



Large Figure S.A. No 2 2010
acrylic, gouache, pastel, charcoal and ink on paper
210 x 180cm

Portrait of G.E. No 3 (detail) 2015
acrylic, gouache, pastel and charcoal on paper
76 x 56cm

David Fairbairn: Drawn to Print

Emeritus Professor Sasha Grishin AM, FAHA
Australian National University

Apelles, the greatest painter of classical antiquity declared “Nulla dies sine linea” [Never a day without a line]¹. He felt that line in his practice lay at the foundation of all art. From Apelles to Giotto, the quality of the artist was judged by the quality of his line – Apelles could convince the ancient world of his outstanding merit by visiting the artist Protogenes at home in Rhodes and drawing such a fine line that all artists marvelled at it. According to Giorgio Vasari, when the Roman pontif was seeking an artist for a major commission in Rome, Giotto simply drew the outline of a perfect circle to convince “the Pope and many of his courtiers ... that Giotto must surpass greatly all the other painters of his time.”²

David Fairbairn is a draughtsman who paints and the multiplicity of lines is his method for revealing form. Although the human figure is not the sole subject of his art, it has been a central preoccupation over many years. He frequently works on a large scale, where he engages the drawing with the full-reach of his body, so that the mark making has a decisive gestural quality, akin to trails of energy preserved in the arena of the picture space. His drawn and etched heads are monumental and larger than life-size, but they are not monolithic, they emerge like living entities surrounded by air. They possess a breathing lightness and exist within a spiritually charged space. The air around them seems as important as the forms contained within the lines articulating the heads, the surface remains dynamic, whether this be in the colour drawings or the monochrome etchings.

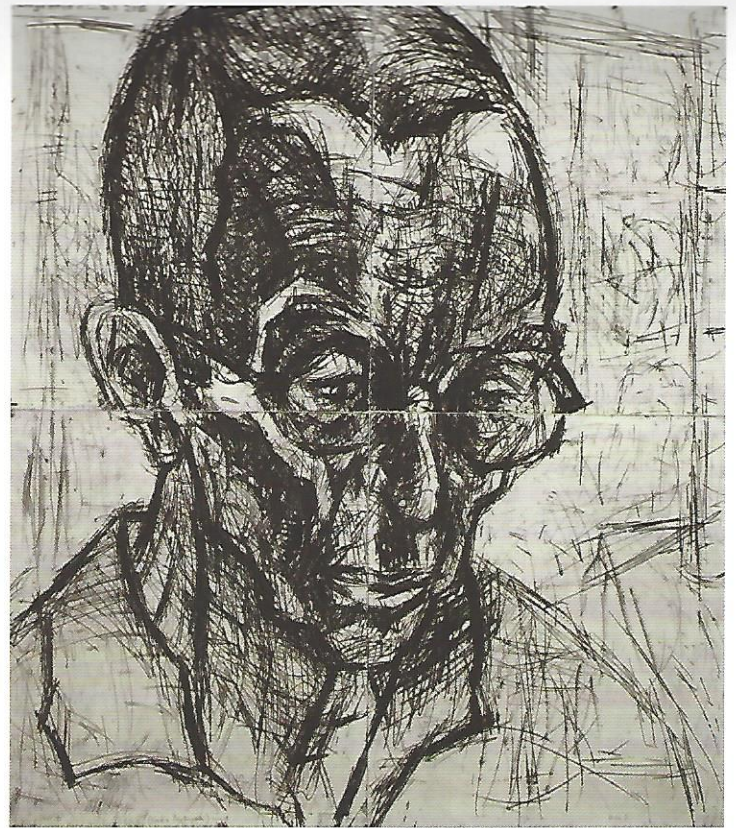
David Fairbairn was born in Africa of English parents, the son of a mining

