

COLLECTOR'S DOSSIER

JON CATTAPAN'S LOCAL TRUTHS

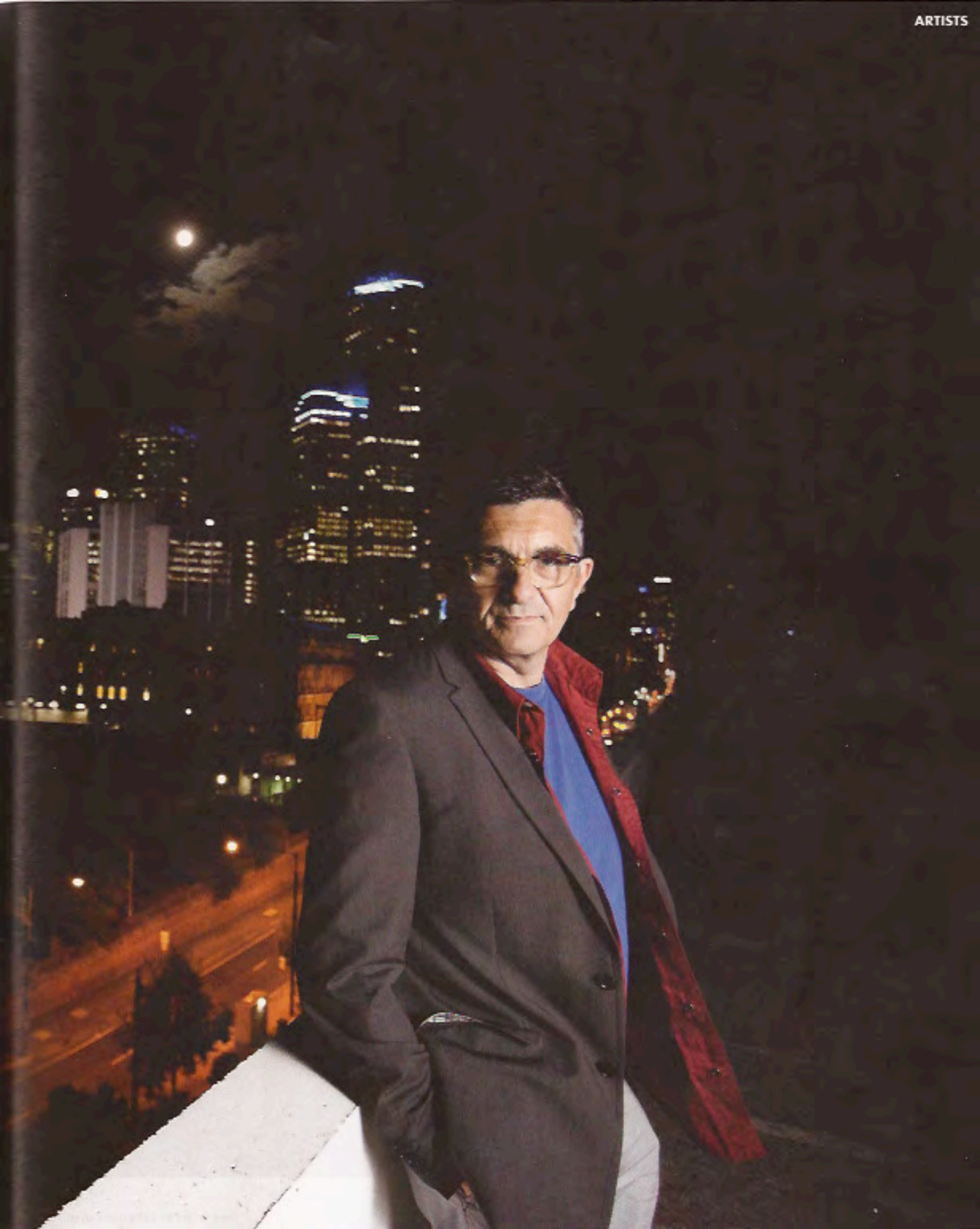
RELATIVELY EARLY IN HIS CAREER, PAINTER JON CATTAPAN REALISED THE IMPORTANCE OF REFERRING TO BOTH THE LOCAL SITUATION AND THE UNIVERSAL CONDITION IN HIS WORK. OVER HIS THREE-DECADE CAREER HE HAS REMAINED RESOLUTE IN THIS AND ALSO REMARKABLY CONSISTENT WRITES **SASHA GRISHIN**. PORTRAIT BY **ROY CHU**.

