

## REACH & ENGAGEMENT

SOLO EXHIBITION BY PAUL DARRAGH

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These paintings were created in the last quarter of 2020. The intention was to visually document the confusion and chaos of an eventful and historic year. One of the most alarming developments of 2020 was the rise and spread of fake news, misinformation and hatred. The disassembling of truth to suit ones own beliefs has lead to a major fracturing of society across the world, as a result of the pandemic and the rise of far-right politics. This has lead to the dissemination of conspiracy theories through social media that many people readily absorb as fact.

These paintings depict surreal scenes that defy space, logic and time. These scenes are an abstract depiction of the free fall into the proverbial rabbit hole that is the Internet, conspiracies and misinformation.

A limited collection of icons make up the content of most of the paintings, the most predominate being the semi-circular arch. This shape has become a reoccurring motif in many of my paintings and is used as a portal in which the viewer can transcend between worlds and dimensions. The arch is one of the oldest and most recognizable architectural icons and is perceived as a symbol for strength, unity, religion and history. In an art-historical context the arch is a constant fixture from classical to post-modernist art. The key inspiration and appropriation for its use in my work is from De Chirico paintings and contemporary interior design company Mr Buckley. In the context of these paintings the arch is used as a base form. The arch is the truth, the standard, the precedent. It is the window to view all else that is perceived or believed.

Other icons such as the ladder, game piece and hour glass reference board games played in my childhood such as Snakes and Ladders, The Game of Life and Pictionary. These icons are used for several reasons. Firstly, the association to board games identifies a linear journey in the mind. When illogical use of perspective and spatial rendering is used to defy this linear journey the result is a surreal and discombobulating image. Board game participants share a singular winner-takes-all ideology. It is after all a competition, void of empathy. This scenario played out in 2020 with many people choosing to protect themselves rather than think of the greater good and holistic goal when beating a global pandemic.

The ladder and stairs are a mode of transport within these paintings. They shift our perspective in every dimension, and because of the flat rendering style the spatial logic can be manipulated. In some instances we appear to be falling into a black void, only to realise we are climbing out of one. This illusionistic approach is made famous by M.C Escher, and although his works are not an aesthetic reference I would be remiss not to acknowledge their powerful contribution to the vernacular of optical illusion in visual art and pop culture. These works would not exist without Escher's groundbreaking rendering style. In the painting "Vertigo" this influence is very apparent. As in its namesake, the movie "Vertigo" we are chasing a constructed reality that ultimately is confusing, dynamic and false. This painting is a summation of the nonsensical journey one will endure when following fake news and misinformation online.

Most of these works feature a blue sky with subtle spray paint clouds. This is another symbol that is used to employ meaning and compositional trickery. The sky lures the viewer into a false sense of optimism, in the way that lies and untruths are never packaged as harmful and damaging propaganda. The rendered sky is also limitless, without boundaries and walls, therefore a useful platform in which to manipulate space. Some elements appear to be floating in the infinite blue, yet adjacent shadows will prove this assumption incorrect and the sky becomes a surface. In the painting "Sky-Mall" this technique works in reverse where the walls are immediately apparent but then on further viewing they fall into infinite depth and become sky.

As mentioned with the board game reference, a lot of these paintings journey through different levels or stages, albeit, a nonsensical journey. One must climb stairs, then descend a ladder and go through an arch in order to unlock a truth. Other symbols such as keys and keyholes allude to this enigmatic hunt. In "Untruth Empire" and "Reach and Engagement" abstract ionic columns are featured to represent establishment and government. Over the course of 2020 in many countries around the world, including our own, citizens questioned, defied and denigrated government leadership and authority, mistaking lock downs and restrictions as a draconian attack on personal freedoms.

Finally I want to touch on the title of this show "Reach & Engagement." Reach & engagement is a marketing term commonly used about social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to measure how many people a single post reaches and how users engage with that post by commenting and sharing. This data can track how quickly lies and misinformation spread throughout the Internet, especially on Facebook. So many of us are engaging in the proliferation of these lies and hatred without even knowing it. We have become pawns in a worldwide game of division and anxiety.