

Opening Wednesday 15 August 6 - 8 pm
Exhibition 15 August - 15 September 2007
www.boutwelldrapergallery.com.au

Above, December 15 2006, (detail), oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm
Right, April 22 2007, oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm
Far Right, March 22 2007, oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm
Cover, March 15 2007, (detail), oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm

Overleaf left, October 12 2006, oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm
Overleaf middle, December 31 2006, oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm
Overleaf right, December 25 2006, oil on canvas, 105 x 123 cm



The paintings of Geoffrey De Groen appear pared back, simple, reticent. And indeed they are. But they are also wonders of subtlety. Their sophistication, allied with gut instinct and an emotional tenor that can feel as finely calibrated as a nocturne, places them among the very best things in recent Australian art.

De Groen lives in Taralga, a town on an open, elevated plateau not far from Goulburn. He paints in a studio next to his house. He works on several paintings on any given day, moving them back and forth across the studio to see them in different light as they develop. Thus do they take their place in his imagination: slowly, without preconception, without recourse to formula.

He covers his surfaces with thin layers of transparent colour thinned further by the use of a lean medium. The way the colour is applied is critical. De Groen paints wet-into-wet, but with hardly any paint on his wide, long-handled brush. He feathers it in, then spreads the colour across the surface using a non-absorbent scourer. He goes to great lengths to avoid visible brushmarks on the surface, because he wants the eye to scan without hitch and, most importantly, to be directed past the surface into the depths of his paintings.

In these paintings, he uses pure colour, cross-mixed. "I work with a limited, close range of colours and values very deliberately. The purity of the colour interests me. I try not to reduce it much, I don't want turbidity. In the end, though, I'm not interested in colour for its own sake. I'm interested in what it can do."

De Groen uses all the subtlety of his instinct, temperament and experience to make great play with degrees of opacity, shifts of tone and heart-stoppingly sensitive colour relations. To look at these paintings attentively is to immerse oneself in a world of ambiguity. Spatially, one feels untethered. Some shapes push forward, others recede, and then, as the eye moves on, these zones seem to switch properties. Clouds of cool green pigment may invade one side of a coloured shape that initially appeared definite, inflecting it with ambiguity. A warmer, yellow tint will invade from the other side, and suddenly, what had appeared as clear-cut as a trinity becomes an entrancing conundrum.

As one looks, one sees shapes contracting and dilating. One's inability to analyse and understand what one is seeing – even in works so modest and simple-looking – is key to their effect. In De Groen's best works, you can sense a pulse or heartbeat. Because it is so particular to the work in question – strong or weak, slow or fast, calm or keyed-up – and because it changes over time and according to different lights, different moods, different times of day – it has its own mysterious, challenging life.

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Sebastian Smee is the art critic for The Australian

