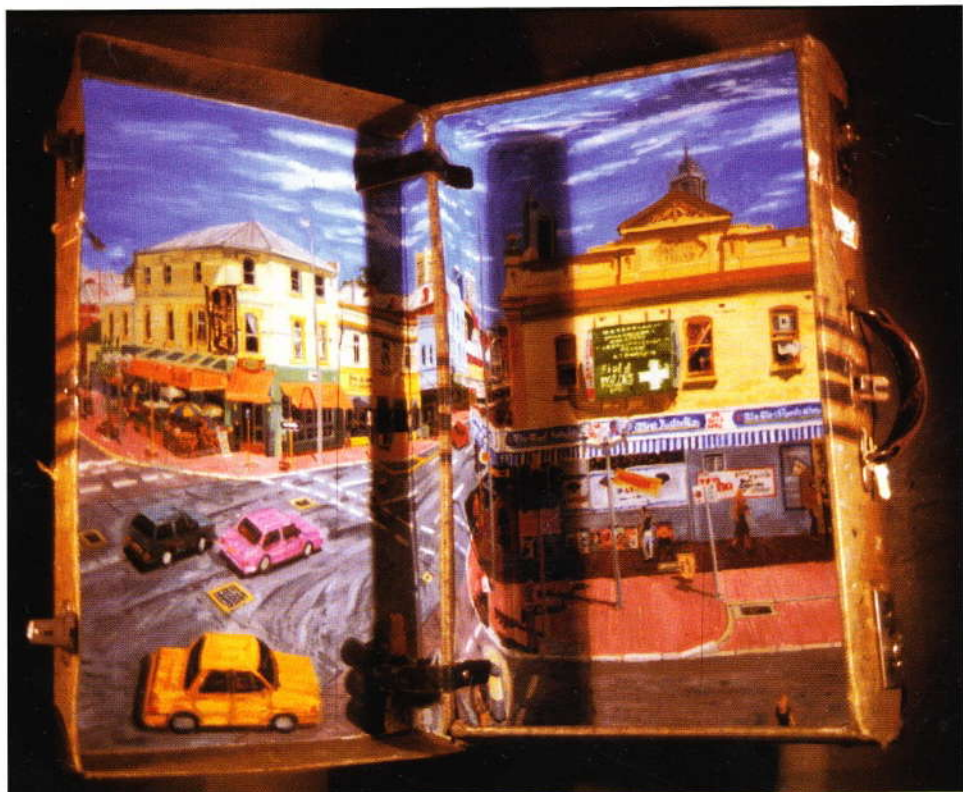


DAVID BROMFIELD

# Suitcase City



A study of the work of Thomas Hoareau



*On the Balcony Brass Monkey Hotel* (1997), 81 x 51 x 18cm - oil on linen lined suitcase with handmade Indian handle

# 1

## Suitcase City

*Gold assay.* - Among the concepts to which, after the dissolution of its religious and the formalization of its autonomous norms, bourgeois morality has shrunk, that of genuineness ranks highest.... Previously, the question of authenticity was doubtless as little asked of intellectual products as that of originality, a concept unknown in Bach's era. The fraud of genuineness goes back to bourgeois blindness to the exchange process. Genuine things are those to which commodities and other means of exchange can be reduced, particularly gold. But like gold, genuineness, abstracted as the proportion of fine metal, becomes a fetish. Both are treated as if they were the foundation, which in reality is a social relation, while gold and genuineness precisely express only the fungibility, the comparability of things; it is they that are not in-themselves, but for-others. The unguineness of the genuine stems from its need to claim, in a society dominated by exchange, to be what it stands for yet is never able to be. The apostles of genuineness, in the service of the power that now masters circulation, dignify the demise of the latter with the dance of the money veils.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, Los Angeles, 1944-47.<sup>1</sup>

Everything I paint seems to disappear.  
I have the reverse Midas Touch.

Thomas Hoareau, Perth, Western Australia, September 1998.<sup>2</sup>

Of all the cities, Perth, the most isolated, is most closely tethered to the rest of the world by an umbilical chord of exchange values. It has been so for at least a century. As its early architecture indicates, Perth was intended as a synthetic country town, a reassertion of the social hierarchies and obsessions of a rural capital from the Home Counties. Life in Perth was to be a Jane Austen novel set in the antipodes. Its founders and leaders were as determinedly blind as Emma or Mr Knightly to the sources of their wealth, at least as backhanded and vicious as the squirearchy of the old country in defending their unacknowledged privilege. They brought from Britain an unbounded fear of society, let alone 'the people', and a consequential addiction to the petty privileges, sensitivities and commercial vice of the parish pump.

