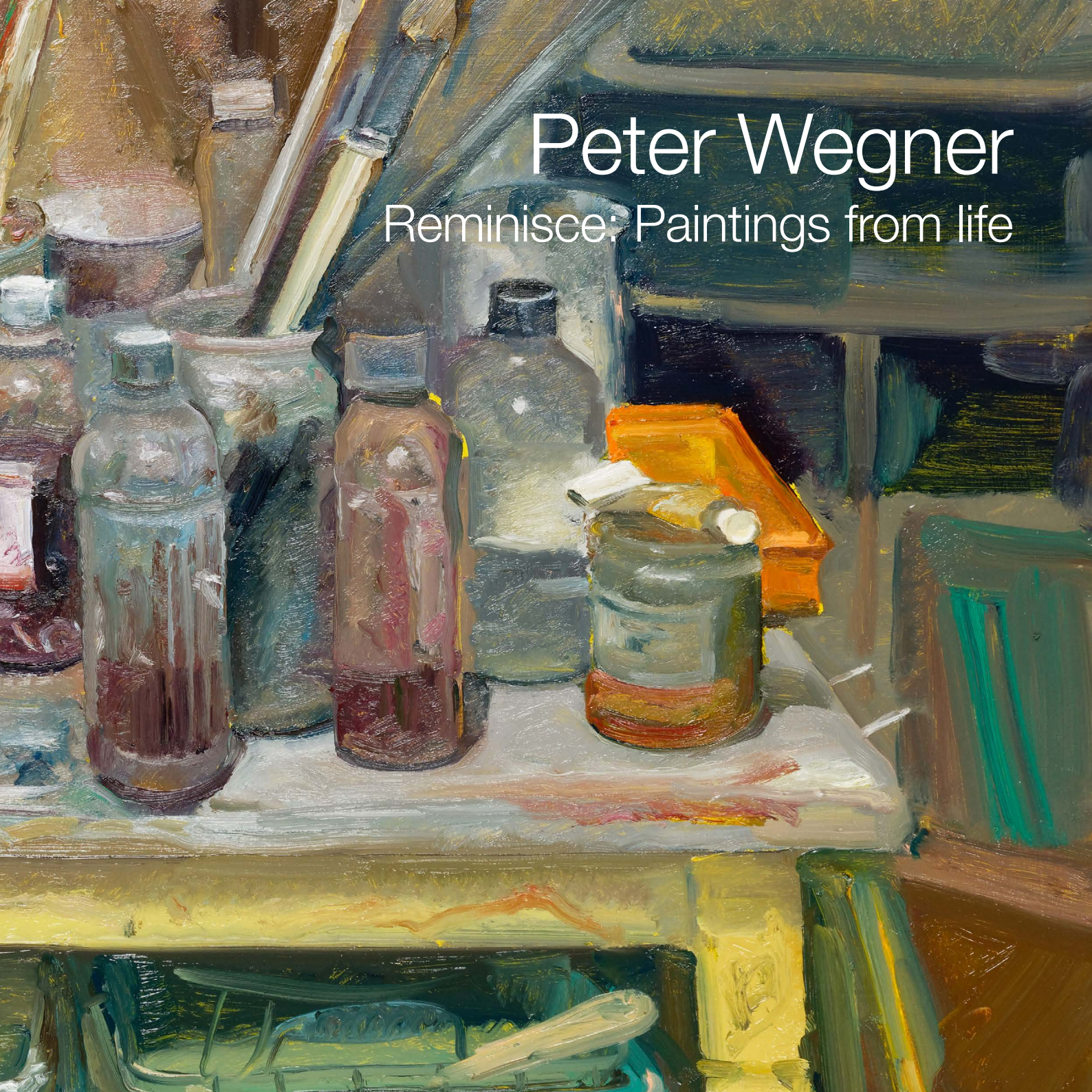




Peter Wegner

Reminisce: Paintings from life



Peter Wegner, photo by Stephen McKenzie, 2023

Peter Wegner

Reminisce: Paintings from life

29 September – 24 October, 2026



King Street Gallery
on William







Peter Wegner, photo: Joanne Leong, 2026

Reminisce: Paintings from life

Dr Benjamin Thomas, Rusden Curator, Cultural Collections, University of Melbourne

Nestled in a forested gully in Melbourne's northern fringe, Wegner's studio - is an evocative space full of character. The scent of linseed oil intermingled with the undertones of aged leather and textiles. The dark timber flooring is itself a canvas for an array of daubs and smears that bear witness to the decades. Heavily upholstered chairs and sofas are positioned around the room. Turkish rugs lie on the floor or are suspended on the walls, awaiting their turn to feature as a backdrop for a sitter.

