

ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALASIA

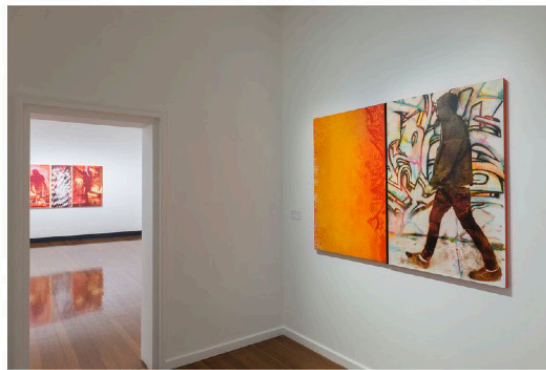
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On the stage of his canvas: Robert Boynes's 'Modern Times' at the Drill Hall Gallery

July 13, 2017



ROBERT BOYNES: MODERN TIMES, EXHIBITION INSTALL VIEW, ANU DRILL HALL GALLERY, CANBERRA, JULY 2017; PHOTO: ROB LITTLE, RLDI

In his paintings, Robert Boynes delves underneath the surface of the city, dissolving narratives, blurring edges, creating incandescent figures from the excised fragments captured in the frame of his camera. He conjures the metropolis as a complex set of spaces and structures where individuals work and live together, inhabiting streets and offices, negotiating interwoven infrastructures of transport and communication which operate diagonally, horizontally, vertically and virtually. The complex hive-like nature of the city brings individuals together and also separates them.

Currently surveyed at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra (until 13 August), Boynes's paintings deliver his insight into the insistent aloneness of any individual, either standing on a platform literally alone – *The Delay* (2003) – or in a crowd crossing a street, ostensibly part of a group – *Lazer* (2009). There is a kind of blindness that overwhelms the individual as they become embedded in the machine of the city. And an aspect of the city machine which pervades more and more is surveillance. Many of Boynes's titles refer to such technology – *Infrared Scan* (2003), *CCTV1* and *CCTV2* (both 2008). In an attempt to counter its effects, individuals retreat inside their own heads where surveillance cannot reach.

Boynes has photographed people on the move for many years. Walking in the city with his camera, standing in a station, or outside a museum, the space of the city becomes Boynes's stage set and the actors are performing (the actions of their everyday lives) on his stage. He looks, and composes and captures slivers of time that fall between moments in a continuum of city life and human interaction.

There are layers and layers of processing applied to get from the first photographic moment to the finished painting: through screening, hosing, scraping, layering and application of colour, the unknown subjects have their vitality transformed and become the vivid carriers of meaning on the stage of his canvas.

In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985), the postmodern condition is manifested as information overload, as the protagonist moves through a world increasingly submerged in media stimuli. Many of the figures in Boynes's paintings appear to move through the world in a similar state of submersion. There is a low-grade anxiety triggered by the powerlessness inherent in being complicit in a system based on production and consumption and which has become a leviathan, bearing all before it – whether privileged or not. These individuals are immersed in the city, in the white noise of the streets.

Patsy Payne, *Canberra*