engineer. In his comments about his art, he makes frequent reference to the impact of African visual codes in his childhood and has continued to collect African masks with their striking visual impact and sense of detachment, but simultaneous quality of spiritual presence. His formal studies in art commenced in Britain, at Wimbledon, West Surrey, and subsequently continued at the Royal Academy Schools in London. What survives from his British work from the late 1970s, while he was at the Royal Academy Schools, demonstrates an early struggle with formal elements resolved as non-figurative images made up of abstract shape canvas pieces inspired by the British artist Michael Moon and the Americans, Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly. He employed a generally subdued palette of earthy browns, tans, blacks and greys, frequently shot through with occasional pink stripes or orange patches to create a degree of surface vibrancy with interesting relief shapes. In marked contrast to the work for which he subsequently gained national recognition in Australia, he recently observed, “I still believe the re-constructing from the visible world is a continuing obsession, with an element of cubism thrown in for good measure!”³

In 1981 David Fairbairn escaped both England and non-figuration to find refuge in Australia, initially in Sydney, and then at Wedderburn, outside of Campbelltown near Sydney. On his arrival in Australia, almost immediately elements of figuration entered his practice and while still exploring constructed sculptural forms, this exploration developed within a more figurative mode of thinking. Part of the visual baggage which he brought



Large Head J.L. No 1 2015
 acrylic, gouache, pastel, charcoal and ink on paper
 130 x 120cm



Large Head J.L. No 1 2016
 copper etching, drypoint, aquatint, power- tools on four sheets of Arches 270gsm paper
 Unique state
 121 x 106cm

with him from Britain undoubtedly included the impact of Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, with their imposing imagery and their intensity of gestural mark making. This however only emerged in his mature art in Australia, when he felt the strength and confidence to absorb something of their lexicon, but as integrated within his own practice.

In Fairbairn's practice, there is no attempt made to 'translate' an image from one medium into another, it is always a question of creating the image in the most appropriate technical language. In this context, some of his most remarkable works are the recent huge etchings. The images, measuring about 120cm by 110cm, are developed by the artist directly from the model. Four large copper plates are brought together on the artist's easel to make one composite whole and it is on this surface that Fairbairn struggles with his sitter. The sitters in his etchings are generally people whom he knows well, frequently from his immediate circle of friends at Wedderburn. He has often expressed his preference for faces of the elderly, infirm and, on occasion, those already in God's waiting room. We have an exploration of the human physiognomy, a study of its moods and character. The longer you pause with Fairbairn's work, the more you will see the interpretation which the artist has given his sitter — his private musings and personal relationship with the person. He once observed "Ideas embodied in the works include contours, mapping and landscape — think of the head as something you walk across."⁴ These 'physiognomical topographies' are literally and symbolically multilayered. Although constructed and abstracted, there is a constant reassertion of the sitter's identity, they are, in the final

analysis, a specific character study, but one which can also be read on a more universal level.

Although etchings of giant heads in Australian art have been popularly associated with the work of Mike Parr, the heads of Fairbairn pull in a different direction. Parr's self-portraits, brilliantly realised as etchings by John Loane, tend to strive to capture a single expressive moment in time; in the case of Fairbairn, the portrait develops over a passage of time and the etching explores the shape of time and records the growth of a relationship between the artist and the sitter over a number of weeks, months or years. The etching becomes an autograph exploration, rather than a snapshot; a narrative and not simply a statement, and it is a narrative that engages many aspects of the dynamics established between the artist and his subject.

In the 1st century BC, Horace praised the artist who "in painting he shows both the face and the mind."⁵ This I feel David Fairbairn achieves admirably in these etchings and it is an achievement of a very high order.

¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, chp. XXXVI

² Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Giotto*

³ David Fairbairn, email to the author, 13 July 2012

⁴ David Fairbairn quoted in Janet Mackenzie, *Contemporary Australian drawing #1*, Melbourne, Macmillan Art Publishing, 2012, p.77

⁵ Horace *Epistles II* line 97 "Suspendit picta vultum mentemque tabella"