Except here, there is no sitter. Empty scenes of vacant couches, armchairs, and domestic spaces devoid of human presence, generating tension in our response. Are we witness to a moment in time, just before the figure enters the scene? Have they perhaps just vacated, leaving their imprint - an orange jacket, draped on the back of a chair awaiting its owner's return; a kettle plugged in at the wall, a chair pulled back from the table. Were they ever there?

Reminisce: Paintings from life brings together a body of works that meditate on a theme that has been a central subject of Wegner's oeuvre over the last four decades. The two subjects have collided. These soft,

worn props of weathered armchairs and couches supporting figures that almost spill beyond the confines of the chair; fleshy nude folds cascading around them not unlike the upholstery stuffing bursting through the seams.

Peter Wegner immigrated to Australia with his family. He grew up in Morwell and by his own admission, 'there's not art at all in the DNA, absolutely none'. His father worked for the State Electricity Commission (SEC) while his mother tended home. And yet his youth was consumed with drawing, devouring art books, and frequenting galleries. With no formal art training, he participated in his first group exhibition in 1977 before securing a three year AME Bale painting scholarship mentored by Sir William Dargie.

Whether conscious or subliminal, time and memory is ever-present in Wegner's work. Nothing is static. Nothing stays still for long. Horizon lines are never flat; we are in motion. A couch lists uneasily so that the whole scene seems to tumble forward, dragging the heavy furniture with it, as it slides precariously towards the viewer. An armchair, like the studio floor, carries all the hallmarks of age and wear, its arms collapsing,

the upholstery puckered into folds that draw our gaze towards a misshaped and hollowed cushion, as if only just vacated. A silent witness to countless models who have nestled between its arms.

And that is precisely the intent. For despite the absence of the figure, these works are nonetheless portraits in their own right. ‘A chair or couch has a familiarity and history with the person who sits on it. The stories they could tell,’ Wegner muses.¹ Pairs of Victorian salon chairs are thus positioned as if they themselves are the subject couple. Walking sticks lie at the feet of a well-worn armchair; left by the sitter or humorously suggested as aids for the aged furniture? It is an observation that art critic Robert Nelson noted a decade ago, in relation to the artist’s works in this genre, proposing that these vacant spaces present us with ‘a pictorial oxymoron: a presence built out of absence, a monumental form that consists of emptiness’.²

And in that absence, it is impossible not to see the shadow of Wegner’s muse and friend, artist and poet Graeme Doyle. ‘Graeme and I met at art school in 1982’, Wegner recounts of his introduction to Doyle at Phillip Institute of Technology. He first asked him to sit for a portrait three years later, and ‘over the years one painting turned into another until now hundreds of paintings and drawings exist of Graeme in our 35-year collaboration and friendship’.³ Their friendship resulted in the exhibition, *Sitting Still: Portrait Studies of Graeme Doyle* at the Castlemaine Regional Art Gallery in 2002, shown again the following year in Melbourne at Australian Galleries, and followed up more than

a decade later at the same gallery with the playfully titled, *Still Meeting - Portraits of G.D.*

It is not too far of a challenge to situate *Reminisce: Paintings from life* within the continuing exploration of this narrative, prised wider to reflect on not just the void left by Doyle’s passing but the implications of the passing of time for us all. These weathered couches and chairs - tired, worn and vacant - these empty rooms and kitchens, where life once hummed, are a stark commentary on ‘the quiet resilience of aging and the power of what is present in absence.’⁴

- Dr Benjamin Thomas, Rusden Curator, Cultural Collections, University of Melbourne

Dr Benjamin Thomas is the Rusden Curator, Cultural Collections, at Trinity College, University of Melbourne. With John Poynter, he co-authored *Miegunyah: The Bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade* (MUP, 2015) and was a contributing author to *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection* (MUP, 2020) and *On the land of the Bunurong: a history of art and architecture in Frankston* (McClelland Gallery, 2023).

1. ‘Life behind the canvas. Portrait of an artist’, Monash University, alumni profile, November 2021, <https://www.monash.edu/alumni/monash-life/2021/peter-wegner-life-behind-the-canvases>
2. Robert Nelson, ‘Peter Wegner’s White on White a fulsome celebration of vacancy’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 2016.
3. Peter Wegner, *Chef’s coat – Graeme Doyle*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Archibald Prize – past works and winners, 2020, <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/2020/30252/>
4. ‘Peter Wegner. *Beyond the Empty Chair*’, exhibition opening, Australian Galleries, Instagram post, 27 May 2025.



