly, women, and even ill people, with whom he has been able to establish a special rapport. He has achieved this through a process that includes writing copious notes about the sitter. Each important work has a dossier of notes and commentaries, and includes photographs of the various stages of the work. The process is often long and can extend over many months.

One might not expect to find the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler discussed in an essay about David Fairbairn. Hodler may not be an artist whom Fairbairn has looked at – he is not as well known as his compatriot Giacometti, for whom Fairbairn has a high regard, but Hodler is interesting for several reasons. Hodler considered his large mural works as public works; the paintings as more personal and private. In this respect Fairbairn's large heads, which might be seen as 'public works', are in fact the opposite – intimate and private. But it is one series of



works that Hodler produced during a period of some thirteen months that makes the comparison to David Fairbairn interesting.

Late in 1913, the sixty-year-old Hodler learned that his mistress, Valentine Godé-Darel, who had just borne him a daughter, was terminally ill. For the next thirteen months he was constantly at her bedside. Hodler made endless drawings, sketches and paintings, recording the ravages of the illness on the woman he loved. With memories of Holbein's *Dead Christ*, which he had seen many years before, Hodler painted Valentine with an amazing frankness, producing one of the most sustained chronicles of physical decline.

Valentine died in January 1915. Hodler examined the subject before him and painted the silent suffering of the woman, reflected by his own horrifying experience of the event. As with Cézanne and Vollard, there is no real participation between subject and the artist. It is a one-sided activity. David Fairbairn's works are different in kind.

Fairbairn sometimes takes as long to complete just one of those large heads. His is also a sustained effort, but he is not interested in just fixing the likeness of his sitter, or to depict the outside reality of the person. It is the reverse. Fairbairn looks deeper, peeling away the layers, going beyond what the eye alone can see. He is mining that person's personality which, when the work is complete, becomes a kind of resurrection of the spirit, with the inner depths of the model in all his or her fragility deposited on the canvas.

This involves much scraping and over-painting; going back to an earlier phase of the work to proceed again towards that ideal destination that at the beginning was only an intimation. Eventually these silent dialogues with the sitter produce the desired result. In the case of Hodler, the artist at work was the 'witness'; in Fairbairn's case, the artist is more of a 'medium', where intuition and the artist's ability, merge to produce a complex work of art.

Whistler said that a work of art was finished when you could no longer see how it was done. Although this applies to Fairbairn's work (it would be hard to make a replica of one of the large heads), it would be more correct to say that one of his works is finished when the artist is no longer able to proceed – when he has done all that is possible; the work having been wound up like a spring and charged with emotion. It is up to us to unwind it and bring it to life.