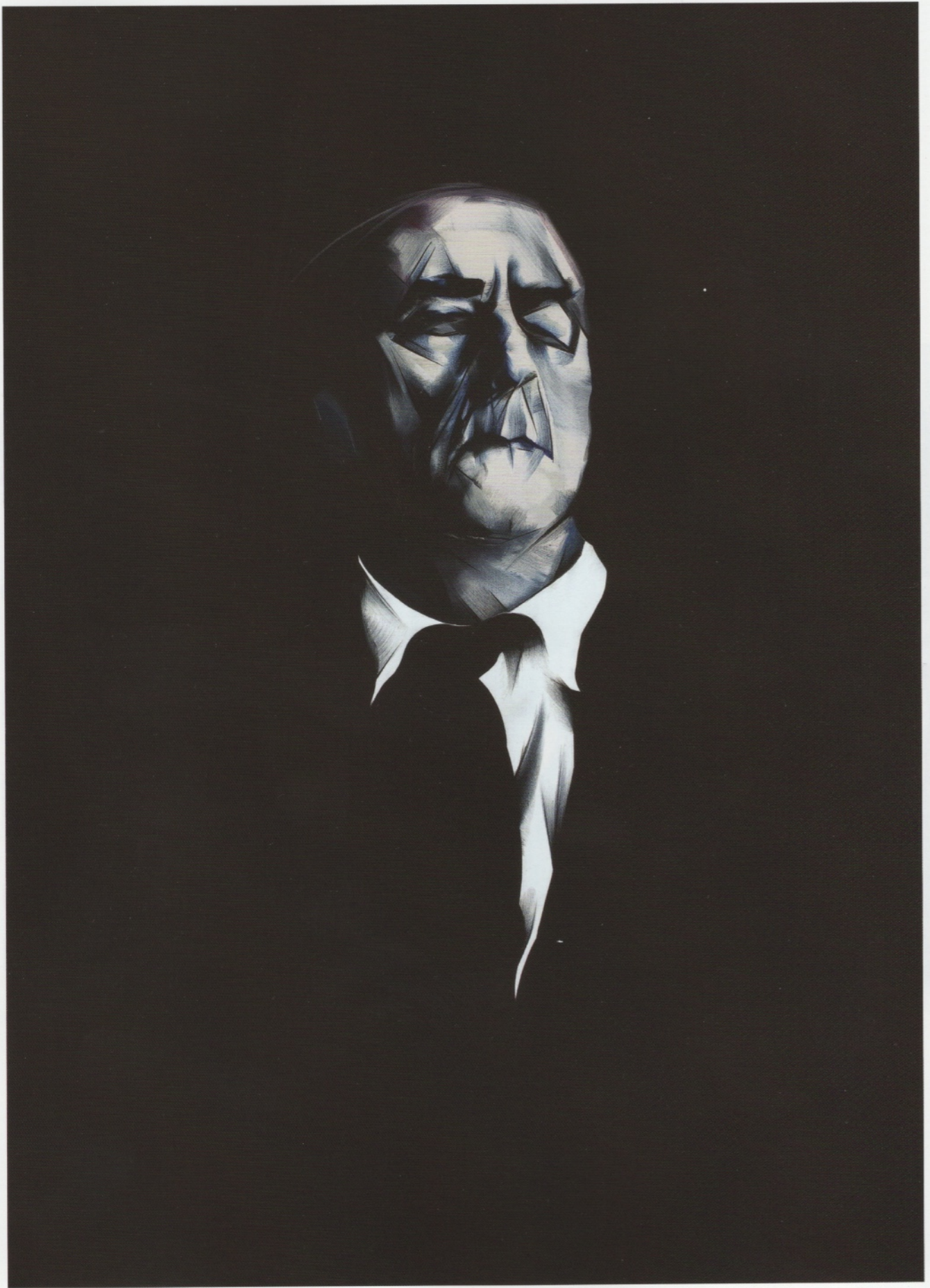


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Nigel Milsom | New South Wales focus issue | Janine Burke on animals in curatorial practice



Nigel Milson, Judo House Part 5 (Faith, Hope & Luck), 2012–13, oil on linen, 126 x 90cm; image courtesy the artist and Yuill/Crowley, Sydney

Nigel Milsom: Surface tension

RACHEL KENT

Nigel Milsom has long explored the contrast between darkness and light, background and surface in his paintings. Working from a black background through to white foreground and imagery, the contrast between extremes allows for a range of tonality in between, introduced as subtle elements of colour and shading in some works, and muted areas of grey in others.

