

JOHN DENT: Recent Paintings

18 May – 28 June 2024

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It was at George Baldessin's studio in the Winfield Building that my real education began, and where I took my first uncertain steps into the Art World. His leadership was inspirational, and it is to him, looking back 53 years, that I owe so much. He frequently reminded us that the journey of an artist's was infused with frustration, rejection, jealousy and deception. Begging was part of our trade.

The year 1995, I travelled with friends for the opening of the Whiteley Exhibition at The Art Gallery of New South Wales. The first hour was to be taken up with speeches; so, I ventured outside onto the steps of The Gallery. So too, had most of the artists of Sydney.

Within minutes, a young man approached me, hoping he could enter to see the show.

Why me?...

"By invitation", I said.

He looked upset, so I told him "The show opens tomorrow for the public". "That's too late" he replied. Sensing his anxiety, I asked why - he had to make an important decision. He had been attending art courses at night whilst working as an engineer, and increasingly, painting had dominated his thoughts. It was THIS exhibition that would be the decider for his future life. "Do you know what will be required of you and what lies ahead?" I repeated Baldessin's advice, "can you deal with such obstacles?"

"Don't know", he replied.

Such an answer convinced me he was telling the truth. "Come on, let's go in, the speeches should be finished, and good luck!"

53 years later, Baldessin's advice was still relevant.

John Dent, 2024

Inquiring of John Dent what he considers significant in his art, he responds with the statement above, "a human interest story and something that is still with me." This narrative reveals several key themes - the belief in an artistic calling; the eternal progression of art history and most importantly, the art of story telling.

John Dent was naturally drawn to art before himself making the decision to become an artist, undertaking early studies at RMIT. However, it was his exposure at the Winfield Studio and the mentorship of artists such as George Baldessin, Fred Williams,

Le Chat qui Ronronne

oil on canvas
92 x 66 cm



Bouquet with Lemon

oil on canvas
38.5 x 46 cm



Sydney from Darling Harbour I

oil on canvas
71 x 50 cm



Rhodes I
oil on canvas
87 x 61 cm



Still Life
oil on canvas on board
31 x 26.5 cm



Cap d'Antibes
oil on canvas
87 x 165 cm



Cape Schanck I
oil on canvas
102.5 x 106.5 cm

Roger Kemp and John Olsen which Dent credits as being a more significant education, outside of any art school learning about materials and techniques. From such mentors, Dent could experience something that can only be felt rather than taught - the sense of dedication, the continual work, being open to new ideas and finding inspiration, the drive to create art. Despite clearly being subject to learning, developing, continual growth and work, perhaps simply one is an artist or not, it is integral to your identity. And perhaps there is a recognition amongst artists, an understanding of the internal struggles beyond any natural talent to make a career. Dent's story reveals the often unconsidered harsher side to the life

of a professional artist. The calling, however, is greater, so when faced with frustration, rejection, jealousy and deception, one is spurred to continue on.

Dent certainly benefitted from the early support and camaraderie of artists firstly in Melbourne and later from peers and mentors during his time in Paris in the early 1980s. Here Dent was exposed to new skills, learnt at the seminal printmaking atelier Lacouriere-Frelaut. Paris also gifted Dent with his most essential support, his partner, Renee.

Time living in Europe allowed Dent to encounter the wonders of great institutions and

soak up art historical treasures, building on the profusion of influences, which continue to shape his own art practice.

On his return to Australia, Dent travelled in Central and Northern Australia, painting the people and the land, finding yet another stimulus for his art.

With his wide variety of interests, Dent is always learning, always looking and this shows in his own art creations. Some works bear a clearer influence of a particular artist or style than others, perhaps Baldessin here, or Bonnard there, but they are always reimagined through the prism of Dent.



Portrait of Renee
oil on canvas
200 x 93 cm



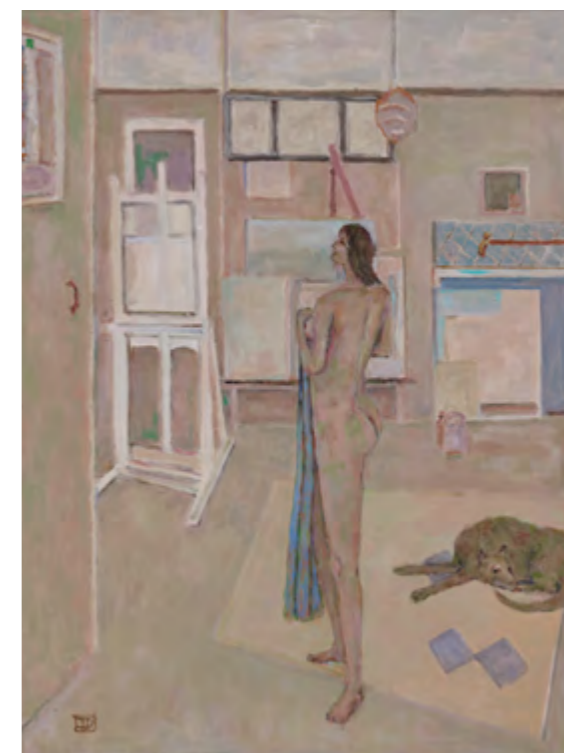
The Meeting
oil on canvas
51 x 66 cm



Cape Schanck II
oil on canvas
43.5 x 41 cm



Montauban
oil on canvas
67 x 54 cm



Naughty Dog
oil on canvas
40.5 x 28 cm

Studio, Paris 14eme Arrondissement II
oil on canvas
86.5 x 66 cm



Natura Morta I
oil on canvas
102.5 x 56 cm



The Arrangement
oil on canvas
87 x 107.5 cm



Natura Morta II
oil on canvas
102.5 x 56 cm



Albi
oil on canvas
45.5 x 61 cm

The artistic calling is greater, so when faced with frustration, rejection, jealousy and deception, one is spurred to continue on.

