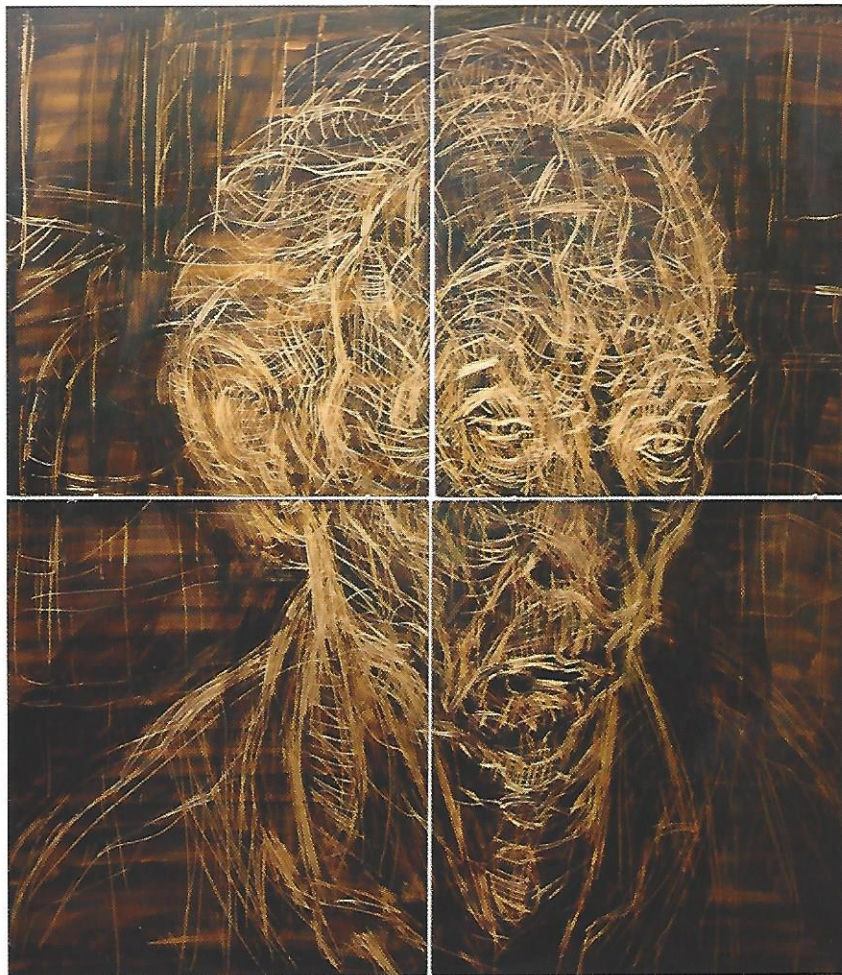


DAVID FAIRBAIRN

ESSAY NATALIE WADWELL



01

WHILE STUDYING AT THE WEST

Surrey College of Art in Farnham and the Royal Academy Schools London during the 1970s, David Fairbairn ignored his instincts to work from the life model and followed the advice of his lecturers to produce flat abstract paintings. After visiting in 1981 and meeting artist Suzanne Archer, Fairbairn decided to move to Australia a year later. Subsequently, he decided to return to working from a life model to create figurative drawings. This saw the beginning of his exploration into mixed media drawing techniques.

Since producing his seminal works in 1998 and 1999, an ongoing exploration in Fairbairn's process has been the conversation between wet and dry media. His mixed media drawings involve working with gouache, ink, charcoal, pastel and acrylic on paper. As curator Renee Porter has identified, Fairbairn does not seek to flatter or capture a photographic likeness of his sitters, but rather explores the power of an accumulation of lines to reinterpret his subject. Fairbairn's long-standing interest in many of the post-war English artists such as Lucien Freud, Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon is evident in much of his mature work.

