

# KEVIN CONNOR

Review Elizabeth Fortescue

Just before his exhibition at Liverpool Street Gallery in May, Kevin Connor invited Elizabeth Fortescue to view his recent work in his Darlinghurst studio

As you wander down Riley Street with Kevin Connor at lunchtime, drinkers propped against a telegraph pole outside the pub raise their beers and sing out a cheery "g'day". It's Connor they are saluting. For years, the artist has haunted this rabbit-warren precinct of inner-city Darlinghurst with its street-front restaurants, quaint terraces, converted factory buildings and half-way houses with residents sitting out the front in plastic chairs, smoking.

Connor is a fixture in this part of town. He is usually huddled in a café corner, discreetly observing the human traffic and sketching in a little book.

Connor's studio is just around the corner from the Riley Street/ Stanley Street café precinct, down a quiet laneway where the hustle and bustle is quickly left behind. His studio is upstairs in a former printer's building, its windows opening on to picturesque views of rooftops, chimneys and sunny, walled gardens.

This is where Connor has prepared the work for his new exhibition, Kevin Connor: Paintings and Drawings, at Liverpool Street Gallery.

For the exhibition, his third at Liverpool Street Gallery since 2006, Connor has painted some of the biggest canvases of his life. The largest of these pictures measures 2.4m by 3m. They dwarf him as he wheels them around the studio on huge easels. They bang against the lights which hang from the ceiling on chains.

Connor manhandles a massive canvas into the light streaming through a window. It is of Circular Quay. Done from memory as well as drawings, the painting captures the Quay as though from a vantage point Connor could not possibly have had—hovering high above the ferry wharves like a bird, with the Harbour Bridge on the left and the Opera House on the right and the full spread of the bluest harbour water right in the middle. You could spread your wings and swoop right into that blue expanse. It's exhilarating.

In the foreground of the painting is a motley procession of passers-by, as there always is at the Quay. Connor says the figures on the left of the canvas are drawn from his early memories of this iconic spot, and he has painted the Harbour Bridge above their heads as though it were partly obscured by the polluted air which would sometimes fill Sydney Cove when he was young. On the right of the canvas are figures from the present day, with the sails of the Opera House coruscating in the vivid light. It's as though Connor has painted a lifetime of memories of the Quay, from left to right across his vast canvas.

Next up is a painting of Stanley Street. Actually, Connor has painted two versions. In the first, the colour is more intense and the brushwork more fevered. A figure at the centre of the picture is seated in a chair. Connor has painted the man's head twice, to show that the man was looking down but has just noticed you and is returning your gaze. In the background the buildings leap into the sky like flames.

In the second version, the tones are more muted and the colours are gentler. But the background buildings still look like rollercoasters. Both paintings depict the Darlinghurst Connor loves—a tableau on which the stuff of daily life is played out by the artist's cast of characters. These characters are everyday people with hardworking lives, but Connor gives them the same monumentality as the buildings which will outlast them by many generations.

You struggle to orient yourself in these pictures—to see exactly where Connor might have situated them. On your way to the studio that morning you noticed an old white block of flats, and you think you have spotted that block in one of the paintings. Connor is pleased.

"It's meant to be like that," he said. "That's good. It's about the spirit of the place."

Connor pulls out a massive portrait of his father in the 1930s which he has titled *The Railwayman*. This painting seems like a startling departure for Connor. His father was an employee of the NSW Government railways. One of his postings was a tiny hamlet called Wallenbeen, between Cootamundra and Harden. Connor remembers his early childhood at Wallenbeen very well. The place was isolated, but big enough for the circus to visit.

"There were awful dust storms down there. There was a great drought, and swagmen used to beg at the back door and you couldn't feed all of them. It was a very lonely railway house, and it was a tough time," he said.

His father was a tough little Irishman. Recently, when Connor found a photograph of his father taken in 1929, he was inspired to paint him for the first time.

Connor, an Archibald Prize winner, has also painted a self portrait for the exhibition. It is a remarkable work in which the artist's eyes gaze off to one side with an expression of quizzical diffidence. His white beard emerges from the gloom, and his body has been painted as though it were thin and spare. The canvas is 2.4m tall.

The exhibition is also to include 16 drawings in ink, watercolour



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and gouache. Connor based these on sketches which he made last year when he and his wife Margaret went on the maiden voyage of the Queen Victoria from Southampton to Sydney. The drawings in the exhibition depict one magical day the couple spent in New York, when the ship came in with the dawn and sailed out at dusk. During the day, Connor walked up to the Museum of Modern Art and based one of his drawings on the people he saw there.

On board the ship, passengers were able to attend art classes. One day Connor was sketching people playing the pokies when he felt someone looking over his shoulder. "Oh, you're good," his observer said. "You must have been doing the art classes."

Kevin Connor—Paintings & Drawings 2009  
16 May - 11 June 2009  
Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney  
[www.liverpoolstgallery.com.au](http://www.liverpoolstgallery.com.au)



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01 **Circular Quay**, 2009, oil on canvas, 242 x 303cm  
02 **Sunday MOMA, New York I**, 2008, ink, watercolour and gouache on paper, 42 x 59cm  
03 **Stanley Street II**, 2009, oil on canvas, 196 x 242cm  
Images courtesy of Liverpool Street Gallery