Gold changed all that.

From the 1890s gold found in the deserts round Kalgoorlie flooded the city with the purest form of exchange value. Gold had no history, no place in the delicate balance of skills, the all embracing web of memory and respect for one's neighbours and their place that is needed to tend and maintain the land productively, to make a high Tory toytown tick over to everyone's satisfaction. Gold could change things in an instant, throwing up hotels and brothels, railways and suburbs where none had been before, erasing them the instant the balance of universal exchange tipped against the inhabitants.

In its service Perth became a city of lawyers, stockbrokers and accountants, the first apostles of authenticity, later joined by property developers, mining corporations and insurance brokers. In the 1980s and nineties it emerged as that most terrifying of lived-in contradictions, the provincial metropolis. The morally myopic descendants of Austen's

England survived intact by surfing the stock exchange and the property market. Modern day Mr Knightleys describe Perth as a big country town. If so it is a country town with an empty urban core, rotting buildings, a growing drug problem and the most arid suburbs outside Los Angeles. Night and day the dance of the money veils transmutes each tiny detail of our everyday life. The very stones of the city have become no more than shifting ciphers for exchange.

You can still walk round the City of Perth in an hour and a half. Nobody does.

From King's Park to Claisebrook, fast moving cars and ancient demolition sites cross-cut the urban fabric. Dirt blows in your face at every step. Traffic grinds sand and shit nonstop through the restaurants and coffee bars of Northbridge, now touted as the city's pleasure district. Phillip Marlowe found meaning in the mean streets of LA. There is nothing to find on the meaningless streets of Perth.

The painter Thomas Hoareau works there in his tiny corner cupboard studio. Most mornings he follows the same routine, a bicycle ride from East Perth, across wasteland, round the great ditch of the Polly Farmer freeway, an expensive traffic sewer named for an impoverished football hero. As this is written the giant wound of this 'Northbridge Tunnel' carves its way slowly from one end of the city to the other, the latest spasm of erasure and destruction.

As you cross the bridge over the railway line at East Perth, the city unpacks, a travelling salesman showing his wares at a country fair. The single line of high rise office blocks along St George's Terrace offers a backdrop to a jumble of houses, factories, garages, improvised offices and massage parlours. All wait to be swept away by the next shift in exchange, a sprawling pile of infants' building blocks, tumbled to a half finished daydream, soon to be demolished by the next primary class.

No city in the world has so many incomplete public buildings, failed urban projects. The original art gallery and museum and the technical college were only half built and the now oddly curved East Perth Police headquarters is all that was accomplished of the dream of a grandiose circle of public service buildings. In the eighties greedy developers were anxious to avoid the heritage laws. Great open cut pits and 'bomb sites' covered with weeds opened up across the city. They are still there. The 'decapitated' head of an unfinished bronze statue in a military cap, an architect and first world war general gazes out over the mess from the banks of the Swan.

This is Suitcase City, barely unpacked before it is old, rotting and ready to go. To live and work here is to be given an uncertain but inevitable use by date, to know that, sooner than pass you by, life will run over you, to keep one's own bags packed and the motor running at all times. This is the territory that Hoareau negotiates in life and art. Over the two decades of his career he lived and worked in around fifteen flats and houses in Perth and Fremantle, only two of these remain undemolished. Both his former studio at the Fremantle Artists' Foundation and his present one in Gotham Artists' Co-operative, Northbridge, face an uncertain future.

In 1997 Hoareau painted **On the Balcony: Brass Monkey Hotel**, a view from the corner of the first floor verandah of one of the hotels thrown up by gold in the 1890s, on the linen lining of an old leather suitcase. The Brass Monkey, formerly the Great Western Hotel, in Northbridge, stands one block down William Street, not far away from the Horseshoe Bridge that takes traffic across the railway next to Perth Station. Once prospectors and investors came to stay. Now floods of suburban shoppers wander open mouthed in the metropolitan junk heap.

The upper floors of the large white building in the suitcase lid house the ramshackle rooms of the Gotham Artists' Co-operative, one of several artists' housing projects encouraged by the advocacy of Keith Sinclair of the WA Department for the Arts. Like the others it offers cheap rent in a government owned property destined, sooner or later, for redevelopment.



