

JHANA MILLERS

Bricks.

Sophie Thorn

The first time I saw Alan Ibell's work it reminded me of something. It was an involuntary prompt that prodded something in the depths of my memory. It was the bricks. Their softly rendered texture and their purposefully off kilter angles. They took me back to sitting in an Art History class looking at a projection of a work by Masaccio, St Peter Healing the Sick with His Shadow, 1424-1425. In the fresco on the slide a brick wall had been restored, but they hadn't gotten the perspective right. At the time it was every bit as irreverent and humorous as seeing Monkey Christ for the first time. In the next slide this had been corrected—the bricks were unremarkable again. Tricks in aid of linear perspective. The lesson was my first introduction to art restoration. The first time I really thought about the way the surface of a painting takes on its own life. It was this innocuous, 600-year-old, background detail that stirred subconsciously when looking at Ibell's work.

But it wasn't just the bricks. It was the way the paint has been worked, as if it is mixed deep into plaster. Other Renaissance heavy-weights such as Giotto and Piero della Francesca have been mentioned in relation to Ibell's practice in the past, and in 2015 he spent time at an artist residency in Assisi, Italy. His delicately built-up surfaces make sense in this light. Ibell's work plays within the bounds of this loaded history. His subject matter and title for this exhibition, Vessels, makes no attempt to beat around the bush. The canvas itself being a vessel inextricably tied to a complex play between mimicry and material. Dichotomies of full/empty, fire/water, abundant/sparse and traditional motifs are reworked to rethink, reflect, and subvert. His titles present further narrative suggestions for the audience to unpack.

Visually Ibell leaves us a great deal of time with our own thoughts; his sparsely populated canvases conveying psychologically charged environments. This is something which is difficult to get right. They contain just a smattering of narrative across a subdued pastel ground: a lone figure, a floating jug, those bricks. This spatial dimension hovers in conversation with the early 90s 'pencil-case' Antipodean Gothic work of Shane Cotton, Tony de Latour, and Seraphine Pick with their tightly controlled floating schema. Delicately oscillating in this space between the banal and the surreal, Ibell's dreamscapes allow for both contemplation and a little subconscious wandering.

Alan Ibell was born in Ōtautahi Christchurch and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Otago Polytechnic, Ōtepoti Dunedin. He spent several years in Melbourne before returning to Aotearoa in 2016. Ibell has won a number of awards including the City of Dunedin Art Awards and the Edinburgh Realty Art Award and was a finalist in the Wallace Art Awards 2016 and 2009. Ibell currently lives and works in Papaioea Palmerston North. This is his second solo exhibition at Jhana Millers.

Sophie Thorn, August 2021