



# PETER CHURCHER

## THE FIRST DECADE

20 March - 16 April 2021

2021: online and onsite

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



**Drinking Age Verified** 2004

oil on canvas  
137 x 153 cm



**COVER**

**The Outcast** 1996

oil on canvas  
168 x 198 cm

**T**his exhibition brings together a selection of paintings by Peter Churcher from 1992 – 2004, examining the beginning and following the growth and establishment of his career as an artist. The paintings show his development as he explores his chosen subject – the human figure – and his increasing skill in the technical aspects of creating a painting, from composition to applying paint to canvas. Brought together, they allow an assessment of the impressive first decade of Churcher's career: from his initial solo exhibition at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art in 1994; his selection as a finalist in significant national art awards (Archibald: 1996, 1997, 1998; Doug Moran National Portrait Prize: 1996, 1998; Sulman 1998, 2000); an increasing number of portrait commissions; recognition from institutions (acquired by the NGA in 2000); his appointment as an official war artist by the Australian War Memorial (2002); and selection for the artist in residence program at Bundanon, 2001.

The early success of Peter Churcher emerged

from a combination of circumstance and talent, nurtured by his family and his initial dealer Lauraine Diggins. Peter's dedication and determination is a part of his personality; an understanding of the discipline required and devotion to practicing technique borne from his studies at the Melbourne Conservatorium.<sup>1</sup> His understanding of painting, in terms of both the technical creation and within an art historical context, was derived from his parents – Roy and Betty Churcher, who were both painters; his mother also a celebrated art curator and administrator and Director of the National Gallery of Australia (1990 - 97).

In a broader sense, Peter grew up with an insight into how to understand a painting giving him a level of comfort and confidence in really looking at paintings, which in turn informed how he wanted to paint and how he wanted a viewer to look at his own painting. His origin story of exposure to the grand masters in Europe and in particular, the revelation he experienced looking at a small painting by Edouard Manet at the Musee d'Orsay and





**Dido and Aeneas** 1999  
oil on canvas  
122 x 107 cm

recognising the joy in creating a painting which can be hung for others to appreciate, leading Churcher to his own easel.<sup>2</sup>

Churcher's artistic concern from the outset was the human figure and the human condition. A realist in style, he drew from the world around him – the actual physical world (of people; landscapes; settings; disparate objects in his studio) and his own sphere of interest, knowledge and experience (of art historical references and influences; the heroic myths of Virgil, Homer, Ovid; and of the power of art, whether music or painting, to evoke emotion).

Churcher's paintings are a faithful representation of their subject. There is an element of truth-seeking and honesty, for which he has been compared with William Dobell; Lucien Freud and Bill Henson.<sup>3</sup> A rawness in using people he simply met in the street<sup>4</sup> rather

than professional models strengthened this element and appealed to an artist schooled in the European masters in the tradition of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Velazquez and Van Gogh who also elevated ordinary people and objects as art. This adds to the timeless appeal and universal quality of such paintings, something the young Churcher perhaps hoped to emulate.

There are recurring allusions to renowned artists throughout Churcher's paintings<sup>5</sup> in this exhibition, for example, his painting *The Forge of Vulcan* a reference to Velazquez's famous namesake; certain poses evoking those of classical history painting (*Laid Out* reminiscent of Manet's *The Dead Toreador*); the use of contemporary sitters to portray painted characters, akin to Caravaggio and Rembrandt;<sup>6</sup> and the influence of such masters went beyond an approach to subject matter,

as Churcher was also drawn to the very act of painting. This is evident in his baroque use of chiaroscuro, emphasising a level of theatrical mystery and intrigue; his skill in depicting both folds of drapery and the complexity of skin; the richness of his backgrounds. Particularly in an era of photography, Churcher's paintings clearly demonstrate a delight in the radiant painted surface. The pleasure in the act of painting lifts his work beyond a lifelike portrait and it is clear the intention is to both evoke and invoke emotion.

*Regarding Picasso* is another reference to the masters, and highlights a recurring theme: the play between reality and artifice. Here the artist presents himself contemplating a Picasso sculpture and the dichotomy of looking at and being looked at is especially heightened in such self-portraits. This can also be seen in *Reflection* – "the 'African man' catches his own reflections



**Portrait of Kate** 1992  
oil on canvas  
122.5 x 97 cm



**Ross's Dream** 1998  
oil on canvas  
51 x 56 cm



**The Forge of Vulcan** 1994  
oil on canvas  
137 x 152.5 cm





**September 2001** 2001

oil on canvas  
208 x 264 cm

in a mirror that is being held up to him by a 'real man' who on another level is a 'painted man' being observed by a 'real' viewer."<sup>7</sup>

*Portrait of Kate* is a realistic rendering of a real person, however with the emphasis on the luxuriant application of paint and the prowess of displaying different surfaces, from skin to material to glittering jewels. *Vulcan's Forge* presents real people presented in a grandly theatrical setting, interpreting classical mythology.

Churcher asks us to really look and contemplate his work. This is taken to another level in *Ross' Dream* as we are transported from the painting to a state of pure imagination.

A gentleness found in this work is also displayed in Churcher's tranquil and lyrical landscapes; lush green trees and hills, flowing rivers and atmospheric coastlines.