*Big Head Overlooking the City* (detail from sketchbook - circa 1986)

Hoareau occupies the first floor corner space. He has become a familiar sight, leaning out above the passing crowd to record what can be seen in a rugged system of tones, tracing the rhythms of light and shade bouncing between buildings, cars and pedestrians. **On the Balcony: Brass Monkey Hotel** shows his studio wedged in tightly amongst the arbitrary spaces left behind in a row of once proud commercial buildings. There is a cafe whose recently erected sign partly blocked his studio windows, a Hare Krishna restaurant and Il Padrino, the pizza house run by the redoubtable Nunzio whose windows are filled with souvenirs of his famous visitors. Behind them rise the AMP building, the former Bond building, and Central Park, tall towers dedicated to exchange. A new internet shop and an Italian restaurant have opened up since the painting was made.

Across the road lies Leabridge's newsagency, in its most recent remake, decked out with blue and white banners advertising The West Australian. Above it yellow paint transforms the red brick commercial classic, complete with palladian urns, of the 'Busy Bee Arcade 1904', to a film set fantasy. Hoareau's careful observation and punctilious brush strokes play on the fugitive nostalgia, the infolded traces of the big country town, the all pervasive signs of exchange larded all over them, make up on the face of a cheap whore. Hoareau carefully worked the original maker's label into the patchwork litter of posters, signs and street furniture. This is more than a witty improvisation. The suitcase too is a product of exchange and its requirement for endless movement. You might close the lid and carry the entire city away with you. No one would notice.

Pure exchange is im-mediate. It forbids and cancels memory, all attempts to think beyond the present moment, to articulate the future in which the over-glamourised present can be seen for what it is, a reality of fetishes that disguise, for the (everlasting) moment only, the absolute relativity of all things in a metropolis shaped entirely by gold. Alone among cities Perth strives to exist entirely in this eternal present.<sup>3</sup> Hoareau's painting refounds the potential for memory within its seamless immediacy.

He puts it very simply:

To draw on the energy of the street and inhale the disputed health benefits of the fumes of the busy streets of Northbridge has been a deliberate ploy for me, to strip my work of any cleverness and attempt to negotiate a social function for my painting.<sup>4</sup>

This is an astonishing declaration for an artist in Perth at the end of the twentieth century. This series of essays has a single coherent objective, to offer an account of Hoareau's long term commitment to sociability amidst the ocean of meaningless signs on the streets of Suitcase City.

All social experience requires memory. The amnesiac circumstances of a provincial metropolis force it to produce two contending forms of remembrance, the 'official' record of the triumphal progress of exchange values, an important aspect of Adorno's 'fraudulent genuineness', that which must be 'remembered' if one is to survive, and the ever more fugitive informal memory of a life lived with constant change, so that crack in an ancient worn pavement comes to seem more enduring than the mightiest corporate edifice. Hoareau uses one against the other in his painting so as to open a gap in the seamless here and now all around us that is wide enough for a few ideas to slip through.

He is interested in revealing the joints and dissonances in the urban spectacle continually conjured by exchange value. A crack in a wall is also a crack in the urban and social fabrics. Hoareau searches for ruptures, always temporary and once noticed, easily erased, smoothed over and reintegrated. He likens his method to the action of a zoom lens on a video camera, forever focussing inward. His paintings are chinese boxes in which version after version of the urban can be seen nestling one inside the other, covered over by the spectacle. An account of an artist so clearly focused on and located in his surroundings raises difficulties of interpretation with broad implications.

The challenge is to offer a positive account of the provincial artist. In twentieth century Australia at least, the provincial has always been defined as fundamentally negative, constituted by an absence, deficiency or lack, through which all information about the

current state of affairs in the visual arts elsewhere, (always elsewhere!) is mediated. This leads to a perpetual discount on direct insight in the work of provincial artists, expressed through a deliberately 'blind', metropolitan criticism that 'sees' art exclusively in metropolitan terms that guarantee exchange value. Provincial artists are constrained to work like donkeys in pursuit of pseudo-metropolitan carrots, blind to the discontinuities everywhere around them.<sup>5</sup>

Hoareau is by no means the first artist to attempt an account of Perth's divided urbanity. In the 1930s Harald Vike produced both a highly articulate image of the official version, *The West Australian Museum Looking Towards Perth Boys School*, and a number of expressive 'social realist' images of crowds in railway carriages, cleaning women and so on.<sup>6</sup> Vike's opposing versions of the city are indexed by their separate, apparently irreconcilable, styles. There is also a long history of highly selective view painting in Perth, most notably of the view down on the city from Mount Eliza. Hoareau's urban views from elsewhere both extend and critique that class based tradition of control over urban identity by offering other 'points of view'.

