

DAVID FAIRBAIRN: THE POWER AND IMMEDIACY OF LINE

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Lineage is an exhibition that spans the last twelve years of David Fairbairn's artistic practice. Incorporating an array of media into each work, it is line that brings the work together. Fairbairn defines himself as a draughtsman first and foremost, not a painter. *'The line is a constructed image that reinforces the idea of how something is built without necessarily creating a copy. I like using a line to create a frame, or an idea of something, rather than an exact replica, it makes the work more abstract and highlights the character of the subject.'*¹ Some works start with a print, not a blank sheet of paper. In this case, it is etching that forms the skeletal structure of the image. Multiple layers of acrylic wash are applied one on top of the other, followed by a range of mixed media; gouache, pastel, etching or charcoal, which in turn are incorporated, reworked, partially erased or obscured, and finally drawn together with the characteristic black or white lines that are a Fairbairn trademark. This layering of different mediums and levels creates space within the composition. He refers to this as a *'hybrid process of painting, printing and drawing'*. The artist works on prints, drawings and paintings in a range of sizes concurrently. *Lineage* includes works that are larger than life size portraits to the more intimate etchings and drawings.

Fairbairn's portraits are not flattering, nor have a photographic likeness. Often mature aged, his sitter's faces show the hallmarks of experience; each one has many stories to tell, making the viewer question what lies ahead, not only for the subject, but perhaps themselves. Vija Heinrichs, a Campbelltown resident, is one of his most recent sitters. In her seventies of Latvian descent, she migrated to Australia after the Second World War.

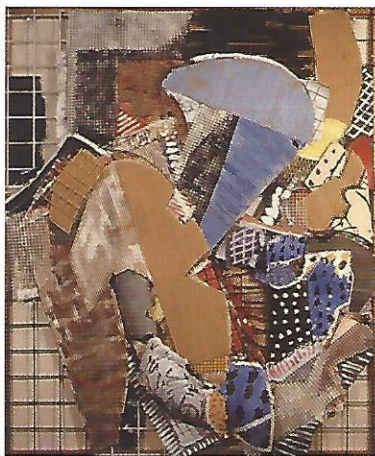
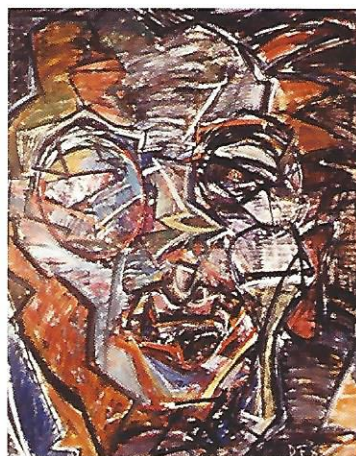


Figure queen 1982

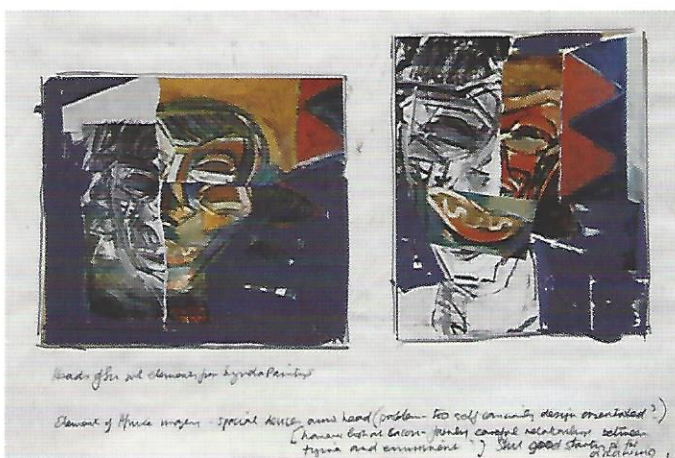


September self portrait 1983

Generally a passive gaze is captured; no smiles or grimaces are visible. These are more than skin deep renditions; moving beyond the wrinkles, laugh lines and grey hair, Fairbairn examines what lies beneath the surface. Clothes are not a device used to signify the sitter; these are secondary, as is the background, which may hint at the architectural and does not provide any detailed references.

It is the weekly ritual of the sitter in his studio over a period of many months that enables Fairbairn to execute these powerful works. The dialogue between artist and sitter is a vital element. Making no attempt to produce a copy of his sitter, Fairbairn is more concerned with interpreting the subject in a personal way. These portraits demonstrate both an audacious and unsentimental process. Portraiture is as much about the artist as it is the sitter: *'My portraits represent the transience of life itself...the passing of time both in life and in the studio. Each work represents a period of a time that has passed during the sitting; you cannot capture that in a photograph.'*² In this way the passing of time is an important factor both in the systematic layering of materials and the experiences of the many sitters who have spent time with the artist while he works. Fairbairn has a refined and confident language which also has a concern for contours, mapping and the landscape. This is evident upon a visit to the artist's studio, situated at Wedderburn. The subdued palette and use of light resonate within the locale.