However, this collection ultimately shows Churcher's mastery of large-scale multi-figured paintings. The earlier paintings, formed from an interest in classical myths and legends, are more tied to meaning, with a recognisable

narrative element, such as *Aeneas Leaving Carthage* and *Dido and Aeneas*. Churcher's interest is clearly in presenting the human emotion of such epic tales.

Churcher's recruitment from a youth refuge organisation near his studio at the time gives a new authority. The boys in *Drinking Age Verified* unapologetically stare out at the viewer, there is no softening of the uncompromising boldness of their pose. Churcher strips back elements of his work, embracing the everyday and revealing the power of art to inspire and to reflect on humanity.

A growing assurance sees Churcher become less concerned with narrative content and with a greater focus on seeking universal truths. This can be seen in the evolution between *The Outcast*, with its mysterious cast of characters and iconographic clues, prompting the viewer to fashion a meaning; compared with *September 2001*. Here, the composition itself provides the narrative tension – who are these people, why are they posed like that, what is their connection, what is the meaning of it all? It is a confronting and powerful work and provokes the viewer to examine the painting and seek

their own meaning and reflection on the human condition.

These early works as a collection demonstrate Churcher's progress in confidence and skill to an artist at the height of his powers.

**FOOTNOTES:**

1. Bachelor of Music, Hons.1986 and Licentiate for Piano Performance, Trinity College, London, 1990 The link between his musical studies and discipline as a painter is also noted by John McDonald, 2006 and Murdoch, A., *The Age*, 1999)
2. Also see Grishin, 2004 and Lancashire, *The Age*, 1996
3. LDFA, 1996 (Dobell); Grishin, 2004 (Freud); McDonald, 2006 (Henson)
4. Churcher's use of 'ordinary' people is noted in Grishin, 2004 "The parade of humanity which the artist has spotted in the street and brought into the studio and which he has studied in considerable detail over a number of years through numerous paintings becomes a cast of characters who play out a largely unscripted narrative." and Macdonald, 2006
5. See also Gott 2000 who notes his "gentle references to famous works" and Grishin 2004
6. McDonald, 2006
7. *Annual Collectors' Catalogue 2003*, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, Melbourne, 2003, p.48

**SELECTED LITERATURE:**

- Backhouse, M., Figuring out the human condition, *The Age*, 27 March 2004, p. 7
- Brewster, R., Investing in Art: How to spot talent and a good buy, *The Age*, 29 March 2004, p. 11



**Riversdale Afternoon Study** 2001

oil on marine ply

20 x 40 cm

- Cawthorne, Z., Bold Strokes, *Herald Sun*, 23 October 2001, p.51
- Crafti, S., Out of the Shadows, *The Age*, 24 October 2001, pp. T1, T3
- Grishin, S., *Peter Churcher and the Humanist Tradition of Painting*, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, 2004
- Gott, T., Peter Churcher, *Australian Galleries*, 2000
- Lancashire, R., Beginning again with a small Manet, *The Age*, 4 September 1996, p. B7
- Lim, A., Churcher, a name in his own right, *The Australian*, 22 October 1993, p. 10
- Makin, J., Broken Bodies, *Herald Sun*, 29 October 2001
- Martin-Chew, L., What he sees is what you get, *The Australian*, 26 April 2002, Preview, p. 13
- McDonald, J., *Peter Churcher: The hunt, sacrifices and other rituals*, Australian Galleries, 2006
- McCulloch, S., Parental portraiture poses lofty challenge, *The Weekend Australian*, 24-25 August 1996, p.12
- McCulloch, S., Theatre Out of Place, *Herald Sun*, 22 June 1994
- Murdoch, A., Drawing on emotion and skill, *The Age*, 27 May 1999, p.20
- *Peter Churcher: Recent Painting*, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art newsletter, no. 16, 1996, pp. 1-2
- Reid, Michael, Quality Bloodlines Show, Art Market, *The Australian*, November 2001
- Rooney, R., John Wolseley, Constance Zikos, Peter Churcher, *The Australian*, 13 September 1996, p.15
- Peter Rudd, Peter Churcher in *Lineage*, Linden St Kilda Arts Centre, 1994
- Striking Portraits on Show, *Port Phillip/ Caulfield Leader*, 5 April 2004, p. 3

**PETER CHURCHER IS REPRESENTED IN THE FOLLOWING COLLECTIONS:**

- Australian War Memorial
- National Gallery of Australia
- National Portrait Gallery
- Parliament House, Canberra
- Parliament House, Victoria
- Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery
- University of Queensland
- Prahran City Council
- Temple Beth Israel



**Regarding Picasso** 2000

oil on canvas

122 x 107 cm





**Aeneas Leaving Carthage** 1998

oil on canvas

137 x 122 cm



**Low Tide Wonboyn** 2004

oil on marine ply

20 x 45 cm



**Laid Out** 2001  
oil on canvas  
122 x 208 cm



**Reflection** 2003  
oil on canvas  
92 x 76 cm



**Wonboyn** 2004  
oil on marine ply  
20 x 30 cm

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Founder: The Late Lauraine Diggins OAM  
Director: Michael Blanche  
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Gallery Manager: Ruth Lovell

# LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

5 Malakoff Street North Caulfield Vic 3161  
Telephone: (+61 3) 9509 9855

Email: [ausart@diggins.com.au](mailto:ausart@diggins.com.au)  
Website: [www.diggins.com.au](http://www.diggins.com.au)

**Gallery & Exhibition Hours:**  
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