Hoareau might be mistaken for a painter of stylised townscapes, but this would be to miss the crucial point. He is not involved in extending a dialectic of styles from elsewhere. His painting constituted itself as a vertical dig through the archaeology, anthropology and sociology of Perth. Unlike Vike, his style, techniques and points of view cannot be indexed to examples and ideas from elsewhere, only to the multi-levelled flux of urban existence. His painting is always an archaeology of the immediate. His technique is always a struggle for memory within seamless present. Traces of that struggle remain in the finished work. This accounts for the notorious 'difficulty' that much of the Perth art world has with it, accustomed, as it is, to an easy read, an easy ride through the 'fraudulent genuineness' of local art. Critical comparisons for Hoareau's work frequently present themselves, not least in my own previous comments. Some are helpful, but, ultimately, they are all alibis for inattention, screening devices, ciphers for a desire to be anywhere but here and now in Suitcase City.

There is Hoareau the inarticulate surrealist, whose vision contains tempting parallels to the surrealist situation in the early 1920s, for example the arcade under sentence of demolition in Aragon's *Paris Peasant*. There is, incredibly, Hoareau, the Pop artist, a sad case of pseudo metropolitan slippage. Perth never had a liberating, innovative Pop culture, only the melancholy spectre of hyper-controlled mimetic consumerism. There is Hoareau the frustrated social realist, with no society to get real about. There is even Hoareau the local symptom of the international painting revival of the 1980s, willing victim of and collaborator with 'The New Spirit in Painting'.

Then there is Hoareau the film noir detective tramping through the mean streets of Perth in search of meaningful if melancholy encounters with morality and the social, the most tantalising analogy of all. Noir movies are built round absences, and fraudulent authenticity in a way that parallels the exchange spectacle in Perth. Like Hoareau, noir directors chose sites where the spectacle fragments - the hall of mirrors scene in *The Lady from Shanghai* is a most prescient example. Like Hoareau they are obsessed with the ecology of signs. Noir, however, is constructed around a moral narrative, a seductive fatality. Hoareau makes no such suggestion. In his images the crime is always about to happen, the streets remain meaningless. If there is an event which rescues us from fraudulent authenticity it will be the painting itself.

Finally there is Hoareau as flaneur, the pseudo Baudelairean ancestor of the noir detective, vehicle for so much speculation about modernity. Baudelaire, however, viewed the initial explosion of the modern in Paris as an unheralded volcanic eruption. His surprised but leisured voyeurism was relatively untouched by the tyranny of exchange value. The dandy-tourist remained safe in the evolving complexities of metropolitan memory. Hoareau's relation to the spectacle is entirely other. His urban excursions are all compulsory. He is more refugee than flaneur, fleeing wearily from a universal disaster with whatever he can carry, looking back in the certain knowledge that nothing will be left on his return. The weariness in his vision marks it as the product of a late, failed modernity, with no

surprises, a paradigmatic example of Gramsci's comment that in the realm of the modern the past is dead and the future has yet to be born.

One could construct a critical 'claim' for Hoareau in national and international art, however, this farcical project soon reveals itself as an attempt to authenticate his work within the system of universal exchange and so render it indifferent. A more compelling project, embedded in these essays, is to trace the charmed circle that surrounds Perth ensuring that all information, artists and art that arrive here from elsewhere will wither on the stony ground of circumstance. The Perth artworld never looks out of the window to see where it is, never brings the past to bear on the present. It is never bored with clichés.<sup>7</sup>

Perth's so called 'absence of memory' is frequently blamed for the poverty of its culture and society. This leads to the obsessive generation of all kinds of local histories each more tedious and inconsequential than the last, as if the vacuum formed by a hundred years of life in the permanent present could be filled with dates, names and inarticulate anecdotes indistinguishable one from another. Hoareau's paintings avoid the amnesia of the local. They invoke memory of all kinds, from the historical dislocation caused by the disappearance of Bishop's House from St George's Terrace, to the infinite number of short term reminiscences carried in crumpled newspaper blown along the gutter. It is not that memory is absent in Perth, it is everywhere, dismembered by the omnipotence of exchange, locked into the permanent present. The problem is one of radical disarticulation, the instant subjection of all experience to the spectacle. Hoareau's paintings occasionally show such useless, inarticulate reminiscences, fossilised dinosaur bones protruding from a cliff face.