Jon Cattapan is one of Australia's more visible and recognisable painters whose works are not only represented in most Australian public art collections but are actually included in their permanent display. Aged in his 50s, he has been exhibiting for over three decades and has attained a distinctive visual language which is immediately recognisable as his own, but without becoming formulaic. He is not what could be termed a template artist.

Born in Melbourne, he is the son of migrant parents from Castelfranco in Veneto in Italy, the famed birthplace of **Giorgione**. The place of his birth and the location of his ancestral home have remained central to his life with a studio in an industrial estate in Moorabbin only a stone's throw from where he grew up, while Giorgione has remained a guiding source of inspiration throughout his life.

As an asthmatic child, Cattapan remembers himself as "dreamy and sensitive," interested in drawing and not part of the dominant sport culture of his day. A defining influence in childhood was a six-month visit to Italy with his mother when he was six and a half, and where he was taught to draw by an older cousin rather than "playing with stick figures". Back in Melbourne, art became a subject at which he excelled at school but "it was something I did – I did not think that it led to anything". It was only in his later years of schooling at Highett High that he encountered an inspiring art teacher, **Ralph Farmer**, "a newly minted, radicalised teacher," who was a practising artist and who introduced him and his fellow students to the art world. It was only then that the thought of art as a career was planted in his mind. At home there was no art, no art books and a career in art was definitely not on the agenda.









"The important thing is that Cattapan does actually paint this world."

Jon Cattapan, *Absence Field III*, 2011. Oil on linen, 180 x 250cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSEH GALLERY, SYDNEY

Cattapan entered the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1974 to study computer science. After a year of technology by day and drawing furiously by night, he shifted across to the School of Art at RMIT, which at the time was in its glory days and boasted on its staff **Andrew Sibley**, **Jan Senbergs**, **George Baldessin**, **Les Kossatz**, **James Meldrum**, **Rod Clarke** and **Len Crawford**. He belonged to the same student cohort as **Peter Ellis**, **Heather Shimmen** and **Stephen Bush** and his art reflected many of their similar concerns. There was a common desire to seek out a visual metaphor through which to tackle some of the big questions of being and to comment on the human condition. There was also an implied rejection of a minimalist aesthetic which did not go beyond pattern-making. While art was viewed as essentially a cerebral activity, there remained the heritage of Melbourne existentialist expressionism, in Cattapan's case, with a distinct punk edginess. Many of these qualities can be traced back to the work and the philosophy on art of **John Brack**, the intellectual giant who cast his shadow over much of the Melbourne art scene, but there was also a broader awareness of the Angry Penguins and of the Melbourne Antipodeans.

When Cattapan emerged as an exhibiting artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s the tide was already turning. Minimalism and conceptual art were caught in their institutionalised cul-de-sac while hard-edge abstraction seemed to have come to its colourful dead end. The new wave of figurative expressionism was evident locally and internationally with **Peter Booth** gaining acclaim with his cathartic painted nightmares and **ROAR** studios entering the Melbourne scene with a splash with their vigorous, youthful, punk-like figuration. The Italian transavantgarde and German and Austrian expressionism had received international recognition and were now represented in Australian public collections and in various biennales. Cattapan, who had received an early musical training in guitar (he once seriously contemplated music as a career), experimented with art school punk rock bands and exhibited strong, frequently collaged, figurative pieces with a punk aesthetic and a pop art sensibility. **Pablo Picasso**, **Jean Dubuffet** and the **CoBrA** artists were among his early gods.

