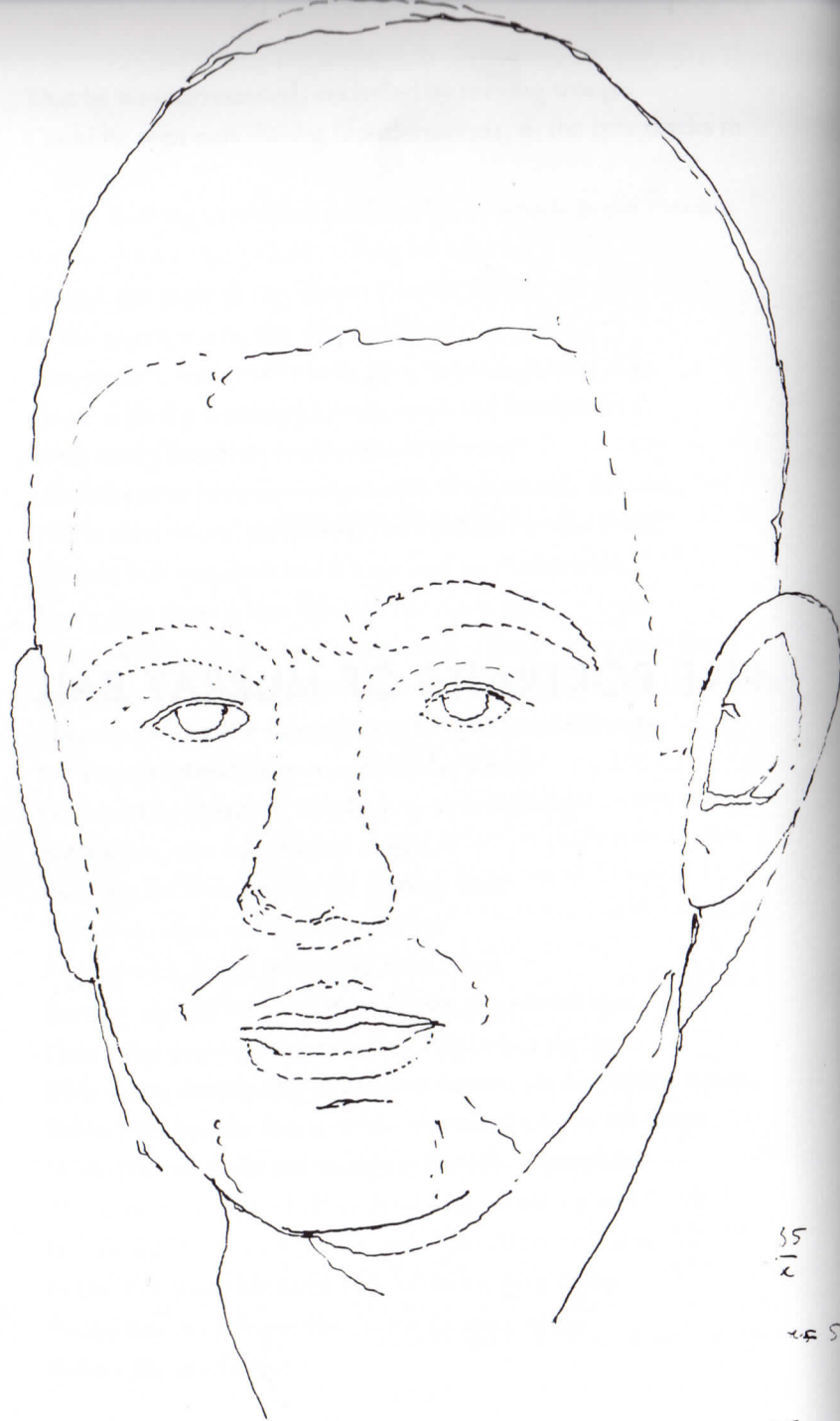


That he was surrounded, encircled by moving troops,
Could be seen only during thunderstorms, in the tyre tracks in
the mud
Or the flashing of torches on the edge of woods in the evening.
Inconceivable that a child, taking his bike for a ride,
Should not wave at the distant Kirghiz behind the wire fence
In the watch tower, the Siberian sentry, so close.
Everywhere scenes of crime, grey regions. A cold atlas
Grew with the cranial skin over neck and forehead.
With every facial nerve stimulated by rain,
Until the roar became recognisable from inside: the east,
The leaden rivers, the plains, the earth in eternal frost,
All that was vast, lost and a long way to Vladivostok.
Every shot drew a line through the open space, a seam,
Along which one learned to separate, a little easier each time,
From the overgrown gardens, the discovered hideouts in the woods.
One day, under the smouldering fire (from which saga
Of Taiga hunters?) was an anthill like a heap
Of crackling shavings, in which to sink burning,
Born again, the naked arms singed.
One boy drowned while ice skating. One
Threw up when another lost his eye
Playing with found munition. One cried,
Because the air, infected by starlight, depressed him.
Didn't the snow creak underfoot like insect shells?
Didn't one already stay away from home...in forbidden zones,
Behind the barrier fence, at the abattoirs, on the ash heaps,
With daily wounds and changing friends. Separation—
Those were small trenches, drawn by pacing up and down,
In cold hands the compasses, until the clamour was silenced
In the wardrobe between old sweaters, geography—
Books and encyclopaedias, a few weather maps
Before the brief *Since*.