Fairbairn was an abstract painter in England in the late 1970s whilst at Art School. On arrival in Australia in 1981 his work (after a series of collaborative works made with Suzanne Archer) started to reference the human figure, through a series of photographic collages and large assemblages. Works from this period reveal a constructed Cubist collage approach, for example the mixed media assemblage *Figure queen* 1982. This renewed interest in figuration had its roots in the evolution of drawing that had taken place in the 'School of London' that included Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. Fairbairn then embarked on the early painted and drawn portraits which were produced in 1983-84 and were exhibited at the Mori Gallery, Sydney, his first major exhibition. In an article by Elwyn Lynn in *The Australian* newspaper in 1984 Fairbairn's work was described as *'jarring slabs of areas of bruise, with some rare lyrical passages of quiet hues as in Head of S.A. with red outline which has had its rare spatial ease invaded by an outline of tooth-like shapes taken from primitive carvings.'*³ In these earlier works canvas was stapled onto board painted and



Page from artist's working diary 1985 (detail)



Head of SA with red outline 1984

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(2)

drawn and then scraped, scratched and collaged. Deconstructing his subjects, various elements were pushed and pulled apart. These earlier works, like those made recently were a combination of painting and drawing, even back then it was drawing that dominated. Fairbairn's development of his own characteristic use of line is evident when looking at his earlier working diaries, so to the development and long-standing persistence to refine this process.

In 1987 David moved with his wife, Suzanne Archer (they had married in 1985) and newborn son Corrigan Fairbairn to Wedderburn, south-west of Sydney. His initial response to that move was to attempt to engage with the landscape in his paintings and drawings. This period was transitional although it resulted in some of these works being included in two solo exhibitions in Sydney, at D.C. Art in 1988 and the Crawford Gallery in 1993. However by 1995 he had secured his position as a draughtsman working directly from life with a sitter. In fact, two of his earliest models of that period were local residents Brian and Robina Lockett. This established a working pattern that has continued to the present day.

In Fairbairn's current studio an imposing printing press is located near the entrance. Pinned to the walls are photographs of sitters, trolleys are filled with for myriad materials, these tools of the trade resonate with a strong sense of order and purpose. A large portable easel is covered with multiple sheets of paper and unfinished works of varying sizes are pinned throughout the space. Lining the shelves are books by Alberto Giacometti, Ian Fairweather, Rembrandt, Juan Gris, Paul Cezanné, Lucian Freud and Henry Moore. Other shelves are filled with slides, photographs and the artists working diaries. These diaries are filled with photographs detailing the working stages of portraits, coupled with detailed annotations. References to other artists are made; alternatives to refine a particular work are jotted down. This may reference the tilt of the head or the angle of the nose or even what he may be reading at the time fills the gaps between images. These diaries are comprehensive to say the least, others might say even obsessive in their detailed



Black tree 1993



Head of Brian Lockett with musical instrument
1995

persistence. What must be acknowledged is that Fairbairn repeatedly questions his own art making with an unbridled determination to find resolution with his work. *Large head V.H. No.2* 2009 is one such work that went through an exhaustive process. With each state of the work, the diary has captured the changes, using both text and image to document this process.

Fairbairn's history of putting pen to paper goes back to his early childhood years. He was born in 1949 in Zambia, Southern Africa. He subsequently spent most of his first nine years in West Africa. He was then sent to a boarding school in England. It was here that he began writing letters to his mother. His father was a mining engineer, based in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia. It was this association with African culture that led to a broad interest in African art, which in turn resulted in an appreciation and fondness for Oceanic, Aboriginal and Papua New Guinea art and culture. These early cultural influences informed his art practice, in particular the mask. Two of these masks, given to his father have since been handed down to David and now hang in his home, a constant reminder of his family roots and a direct influence to his early portraits.

Other artists that have influenced Fairbairn include; Alberto Giacometti, Edvard Munch, Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon and Jackson Pollock. When positioning his work within an Australian context, artists such as Albert Tucker, Pam Hallandal and Kevin Connor come to mind.

He has produced portraits for more than twenty-five years. *Lineage* is a comprehensive body of work and clearly illustrates Fairbairn's mastery of the use of line, the power and immediacy of its mark and his dedicated approach to producing multi-media work that reveals he is one of Australia's leading contemporary draughtsmen.

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1. Interview with the artist 2010
 2. Interview with the artist 2010
 3. Elwyn Lynn, 'Effigies of Urban Man', *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 16-17 June 1984



David in studio, Wedderburn 2009