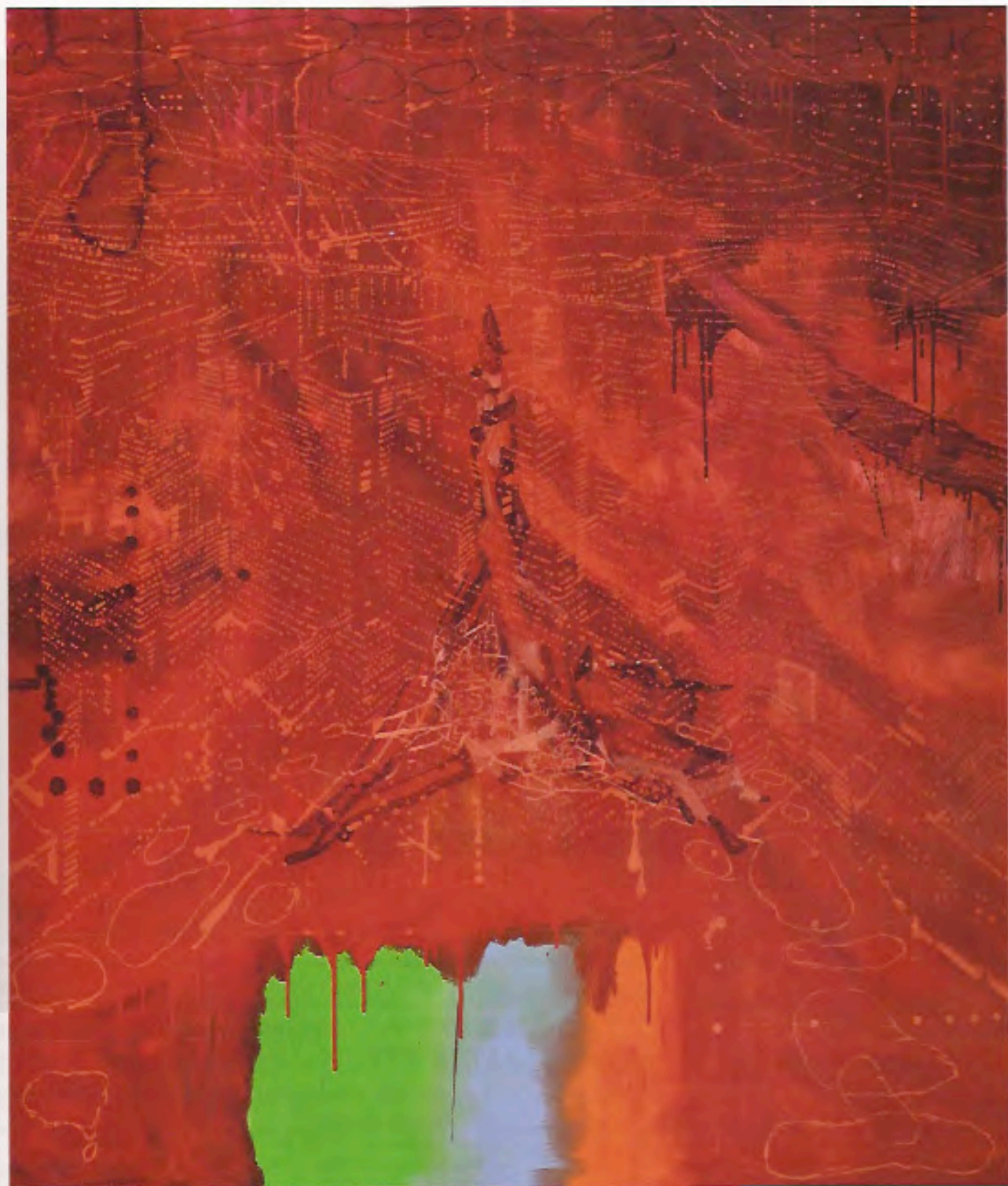
A family tragedy, the death of his sister in 1984, and the break up of a long-term relationship the following year led to his reassessing his path in art and he spent a year in Italy contemplating the beauty of **Giorgione** and of **Giotto** in the Scrovegni Chapel in nearby Padua. He was struck by their "enormous quiet beauty" and the sense of the site-specific, especially in **Giorgione's** work where the background of *The Tempest* seemed still recognisable near the small town of Castelfranco. On returning to Melbourne he increasingly felt that his art had to be true to the local experience yet somehow also comment on the universal.

