



Muse (With Empty Vessel), 2017, acrylic on canvas, 1500mm x 1250mm

Alan Ibell

by Jaimee Stockman Young

Alan Ibell's paintings play out like a *Theatre of the Absurd* performance, infused with the quiet emptiness of antipodean rural gothic. Through narrative, figure and form, Ibell's characters enact a farcical comedy as means to explore existential concerns. Merging this exploration of the literary gothic with abstract references to ancient Greek and Roman mythology and poetry, roaming hills and dark landscapes create visual allegories to a perilous paradise – tranquil, inescapable, disjointed. Figures wander through quasi-familiar environments, playing with the history of the New Zealand gothic genre. Teasing out colonial anxieties, in works such as *Travelling Stranger II (Passage)*, there feels a need for connection, romanticising isolation, something that feels both intimate and very distant. Mid-century rural Aotearoa with a Sisyphian spin and a delicate pastel color palette.

It is interesting to see the progression of Ibell's practice from simplified illustration to larger, expansive, more saturated paintings. The world which the artist is building feels as if it is growing ever wider, the dreams he paints gaining more clarity. Ibell often uses the two dimensional plane of the canvas to open up minimal-surrealist spaces – constructing simplified, abstracted stages that speak to both the imagined and the tangible. These spaces become a theatre arena for a deadpan comedy, obtuse yet simple, the psychology of the spatiality is constructed in a manner that guides the viewer to a psychological space.

It is interesting to note how the artist has used this language and brought this further into the gallery. In the 2017 exhibition *The House of the Poet* Ibell pushed the importance of this architectural aspect of his work into the installation and layout of the paintings themselves, presenting a question of how this work is read as a part of the environment of the space the audience inhabits. This has been achieved through the action of hanging in an unconventional manner – portrait works hang near the ceiling of the gallery to mimic the spatial/displaced nature of the objects within the larger paintings, expanding the dimensionality of the work, the shifting planes moving back and forth.

Stepping away from depictions of concrete existence, these stages are broken up into vanishing planes and dramatic geographies, obscured figures and disjointed domestic objects. Panels of colour break up environments like theatre backdrops in works such as *The Letter*, *Landscape with Figure Reflecting on His Past Selves* and *Muse (with empty Vessel)*. The effect of these spaces sits somewhere between soundstage and dreamscape, like

a descriptive piece of poetry that stops short of giving the reader too much information. Block colours simplify figures into geometric forms, abstracted landscapes and loose brushstrokes speak within a painterly vernacular to the history of painting itself. Ibell incorporates traditions of figuration often seen in the pre-perspective awareness style within the early renaissance works of artists such as Giotto and Della Francesca.

Ibell's practice holds a poignant aesthetic sentiment that feels deeply tranquil, like a sedative sending the viewer to a land in their mind. As the artist grows this land, the environments get richer, more engaging. In *The House of the Poet* Ibell reflects on the "domestic setting as a timeless symbol for one's inner life" and this inner life is littered with seemingly slapstick props; a broken chair, a lonely tree, a letter addressed to no-one. Grecian vases connect to an ancestral past, a fiction, clues to one's inner psyche. The actors in Ibell's works are often faceless, obliquely gendered, obscured, exaggerated semi-humans. The objects around them often feel as though they offer clues to the absurdist metaphorical parable in which the work intends to convey.

Sigmund Freud once wrote "The dream is the liberation of the spirit from the pressure of external nature, a detachment of the soul from the fetters of matter." The idiosyncrasy of the dream-like nature of Ibell's work is that the release from the bounds of reality seem to result in a world where the narrative loses itself in ellipses. Thoughts wander off, figures wait for the arrival of a party that will never show, bodies fade into the midst of their surroundings, faceless portraits break the fourth wall, staring out at the audience imbued with a poignant mix of humour and melancholy. Ibell's work brings to a painted stage the poetry of the mind, the wandering of the psyche and the absurdity of human experience.



Threshold IV, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 1200mm x 1000mm



Elegy, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 200mm x 255mm; *The Water Jug*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 280mm x 350mm



Portrait Of Sisyphus (Study In Erosion), 2017, acrylic on canvas, 1200mm x 1000mm





BORN: 1983, Christchurch

LIVES: Melbourne, Australia

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Fine Arts, Otago Polytechnic

AWARDS/DISTINCTIONS: *Arte Studio Ginestrelle International Artist and Writers Residency*, Mount Subasio, Assisi, Italy (2015); *City of Dunedin Art Awards - First Prize* (2010); *Edinburgh Realty Premier Art Awards - First Prize* (2009); *Derivan Art Award*, Otago Polytechnic (2007)

COLLECTIONS: The James Wallace Arts Trust, Auckland

PUBLIC EXHIBITIONS: *The 25th Annual Wallace Art Awards - Salon des Refusés*, Pah Homestead (2016); *He Thinks This House Is A Tomb*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne, Australia (2015); *International Contemporary Art Exhibition 2015*, Art Gallery le Logge, Assisi, Italy (2015); *Absences*, Little Tengu, Melbourne, Australia (2015); *Rubicon ARI Launch*, Rubicon ARI, Melbourne, Australia (2012); *Still Living*,

Red Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, (2012); *Face...Paint?* Gallery 33, Wanaka (2012); *Isn't It Good To Be Lost In The Wood*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne, Australia (2012); *Yallop & Smith Memorial Exhibition*, a Gallery, Dunedin (2011); *Without Hope. Without Fear*, Dowling St Studios, Dunedin (2011); *Feast*, Gallery 33, Wanaka (2010); *Chop Chop!* Gallery 33, Wanaka (2009); *The 18th Annual Wallace Art Awards - Salon des Refusés*, Pah Homestead (2009); *Tales from the Interior*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin (2009); *Convergence*, Gallery 33, Wanaka (2008)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY: 'Art For Sale' 22/2/17, *Viva*, Feb 2017, 'Ibell acrylic takes top prize', *Otago Daily Times*, Nov 2010; 'A Year to Remember' by Nigel Benson, *Otago Daily Times*, Dec 2009; 'Postcards: Dunedin' by Natalie Poland, *Art News New Zealand*, Spring 2009, pg 37; 'Ibell wins major award', *Otago Daily Times*, Aug 2009; 'Young Artists Ex-cite' by Catherine Wellington, *The Star*, Nov 2007

