

CHRISTOPHER ORCHARD

The Uncertainty of the Poet

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Wakefield
Press

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Journey of the Everyman

Christopher Orchard's drawings, paintings and sculptures 1973–2016

Margot Osborne

At a time when art can be made of virtually anything, it seems an anomaly that contemporary drawing is still narrowly defined in some quarters as a preparatory or subsidiary discipline, a rehearsal for the main gig of painting. This is despite the fact that drawing today has been reclaimed by a spectrum of contemporary artists. On the one hand, artists have recognised that drawing, or mark-making, is the ultimate conceptual and gestural art form, both as a spontaneous means of thinking through making, and also as a means of expressing unprocessed emotions through an almost intuitive connection between mind and hand. On the other hand, there has been a revival of drawing by artists who seek to harness its representational and illustrative power for metaphorical and poetic purposes.

The aesthetic power of Christopher Orchard's drawings lies in his ability to synthesise these differing qualities. He deploys his drawing skills and understanding of the history of the discipline, not so much as a means of depicting the observable world, but rather, as a means of poetic embodiment, and of encapsulating his perceptions of what it is to be human. At a certain viewing distance, it is this poetic representational narrative that holds the gaze. As one draws closer, the sheer glorious materiality of his mark-making in all its layered detail, complexity and subtlety becomes apparent. Close up one might notice a palimpsest of delineations and marks arising from that fusion of forethought and intuitive mark-making which is part of the artist's creative process. One of his artist heroes, William Kentridge, once said:

I believe that in the indeterminacy of drawing – the contingent way that images arrive in the work – lies some kind of model of how we live our lives. The activity of drawing is a way of trying to understand who we are and how we operate in the world.¹

Over the past twenty-five or so years in his evolving body of drawings, Orchard has drawn on the long tradition of the journeys of the Everyman, a non-heroic and occasionally comic individual, endowed both with human frailties and stoic resilience. He has created a continuing narrative, richly imbued with literary and artistic references, based on imagined scenarios experienced by his gradually aging protagonist and alter ego. Most recently the protagonist of Orchard's drawings and paintings has been the nondescript little Bald Man of indeterminate age, perennially attired in an ill-fitting suit. Orchard has described him as 'a little fella full of the fragility of being human'.² Sometimes the Bald Man is alone, but the artist often draws him with a double or doppelganger, and sometimes he is multiplied as a group of facsimiles.

In his drawings, pastels and occasional paintings featuring the Bald Man, Orchard portrays a parallel universe in which the realism of appearances is destabilised. Everything is possible, but nothing is certain. His protagonists exist within imagined scenarios, drawn from a reconstruction of memory, as concrete manifestations of a state of mind. The dilemmas they face are frequently imbued with an absurdist sense of futility that conjures up such literary Everyman figures as T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, or Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. At times, also, Orchard's drawings allude to the exaggerated comic types of Italian theatre's *commedia dell'arte*.

In opening Orchard's exhibition *Transit* at BMG Art, Adelaide, the former artistic director of the State Theatre Company, Adam Cook, observed:

As a theatre director I am naturally drawn to the bold, stark and dramatic sets in which this foreshortened

Water (detail), 2004, charcoal on paper, 180 x 110 cm.



relative of Alfred Hitchcock continues to appear. For me he shows all the intriguing inscrutability of an Easter Island statue. We can't quite read what he's thinking or feeling, but he's very focused on the task at hand, trying to shape or measure or record the world he inhabits, or dreaming of a world beyond the one in which he finds himself.³

The existential circumstances evoked by Orchard's drawings have potential to transcend idiosyncratic manifestations of the artist's private universe. At their best these drawings become a poetic visual realisation of generalised or archetypal states of mind endemic to contemporary life – anxiety, uncertainty, doubt, fragility, vulnerability, solitude, hope and even wonder. In *Thrown (Tumble)* (2012), five suited bald men tumble through the clouds, evoking a formation skydiving team in disarray, discombobulated by elemental forces beyond their



Thrown (Tumble), 2012, acrylic on canvas, 185 x 155 cm.

control. The fragility of being human is encapsulated in the drawing *Floatation Device* (2013). A lone figure stands in a subway tunnel up to his knees in floodwater, desperately grasping against his chest an oversized and somewhat malevolent soft toy that offers him no hope of salvation.

These bald men endure the uncertainty of their existence with stoic equanimity, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. This is epitomised in Orchard's pastel *Approaching Storm* (2009), in which three men play boules in a desert setting against a threatening sky. They are positioned to the far left of the frame, diminished in scale and overwhelmed within the immensity of the landscape, yet the men continue their game apparently unperturbed, casting a ball of metaphorical hope into the void. Perpetually, there is uncertainty in the face of the rhetorical question, 'What will we do now?'

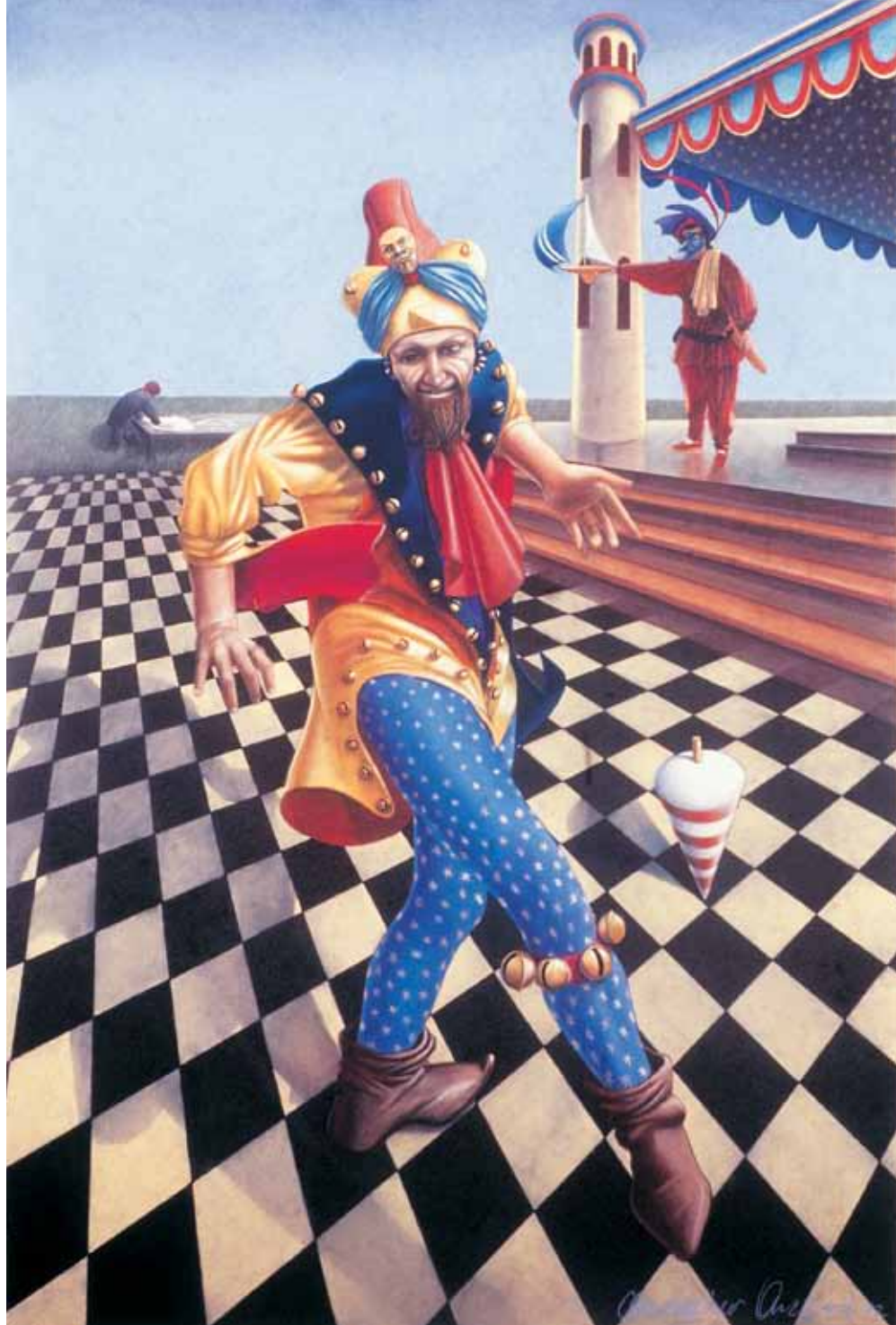
Orchard borrows digital gaming terminology in referring to the Bald Man as his avatar, or alter ego.⁴ He has said that over time he has come to know the features of his avatar's fictional physiognomy as intimately as he knows his own. Since around 2003–2004 he has drawn this bald-headed figure hundreds of times, both in rapidly executed sketches and fully worked charcoals and pastels. In this constant reiteration he looks for variance within repetition, 'the fact that one can never make the exact same thing twice', comparing this to the infinite variety of DNA. Through this repetition and accretion of incident, the small Bald Man has progressively attained a fictional reality that belies his origins in the imagination of the artist.

On one occasion in an airport lounge Orchard saw a man who was the doppelganger of his 'little fella', the Bald Man:

... there was a guy as bald as a badger sitting with his back to us. Then he got up and turned to go and he's side on, it was like an electric shock, and he walked into a lift and I've never seen him again. ... I had this almost visceral sense that 'I made that guy'.⁵



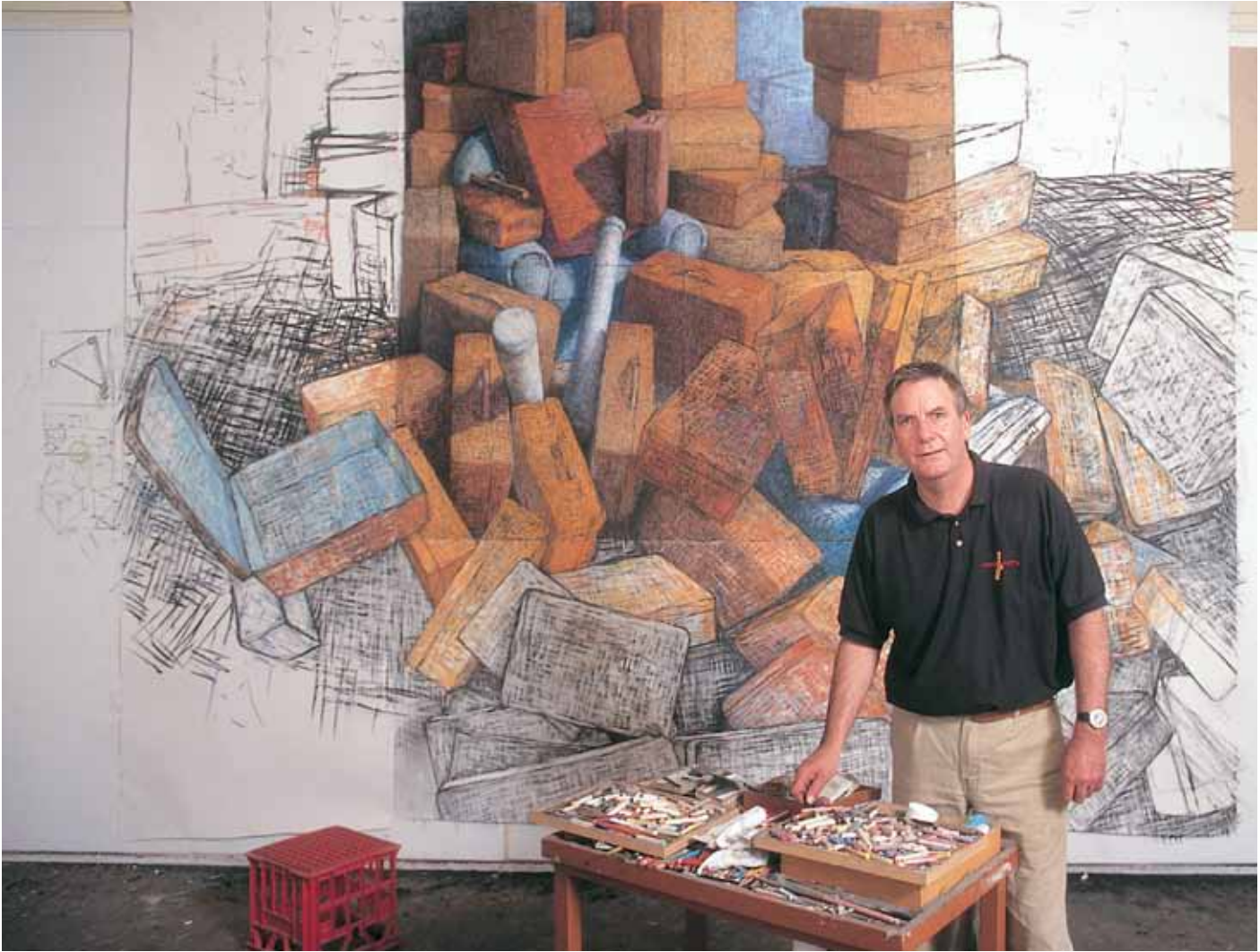
The Uncertainty of the Poet, 1990, charcoal on paper, 150 x 110 cm.

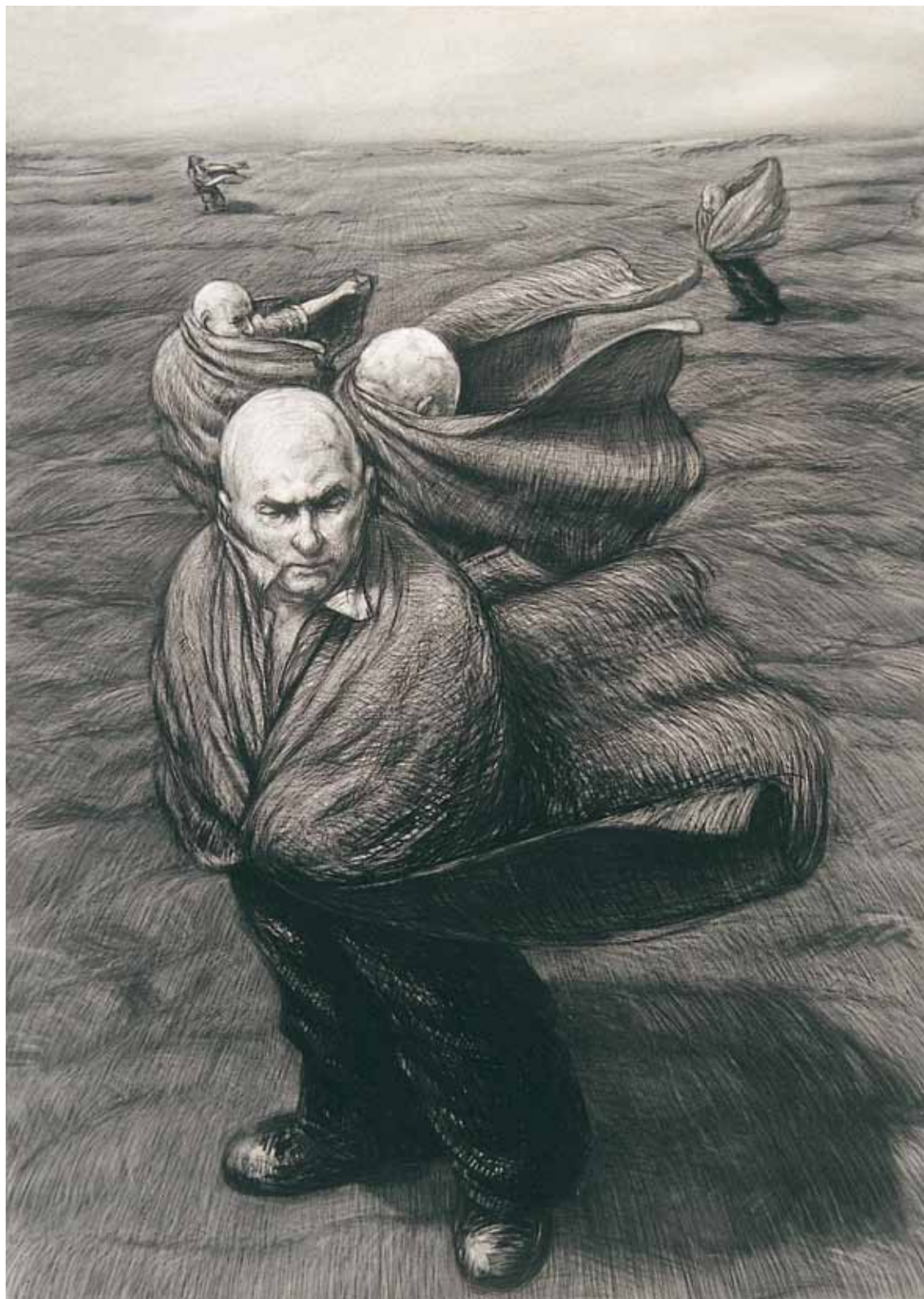


As the World Turns, 1992, charcoal, pastel on paper, 150 x 110 cm.



Bourbon Street Dancer, 1993, charcoal, pastel on paper, 150 x 110 cm.





Scent, 2004, charcoal on paper, 150 x 110 cm.



Above: *Clear*, 2009, charcoal, pastel on paper, 160 x 110 cm.

Left: *Piggy Back*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 185 x 155 cm.





The Runner, 2014-2015, acrylic on canvas, 155 x 185 cm.



Twist, 2015, acrylic, charcoal, chinagraph on paper, 76 x 56 cm.