Cattapan observes: "Obviously I had always been obsessed with Melbourne, what it meant culturally ... I tried to call up the whole idea of identity and my own identity as belonging to a particular place and time." The 18 months he spent in America in 1989 and 1990, part of it in the Australia Council Greene

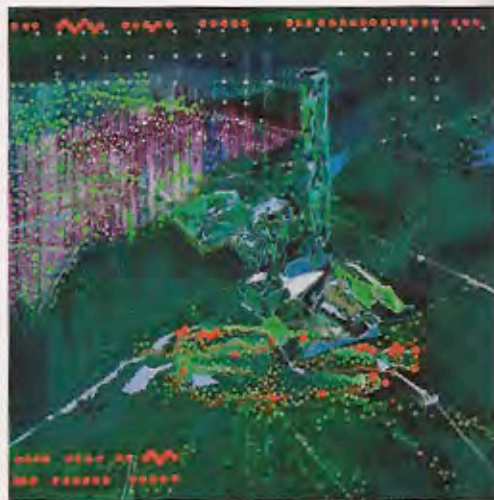
"Colour acts as the visual hook in his art, the seductive sensuous experience, but frequently there is a bite in the tail."



Jim Carapene, *Imagine A Rapt (Hunt Bullish #)*, 2011. Oil and acrylic on linen, 108 x 195cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KUNSTHAUSGALLERY, STUTTGART



Jon Cattagan, *Glossy Red (Hard Rubbish 8)*, 2011. Oil and acrylic on linen, 196 x 160cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KATIMANAWATERS, MELBOURNE



Street studio in New York City, expanded his horizons as his urbanscapes took upon themselves something of a universal dimension with images of vast metropolises facing a great deluge. He recently said: "When you are up high, you experience a remarkable beauty, you feel the pulse of the city." In his paintings the surfaces became flatter and the focus in his art moved from the specific to the universal. As money ran out in America he took up a residency at the Canberra School of Art late in 1991 which led to a job which he retained until 1994. It was in Canberra that the school noticed his early expertise with computers and invited him to develop an early digital course. We must recall that photoshop had only entered the market in 1990, so he was experimenting with rather embryonic forms of the software, however they soon became an integral strategy in his art making. After a short stint in Sydney, he took up an appointment at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne where he continues to work with postgraduate students.

Much of Cattapan's work starts in a scanned image, frequently from photographs he takes himself or comes across in the media. These are worked, rearranged and layered until something approaching a compositional structure is arrived at. Then this print-out is gridded and manually transferred onto the canvas, the colour scheme is determined and slowly and somewhat mechanically the dotting process is commenced. Working left to right, he is always on the lookout for the fortuitous accident. Colour acts as the visual hook in his art, the seductive sensuous experience, but frequently there is a bite in the tail and once the viewer has been engaged by the sonorous haze a disturbing social content is revealed.

In the opening decade of the new millennium, in Cattapan's art there has been a move back to more socially engaged imagery as he moved from the somewhat abstracted images of submerged cities to engage with the burning issues of his day, such as the oppressive labour policies of the Kennett and Howard governments and images of truth overboard with his persistent use of the image of the children overboard incident which was part of the SIEV 4 drama and the general plight of refugees. Cattapan observed in an interview in 2006: "I do think it's important to, not necessarily present a report card of your time, but it's good to be part

of what you live through and to maybe spin off from what you're living in so that you, in a sense, bear witness but in a very personalised and very subjective, sometimes poetic sort of way."

