

Richard Lewer

Don't forget to breathe

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William Faulkner begins his novel *The Sound and the Fury* inside a mind already in motion. There is no introduction, no orderly account of events, no distinction between what matters and what does not. Sensation becomes memory, memory becomes the present, one thought interrupts another. Meaning accumulates slowly, through fragments. There is something of this rhythm in Richard Lewer's *Don't forget to breathe*. Across some sixty small paintings, the world arrives without much regard for hierarchy. A storm gathers over a suburban street. Two Cape Barren geese stand in the middle of a road. An albatross crosses an empty sky. MH370 remains suspended above a line of trees. Elsewhere there is a plait of hair, a vase of flowers, Uluru after rain, a full moon. One image follows another, each carrying whatever weight it happened to possess at the moment Lewer encountered it, before slipping into the larger field of our own associations and memories.

Taken one by one, each painting is an immediate response to a particular thing. Together, they begin to resemble something far more complicated: the unruly movement of a mind trying to keep pace with the world. Lewer has always been an avid observer. His work has moved through true crime, sport, religion, family, shame, grief and other people's confessions, drawn from the stories and circumstances he encounters around him. In *Don't forget to breathe*, that attention feels accelerated and compressed. The paintings operate almost at the speed of encounter. Something catches his eye, troubles him, amuses him or refuses to leave, and into the work it goes. Yet just as many paintings are left behind. Some become, in Lewer's words, "old news", others simply prove not worthy of keeping. The process is as much one of editing as accumulation.

Often, that encounter begins with the morning news. Lewer scrolls through an algorithmically determined feed, one of countless versions of the world being delivered back to us each day. War can sit beside weather, catastrophe beside celebrity, politics beside sport. The gravity of one story does little to slow the arrival of the next, regardless of its levity. Our attention is continually being asked to expand and contract, to absorb something enormous and then, seconds later, to settle on something completely inconsequential. But Lewer's paintings do not belong only to this public stream of information. His own life keeps interrupting.

Faulkner's character Benjy does not arrange experience according to conventional hierarchies of importance. The distant past can become suddenly present, a smell or sound can carry enormous emotional force. Experience arrives through association rather than explanation. In Lewer's paintings, something similar occurs. A global tragedy and a bird crossing a road can exist within the same field of attention. Neither seems to explain the other. Both were noticed. For the viewer, however, the associations need not end there. In the space between one painting and the next, we begin to make our own connections, following one thought into another, finding relationships that may never have been intended.

Lewer reminds us that we do not experience the world as a coherent narrative. We experience it while remembering something else, making dinner, checking the weather, worrying about someone we love, laughing at something stupid.

Lewer understands the absurdity of this condition. After winning the Archibald Prize, he came across a comment describing his art as looking “like a disabled bird”. It was cruel, ridiculous and, perhaps inevitably, irresistible. Rather than defend himself against it, he painted it. The insult became another thing encountered and absorbed, transformed from an act of casual brutality into something unexpectedly funny.

Humour has always operated this way in Lewer’s work. It does not diminish the seriousness of what surrounds it. It makes living alongside it possible.

There is something exhausting about living with so much of the world available to us at once. Events that would once have remained distant arrive in our hands as they happen. We watch, scroll, react, laugh, recoil and continue. The next image is already waiting. *Don’t forget to breathe* does not offer an escape from this condition. Instead, Lewer makes its strange rhythm visible.

Its title is both instruction and reminder. Breathing is the most ordinary and miraculous thing we do, automatic enough to disappear from consciousness until someone draws our attention to it. *Don’t forget to breathe*. Suddenly the body returns. Perhaps painting performs a similar interruption for Lewer. Again and again, he stops over something. Not necessarily the things we are supposed to stop over, and not always for reasons that can be explained. He notices it, paints it, and then notices again.

The result is not quite a diary and not quite a document of current events. It is something more unstable and alive: a record of what it feels like to be paying attention.

The world keeps coming. Lewer keeps looking. And somewhere between one thing and the next, he remembers to breathe.

– Milena Stojanovska

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Richard Lewer completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland (1992) and a Master of Visual Arts at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne (2000). He has been a six-time finalist in the Archibald Prize, winning the award in 2026 with his portrait of senior APY artist and Ngangkari (traditional healer) Iluwanti Ken. His work has also been shortlisted for the Sulman Prize, Basil Sellers Art Prize, Blake Prize and the Black Swan Prize for Portraiture. Recent major exhibitions include 'What They Didn’t Teach Me in School', New Zealand Portrait Gallery, Wellington (2024); the NGV Triennial (2023); 'Steve', commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia (2023-24); and 'On-Site', commissioned for the opening of Sydney Modern at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (2022). Lewer’s work is held in major public collections throughout Australia and New Zealand, including the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Te Papa Tongarewa and Auckland Art Gallery.