O B S E R V E R I S M

Portrait Commissions

For research institutes, universities and the people who lead them



The Observer of Dark Matter, Professor Elisabetta Barberio. Oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm, 2026

Samuel Morrow

Studio, Surry Hills, Sydney

THE IDEA

Australian science is photographed constantly and almost never painted.

A photograph records what a lab looked like on one afternoon. A painting is the thing people stop in front of. It stays on the wall after the director has moved on, after the instrument has been decommissioned, after the Centre has wound up, and it tells the next generation of students who was here and what they spent their lives looking at.

I paint scientists with the instrument or place at the centre of their work. The painting is made from time spent with them where they work, and then built properly in the studio over months.

HOW THE PAINTINGS WORK

The centre is resolved. The edges are not.

In physics, light stays a wave of possibility until something observes it, and then it becomes a single fact. Vision does something similar. What you are looking at is sharp and specific. Everything around it is not blurry so much as undecided.

So in my paintings the focal point is fully rendered, and the periphery opens into fine circular and spiralling fields drawn from the geometry of light that carries a twist (orbital angular momentum). The picture settles wherever the viewer puts their attention. I call the method Observerism.

For a scientist, this means the edges of the painting carry the thing they study. Dark matter gathers around Elisabetta Barberio. The night sky over Mount Stromlo hangs above Brian Schmidt.

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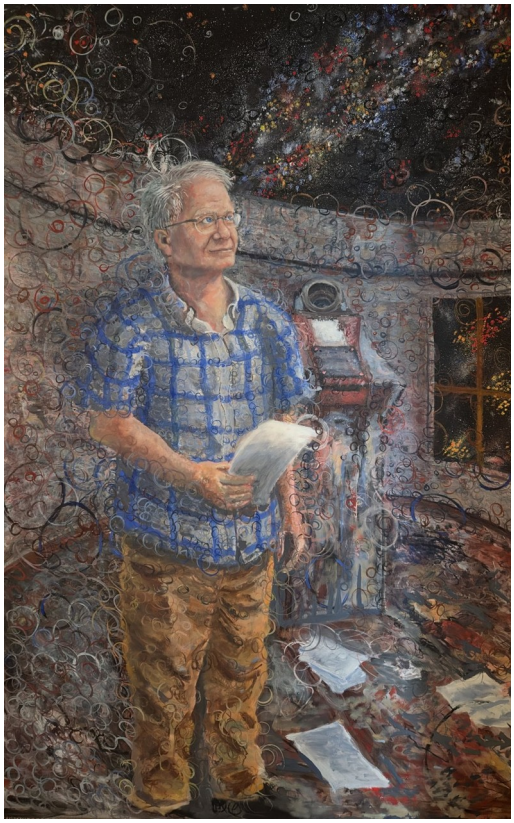
THE SCIENTIST SERIES

Three portraits so far



Professor Brian Schmidt AC

The Observer of Cosmic Expansion, 2026. Oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm.

Painted at Mount Stromlo, where he led the team that measured the accelerating expansion of the universe, among the telescopes still in ruins from the 2003 fires. Professor Schmidt holds a study from the series.

Professor Elisabetta Barberio

The Observer of Dark Matter, 2026. Oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm.

Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Dark Matter Particle Physics, holding one of the ultra pure crystals built for the SABRE experiment, a kilometre underground at Stawell.

Dr Alan Finkel AC

2024. Chief Scientist of Australia from 2016 to 2020. Acquired by the sitter.

OCCASIONS

When institutions commission a portrait

- A director, founder or long serving chief operating officer stepping down
- The close of an ARC Centre of Excellence or another major funding term, as a permanent record of what the Centre did and who led it
- A Nobel, a Prime Minister's Prize, an AC or a fellowship of the Academy
- A foundation anniversary, a new building, or a lecture theatre or hall named after someone
- A gift from staff, students or a board to someone who built the place

It can also be a place rather than a person. A painting of the instrument, the lab or the observatory that a Centre was built around is often the better choice when the work was done by a team.

PROCESS

How a commission runs

	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
1	Conversation	A first talk by phone, video or in person about who or what the painting is for and where it will hang. No cost.
2	Proposal	A short written proposal with format, price and timeline, suitable for internal approval. Nothing is booked until you have it.
3	Booking	50 per cent deposit secures the commission and its place in the schedule. Refundable in full until the first sitting.
4	Research visit and sitting	Time with the sitter where they work. Drawing, reference photography, and asking what they actually do. I come to you.
5	Composition	A composition sketch for approval before paint goes on the canvas. One revision included.
6	Painting	Made in the studio in Sydney. Progress images at the underpainting stage and once more before completion.
7	Completion	You see the finished painting. The balance is due on approval.
8	Delivery and unveiling	Delivered and hung. I am happy to speak at an unveiling about the painting and the method.

FORMATS

Formats

All works are oil on canvas, complete and ready to hang. Each commission is quoted individually in the written proposal, with a fixed price and a fixed timeline.

FORMAT	SIZE	TIMELINE	
The Study	60 x 45 cm	4 to 6 weeks	A single head, close and direct. Suits a gift, a farewell, or a first commission.
The Portrait	120 x 90 cm	10 to 14 weeks	Half or three quarter length, with room for the lab or instrument to open up around the figure.
The Full Scale	180 x 120 cm	5 to 7 months	The scale of the Scientist Series. Figure and setting at full presence. Made for a foyer or a named space.
The Place	150 x 120 cm	10 to 14 weeks	The lab, observatory or instrument on its own, without a figure. Suits a centre rather than a person.

Other sizes are possible and quoted individually. Where more than one work is commissioned together, for example a portrait and a study for the sitter to keep, the pair is quoted below the sum of its parts.

FOR ORGANISATIONS

Practical details

Proposal	Written proposal with fixed price and timeline, ready for a committee or finance sign off
Payment	50 per cent deposit, 50 per cent on approval of the finished work. Bank transfer. Invoices can be split across financial years
ABN and GST	ABN 35 422 049 477. Not registered for GST
Travel	Research visits within Sydney included. Interstate travel at cost, agreed in writing before booking
Delivery	Included within Sydney. Elsewhere by specialist art transport, at cost
Framing	Not included. I can arrange and quote it, or your facilities team can
Documentation	Condition report, provenance and an insurance valuation letter supplied on delivery
Images	High resolution images cleared for your own communications, credited to the artist
Copyright	Remains with the artist. The institution owns the painting outright

ABOUT

Samuel Morrow

I am a painter based in Surry Hills, Sydney, and the founder of Observerism. I trained as a building designer and work in architecture, coordinating the design and delivery of large buildings, so programs, budgets and approvals are part of my day job. That tends to make a commission easy to run from the institution’s side.

The Scientist Series started with Dr Alan Finkel in 2024 and continues with new sitters each year. Each painting begins with a conversation about what the person spends their life looking at.

START A CONVERSATION

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The first conversation costs nothing and commits you to nothing. If a commission is not the right answer, I will say so.