Two Friends, 2026, oil on board, 24.5x36cm







Damaged Chair and Self Portrait, 2025, oil on linen, 122x91cm



Study for Friendship (The Outsider), 2025, oil on board, 29x38cm



Studio Interior, 2025, oil on linen, 91x106cm



Peter Wegner, photo: Jenny Wegner, 2021

Reminisce

Through this exhibition, I have continued my long-standing interest in the empty chair. It represents a return to the absent sitter, and an exploration of how an empty chair or couch can evoke both the past and the people who once occupied it.

Many of these chairs are worn, torn and marked by age. Each carries a history connected to the lives of others. They may have been worn out, discarded or rejected, yet it is precisely this sense of rejection that I seek to give voice to. Their stains faded fabric and other signs of wear become, in a sense, a portrait of the absent sitter.

These objects become triggers for memory. Once central to another life, they now form part of a human fabric that connects one generation to the next. Each has its own history, its own sense of belonging and its own silent presence.

I think particularly of my father, who would always sit in his favourite chair. It was his chair, a place that seemed to carry a sense of ownership and familiarity, becoming part of the predictable rhythm of everyday life. After his death, the empty chair became a powerful reminder that, although he was gone, his presence could still be felt.

I think of these paintings as time capsules, representing both loss and the passage of time. Reminisce is, in many ways, my own recollection of these familiar interiors and the people whose presence still lingers within them.

- Peter Wegner



*“Empty scenes of vacant couches, armchairs,
and domestic spaces devoid of human presence, generating
tension in our response. Are we witness to a moment in time,
just before the figure enters the scene? Have they perhaps
just vacated, leaving their imprint - an orange jacket, draped
on the back of a chair awaiting its owner’s return; a kettle
plugged in at the wall, a chair pulled back from the table.
Were they ever there?”*

Excerpt, Dr Benjamin Thomas,
Reminisce: Paintings from life, pg. 8

The Orange Shirt, 2025, oil on linen, 91.5x76cm









Peter Wegner, photo: Bill McAuley, 2023



Distressed Couch, 2025, oil on board, 28x37.5cm



My Father's Chair, 2026, oil on linen on board, 30x23cm



Study for The Kitchen, 2026, oil on board, 20x23cm



Centenarian Chair, 2026, oil on board, 39.5x45cm





Empty Chair, 2026, oil on linen on board, 30.5x23cm



Study for The Meeting, 2025, oil on board, 55x64.5cm





Study for Elisabeth, 2026, oil on board, 40x30cm



Elisabeth, 2026, oil on linen, 101.5x101.5cm



Artist Hands, 2026, oil on board, 21x27cm

Peter Wegner
Selected Biography

[illegible]

Collections
Anglican Centre, St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne
Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum, Melbourne
Australian National University Collection, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
Australian Racing Museum, Melbourne
Bathurst Regional Gallery, Bathurst, NSW
Benalla Art Gallery, Benalla
Castlemaine Performing Arts Centre, Castlemaine
Castlemaine Regional Art Gallery, Castlemaine
F.W. Curtis Collection, La Trobe University, Bendigo
Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale
Haileybury College Collection, Melbourne
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
La Trobe University Art Collection, Bendigo
Melbourne Grammar School Art Collection, Melbourne
Moonee Valley Racing Club, Melbourne
Municipal Collections of Dandenong, Clayton, Bright, Altona, Frankston, Flinders and Nillumbik Shire, Melbourne
Murray Art Museum Albury, Albury, NSW
National Library of Australia, Canberra
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra
National Gallery Australia (NGA), Canberra
Perpetual Trustees Collection, Sydney
Queensland State Library, James Hardy Collection, Brisbane
Shell, Australia
Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, Swan Hill
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart
The Kedumba Collection of Australian Drawings, Wentworth Falls, NSW
Tweed River Art Gallery, Murwillumbah, NSW
University of Melbourne, Melbourne
Victorian State Library, Melbourne

2018

2016

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2021 McDonald, John, 'Archibald Prize winner makes for a nice story, but was also clearly the best in show', published June 4 2011, *The Sydney Morning Herald*
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A comprehensive CV for Peter Wegner is available on the King Street Gallery on William website
<https://kingstreetgallery.com.au/artists/peter-wegner/#cv>



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Cover:
Detail from *Studio Interior No 1*, 2026, oil on linen, 86.5x122cm, page 14

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