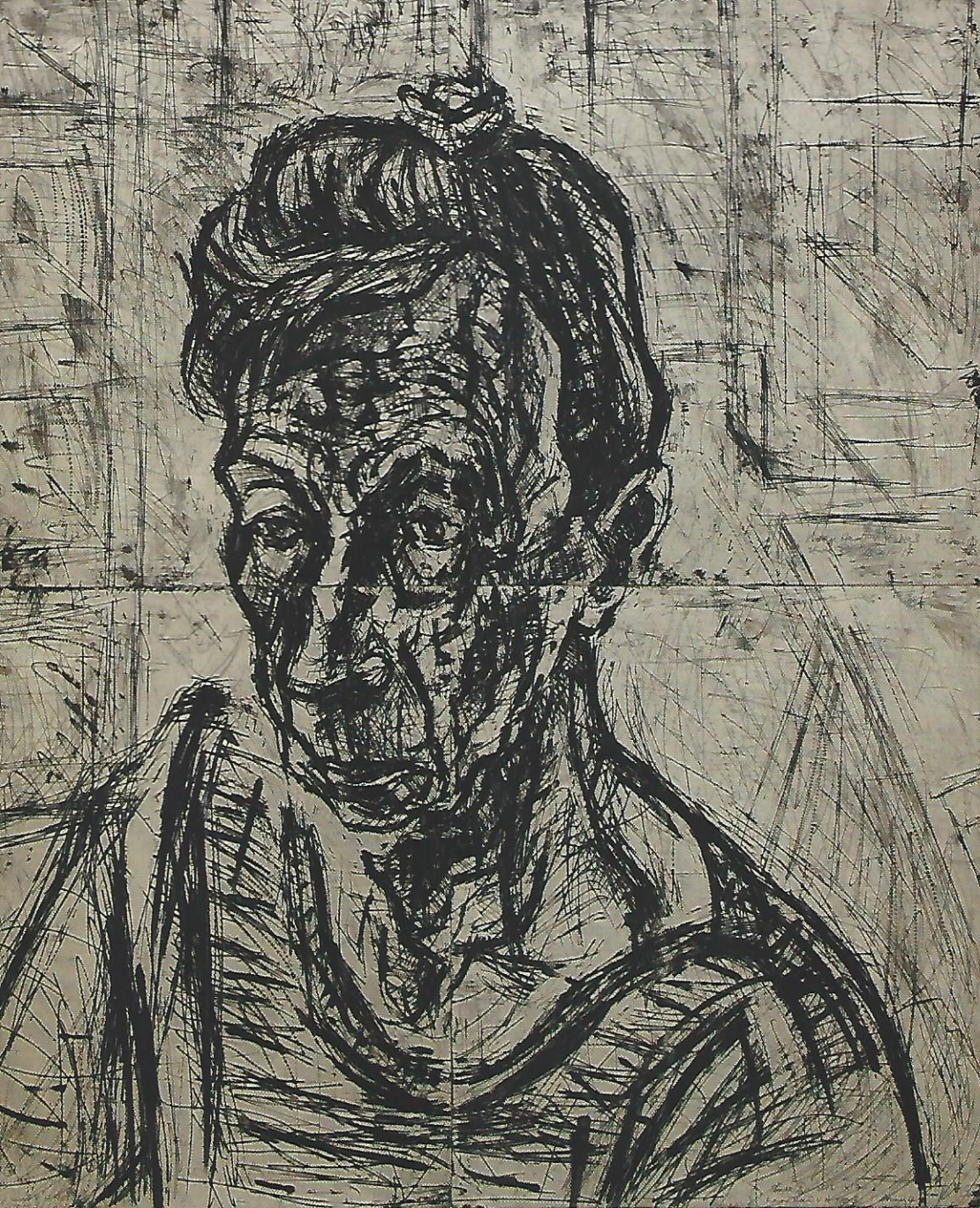
One recent example of this is 'Head of J.L. No 1' (2015). Fairbairn has known John Lascelles for 20 years. Building up from the prepared background, every gestural stroke carves the form of the sitter. The work's energy is loaded with the intrinsic qualities of the medium; the chalky marks of pastel contrast with the flat appearance of acrylic and the white gouache highlights. Fairbairn's drawings are as much about the artist as the sitter, as these renderings seek to map both the physical and psychological presence of his sitter.

Picking up on his interest in 'drawing with paint' Fairbairn asked Lascelles to sit for 'Large Head J.L. No 3' (2015). This time, Fairbairn contained his use of colour to the figure. Against a simple background, the bold depiction of the subject in hues of blue sits forward. His application of paint is somewhat contained between the black, white and brown lines which give form to the subject. Like many of Fairbairn's sitters, Lascelles' gaze is preoccupied by something off the page to avoid the confrontation of eye contact.