His experiences as an official war artist in 2008 heightened his fascination in mapping through technology the behaviour patterns of societies and individuals. The experience of working in Timor-Leste provided him with a perfect avenue through which to observe the movement of armed peacekeepers among civilians within an urban setting. Here he adopted the strategy of presenting a view through night vision goggles which not only colour the whole scene into an eerie neon green, but also restrict the soldier's peripheral vision hence heightening the sense of unease. In many of his recent works he plays with the notion of the uncanny, where something familiar – a rubbish collection sitting on a street curb, for example – becomes disconcerting, where although nothing much happens the sense of anticipation is immense. His paintings are increasingly overlaid with dots and lines suggesting computer codes or map grids, all heightening the sense of unease. Increasingly his paintings develop a conscious iconic property – as objects not only of beauty, but also for contemplation.

The best works and where to find them

Cattapan is a very consistent artist whose best work is also among his most recent. Relatively little of his work has come up at auction. Several public galleries including the National Gallery of Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria have major holdings of his work. His work is also held by many other state and university collections.

Prices at auction

Auction prices have ranged from \$2,000 to \$20,000 (hammer price) for his recent canvases, but don't come up that often.

How to start collecting

Jon Cattapan is also a well-known printmaker so high quality work can be acquired at a very modest price. His recent paintings range in price between \$4,000 and \$50,000. His prints are as little as \$500. An excellent reference for collectors is the major monograph by Chris McAuliffe, *Jon Cattapan: Possible histories*.



“It’s good to be part of what you live through and to maybe spin off from what you’re living in so that you, in a sense, bear witness but in a very personalised and very subjective, sometimes poetic sort of way.”

From left:

Jon Cattapan, *Imagine A Fish (Flow Bulrush 4) (6)*, 2009–11. Oil and acrylic on linen, glass panels, each 140 x 140cm. COURTESY TITELARTIST AND MAGE GALLERY, LONDON

Jon Cattapan, *Exhibition Group No 2*, 2011. Oil and acrylic on linen, 168 x 125cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHRIS McAULIFFE

GOUGH WHITLAM AND MALCOLM FRASER PROFESSOR IN AUSTRALIAN STUDIES, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

"While **Jon Cattapan** is by disposition an optimist – definitely a glass-half-full kind of a person – much of his art is shaded with trepidation. His tormented half-man, half-beast figures of the 1970s morphed into the fear and loathing of his 1980s cityscapes. And from there Cattapan began melding oozing paint and pixelated dots into the flowing maps of cyberspace, capital and power that characterise his current work. His most recent paintings – militarised landscapes viewed through night vision goggles – reek of ominous dread. Cattapan paints what the critic **Paul Virilio** dubbed 'nocturnal transterritoriality'; a nightmare realm of high-tech global policemen 'halfway between democracies and the tyranny to come'.

"The important thing is that Cattapan

does actually paint this world. That is, he seeks an equivalence between viscous pools of paint and the digital terrain of globalised commerce and conflict. He insists on processes of representation rather than invoking presence. Much contemporary Australian art seeks a different kind of equivalence: the suture and montage of samples of the world that we see in video and installation or the 'stunned mullet effect of a presence' (Virilio again) common to hyperrealist painting and sculpture. For Cattapan, painting is both a physical and reflective process, one that allows him to ask, as colours flow, meld and dissolve, what it would be like to experience the groundless, unanchored social spaces of liquid modernity."

Sasha Grishin



1956

Born in Melbourne

1977



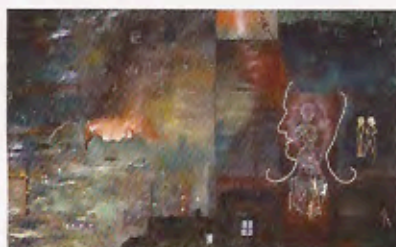
1980

First commercial gallery show exhibiting with Peter Ellis at Drummond Street Gallery in Melbourne

1985

Lives in Castelfranco, Italy and also spends time travelling in New York and Los Angeles