*Otto Lilienthal (1848-1896) German aeronautical pioneer

IMANTS TILLERS

FIVE PORTRAITS OF MURRAY BAIL



Sometime in 1985, it was decided somehow (by Murray, I think) that I should paint his portrait. This was not a straightforward task as then I was anything but a portrait painter. Nevertheless over the next six years I made five valiant attempts. I started by taking photographs of my subject; sketches and even measured drawings.

I was motivated in part to repay Murray's generous flow of valuable snippets of information to me—for example that the sleepers on the Trans-Siberian railroad were made of ironbark wood from New South Wales, or that Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was first published in Riga, or that German artist Anselm Kiefer's suitcase on his visit to Australia was full of expensive Cuban cigars. Murray, also, when he lived near my Chippendale studio, took me one afternoon on a kind of "Boy's Own" expedition to nearby Dangar Place, notorious scene of former N.S.W. detective Roger Rogerson's showdown with Warren Lanfranchi. We found no bullet holes there but I came away impressed with the scope of Murray's interests. And when it came to art, Murray had impeccable taste: Douglas Heubler, Joseph Beuys, Shusaku Arakawa, Ian Fairweather, Colin McCahon, Max Beckmann, Giorgio de Chirico, Brice Marden. The small McCahon on a single 10" x 14" canvasboard panel which had pride of place in his current Elizabeth Bay flat—one of the works from the 1978 series *Truth from the King Country—Load Bearing Structure* is a work to covet. Luckily, Murray is also a bit of a trader so I can boast at least an Arakawa of my own, *In voice/in and around*. However, with its inscription "to dear Margaret and Murray Bail with love!!", it still does not seem to fully belong to me.

Murray's most recent "pearl of wisdom" for me was a photocopy of Mondrian's unlikely abstraction of an Australian gum tree, *Eucalyptus* (1912). As Murray notes, it is "hard to tell if it's lemon-scented or a Ghost Gum."

Erased Portrait of Murray Bail 1985
oilstick, oil, synthetic polymer paint on 67 canvasboards
No.8075-8141
279 x 229 cm

In this painting, Murray's face is on the left-hand side of the picture near the superimposed canvas-board panel under a layer of paint. He is there but not visible. In fact I began this work by making him part of an image by Arthur Boyd—*Interior with black rabbit* (1973), a painting that Murray highly recommended to me. But in the process of painting this work, I decided that I preferred Fairweather's *Chi-tien stands on his head* instead. This became the visible layer. It is typical of my work process that failed paintings can be superceded or recycled.



Portrait of an Australian 1990

oilstick, gouache, synthetic polymer paint on 42 canvasboards

No.30731-30772

229 x 178 cm

After my first (some would say) obscure and rather unsatisfying portrait, it was almost five years before this second attempt. At this time, Murray steered me in the rock-solid direction of Max Beckmann, a master of portraiture. In my work, Murray is brimming with confidence, reflecting the fact that his book on the New Zealand painter, Colin McCahon, was proceeding magnificently. Unfortunately this project soon afterwards ran aground on the dangerous rocks of New Zealand parochialism. I remember Helen Garner responding very positively to my version of Murray in my studio, even suggesting that Murray get a new haircut! This painting was subsequently a winner of the Aberdare Art Prize and is now in the Ipswich Regional Art Gallery.



Necessary Protection 1990

gouache, oilstick, synthetic polymer paint on 42 canvasboards
No.30816-30887
229 x 178 cm

This is probably the best and most successful portrait in the series and it was selected and hung in the 1990 Archibald Prize. The work is based on a snapshot Murray took while collecting data for his McCahon book. He generously gave me a number of these snapshots and I noticed that in one of them Murray's face and body were reflected in the glass protecting a work on paper by McCahon. It was as though Murray had been mapped into the McCahon itself through the act of photographing it. Also Murray's shadowy, reticent but nonetheless insistent presence is in stark contrast to the assertive "I" of McCahon's work. Some friends even thought that Murray's elusive character had been finally captured here. What interested me most was the readymade nature of this juxtaposition (captured inadvertently by Murray himself—not artificially engineered by me). I needed only to reproduce in a painting what was already present in the snapshot.

