



# LOOK, *don't* TOUCH

Robin Eley's new body of work examines the isolation of the Facebook generation

WORDS SAMELA HARRIS

A Loss of Density,  
by Robin Eley.

**THE** more connected we become, the further apart we grow. This thought simmered on the backburner of Robin Eley's brain as he checked his friends and posted his updates on Facebook.

It began to heat up when he took his portfolio around the chic modern galleries of New York where dealers, impressed with his surrealist technical skills, were asking if he had something he wanted to say with his art. What was his "signature"?

And thus did he begin to ponder his life, his times, his people, his world, his art.

A new show, called Singularity, resulted from a manifestation of the artist's sense of the new ivory towers young people are constructing within the swarming networking of their social media.

Eley has caused something of a sensation since he transferred his work from commercial illustration to pure art a couple of years ago. He began with portraits. Straight away and twice in a row he leapt to finalist positions in the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize.

Now, Hill Smith Gallery has offered him his first commercial show. Eley has worked for seven months, preparing his series of 15 new paintings. To achieve the high finesse of his intense detail, he has been working 90-hour weeks. Five weeks of such labour went into his largest painting – a cellophane-surrounded nude.

Sam Hill-Smith describes Eley as "undoubtedly a dedicated and gifted" artist and his work as "meticulous compositions". Working in oil on Belgian linen, they convey a balance between technique and conceptual ideas to create a sense of harmony and powerful beauty," Hill-Smith enthuses.

Although English-born and Adelaide-raised, Eley had studied art in the US and was keen to get feedback on his new work as a full-time studio artist.

The Americans talked to him about a "signature style" and, says Eley, he was stirred to be less disparate in his work and to seek a more cohesive style, and within it, a statement. "After the US I was really thinking, getting down to the heart of what it was I wanted to say before recreating and re-imagining things that made me feel something," he says. "One of those things was the way we are experiencing isolation in the modern world.

"I'm the son of a parents who met in an overseas country neither was from. Mum was from China and had moved to London, isolated from her friends and family. Dad was from Adelaide. Today the isolation is different from theirs. We are so connected we don't even need to connect. Modern isolation is the technology we have actively embraced. We are all on Facebook where we don't have to ask our friends how they're going because we can see what they're doing."

Eley says he has used synthetic materials as a metaphor for the separation of his generation – cellophane you can see through but not feel through. "Under the premise of social networking, we guard and meter our time, unaware the walls of ivory are rising silently around us," he says. "It is a seductive existence where quantity trumps quality, where a smile is supplanted by a like button, and the accumulation of friends seems more important than our interactions with them." ■



Solar, oil on Belgian linen.