The provincial situation is neurotic, iterative, tied to the wheel of circumstance, the fraudulent genuine as received truth. Provincial culture is self-limiting, homeostatic. Little has been said about the mechanism whereby exchange value constitutes itself internally, linguistically and psychologically, as a series of prohibitions and constraints, unspoken extra-aesthetic rules of 'taste' which operate during production and consumption of works of art. The complex scrutiny of memory in Hoareau's work is a delicate negotiation with these rules.

The discomfort I feel with the word provincial may well be a sign that one such taboo, (against naming the effects of universal exchange) may well have come into play. 'Thus far and no further' is the guiding principle of the Perth art world. It conjures up precisely the psychic terrorism in which many of its inhabitants live. What mechanisms are in play when provincial artists fail in the struggle to emancipate themselves and us, or, more frequently, when we fail to see that they have succeeded?

Hoareau has occasionally commented on his complex relationship to memory. In November 1990 he placed the demise of the art magazine *Praxis M* in the context of changes to another repository of memory, the Perth railway system:

Coinciding with the disappearance of *Praxis M* and, at first glance irrelevant and unrelated is the electrification and automation of our rail system. What has this got to do with *Praxis M* or even contemporary art, the reader may ask. Very little in a logical sense but they both hold for myself experientially, a long running parallel personal history.

My visits to the *Praxis M* office originally in Fremantle at *Praxis* and after the move to Perth in PICA, were done via the Perth-Fremantle railway system.... Many heated dialogues concerning contemporary art were carried out in the neutral territory of these railway carriages with fellow artists, including Peter Wales, Theo Koning and Phillip Burns. These discussions I can now say in retrospect, have contributed to the formation of my own art practice.

Having now established this tentative link to the reader it is with suspicion that one views the changes that are occurring in the railway system at the moment. Hopefully they will not prove as hostile and impracticable as those in the Perth City Station itself. The insensitive layering of past and present architecture in the station is further aggravated by the walkway addition solely, it seems, for the convenience of shopping.



One can feel a sense of loss with the imminent automation, bringing forth the disappearance of the humanising bridge in the railway system of its conductors. No longer will they be seen shouting stations and interrupting the silent isolation of its passengers through their issuing of tickets. They will disappear shortly and instead of a conductor, we will be smiling mutely at the blurred reflection of ourselves from a six feet by four feet rectangular metal box.

Currently the conductors surreally stalk the train carriages, stripped of their ticket machines, they check tickets in a neglectful ghostly fashion. Part of a slow phase-out program they are the victims of a rationalization occurring through automation. The modern urge for efficiency has unfortunately, overridden [sic] the awkward, some would say antiquated necessity for human contact in everyday activities. This attitude has led to much of the barren terrain in our urban landscape. . . .

While fitting the electrical motors necessary for our modern trains to run on these lines, Trans Perth has brought back into service temporarily, the old carriages of the past, which unlike their modern counterparts, ride smoother and are better ventilated though the use of open windows. At night these old trains do not permeate [sic] that claustrophobic feeling that the modern trains do, this feeling sometimes extending to paranoia in the passengers, is brought upon [sic] by the tinting of the windows in the modern trains, where a view out of the window is impossible because of the mirror reflection. At the moment though, what joy and fun it is ride these old green and grey carriages which are usually put on only for special events such as the Royal Show week.

Historically much of this rationalisation of railways began during the time of the 1986-87 America's Cup held in Fremantle. With the 'sprucing up' of the stations we also saw several added including, 'The Esplanade' and 'South Beach', these stations now lie dormant and unused. We also saw the unnecessary disappearance of the old but dignified wooden train shelters and more importantly the demolition of two supposedly unsightly railway bridges. These were a stately wooden lime green bridge in Mosman Park Station and a metal bridge connecting Cicerello's and Esplanade Park, both were replaced by a dangerous maze of walkways. The latter bridge supplied a refreshing view of Fremantle and the ocean.

The calls and echoes of departure times originating from the loudspeakers in Perth City Station can be heard quite clearly from PICA. Passengers can be heard to 'hurry along' as the trains will be departing shortly on the stated platforms or the train driver will be told to delay departure as they have a 'runner' on their platform. In the afternoon hearing these calls one can almost imagine journeys on these trains are journeys through time to the future. Hopefully it is a future which will be kinder than it is presently to its past. [sic]<sup>8</sup>

This may be a useful document of change, complete with nostalgia. It is also a snapshot of the eternal present, a verbal X-ray of the mechanism of exchange, glimpsed working away beneath spectacular surface changes that overtook Perth in the 1980s and 90s. As the Situationists pointed out, there are moments when the various layers of meaning and interrelations which normally lie concealed beneath the spectacle become clearly visible. Hoareau's willingness to look beyond it was stimulated by the widespread reconstruction and redevelopment of the 1980s. His early work, however, makes clear that he recognised from the beginning that even the carnival of the America's Cup was 'business as usual'.