Presented by the Moran Arts Foundation at Sydney's Juniper Hall, the recent exhibition of 29 paintings encompassed 14 years of Milsom's practice from 2001 to the present. Through it, an array of subject matter was revealed. We saw, for example, anonymous judo figures posing in their loose white costumes or fighting one another – a development from Milsom's interest in architectural structures and Japanese-style judo houses; snarling greyhounds tearing around an invisible track, angular lines marking their speed – a reference to his years living in Glebe near Wentworth Park, witnessing the daily activity of the dogs and trainers there; a series of bird studies, as grey-white silhouettes against a cloudless, empty sky above; scenes reminiscent of the artist's early charcoal drawings of industrial structures from his hometown of Newcastle, where he now lives once more; and portrait paintings of friends, family and figures from popular culture – for instance, we might recognise John Cleese in *Judo House Part 5 (Faith, Hope & Luck)* (2012–13).

Each of these latter works was specific yet unusual. The character and physiognomy of the sitter was revealed, yet the face broken down into a series of planes: into contrasting lines, angles and light, as a cubist painter might have done to examine solid form and its representation on the canvas. Among these works was *Judo House Part 5 (Faith, Hope & Luck)* (2012–13), otherwise known as 'Uncle Paddy' and winner of the 2013 Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. Uncle Paddy was a near-mythical figure from Milsom's childhood: his grandfather's best friend whom the family actually only met once, at the grandfather's funeral, despite hearing about his existence for years.

All of Milsom's paintings, with their diverse subject matter, are a means to an end. Rather than attempting a detailed or even specific narrative – 'Uncle Paddy' perhaps excluded – they tend to be open-ended, allowing viewers to bring their own memories, thoughts and associations to them while studying their surface tension, tactility and contrast of light and darkness. Most of the exhibited works were smooth and carefully worked in their surface finish, yet one or two were quite thick and viscous – in particular, the black abstracted *Untitled (Un-axed Tree)* (2001), all paint and sweeping brushstrokes. This small piece formed a counterpart to the large three-part painting by Milsom which is currently on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, *Untitled (it's kept together by moving all around)* (2006), of inky black trees swaying against a windy night sky.

The two most recent paintings in the exhibition bore the subtitle *The White Bird* (both 2014–15). One was, in fact, a large canvas depicting the Roman baroque sculptor Bernini's famed marble sculpture of *Saint Theresa in Ecstasy*. In the original sculpture, which dates from 1647–52, one sees the figure of the saint swooning against a shower of golden light, an angel poised above her with love's arrow raised. Milsom first encountered this work in reproduction in an art book and it struck him as uncannily painterly, rather than sculptural: being flat on the page, with its dramatic, luminous background and theatrical figures in the foreground. There was also an acute sense of recognition that struck Milsom between the two opposing figures, or life forces, and the overwhelming emotions depicted.

A small painting, subtitled *Bird as Prophet* (2009–10), sat just inside the entry to the exhibition. In it, we saw the white form of a bird, its wings spread, rising into the inky black sky above. It was a simple work – nothing more or less than bird and background – but as a metaphor for life's enduring force, it suggested a powerful future ahead.

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This is an edited version of the author's opening remarks, 18 April 2015; 'Nigel Milsom: An Overview' was at the Moran Arts Foundation, Juniper Hall, Sydney, from 18 April to 17 May 2015.



Nigel Milson, Judo House Part 6 (The White Bird), 2014–15, oil on linen, 230 x 195cm, Yuill/Crowley, Sydney; image courtesy the artist and Yuill/Crowley, Sydney

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Nigel Milsom: An Overview, exhibition view, Juniper Hall, Sydney, 2015, with (from left): Judo House Part 3 (Bird as Prophet), 2009–10, 170 x 220cm, private collection, Sydney; Judo House Part 3 (Bird as Prophet), 2009–10, 93 x 87cm, Yuill/Crowley, Sydney; image courtesy the artist and Yuill/Crowley, Sydney