1988



1993

Curated into the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery

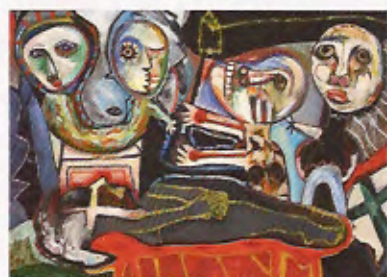
1974

Studies computer science at RMIT but quickly switches to fine art

1983

His sister dies

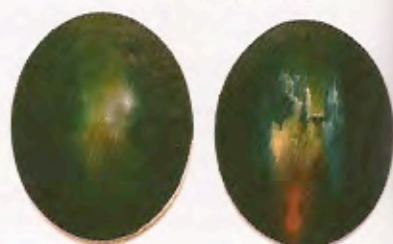
1984



1979

Lives and works in London with Peter Ellis, avidly following the music scene

1991



DOMINIK MERSCH

DIRECTOR, DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY

Jon Cattapan's Sydney dealer **Dominik Mersch** believes he "is an artist who does not have a purely local perspective but brings with him an internationalism which comes from years of living and working abroad. I think of him as an international artist who deserves to be shown internationally. And this is what I am doing. I took Jon to the international art fairs in Auckland and Singapore.

"His significance and importance in contemporary Australian art is reflected in the fact that his work has been acquired by so many major institutions throughout the country and perhaps what is even more important is that it is constantly on display on the walls of most major public art galleries.

"Jon has always been a political artist, whether reflecting on the human condition in his sweeping cityscapes,

engaging with the theme of the boat people and the children overboard incident, working as an official Australian war artist or, as in his present body of work, examining the islands of hard rubbish with allusions to refugees, detention and urban squalor. What I find rewarding about his work is that he is not a formulaic artist who will repeat endlessly a style and imagery that has found favour in the art market, but he has the ability to change, evolve and reinvent himself, as he does in this new body of work. This is quite exciting for me.

"People who collect his art are generally well-educated, established or young collectors. They like work which is challenging, interesting and with which they can engage on both an intellectual and aesthetic level."

Sasha Grishin

Far left:

Jon Cattapan, *Imagine A Raft (Hard Rubbish 1)*, 2011. Oil and acrylic on linen, 196 x 168cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

Timeline:

1977: Jon Cattapan, *Hot Corgis*. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 121.5 x 84cm. Collection of the artist. COURTESY THE ARTIST

1984: Jon Cattapan, *Sister*. Oil on canvas, 155 x 217cm. Collection of the Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne. COURTESY THE ARTIST

1988: Jon Cattapan, *Church alight (East Melbourne)*. Oil on canvas, 10 parts. COURTESY THE ARTIST

1991: Jon Cattapan, *Double Ellipse (From the city submerged)*. Oil on canvas, two ellipses, each 50.6 x 85cm. Private collection, Melbourne. COURTESY THE ARTIST

1997: Jon Cattapan, *Red System No. 1 (The First Deadly System)*. Oil on linen, 196 x 168cm. Collection of the artist. COURTESY THE ARTIST

2002: Jon Cattapan, *Turning*. Oil on linen, 196 x 275cm. Collection of the artist. COURTESY THE ARTIST

2003: Jon Cattapan, *Carbon Group No. 1*, 2003. Alkyd modified oil paint and pencil on paper, 51 x 66.5cm. Private collection. COURTESY THE ARTIST

2008: The monograph *Jon Cattapan: Possible Histories*.

2012: Jon Cattapan, *Imagine A Raft (Hard Rubbish 9)*. Oil and acrylic on linen, 140 x 180cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KALIMANRAWLINS, MELBOURNE

1997



2002

Fuelled by concerns over asylum seeker issues and protest, his work becomes increasingly political



2003

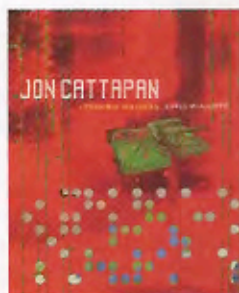


1999

Cattapan: The City Submerged tours to regional galleries in three states

2008

Jon Cattapan: Possible Histories by Chris McAuliffe is published; and Cattapan travels to Timor-Leste as an Official Artist for the Australian War Memorial



2011

Begins using imagery of street curb hard rubbish collections

2012



2006

The Drowned World, a major survey curated by Chris McAuliffe, shows at the Potter Museum of Art