Thomas Hoareau was born at McLaren Vale, South Australia in 1961 but grew up in Beaconsfield, Fremantle in an emergency 'suburb' of post-war weatherboard houses, long past their use by date. He was perpetually in the presence of impermanence. His mother raised him and his brother in a stressful one parent family. This reinforced his awareness that all things were provisional. His early work indicates that he already knew that beneath any disruptive change there remained 'Hard Times, Business as Usual.'

In 1981 he graduated from WAIT, now Curtin University, School of Fine Arts with a distinction in painting. He remembers it as dominated by variants of 'British Abstract Expressionism' propounded by Mac Betts, Doug Chambers and others. He was already familiar with reproductions of *The Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)* 1972-74. Other canonic paintings by R B Kitaj impressed him deeply. His fellow student,

friend and later colleague the painter Richard Gunning was enthusiastic about Warhol. Ted Snell and Bruce Adams offered a wide grounding in twentieth century art movements:

They allowed us to paint what we wanted. . . .

Despite what's said about art education at Curtin at that time I wasn't naive, even then, about contemporary art practice. Bruce Adams was teaching there. Bruce was giving a really good overview and a really good damnation of why you shouldn't be painting. Mike Parr came over and gave a talk in 1979 - he mentioned Hermann Nitsch. Bruce would have his thing about regional pop culture, the Royal Show and so on. There was a breadth of cultural awareness which Bruce was giving us. . . .

I think there was considerable understanding especially about Australian Art History. But with Bruce it was hard not to come away with despair because there was a lot of despair about the art scene in Perth. Even though Bruce became one of my early supporters he was cynical, even despairing about painting.

But as you said, with this thing in the eighties that happened, I think it really did open up what you could paint about, this degree of critical alienation that's going on in my drawings then.<sup>9</sup>



*Man with Lots of Things In the Air* (1982/83) - 58 x 77 cm, acrylic on paper

There is little record of work he made at WAIT. Several pieces from between 1982 and 1983 indicate that he was rapidly reassessing his aims as a painter. His sketch books and paintings from that period are filled with figures on the edge of losing control such as **Man with a Lot of Things in the Air**. A one dimensional figure dances, arms outstretched amongst a pattern of cartoon like solids as if he can't decide which to catch. The title written at the bottom of the image may have been suggested by a similar strategy in David Hockney's early works such as *We Two Boys Clinging Together*.

Hoareau remembers that it was made just after he finished his studies:

It was made just after art school almost. It really typifies how I was painting in art school in that I was virtually colouring in.

I was getting rid of all expression, all the marks...

... the writing in the paintings comes quite early. I used to do that in art school. I used to write the titles of the work like the title of the song that might have inspired the work. I would do party painting and write 'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to'. On **Business As Usual** one part of it has 'I second that emotion' written on it and that comes from a song.<sup>10</sup>

The graphic indifference of the solids in **Man with a Lot of Things in the Air** is a response to the realm of exchange where one thing is good as another. The protagonist is indeed the artist. In **And all this shit just piles up!** a figure faces into the picture which is composed of nothing but a pile of red and blue gestures surrounded by black. In **Getting rid of a few things** the naked artist is flinging a tensely interlocked pattern of domestic objects, LP's and incoherent paint marks to the four winds. From the start Hoareau fused his personal experience and relationships onto physical objects and material aspects of painting with wider formal significance:



*Coffee Drinker* (1983) - 36 x 30cm - acrylic on paper

In the eighties that was seen as a worthwhile thing to paint about, getting rid of your personal belongings.

... there's a comic book aspect to them, perhaps the Hockney influence then, maybe it's just, you know, that you use a certain kind of motivation to make work. I mean, **All this shit piles up**, what is that about? Is the artist making a comment about all these paintings that pile up and not really knowing what to do with them? Or this one here, **The Coffee Drinker** or **Sullen Silhouette** or something, it's called. These are casual observations while drinking coffee. You remember when the Alba gardens used to be upstairs ?...

