



**LOOBY
NOW**

More is not always less.

Intricate? Elaborate? Many-layered? All these. And more. Still, intricate comes closest for a survey of Keith Looby's output over seven decades. Intricacies inside each work, across their expanse, and between their creator's life and his re-imaginings as their tendrils stretch from paintings into the drawings, from prints to the collages.

Elements in one medium are recognisable in others, metamorphosing, as Looby explores paths kept open by the range of his subjects, methods and materials.

His palette shifts from the sombre to the sumptuous, surfaces emerge from the thin to the textural, indeed, towards the sculptural in 'Anne Summers' (1980).

Stillness within a frame can never constrain the forces curling through the tension between curves and angles. Even Canberra lounge-suites seem restless.

Figures, faces, symbols and signs crowd the mural-size canvases from his early years in Rome, as in 'Incarnation' (1965), now in the Queensland Art Gallery. Here are puzzles enough to unhinge an iconographer, and occasions for gallery-goers to rejoice in how much is to be gained by lingering over each piece as a window into fecundity.

The suite of portraits appear as doppelgangers of their subjects and some aspect of their public lives, a cross-over clearest in Max Gillies's imitating Hawke, and more subtle in the shadow of surveillance cast across the Communist journalist, Rupert Lockwood, who is the public expression of Keith's father's outlook. The portraits thereby double as self- portraits, illustrating Marx's apprehension of individuality as an ensemble of social relations.

In the class-photograph series, students whose names Keith could not recall return as shades. (One set is in QAG).

Three books of drawings set out from the origins of life on our planet to traverse the millennia-long occupation of this continent, before the third volume depicts the settlers. The trilogy's sweep is held together by his penmanship, by the convolutions of angophoras, and by blending the animal with the vegetable - the Grottesque in its original and noble sense.

Our desacralized culture leaves little space for art outside its commodification, which led Looby to admire Phillip Guston for his humanism and humour, his politics and painterliness, as he moves away from New York Abstraction.

If Looby's themes could not be more Australian in their being at ease in suburbia, their cramped conditions could hardly be more un-Australian. His vision splendid is of domestic interiors, not Paterson's 'wide-brown land extended.' The 'weird melancholy' that long ago disturbed Marcus Clarke about 'the Bush' now lies in wait to discomfort dwellers of the urban fringe.

A Looby is not a work not to be strolled past, glancing at its label. To approach one is to enter a maze. Its centrepiece is not an obelisk but the oblique. Clues to its intentions stay in sight. Too narrow a focus - say on a single figure - conceals its significance before the composition extends an invitation to look again.

Humphrey McQueen ~ September 2023



School Party 1991, Oil on canvas, 101.5 × 129.5 cm



Romantically Bound 2002, Pastel pens on paper, 37.5 × 54.5 cm (image)



Eye Ruth 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 46 × 40 cm



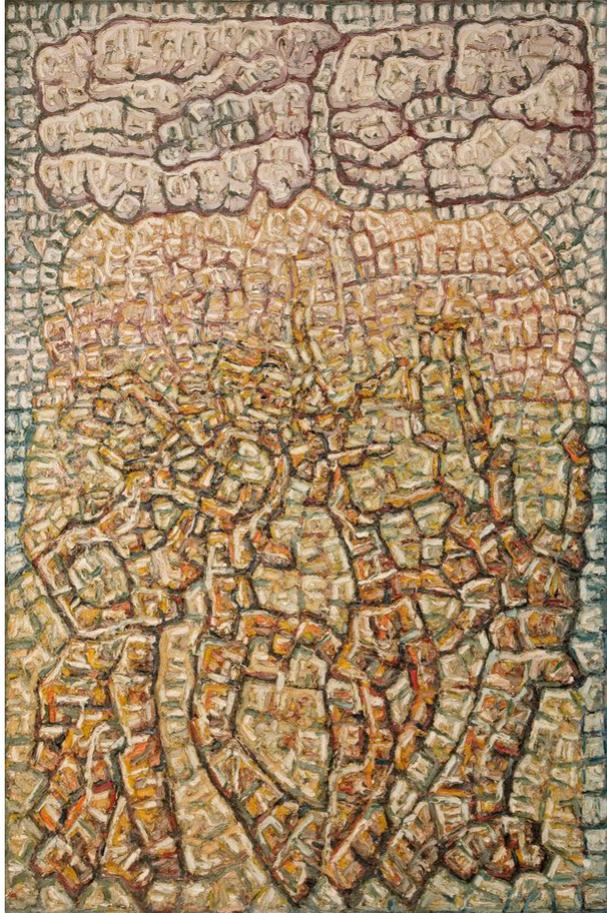
Study for 'Individual Max' 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 46 × 40 cm



Family Floe 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 46 × 40 cm



Herself 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 46 × 40 cm



Island Clouds 1987, Oil on canvas, 230 × 152 cm



Tasmanian Trees 1987, Oil on canvas, 182 × 122 cm



The Island 1985, Oil on canvas, 230 × 245 cm



Second Class 1979
Mixed media on cardboard, 51.5 × 64 cm



Tastemakers 1977
Oil & collage on board, 48.5 × 59 cm (image)



They're Funny Fellows Now 1980, Etching, 45.5 × 59 cm (image)



Study From Resurrection 2008, Ink pen on paper, 90.5 × 50 cm



Billy Boy 1996, Ink pen on paper, 72.5 × 54.5 cm



Hero 1984, Etching, 47 × 58.5 cm (image)



Arteater 1984, Etching, 51.5 × 59.5 cm (image)

front cover image: *Dear Sir* 1982, Oil on canvas, 185 × 154 cm

A selection of works from Keith Looby's exhibition, 'LOOBY NOW'

9 September – 30 September 2023

Woolloongabba Art Gallery

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