EVERY NOW AND THEN AN ARTIST arrives on the scene and disrupts it much like a meteorite illuminates the night sky in one intense, extended moment. Such was the impact of American painter, James Doolin, in Australia in the mid-1960s.

Yet Doolin’s contribution may seem almost apocryphal. First, because he lived in Australia for just a brief period (1965-67) and his intriguing career continued on after his return to the US, lasting until his untimely death in 2002. Secondly, because the work for which he was known in Australia was largely misunderstood, caught up as it was in the then stoush between “hard-edge” abstraction and the rest.

Doolin was also “apocryphal” in the sense that many of us at the time thought we knew Jim even when we didn’t. I think, at the risk of sounding trite, it was because the work communicated so strongly that we all felt that we were in the presence of the man. Certainly, I did – and yet I never met him. Sure, there were direct connections through my brothers, Tony McGillick and John White, and through other artists such as Robert Jacks. And, yes, I helped hang the legendary 1970 Central Street Gallery exhibition of the arched Artificial Landscapes – according to Doolin’s strict directions concerning height and spacing. But my only direct contact with Jim (by phone and letter) was in 1993 when Tony died and later when I organised a short television documentary on him for SBS TV in 1994.

It was in editing this piece that I was jolted out of the time warp which had trapped me into defining Doolin by the paintings of the mid-1960s – because his current work wasn’t “abstract” at all, but consisted of intensely “real” urban landscapes.

There had been an early warning sign, of course – Doolin’s extraordinary ‘Shopping Mall 1973-77 – A Conceptual Perspective’ which toured Australia in 1978, the year in which Doolin returned for a three-month stint as visiting artist at the Victorian College of the Arts. The 229 x 229cm painting, ‘Shopping Mall’ itself, was accompanied by all four years of preparatory drawings, studies and photographs.

The concept of the exhibition was a clue because it drew attention to the importance of process. Indeed, Doolin once commented, “Painting is about the process of making it.” But it also drew attention to the way the axonometric painting – an aerial view of an intersection at Santa Monica Mall organised around the X formed by the two intersecting street axes – resulted from extraordinary geometric complexity and rigour, reminiscent of the work of one of Doolin’s great influences, Piero della Francesca.

‘Shopping Mall’ made it clear that Doolin was and always had been a landscape painter. As Tony McGillick said in the catalogue, “He maintained traditional values of originality and craft while working in an entirely contemporary mode.”

His first set of Artificial Landscapes, seen in two solo shows in Melbourne then Sydney (1966-67), drew their imagery from the urban landscape, while the meticulously crafted Arched Landscapes (Doolin said that he never touched these canvases with his bare hands) were what he called an “illusory object window”. In a letter he wrote to Tony McGillick he went on to say that “these paintings are completely traditional and concerned with the things that landscape painting always has been since its beginning.”

This was not fully understood in Australia at the time. Doolin’s real impact was through his professionalism. This impact was huge on a group of Melbourne painters – Robert Jacks, Robert Rooney, Robert Hunter and Dale
01 Artificial Landscape No.11, 1969, liquitex on canvas, 206 x 138cm
02 Highway at Night, 1984, oil on canvas, 183 x 244cm
03 Bridges, 1989, oil on canvas, 183 x 259cm
Doolin’s art was an investigation into illusion ... he said that he found abstraction too constraining, hence his return to figuration, except that his images either of the desert or bleak urban landscapes always have a heightened emotional intensity to them.
Hickey – even if the local critics dismissed him. The late Robert Jacks recalled that Doolin was the first artist he had met who had his own electric drill and saw, who worked so hard and who applied the same obsessive rigour to making his stretchers and crates as he did to painting itself. The nine arched paintings took a year to paint, while ‘Shopping Mall’, a single painting, took four years.

Professionalism, sensuousness and meticulousness. These are the hallmarks of James Doolin’s painting. He was a “slow” painter. And as we know from the Slow Movement, the more you slow things down, the richer the rewards.

Essentially, Doolin’s art was an investigation into illusion. Returning from Australia, he said that he found abstraction too constraining, hence his return to figuration, except that his images either of the desert or bleak urban landscapes always have a heightened emotional intensity to them combining, if you like, the menacing atmospherics of Thomas Hart Benton and the sense of alienation found in Edward Hopper.

This was first evident in the paintings he did during his three years of living in the Mojave Desert in the early 1980s. But when he returned to live in Los Angeles the sense of magical awe he saw in the desert became a kind of dark magic as his urban landscapes responded to the loss of natural landscape, being replaced by the artificiality of the modern built environment. In the words of
Los Angeles Times art critic, Christopher Knight, he had "a gift for endowing the everyday with a sense of estrangement". In this regard Doolin had come full circle: he was still painting artificial landscapes, but using directly perceived images rather than images abstracted from the "real" world.

Abstract or figurative, the issues for Doolin were always the same. As Roger Fry pointed out in his last lectures (warning against all-out abstraction), figuration served to animate the formal properties of a painting — what Doolin referred to as pictorial composition and the way all the components of a painting came together in an extended moment of equilibrium. In retrospect, we can see that the paintings which set the Australian art world talking in the mid-1960s were much less abstract than they seemed — their imagery was actually drawn directly from the observed world.

All we needed to do was take the pictures at face value. It is always useful to remember Clement Greenberg’s advice and ask ourselves: What am I looking at?

“I strive to make my paintings strong on the abstract level, clear on the descriptive level, and mysterious on the narrative level so that viewers can make up their own stories and symbols.”

— James Doolin (1983)