



Callan Park Gallery

For Self-Taught and Outsider Art

Michael F Brien - Dream Reality

Michael F. Brien (aka 'The Count') has lived many lives. He has been a sailor, a soldier, boxer, husband, father, ballroom-dancer, restaurant critic, and poet. He has fought, loved, traveled as a child along the routes of seasonal fruit-picking work with his family, and wandered the world with mates-in-arms as well as alone. In recent years he has been driven, compulsively to paint, making images that are fragments of the summation of these lives; the tangible revelation of dream and personal and cultural memory. The constant that runs through everything is his gypsy identity.

Brien was born a full-blood Romany in 1933, forty-one days before the man he calls his stepfather returned home after years away in the army. A violent individual, who never accepted Michael, he was physically abusive to son and wife until the day, much later, when Michael, now the navy boxing champion, slugged him, effectively bringing a stop to his terror. Through his childhood the threat was ever-present, though, and made doubly so by parental incomprehension in the face of an exceptionally bright child who received a private school education on a scholarship, was dux in his year, and offered a scholarship place at Oxford. In the face of his stepfather's violent opposition to university, in the end his mother enlisted Michael in the Royal Navy, little realizing that domestic violence would be replaced by the experience of war.



Much of Brien's painting relates to his Romany heritage, both as personal memory and deeper cultural narrative, revealed as dreams. *Gypsy Camp* (2007), for example, is reminiscent of the context of the artist's earliest memories. Different types of gypsy *vardo* (horse-drawn wagon) can be identified, including the Bowtop, Burton, Ledge and Reading, together with a birthing tent much like the one the artist himself was born in at the gypsy encampment in Belvedere Marshes, Erith in



southern England. In the painting a man stands next to the birthing tent, hands raised in elation at the birth of a son. *The Rescue of the Patriarch* (2010), on the other hand, tells how a Patriarch was taken by Jesuits and held captive, only to be freed by the rest of his group pouring out of the surrounding woods and seeing off his captors. Castles, too, are a common motif, referring to the Knights Templar who have been connected to gypsies since the Middle Ages. *In Spanish Castle Beside a Waterfall* (2005), the Templars converge with Brien's own Iberian heritage on his grandmother's side. Characteristically, even in paintings like this in which no figures are depicted, everything feels alive

and inhabited, from the presumed inhabitants of the castle, behind lighted windows, to the somnolent landscape and arrested-teeming column of white water.

Michael F. Brien is an avuncular man, whose mental life is rich in images and stories. Outwardly larger than life, he is immediately recognizable as the Romany elder, 'The Count' (as everyone knew him in his restaurant critic days in Sydney's Inner West), and the keeper of the painted word. But it is the interior, relatively unmediated and unhindered realm of his dream-world that provides revelation and, I think, at times catharsis. Besides the good memories of serving in the armed forces, of which there are many, his experiences in the Korean War have left a lasting legacy of powerful, sometimes debilitating nightmares; too powerful, perhaps to be translated into paint. In short, their content revolves around Michael being coerced into some terrible act and then being left alone to inhabit the consequential base ruins. In these nightmares there is no redemption. Something of their underlying content might be intimated in apocalyptic paintings like *The Angel Gabriel* (2010) and *Comet* (2008), or more subtly in *Tsunami* (2008). Yet the dreams that are the more common engine of his creative production tend toward the joyous and redemptive. Architecture is a common theme in this vein, where buildings take on functions of safekeeping, transformation, and freedom of thought and act. The very early *Mystic Dream* (2004), for example, presents a liberating transition from this life to the next, whilst *A Gift Mansion* (2010) is the simple manifestation of the desire for home, painting studio and security. That this mansion is for Brien is made clear by the red rose above the front door and the welcoming fairy. *The Artist Painting his Mansion* (2010), meanwhile, is a glorious celebration of a glorious, richly symbolic dream.

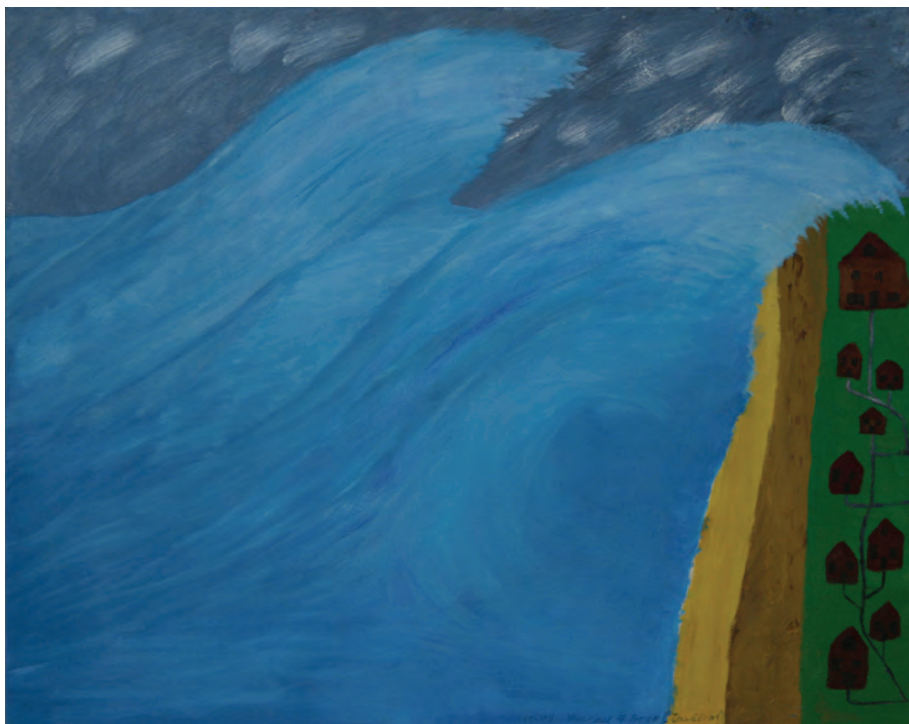
As a gypsy, the world of faerie is alive to Brien, as much as the sacred world of God and Saint Sarah (*Sara e Kali*), mythic patron saint of the Roma people. So it is no surprise that we encounter images like *Fantasy Land* (2009), *The Fairyland Gypsies* (2009) or *Guardian Angels* (2007). In works like these fairy dust is conjured through the