There is a distinct shift in energy between the marks of Fairbairn's mixed media drawings

and that of the copper etchings. Unlike his previous studies, these monoprints are absent of colour, relying solely on the marks worked and reworked through the etching process. Significantly, Fairbairn works directly from the sitter onto the copper sheets without any preliminary drawings. However, one technique that he does transfer from his previous compositions is the use of a bold figure against a simplified background. Furthering his studies of John Lascelles, 'Large Head J.L. No 1' (2016) captures the sitter in a pensive state. Dense black lines cut out his rigid frame on the page with thin, wispy lines and cross-hatching give the suggestion of form.

- 01 Large Head T.C.No1, 2015, preparatory drawing on four copper plates, 121 x 106cm
- 02 Large Head V.H. No 3, 2017, copper etching, drypoint, aquatint, power tools on BFK Arches 270gsm grey paper, unique state, 121 x 106cm
- 03 Large Head V.H. No 1, 2016, copper etching, drypoint, aquatint, power tools on BFK Arches 270gsm grey paper, unique state, 121 x 106cm
- 04 Portrait of J.L. No 1, 2015, copper etching and drypoint on Hahnemule, 36 x 30cm
- 05 Large Head J.B. No 1, 2016, copper etching, drypoint, aquatint, power tools on Arches cream paper, unique state, 121 x 106cm



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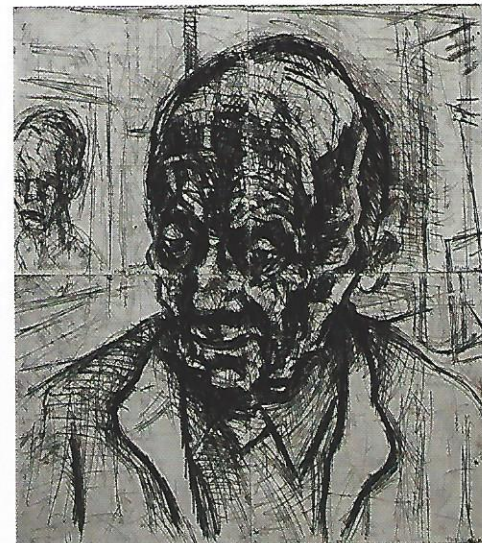
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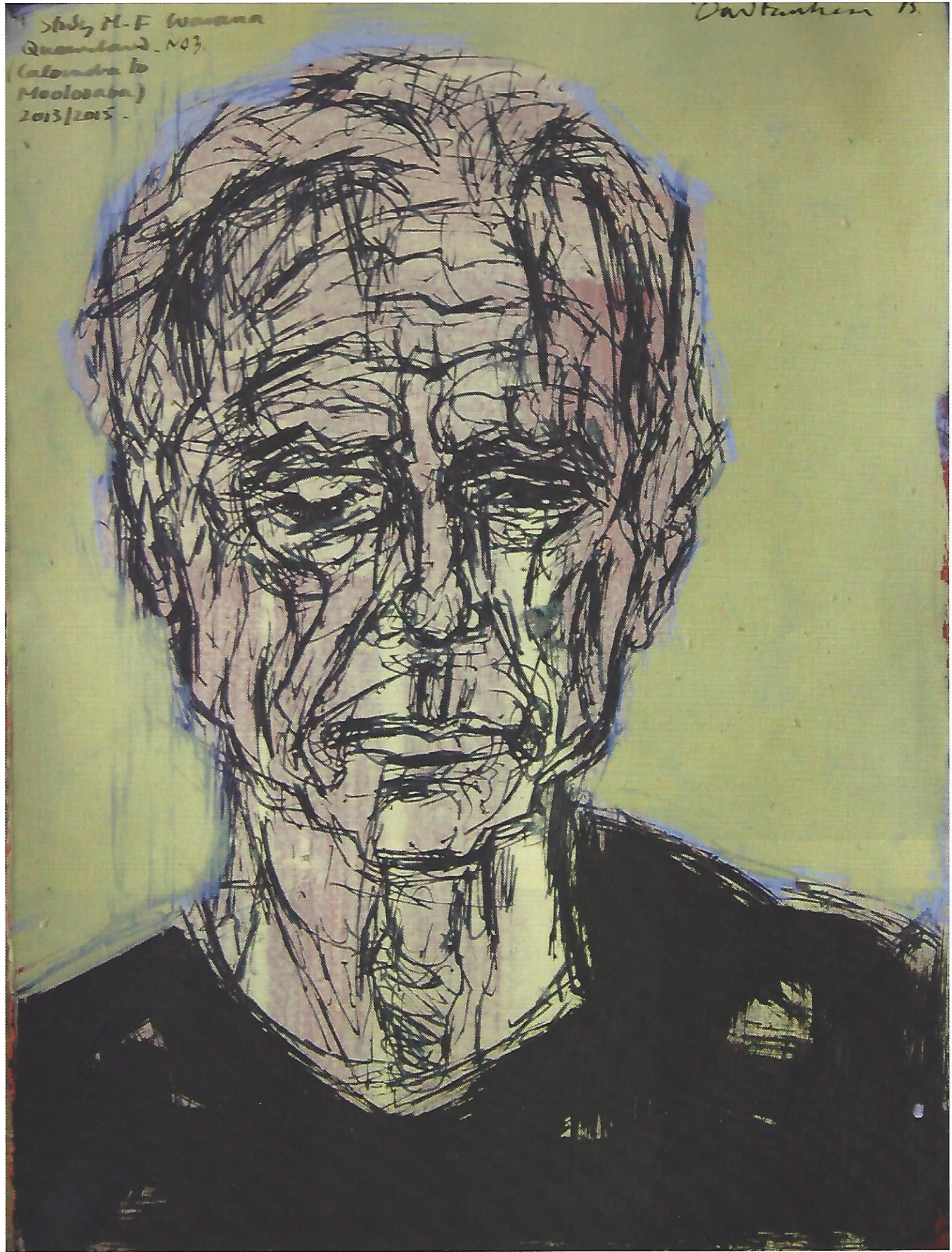
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Study, M.F. Warrana
Queensland, No. 3.
(Calandra to
Mooloolaba)
2013/2015.