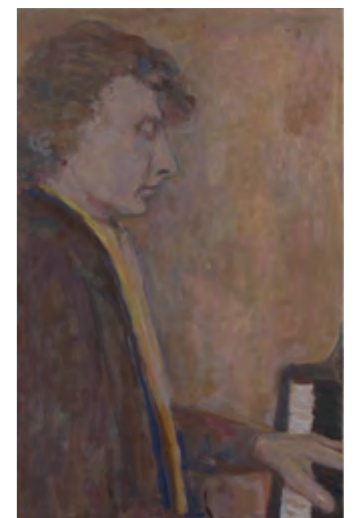
He is a versatile artist, both a painter in oils and gouache and a particularly skilled printmaker and despite the myriad of influences and references, all are recognisably Dent artworks with complex compositions and often a muted palette that belies the sophisticated layering of colour.

As well as ongoing influences throughout his career, Dent has been drawn to particular themes for his painting subjects – interiors, still lifes, portraits and landscapes.

The still life paintings tend to gather the usual suspects of the theme: flowers, fruits, bottles and vases to create a conversation, yet there are often other enigmatic elements; a small red bottle in *Hydrangeas* or the range of utensils strewn across the table in *Table Setting*, opening the possibility of a different and more interesting conversation. It is also not surprising to see musical elements in the still life paintings, such as *The Metronome*, with

their lyrical compositions and harmonious colour. The culmination of these still life conversations is a striking triptych, *Natura Morta I* and *II* flanking *The Arrangement*.

In much of Dent's work there is a suggestion of narrative; a hint to peak the viewer's interest but subtle enough to remain out of grasp. We feel like we have stumbled across a scene already in progress – languid supine figures; eclectic collections of objects; a surfer contemplating the water; cats across rooftops; figures trekking across red desert sand. Here we can appreciate Dent's art of story-telling. Much as in his statement about his art, Dent presents an engaging narrative which invites the viewer to search for meaning. In this collection of recent paintings, we are immediately attracted to the works, with recognisable elements – figures, landscapes, objects; yet a closer examination allows a fuller appreciation and engagement with the artwork. Paintings such as *Sunday Morning*; *London Bedsit* and



Portrait of Piers Lane
oil on canvas on board
46.5 x 30 cm



Odalisque
oil on canvas
98 x 75.2 cm



Table Setting
oil on canvas
92.5 x 77.5 cm



The Metronome
oil on canvas
66.5 x 51 cm



The Model
oil on canvas on board
38.5 x 29.5 cm



Looking towards Saint-Sulpice
oil on canvas
65 x 54 cm



Rhodes II
oil on canvas
80 x 66 cm

Le Chat qui ronronne, we wonder at the presence of the figures and their motivations. Such works also reveal Dent's effective use of pattern and space – the checkerboard floor against the expanse of wall; the striking black and white patterning with floating objects, a theme much explored in Dent's etchings in particular; or the graphic boxing of a window frame, highlighting the figure against a bare background.

The portraits and landscapes are perhaps more straightforward being depictions of person or place but they go beyond merely capturing a likeness to explore an essence. A clear sense of place is established, whether it be Sydney Harbour or Arnhem Land. Yet, there are affinities between the coastal paintings of *Cape Schanck I* and *Cap d'Antibes*, despite being a world apart. The paintings of Rhodes, whilst identified through the title, speak to the viewer more through the closed in streets and figures than providing scenic views. There can be a sense of unease to some of Dent's work as we wonder about the relationship between the elements depicted. However, it is only

ever a suggestion, even the naughty dog is not shown caught in the act but rather chastised in his basket. The portraits also capture some quintessence.

The portrait of *Piers Lane* brims with an intensity appropriate to a classical pianist. *Odalisque* goes beyond any individual person or a model with the obvious ties to traditions of such imagery in art history.

Undeniably Dent is a dedicated artist, with over 50 years of art making and exhibiting; a repeat finalist in both the Archibald and Wynne Prizes; celebrated with a retrospective at Castlemaine Art Gallery in 1994 and represented in significant collections including the National Gallery of Australia; the National Gallery of Victoria; Art Gallery of New South Wales; Parliament House; Arts Victoria; National Gallery of New Zealand, Bibliotheque Nationale de Paris as well as numerous regional galleries, university collections and private collections both in Australia and internationally. Dent is an artist who draws from the rich tapestry of art history



La Parisienne
oil on board
37.5 x 29.5 cm



Comport
oil on canvas
46 x 33 cm

and has made a place for himself within the "Art World", as we are drawn to Dent's story telling we are drawn to his paintings, simple yet redolent with substance. We recognise here is someone who is called to be an artist and to present his craft for our enjoyment.

–Ruth Lovell



London Bed-Sit
oil on canvas
167.5 x 107.5 cm



Rue des Ursulines
oil on canvas
107 x 142.5 cm

COVER: Sunday Morning
oil on canvas
111.5 x x 142.5 cm

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Tues – Friday 10 am – 6 pm
other hours by appointment