application of glitter, and in general metallic paints are a staple of the artist's arsenal of painterly tools, adding to the luminescence of his works. It is hard not to sense in all his paintings the workings of an animate sounding cosmos; from the dream-reality of landscapes such as *River Cave 2* (2010) and *A Dream (The Water Tunnel)* (2010), to iconic beloved figures, as in *Spanish Dancer* (2007) with its dream-stage setting and Northern Hemisphere constellations set against a barely resisted void.

Michael F. Brien first came to Australia in 1952, near the beginning of his adult life, as part of the crew of HMS Glory; an

event recently memorialized in a little self-portrait based on a black and white photograph taken at the time. It is a happy image, imbued with the sea and a bright cosmos. Only the turn of the dark, unreadable eyes and a perhaps slightly-too-fixed smile might suggest more troubled domains. At the conclusion of his military service Michael eventually found his way back to this country, this time to settle. *Self-Portrait* (2008) is the self-contained, somewhat hypnotic image of experience. This is 'The Count', the Romany artist and seer. This time the gaze is steady, levelled at the viewer directly. We are invited to share in the depths they look into.



Colin Rhodes, September 2010

List of Works in the Exhibition

1. *Vanished Civilization*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 46 cm. \$260
2. *Pondering*, 2004, oil on board, 76 x 38 cm. \$240
3. *Tsunami*, 2008, oil on canvas, 76 x 61 cm. \$400
4. *River Cave 2*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 70.8 x 60.7 cm. \$360
5. *Mangroves*, 2008, oil on canvas, 65.4 x 54.7 cm. \$400
6. *Spanish Castle Beside a Waterfall*, 2005, oil on canvas, 91.3 x 61 cm. \$380
7. *Mountains*, 2007, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 76.5 cm. \$360
8. *Fantasy Land*, 2009, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 76 x 101.2 cm. \$400
9. *Vienna*, 2008, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 91.2 x 111.7 cm. \$400
10. *Claridges*, 2010, oil on canvas, 91 x 83.7 cm. \$380
11. *Fairy Land*, 2009, oil and glitter on canvas, 83.5 x 76.2 cm. \$350
12. *The Academy*, 2010, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 76 x 91 cm. \$380
13. *The Artist at Four-and-a-Half Years Old, Lichfield, Staffs.*, 2009, oil on canvas, 83.5 x 66 cm \$380
14. *The Rescue of the Patriarch, 2010, oil on canvas, 83.5 x 60.5 cm \$400*
15. *Gypsy Camp*, 2007, oil on canvas, 75 x 60 cm. NFS
16. *Self-Portrait, 1952 in Australia, 2008, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 30.7 x 30.6 cm. \$270*
17. *Self-Portrait*, 2008, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.6 cm. \$280
18. *Gypsy Lady*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 35.8 x 46 cm. \$270
19. *Spanish Dancer*, 2007, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm. \$280
20. *Guardian Angels*, 2007, oil and glitter on canvas, 61.2 x 51 cm. \$300
21. *Sitting Dream*, 2005, oil on canvas, 45.8 x 35.6 cm. \$260
22. *Comet*, 2008, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 91 x 60.7 cm. \$380
23. *Mystic Dream*, 2004, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. \$180
24. *The Artist Painting his Mansion*, 2010, acrylic and metallic paint on canvas, 61.7 x 45.7 cm. \$280
25. *A Dream (The Water Tunnel)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60.2 cm. \$350
26. *The Roundhouse*, 2007, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 60.7 cm. \$380
27. *Hotel of Dreams*, 2009, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 71 x 76 cm. \$400
28. *A Gift Mansion*, 2010, acrylic and metallic paint on canvas, 60.7 x 51 cm. \$280
29. *Roseanne Wants to Fish*, 2009, oil on canvas, 83.5 x 76.2 cm. \$300
30. *The Angel Gabriel*, 2010, oil on canvas, 60.6 x 71 cm. \$400
31. *The Fairyland Gypsies*, 2009, oil on canvas, 121.8 x 30.8 cm. \$390



Michael F Brien - Dream Reality will be on display to Wednesday 13 October 2010.

Gallery hours: By appointment

For further information please contact:

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Images: *Hotel of Dreams*, 2009, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 71 x 76 cm; *Gypsy Camp*, 2007, oil on canvas, 75 x 60 cm; *Spanish Dancer*, 2007, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm; *Self-Portrait*, 1952 in Australia, 2008, oil and metallic paint on canvas, 30.7 x 30.6 cm.; *Tsunami*, 2008, oil on canvas, 76 x 61 cm; *The Fairyland Gypsies*, 2009, oil on canvas, 121.8 x 30.8 cm.