Darwin 13.



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I enjoy the ritual of setting up and spending the day producing the prints. It is physically demanding, but it is also meditative. It allows me to act more intuitively.



07



08



09

A recent development is using a larger scale in his printmaking (120 x 106cm). Now working exclusively on heavyweight paper, each print is made up of four smaller plates. His greatest challenge has been the sheer physicality of this process. In producing a drawing an artist is deeply engaged with the immediacy of the mark-making. However, when generating an etching Fairbairn is motivated by sheer curiosity about what will emerge from the printing press as there is a delay in seeing the reality of the inverted image.

He says, "I enjoy the ritual of setting up and spending the day producing the prints. It is physically demanding, but it is also meditative. It allows me to act more intuitively. Most prints are the result of three to eight reworkings."

As part of his new etching series, he asked the "vivacious and spirited" Viya Heinrich to resit for him. Viya is of Latvian heritage and came

to Australia as a refugee following World War Two. She has been a sitter for Fairbairn since 2009. 'Large Head V.H. No 3' combines dense contours with thin lines to delineate her form. For those who have had the pleasure to meet Viya, it is apparent that the weight of her personal experiences is captured in each stroke.

As part of Fairbairn's drawing process, he often includes old printing proofs in the creation of a new work. He describes this process as working with the "marks left from a previous life merged with the new in order to start the drawing". This is particularly true of his work 'S.A. No 1.' This charcoal portrait is built up on an old, discarded monotype covered with a surface of white acrylic and gouache. An aura-like residue of areas he has reworked suggests movement behind the figure of the sitter who is carved out in charcoal. This sitter is his wife, Suzanne Archer, who has appeared in many of Fairbairn's drawings since the 1980s.

As Fairbairn explains, every major mixed media drawing "is preceded by a number of simple charcoal drawings. Every etching relies on a drawing that is inverted by the end of the process. Drawing is an act of abstraction; it is a reinterpretation of reality made possible through an accumulation of marks."

Fairbairn's integrity as an artist is in his commitment to capturing the energy of his sitters through mark-making. ■

David Fairbairn is represented by Stella Downer Fine Art, www.stelladownerfineart.com.au

📷 @david_fairbairn66

- 06 Study M.F. No 3, 2013-15, acrylic, gouache, pen and ink on paper, 38 x 28cm
- 07 David Fairbairn working on Large Head S.A. No 1, in Wedderburn Studio, courtesy the artist.
- 08 Portrait of G.E. No 15, 2015, mixed media on paper, 76 x 55cm
- 09 Large Head S.A. No 1, 2017, etching, drypoint, aquatint, power tools on 4 sheets of copper, Arches paper, unique state, 120 x 106cm

Courtesy the artist and Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney.