

BEST OF  
IAN SMITH WORKS ON PAPER



12 ROTHKORNIC CORNERS

IAN SMITH 1993

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Exhibition Catalogue

Exhibition dates: 1 May – 28 May 2018

Designed & published by Woolloongabba Art Gallery 2018

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Photography: Kerrin Smith

ISBN: 978-0-6481502-2-0

## BEST OF IAN SMITH WORKS ON PAPER

Working as an artist since the 1970s in Australia and elsewhere, I'm among those who sought another way around the bipolar condition gripping Australian art. On the one hand, artists frantically following [therefore always behind] significant moves in USA and Europe. On the other, a national identity tradition from the Australian Impressionists, through legendary folk hero and outback settler themes to proliferate landscaping painting. I never kept diaries but always made notes. Recently I found this 1988 comment written just before I moved with my Belgian wife and 2 Australian born children to live in Europe – totally missing Expo Brisbane in the process.

“White Australian art has been held back\* by the need to define Australia and white identity in it. When painting the Sistine Chapel, Michaelangelo was not defining what it was to be Italian. National identity has been kept on as an issue far too long in the creation and criticism of white Australian art — after Nationalism is a dead [and deadly] issue in international art philosophy.” \*I presume, in my youthful rant, I meant held back from becoming great art.

A young life of looking, reading and travelling in USA, the Pacific and Europe brought me to this opinion. The next 7 years in Europe with annual trips to Australia never changed it. If anything, it strengthened. The tendency still lingers today, at least in art which gains public attention and in TV and film. Whether *my* work inevitably defines Australia or not, I've always pitched at wider issues of the human condition and how to do art about it. This overview exhibition of my works on paper shows I often work in lengthy series. I don't 'draw every day' as some artists do, but spasmodically, often with long gaps in between. Then I draw regularly, possibly obsessively, led by concept rather than subject. For example, works from the 'Background' and 'Pictorial Element' series are totally various in subject while consistent in concept: How, when we look at images or views, we focus on certain parts, often without noticing the rest. Then the house painters [Cat.1–6 . of which I've done dozens of paintings and drawings on and off all my life] are primarily 'self portraits' of the artist's dilemma – confronting a surface to be organized, enhanced and given a new reality – as well as Socialist celebration of the worker's cultural elevation. I drew my series of Unavoidable Images [Cat.24,25] after being regularly subjected to junk mail through my mail box with increasing pages of moody, submissive lingerie advertising as though Feminism never happened. The 'Truckloads', seen while out, often driving [before the days of dashcams] and drawn later from memory, address visual memory as a valid recording system alongside directly observed drawing and photography. Begun in the 1970s, the series revelled in the 'new beauty' of functional objects and consumer products as used in 20th century sculpture. The loads become big, mobile 'still-life' moving down the road. [Cat.18,19]

The closest I strayed to portraying Australian society was in the 1970s/early 80s when I populated my work with the tasteless Aussie suburban rabble of the time and their popular culture accessories and environments. [Cat.67,26,20 'Man with a box of beer' 1981, based on a Robert Mercer Photo of me; and 21 'Cowboy' 1972, drawn at art school.] I did it to contradict the mythical, military, outback and city suited characters

which had dominated our figurative art. Meanwhile my experiments with composition, colour and paint application, aimed at survival as a relevant figurative artist in that era dominated by abstraction, minimalism and non-object conceptualism. But it was my sociology which interested writers and critics who found it easier writing about topical social themes with literary narrative than abstract propositions in visual art. I gave into the search for identity in my 1980s series of double bending figures focussing for meaningful touchstones on a shoreline between Australia and the rest of the world [Cat.23]. In 1984, when The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York acquired a painting from this series their rationale went something like: "The work combines understanding of international themes and art movements expressed through blatantly regional subject". This suggested painting our own place could carry a wider, more universal message than Nationalism. [Isn't that what Aboriginal art always did?] My hunched humans devolved into the much maligned cane toad as a metaphor for immigrant white Australians, whose folly introduced the species in 1935. By 1988 [the Bicentennial of white Australian arrival] when I wrote my notebook comment, it probably was time to side-step the celebrations, take my toad metaphor and become a primal toad intruder in cultured old Europe, looking at art and Australia from another hemisphere, on the other side. [Cat.22,34]

We've all heard the qualifying comment about artists: "... but he's a very good draughtsman" or more often: "... she could really draw properly before she went abstract". I was always seen as 'good at drawing', which I take to mean: the ability to graphically represent – with qualities beyond a diagram – something observed or remembered. As an artist 'good at drawing people', I inevitably drifted into occasional portrait painting, some commissioned, some self-set. Certain studies around the major results endure, beyond the sitter, as statements about the human condition [Cat.27–33]. Meanwhile, as a student and then teacher of life drawing, I came to question it as a given historical standard practice in our Modern, Post-modern and digital times. While teaching at QCA in the 1970s, I argued unsuccessfully against life drawing's automatic inclusion in the set course; suggesting it be an elective. Many contemporary artists did not even use the human figure in their work, much less in ways needing accurate drawn representation. My rationale against life drawing was separate from but complicit with feminist denunciation of the clothed male artist/nude female model syndrome. I resolved not to use hired models myself, but maintained the option to draw and paint [directly or from memory] people who became naked [or as good as] in the course of my daily life. This usually meant I was naked at the same time. My 'motel drawings' [Cat.35–37] came from this personal exercise during the time after my return from Europe to Brisbane/Gold Coast. I believe their quality exceeds that of any studio drawings with hired stranger models. They are 'lived in' works which prove yet again that a subject meaningful to the artist yields 'a whole greater than the sum of the parts'.

My billboards [Cat.12–17, 42, 69, 70] also became lived in subjects during my first decade back in Australia. With an ageing mother in Cairns, an art dealer in Sydney and other art interests in Melbourne, I constantly roamed the roads of East Australia. I finally pinned down those roadside sentinals – some remembered from early youthful travels still the same – often delapidated non-signs imposing man-made 'holes' in the



landscape. They allowed me to use any landscape I liked – even ones pinched from my favourite landscape painters – in supporting roles to *my* billboards. And while driving looking at them I passed or was passed by more truckloads than I could draw in a lifetime.

During 2004–2014 I was kept closer to home having bought a getaway place on Lamb Island in Southern Moreton Bay. In my few days a week on the island the garden kept me busy but, to avoid blissing out completely in the beautiful seaside bushland so close to the city, I worked daily on pastels; first of the trees and garden around the house, then into the bush and down to the mangrove shoreline. In this exhibition I'm releasing several treasured tree and floral studies in which geometric structures showed me a way into nature's fluffy, leafy, meandering, organic profusion [Cat.7–11].

Concurrent with this escape to nature, I satisfied my need for conceptual rigor in the protracted 'Background' series [Cat.47–52] where the focal subject is left neutral/negative while the background is highly worked. They echo the billboard works but were sparked while idly watching TV. How often we see a 'talking head' in front of an action scene. Or, blacked-out protected witnesses or whistleblowers speak in mundane interiors. So, what are we looking at, front or back? An NGA brochure of 2 gallery staff dusting 'Blue Poles' set me a delightful challenge of drawing Pollock's master work. 'The Mona Lisa' sits before a delicate landscape [often ignored]. I also comment on Mona's history of being stolen from her frame a few times. I've 'deconstructed' images from my own work and a press photo provided a series highlight. Gough and Margaret Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser – more prominent than each other depending on your point of view – on bipartisan territory at former PM John Gorton's funeral. Them together is the photographer's ironic subject. I give them each a turn as subject and as background. Of course in my series the background *is* the subject. Requiring less work but with an equal point to be made is the series of 'Pictorial Elements' [Cat.53–63]; those uncanny pieces that come out from an image and grab you. Often it is an odd-shaped by-product of the artist's primary concerns [Cezanne's tablecloth], which consequently possesses an unaffected life and power of its own, like a creature from the unconscious mind. On the other hand, my 'horse divided', is read as a complete normal horse although brutally slashed in half by the other horse's neck.

This exhibition combines new works with some held for years – favoured survivors. Hopefully this essay gives a connecting attitudinal thread of functional purpose. It also confesses to my struggle to reconcile universal themes with Australian issues. We live in a young New World society built on top of one of the oldest. Defining National identity seems like a pathological compulsion in our artists. I see my task as to credit that, then build beyond it, not trade on it. In this attempt, these aren't drawn for fun – but I had fun drawing them, if you see what I mean. I think they explore wide territory and do what drawings should do, while not encumbered with the portentous demands of a major work. Maybe the best are major works.

*IAN SMITH, Brisbane, March 2018*



11. 'A green tree' 2005, 70 x 50 cm, Pastel





10. 'Right angle gum' 2005. 76 x 56 cm, Pastel





8. 'Lilac intervals with lavender' 2000, 94 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage





IVAN SMITH 2000

LILAC INTERVALS WITH PALM

9. 'Lilac intervals with palm' 2000, 94 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage



36. '2 motel drawings - vertical' 1996, 56 x 76 cm, Graphite



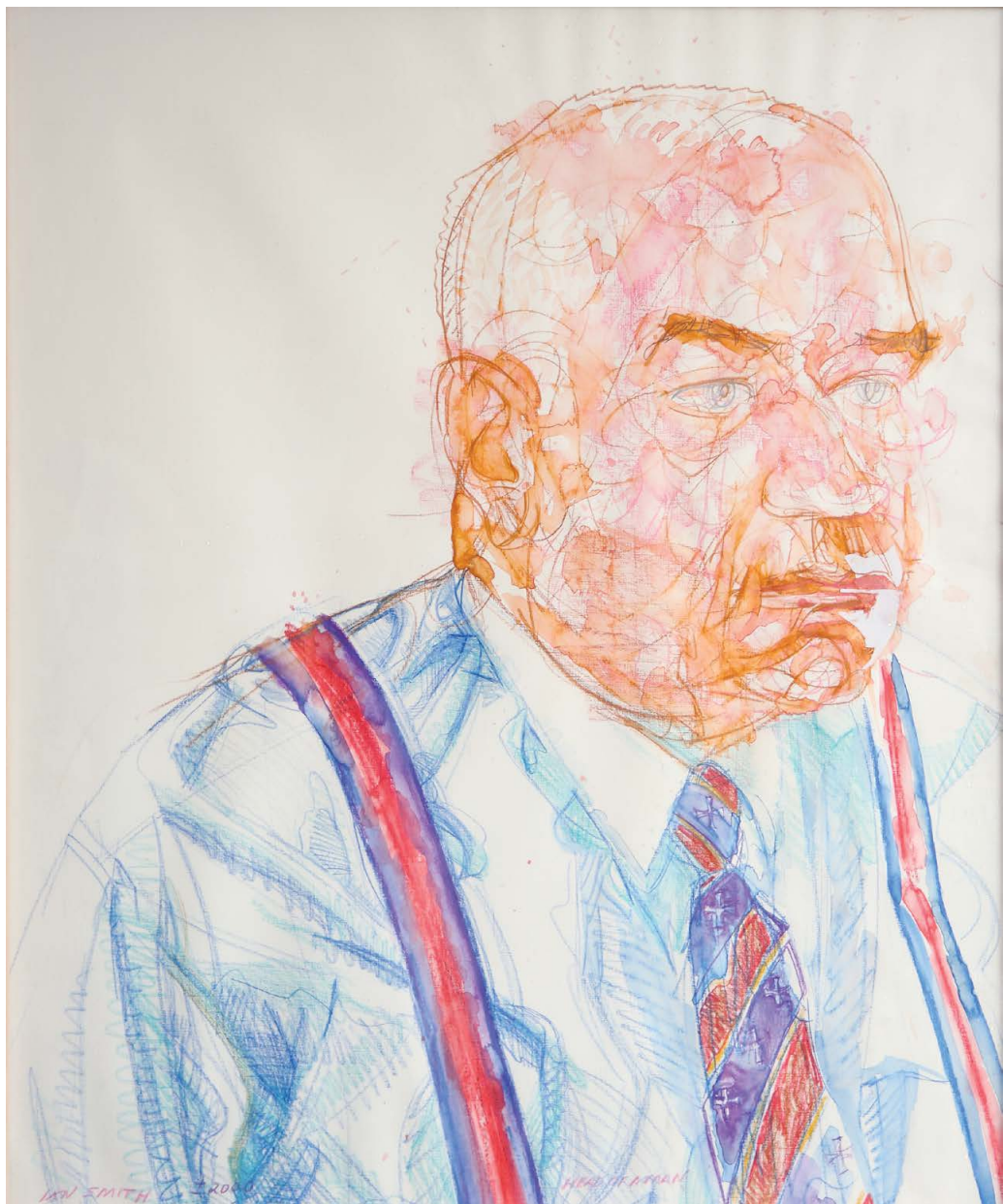
→ IAN SMITH MOTEL DRAWING ± 1996



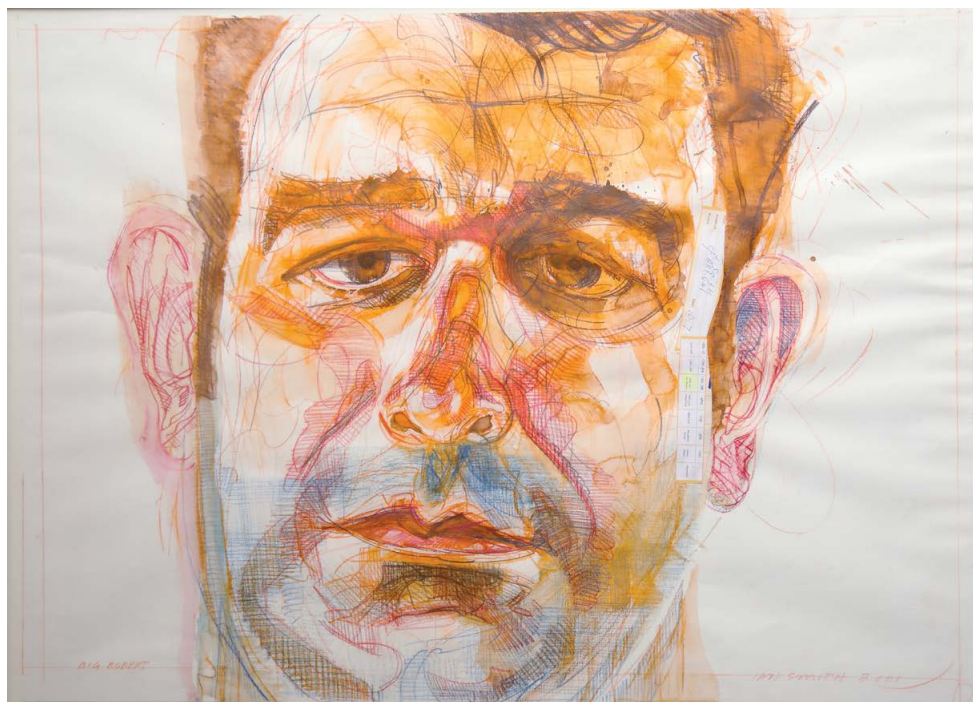
IAN SMITH MOTEL DRAWING ± 1996

35. '2 motel drawings - horizontal' 1996, 76 x 56 cm, Graphite





29. 'Head of a man (Cedric)' 2000, 71 x 59 cm, Coloured pencil & watercolour



27. 'Big Robert' 2001, 59 x 88 cm, Coloured pencil



30. 'Head of a man (Jim)' 2001, 75 x 55 cm, Charcoal





31. 'Davida' 1991, 42 x 30 cm, Acrylic, inks & collage



20. 'Man with a box of beer' 1981, 42 x 62 cm, Graphite & pastel



21. 'Cowboy' 1972, 33 x 53 cm, Charcoal & acrylic





16. 'Rodeus - Cactus' 2004, 94 x 65 cm, Pastel





12. 'Cactus' 2005, 90 x 59 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge





40. 'Great bridge, didn't notice the landscape' 1998, 85 x 60 cm, Crayon & collage





13. 'Oilfield with sign' 2005, 90 x 59 cm, Pastel, oil paint sludge & collage



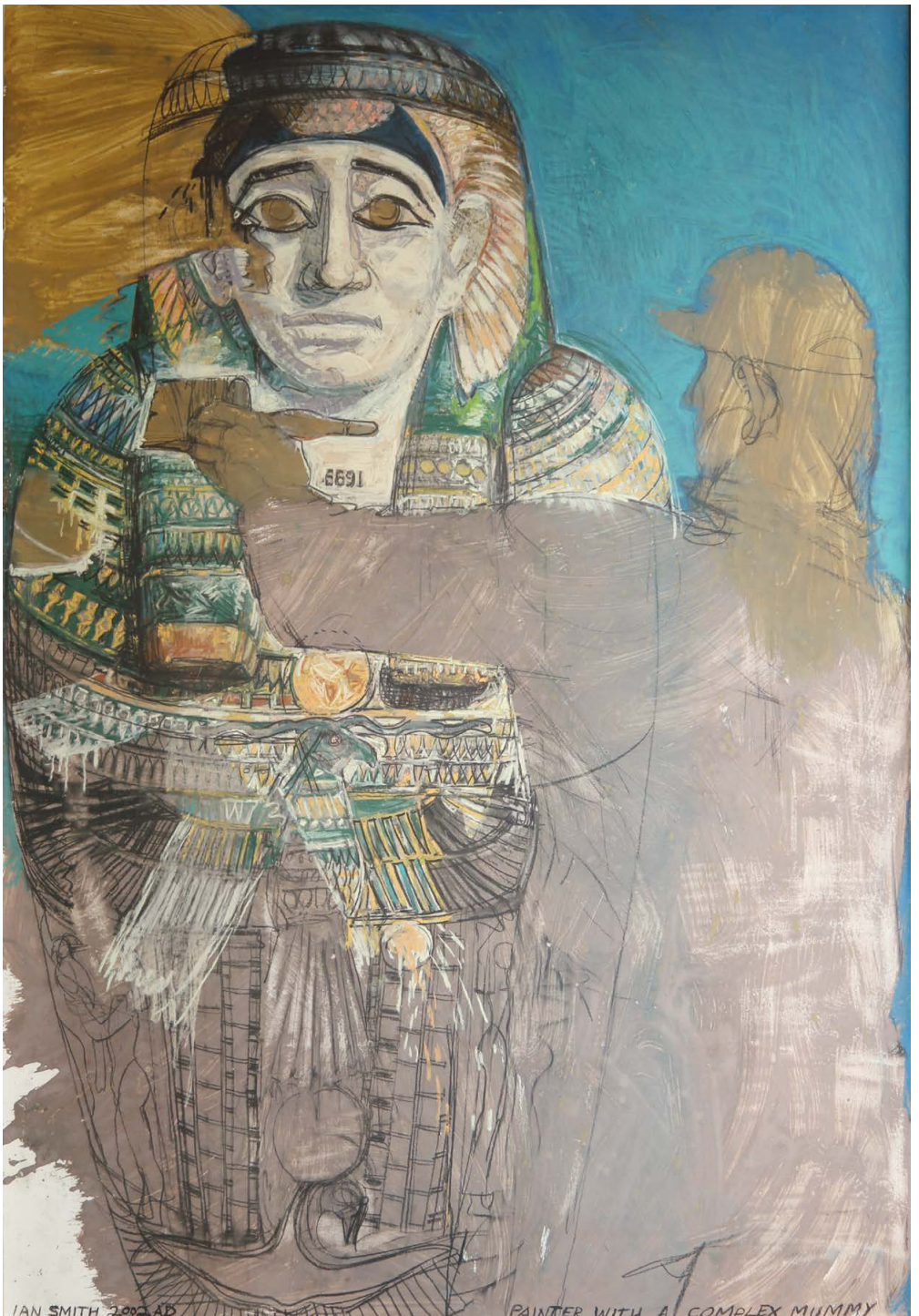
25. 'Only at Berlei' 2013, 76 x 58 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage





50. 'Background to The Mona Lisa' 2004, 94 x 65 cm, Pastel, acrylic & collage





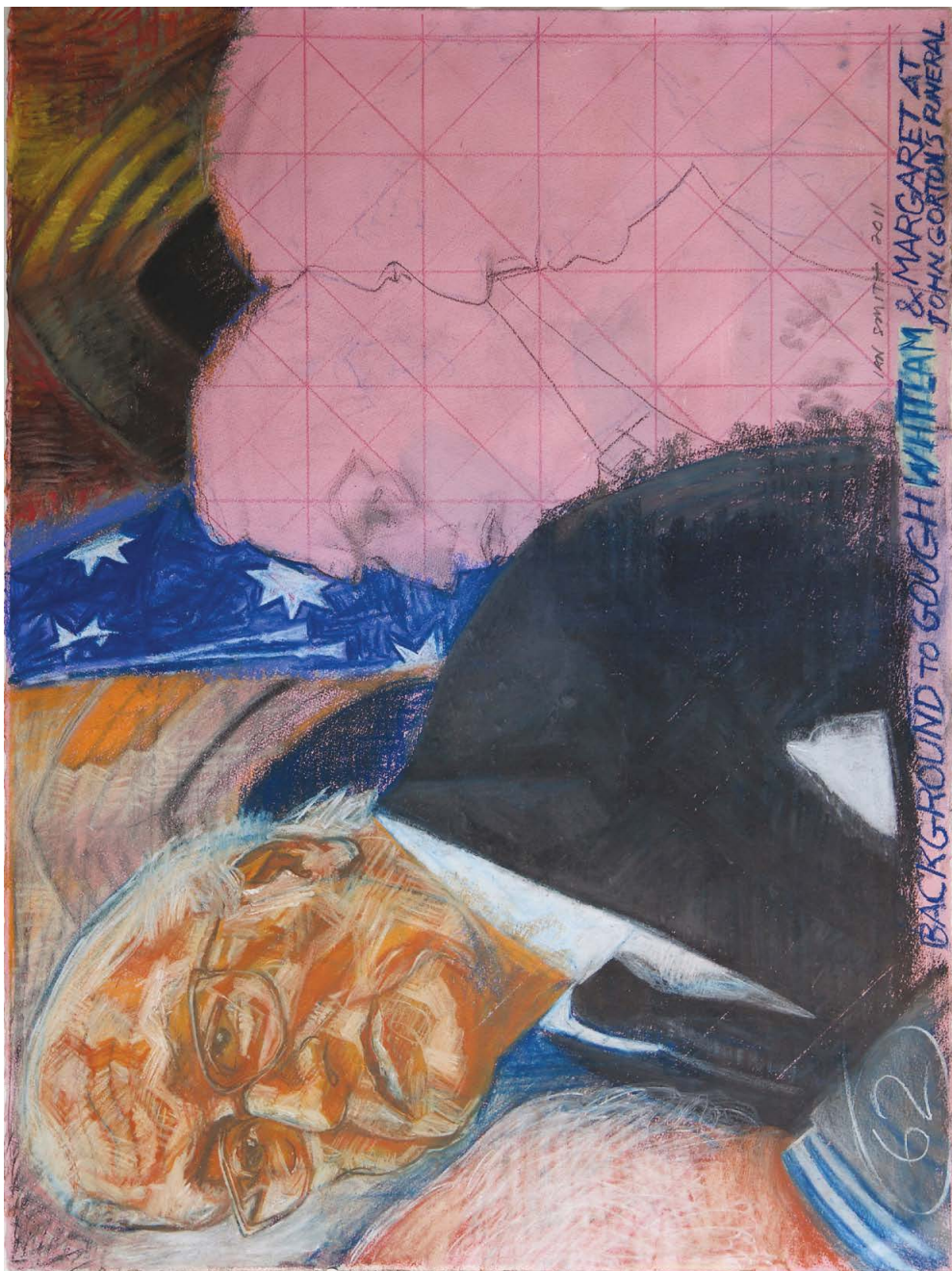
2. 'Painter with a Complex Mummy' 2002, 94 x 65 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge





49. 'NGA - Caring for the collection', 2008, 65 x 94 cm, Pastel, graphite & acrylic





47. 'Background to the Whitlams' 2011, 56 x 76 cm, Pastel & acrylic



48. 'Background to Malcolm Fraser' 2011, 56 x 76 cm, Pastel & acrylic





26. 'Man with one red arm', 1998, 57 x 70 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage



39. 'Clay pan' 2011, 47 x 65 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge



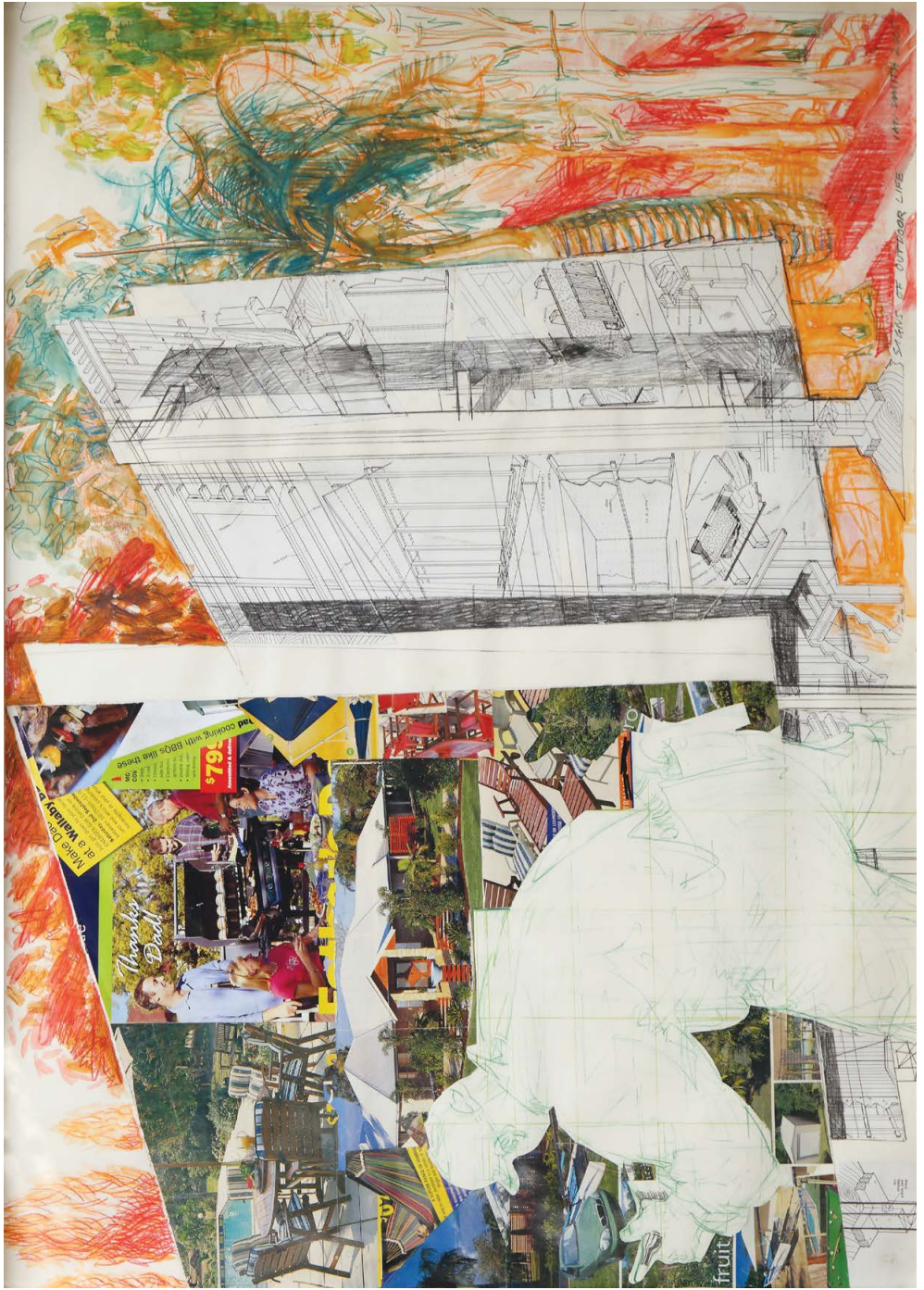


3. 'From our country desk' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage



4. "Canvassing a regional seat" 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage





5. 'Signs of outdoor life' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage



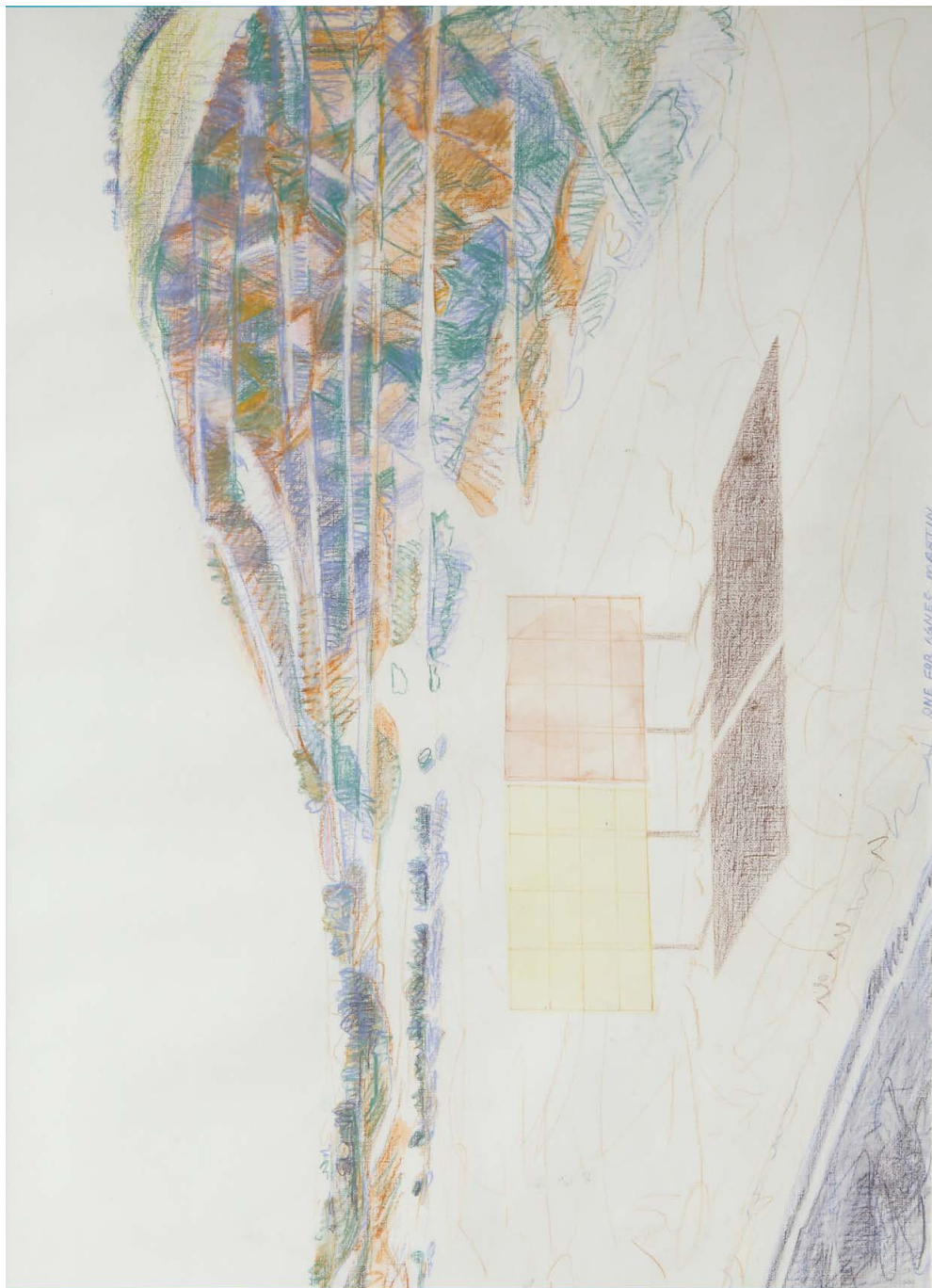


6. 'Rural produce' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage



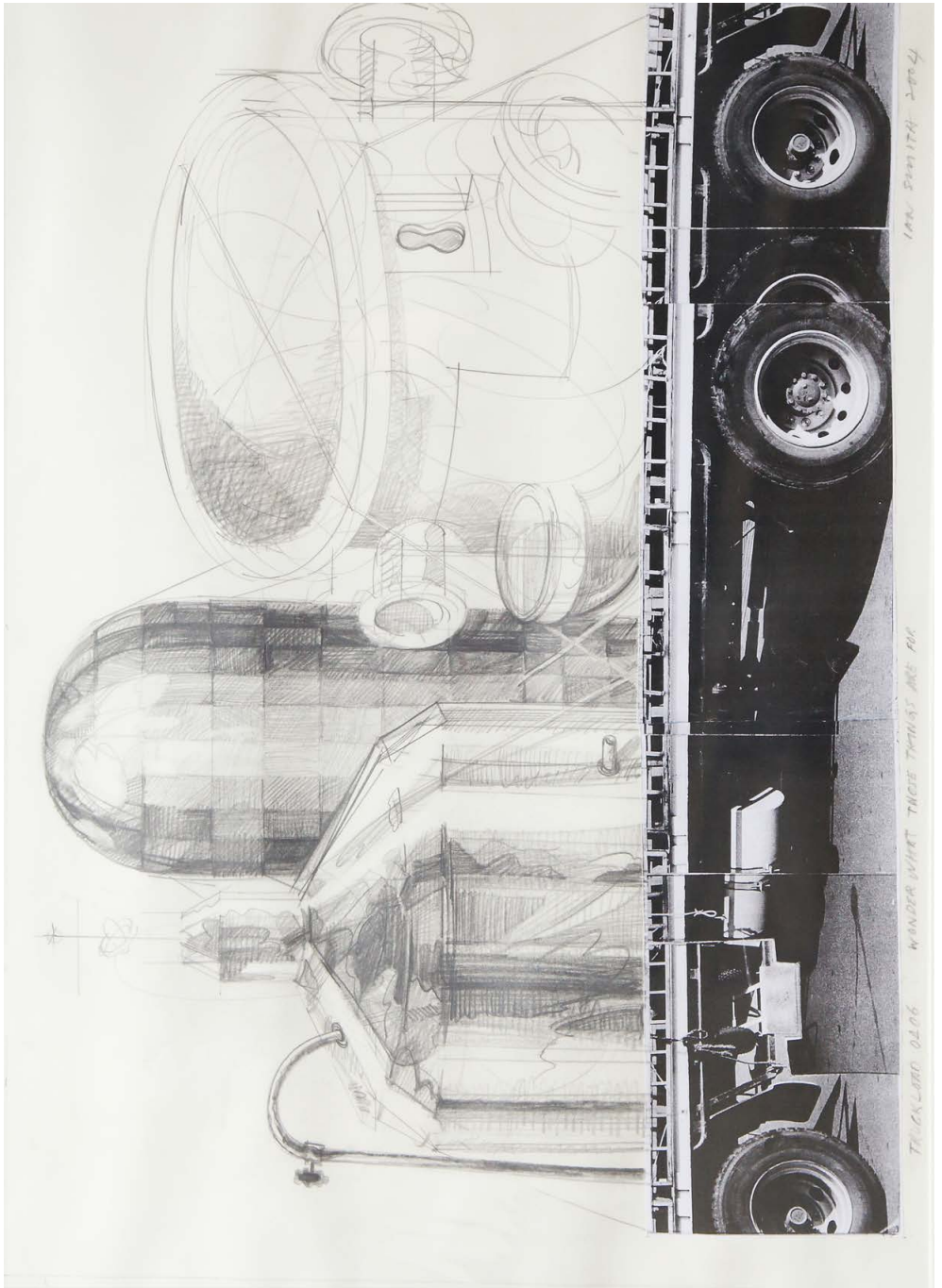
14. 'Ignoring billboards' 2003, 47 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil





ONE FOR AGNES MARTIN

15. 'One for Agnes Martin' 2003, 47 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil



19. 'Truckload' - I wonder what those things are for: 2004, 47 x 65 cm, Graphite & collage





18. 'Idea from a truckload' 1974, 47 x 67 cm, Coloured pencil & collage



43. 'Overpass - Passover' 2000-2010, 39 x 56 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage





46. 'Public sculpture 1' 2017, 52 x 74 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage





41. 'Considering bridges' 1998, 56 x 76 cm, Graphite



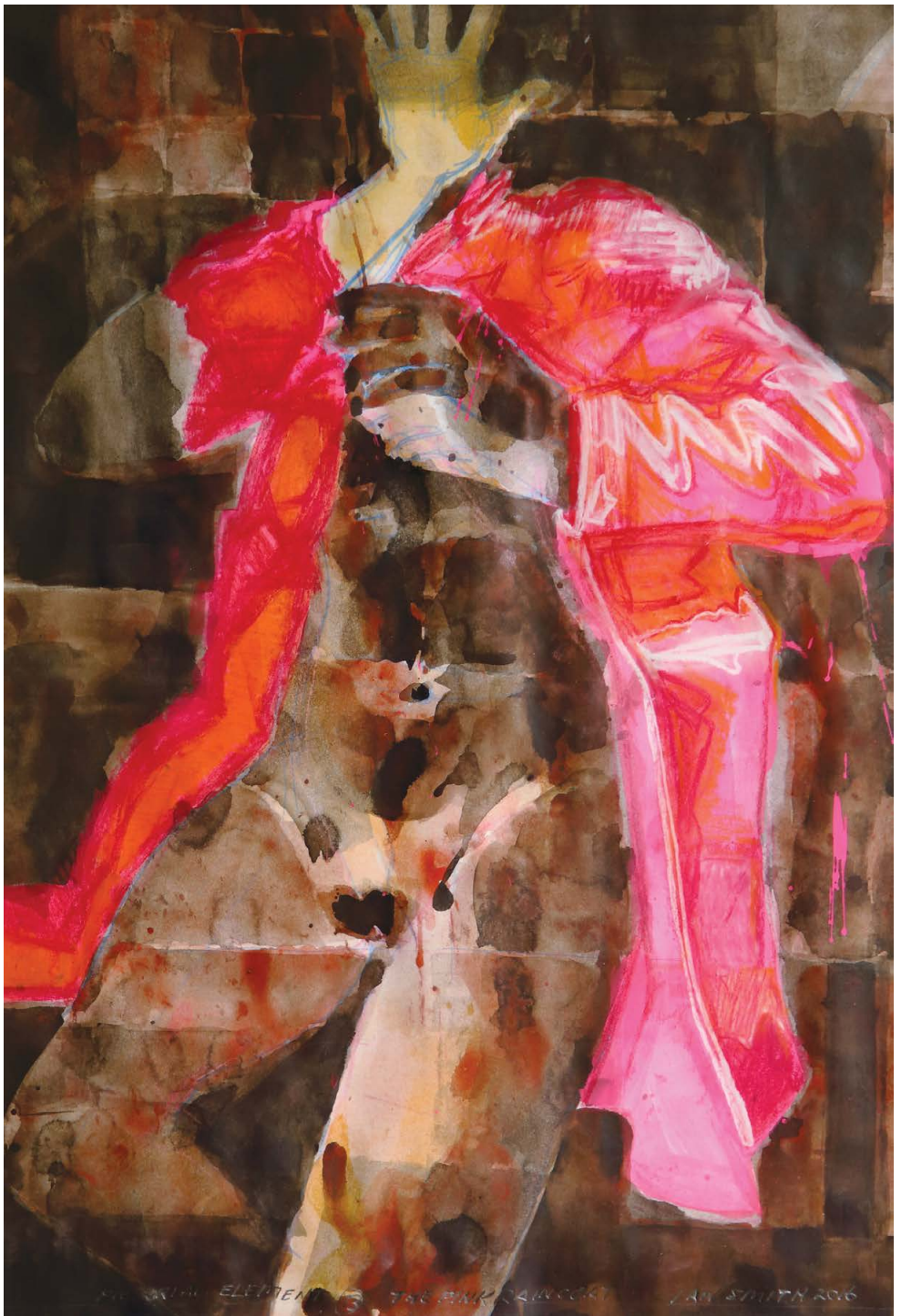


53. 'Pictorial element 9 - Cezanne (tablecloth)' 2015, 46 x 64 cm, Pastel & acrylic



56. 'Pictorial element 12 - Jacques Villon' 2016, 64 x 46 cm, Pastel & watercolour





57. 'Pictorial element 13 - The pink raincoat' 2016, 59 x 40 cm, Watercolour & acrylic



71. 'A Horse Divided 2' 2016, 76 x 56 cm, Pastel & watercolour





72. 'Horseback in Green' 2016, 76 x 56 cm, Pastel & watercolour

## LIST OF WORKS

- 1) '*12 Rothkoic corners*' 1993, 72 x 54cm, Pastel, oil paint sludge & acrylic
- 2) '*Painter with a Complex Mummy*' 2002, 94 x 65 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge
- 3) '*From our country desk*' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage
- 4) '*Canvassing a regional seat*' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage
- 5) '*Signs of outdoor life*' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage
- 6) '*Rural produce*' 2005, 71 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil & collage
- 7) '*My life now*' 2001, 94 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 8) '*Lilac intervals with lavender*' 2000, 94 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 9) '*Lilac intervals with palm*' 2000, 94 x 100 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 10) '*Right angle gum*' 2005, 76 x 56 cm, Pastel
- 11) '*A green tree*' 2005, 70 x 50 cm, Pastel
- 12) '*Cactus*' 2005, 90 x 59 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge
- 13) '*Oilfield with sign*' 2005, 90 x 59 cm, Pastel, oil paint sludge & collage
- 14) '*Ignoring billboards*' 2003, 47 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil
- 15) '*One for Agnes Martin*' 2003, 47 x 65 cm, Coloured pencil
- 16) '*Rodeus - Cactus*' 2004, 94 x 65 cm, Pastel
- 17) '*Billboards over the hill*' 2001-2010, 50 x 68 cm, Watercolour & collage
- 18) '*Idea from a truckload*' 1974, 47 x 67 cm, Coloured pencil & collage
- 19) '*Truckload - I wonder what those thiings are for*' 2004, 47 x 65 cm, Graphite & collage
- 20) '*Man with a box of beer*' 1981, 42 x 62 cm, Graphite & pastel
- 21) '*Cowboy*' 1972, 33 x 53 cm, Charcoal & acrylic
- 22) '*Egypt toad*' 1992, 101 x 75 cm, Pastel
- 23) '*Pavilion 5*' 1984, 75 x 101 cm, Charcoal
- 24) '*Reform*' 2013, 39 x 27 cm, Graphite, coloured pencil & collage
- 25) '*Only at Berlei*' 2013, 76 x 58 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 26) '*Man with one red arm*' 1998, 57 x 70 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 27) '*Big Robert*' 2001, 59 x 88 cm, Coloured pencil
- 28) '*Architect*' 2000, 75 x 55 cm, Coloured pencil
- 29) '*Head of a man (Cedric)*' 2000, 71 x 59 cm, Coloured pencil & watercolour
- 30) '*Head of a man (Jim)*' 2001, 75 x 55 cm, charcoal
- 31) '*Davida*' 1991, 42 x 30 cm, Acrylic, inks & collage
- 32) '*Old Cairns boys*' 1998, 92 x 59 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 33) '*Julie's choice*' 2000, 92 x 59 cm, Coloured pencil,crayon & watercolour
- 34) '*Emblematic self*' 1989, 76 x 56 cm, Oil pastel
- 35) '*2 motel drawings - horizontal*' 1996, 76 x 56 cm, Graphite
- 36) '*2 motel drawings - vertical*' 1996, 56 x 76 cm, Graphite
- 37) '*Under a sunlit window*' 1996, 59 x 79 cm, Graphite



- 38) '*Writer not the warrior*' 2014, 49 x 67 cm, Graphite, watercolour & ink
- 39) '*Clay pan*' 2011, 47 x 65 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge
- 40) '*Great bridge, didn't notice the landscape*' 1998, 85 x 60 cm, Crayon & collage
- 41) '*Considering bridges*' 1998, 56 x 76 cm, Graphite
- 42) '*Billboard built by Noah*' 2011, 47 x 59 cm, Watercolour & collage
- 43) '*Overpass - Passover*' 2000-2010, 39 x 56 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 44) '*Shed*' 1995-2005, 47 x 65 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge
- 45) '*No window of opportunity at Bajool*' 2005, 50 x 69 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge
- 46) '*Public sculpture 1*' 2017, 52 x 74 cm, Coloured pencil, watercolour & collage
- 47) '*Background to the Whitlams*' 2011, 56 x 76 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 48) '*Background to Malcolm Fraser*' 2011, 56 x 76 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 49) '*NGA - Caring for the collection*' 2008, 65 x 94 cm, Pastel, graphite & acrylic
- 50) '*Background to The Mona Lisa*' 2004, 94 x 65,cm Pastel, acrylic & collage
- 51) '*RACQ man background*' 2002, 94 x 65 cm, Pastel & oil paint sludge
- 52) '*Background to garden furniture*' 2011, 59 x 84 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 53) '*Pictorial element 9 - Cezanne (tablecloth)*' 2015, 46 x 64 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 54) '*Pictorial element 10 -Smith (dark horse)*' 2015, 64 x 46 cm,Pastel & acrylic
- 55) '*Pictorial element 11 - G.D.Leslie (red dress)*' 2016, 64 x 46cm, Pastel & watercolour
- 56) '*Pictorial element 12 - Jacques Villon*' 2016, 64 x 46 cm, Pastel & watercolour
- 57) '*Pictorial element 13 - The pink raincoat*' 2016, 59 x 40 cm, Watercolour & acrylic
- 58) '*Pictorial element 14 - A horse divided*' 2016, 64 x 46 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 59) '*Pictorial element 15 - Bridge shadow*' 2016, 46 x 64 cm, Coloured pencil & acrylic
- 60) '*Pictorial element 18 - Arthur Streeton (blue)*' 2016, 84 x 60 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 61) '*Pictorial element 26 - Blue coat*' 2017, 64 x 46 cm, Pastel, acrylic & collage
- 62) '*Pictorial element 22 - From Edgar Degas*' 2017, 57 x 52 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 63) '*Pictorial element 25 - Traveller's trunk*' 2017, 64 x 46 cm, Pastel & acrylic
- 64) '*Palm Beach*' 2001, 38 x 28 cm, Coloured pencil
- 65) '*End of day*' 1997, 28 x 38 cm, Coloured pencil
- 66) '*End of day (sunset)*' 1997, 28 x 38 cm, Coloured pencil
- 67) '*Burnt man*' 1981, 48 x 35 cm, Watercolour
- 68) '*Head*' 1998, 30 x 25 cm, Coloured pencil
- 69) '*Caught in the headlights*' 2011, 44 x 64 cm, Watercolour & collage
- 70) '*His & Hers near a green hill far away*' 2012, 46 x 64 cm, Acrylic & collage
- 71) '*A Horse Divided 2*' 2016, 76 x 56 cm, Pastel & watercolour
- 72) '*Horseback in Green*' 2016, 76 x 56 cm, Pastel & watercolour

## IAN SMITH - Biography

Australian Collections: NGA, Canberra; NGV, Melbourne; QAG, Brisbane; GNT, Darwin; Regional and City council Galleries: Hamilton, Vic.; Karratha, WA; Cairns, Stanthorpe, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Gympie, Gladstone, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Townsville and others; University of Qld, QUT, Griffith University, Brisbane; JCU, Townsville; Uni. Central Qld., Rockhampton; Parliament House, Canberra; Student Unions Sydney Uni., Uni. NSW, Sydney and Melbourne Uni. etc.

Overseas Collections: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; Shenzen Art Museum, China; National Collection Ghana, Emmen City Cultural Centre, Netherlands. Private collections in USA, UK, Netherlands, and Belgium - particularly in Antwerp - where Smith lived for 7 years with his Belgian wife and 2 Australian born children; 1988 to 1994 when he returned to Australia alone and lived Brisbane/Gold coast/Moreton Bay Islands, making frequent trips to Sydney and Cairns.

Born Cairns, 1950, he lived a working class, bush and beach yet artistically active boyhood. In 1968, on a Commonwealth Scholarship, he did one year of Architecture before dropping out, working in a bank for a year then moving to Melbourne to do a Diploma of Art & Design at Prahran College [1970 -1972]. 1973, painted TV sets at Channel 9, then mid-year returned to Brisbane to teach painting and drawing full-time at Qld College of Art until 1979 when he quit and has painted full-time ever since.

Exhibitions since 1972 in Australia and Overseas: include +/- 25 solo shows, Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane/Sydney 1972-2006; +/- 7 solo shows, Heiser Gallery, Brisbane since 2006. He is now represented in Sydney by Liverpool Street Gallery. While living in Europe, involved in many exhibitions; most notably solo shows at Campo & Campo, Antwerp and Emmen Cultural Centre, Netherlands. He has been in numerous curated group shows in commercial and public galleries here and overseas.

Curated solo exhibitions include 'Since I left', 1996 Cairns Regional Gallery then touring; 'On and off the Road', 2010 Gold Coast City Art Gallery then touring to 8 regional galleries, ending appropriately in Cairns.

In a career which really started as a schoolboy, his work uses images of everyday even mundane existence from cane toads to grand bridges, from explicit sexual scenes to blank roadsie billboards in landscape to evoke universal issues. He has won many prizes including Tattersalls Landscape Prize, Brisbane, 2012; and been an Archibald Prize finalist 9 times over 4 decades [first time 1977, most recently 2010]. Also hung several times in the Salon des Refuses, Wynne and Sulman Prizes.







## Woolloongabba Art Gallery

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