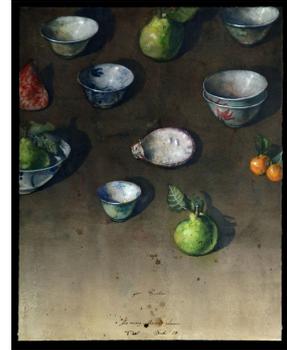


*Meditations on Eternity.*  
Professor Sasha Grishin  
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*Now in his mid-50s, Thornton Walker is an artist who refuses to lie down and repeat himself, Sasha Grishin reports*

Thornton Walker is one of Australia's most successful figurative tonal painters. It must have been very tempting for him to establish a formula in his paintings and to repeat the sorts of works for which he is already popular with art collectors. After all, many Australian artists have adopted this strategy.

T. S. Eliot, in a famous essay on Yeats, spoke of the dilemma facing the writer approaching maturity, which would equally apply to a visual artist. He observed "a man has three choices: to stop writing altogether, to repeat himself with perhaps an increasing skill of virtuosity, or by taking thought to adapt himself to middle age and find a different way of working. Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity."



Now aged in his mid-50s, Walker has if anything embraced Eliot's third path of creative development – he has attempted to reinvent his method of work, in part by meditating on Picasso. About five years ago he began his series of studies inspired by Picasso's *La Flûte de Pan (The Pipes of Pan)*, a large canvas in the Picasso Museum in Paris. Picasso had painted it while holidaying at the Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera in 1923, after he had moved away from cubism and was experimenting with a form of Hellenism with very bulky statuesque forms. In this painting he shows two life-size male figures, wearing bathing trunks, who have terracotta-coloured bodies and who have been placed against the brilliance of the Mediterranean Sea seen at midday in the height of summer. The composition is serene and emotionless, the figures are as if united by a spiritual bond established through music and they are placed against abstracted geometric compositional blocks with their chunky hands and feet frozen in space. Walker shows no desire to paint studies after the Picasso picture, instead his large acrylic and collage canvases in his new exhibition of paintings and works on paper at Beaver Galleries can be thought of as a series of meditations on elements in the Picasso painting. All recognisable figurative content has been removed and we are presented with paintings which are simultaneously tough and confronting, yet at the same time lyrical and highly evocative.

The specific aspect of the Picasso canvas examined in this exhibition is not that of the two figures, one standing while the other totally self-absorbed playing the pan pipes, but rather it is the space between them – the glimpse of the sky and the sea surrounded by the architectural blocks framing the view. In an aphorism ascribed to Picasso, he once described eternity as "the combination of the sea with sunshine".

The Walker paintings are conceived in the form of meditations on eternity, as in part revealed by Picasso. The paintings are visually attractive, even seductive, but there is also a toughness and strong sense of enigma. They are very contemporary paintings which in their resolution owe as much to the Abstract Expressionists and painters such as Robert Rauschenberg and Giorgio Morandi, and the

Japanese Zen thinkers, as they do to Picasso. These are some of the best paintings by Walker to date.



Earlier this year Walker undertook a Printmaking Fellowship at the Australian Printmaking Workshop in Melbourne. In this exhibition, as well as the monumental acrylic collages, there are nine monotypes which have been heavily transformed with watercolour. A monotype basically involves painting on a plate which is then run through the printing press at considerable pressure to leave a singular impression on paper. It is these painterly impressions which he has subsequently heavily manipulated with watercolours. While the still-life imagery in these monotypes is easily distinguishable, the surfaces appear as if viewed through a watery veil where chance has been permitted

to dissolve the deliberateness of the artist's control of the image. The preciousness of this work lies in attaining a state where the paintings assume their own existence, one which denies mimetic literalness of representation or controlled arena of the artist with his bag of tricks. The painting seems to have an independent life, like meditation on something, rather than a physical description of an object's existence in space.

This is a refreshingly tough exhibition by an artist who refuses to lie down and to repeat himself.