

OBSERVATION  
POINT

## JUDE RAE

Portraits take many forms, from official statements of power and status to deeply personal testaments of affection and insight. Artists' self-portraits are a very particular category, one that has always attracted the interest of institutions and collectors as documents of artistic process and subjectivity. For artists it is enduringly compelling, not only because it articulates the self reflection that is critical to an art practice, but because the subject is always available!

In 2008 I was in Madrid on a mission to learn from the great 17thc painters of Spain, Diego Velasquez and Francisco Goya. It was a journey marked by distress. My marriage of 18 years had recently ended, amicably enough, but I was at a loss. My husband and I had grown together and when we split I felt like an old vine that had lost the post it grew around – able to stand upright but with a hole at the centre.

I was drifting around the Prado in that dreamlike non-verbal dream state painters enter when they are looking at work, when I found myself in the contemporary wing surrounded by Cy Twombly's Lepanto paintings, twelve three metre works commissioned for the 2001 Venice Biennale. The beauty and integrity of form and content in Twombly's paintings astounded me. The metaphorical force of the vertical rills and veils of acrylic paint, evoking rather than depicting water, reflections, fire and blood, is extraordinarily powerful. A week later I saw more Twombly paintings, as well as his sculpture and photographs in the Tate retrospective in London.

On my journey back to Australia I thought about Twombly and Velasquez, about Foucault's analysis of Las Meninas, about painting, realism and subjectivity; I think I was a little crazy at the time, desperate to make changes in myself and my work, and not knowing where to start and this was what I painted. It seems a little embarrassing now, putting myself in Velasquez' shoes and substituting the



princess and her carers with my dog, but in retrospect I see it was the beginning of a reconstruction that would take years.

When I decided to enter the painting in the Portia Geach it was so last minute that

I had to roll it up, drive it to Sydney (from Canberra) on the last day of submissions, and re-stretch it under the stairs at the Mascot collection depot. I doubted it would be hung and I never imagined it

would win the award. When I gave a floor talk during the exhibition, someone asked if the dribbles of paint represented tears. Funny how the obvious can elude one – it had never occurred to me...