This work also came after two other readymade portraits of other subjects—one of the filmmaker Paul Cox and one of my partner Jennifer Slatyer. When the work *My Wife as an Apparition* was hung in the Archibald Prize in 1989, the Sydney critic, John MacDonald, suggested that I had superimposed Jennifer's face on a rather feeble nineteenth-century painting—the truth was that I had merely enlarged (using the Superscan process) an existing work in its entirety. The uncanny resemblance to Jennifer was already there in the original—Isobel Tweddle's *Portrait of Miss Ivy Ball in Fancy Dress*—a work painted in the 1920s and now languishing in the vaults of the National Gallery of Victoria.



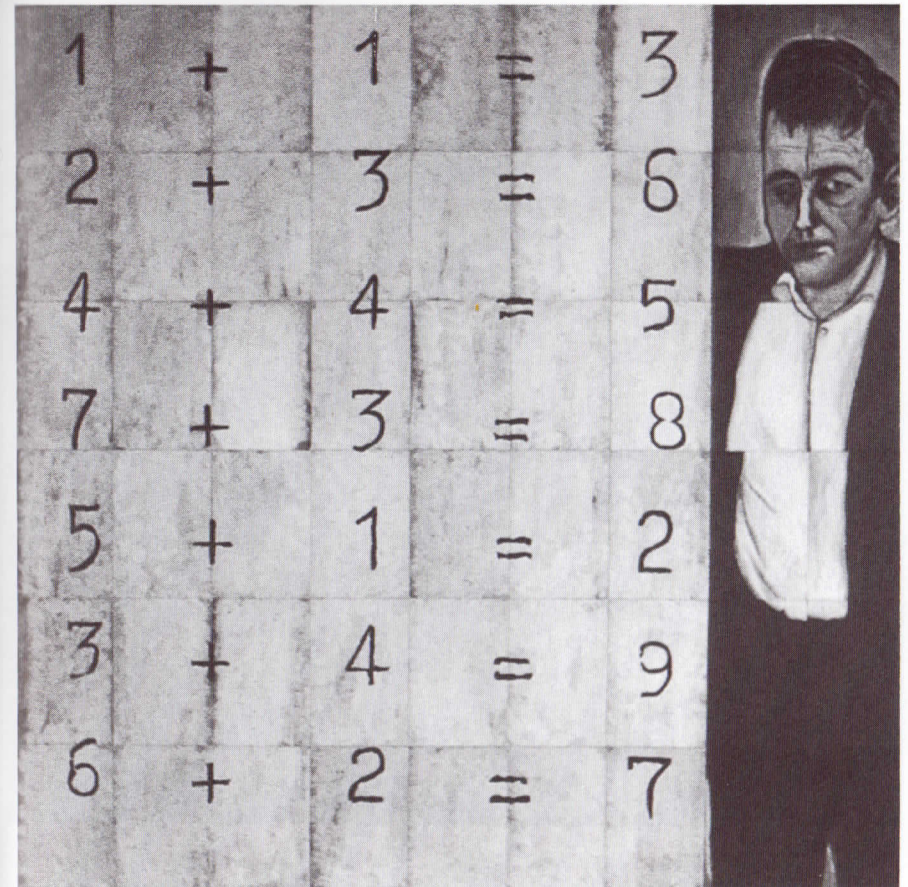
Untitled (1+1=3) 1990

gouache, oilstick, synthetic polymer paint on 54 canvasboards

No. 31147-31200

229 x 229 cm

This work no longer exists. In fact I removed the twelve canvasboard panels featuring Murray and moved them to another painting—the fifth portrait, *The Return of Ulysses*. The remaining panels featuring the equations which don't add up became a new work called *Solutions*.



The Return of Ulysses 1991

oilstick, gouache, synthetic polymer paint on 80 canvasboards

No. 33487-33566

254 x 305 cm

This is the last work of the series. Jennifer Slatyer has written that this work is a kind of homage to Murray Bail (and it is) through the inclusion of his silvery face, hovering God-like over the poignant scene depicted by de Chirico heeding Nietzsche's command to the artist "to go back over everything that had already been done (the constant revisitation, the vicious circle, the serpent of time that bites its own tail in the cycle of eternity)".

Or from a different point of view, is the Murray here like Giorgio de Chirico's *alter ego*—the wandering Ulysses returning to Penelope in the troubled tranquility of a Metaphysical interior?

