



Alan Ibell

by Peter Dornauf

Alan Ibell's enigmatic chronicles lie in a territory somewhere between illustration and art, a knowing amalgam that sits this side of cartoon – a hybrid format that has put new energy and a touch of whimsy into the genre of figure in landscape.

His somewhat slight, faceless and even ethereal personages recall the silhouetted and anonymous characters depicted in de Chirico's work, while the washed-out settings and inscrutable narratives also encompass the ploy of surreal dreamscape. Added to this is a similar undertow of melancholy that pervade the scenes.

Ibell seems to be aware of the disjunction between a sacramental past and a leaner secular present. This is most evident in *The Scene of the Sermon (After Giotto's St Francis Preaching to the Birds)* (2014), where the artist's ubiquitous tie-wearing figure stands adjacent to a clutch of branchless trees in front of a small flock of birds. The man in question is doing anything but preach. He is nonplussed and inarticulate in matters of prayer or liturgy, more comfortable inside a twenty-first century corporate office, counting money.

The artist is unique in that few, if any, New Zealand artists tackle these big themes, more focused as they are on sociopolitical concerns rather than existential ones. Ibell needs to be applauded for this, not only for his individuality but for his adroit Post-Modern treatment, using an oblique and almost light-hearted, sardonic approach to the subject. He is the new Seinfeld, though a tad more unsettling; a detached and mute witness to the drama of life and death played out in a modern economy.

His pawn-like figures observe without passion the absurdity of things as if Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* were played out on a bare stage like characters from *Waiting for Godot*, except something does happen, usually a minor tragedy standing in for a bigger one. In this almost monochromatic world of greys, whites and black, a one legged man attacks a chair with an axe, two men stand helpless before a shut door, a house burns, a tree burns, birds hover as omens, a dead dog

OPPOSITE:
The Lover's Journal 2015
Acrylic on canvas 615 x 615mm.



is observed in silence by two men, six men congregate beneath a leafless tree. The sparse allegories, using elements and hints from Edward Hopper, work up a world of odd estrangement, perplexing nihilism and alienation that befits a condition where all traditional consolations are lost.

More recently Ibell has changed his palette and shifted his gaze to embrace colour and soften the confrontation with the chilly form of the human condition. In his most recent work the trees are still stark but sprout blossoms, birds becomes less ciphers or portents of things while the figures are more filled out and colour-saturated recalling the style of an early David Hockney. *Woman* (2015), for instance, still possesses the ubiquitous blank face, but she seems more illuminated, more at peace with herself and the world, albeit butted up against an all pervasive dark.

Portrait with Plant and Vessel (2015) has the same kind of tranquillity that reveals a shift toward images that are more domestic and interior-orientated. The painting is simply a representation of the title and yet a hint of unease still lingers, Magritte-like, in the blanked out face of the male portrait flanked by the theatrical device of black curtains. The painting of a suitcase, entitled *The Traveller's Belongings* (2015), plays with more formal qualities, working triangulated shapes, and yet for all its colourfulness still carries a suggestion of darker things. The open case reveals a photograph, recalling the enigmatic images from the earlier works of Ibell.

What makes these works appeal to the contemporary sensibility is that they are not riddled with angst or riven with dread but come with a more understated temper. Ibell takes the commonplace and proceeds to make it strange yet resonant with existential meaning – stories of loss both temporal and ultimate that define the human state of being, written up in a minor key that present major themes. They are quiet vignettes with the power to disturb, whimsical yet troubling, presenting their narratives of ontological question with a sad, ironic, even bemused tone.



LEFT TO RIGHT:
The Traveller's Belongings 2015
Acrylic on linen 460 x 610mm.

*Still Life With Three Trees, One
Vessel and 750mls of Looking
Glass Milk (Unspilt)* 2015
Acrylic on linen 460 x 610mm.



*The Scene Of The Sermon (After
Giotto's St Francis Preaching To The
Birds)* 2014

Acrylic on hardboard 1500 x 1000mm.

OPPOSITE:

*The Vision of The Levitating Lamb
(With Tether)* 2014

Acrylic on hardboard 3000 x 1200mm.





LEFT TO RIGHT:

Flooded Home with Red Interior 2015

Acrylic, pencil on board 190 x 180mm.

Landscape with Two Snakes (or One Snake and One Snake Shadow) 2015

Acrylic, pencil on board 195 x 230mm.

Portrait with Plant and Vessel 2015

Acrylic, pencil on plywood 405 x 250mm.

Trapped Crow No. 1 2015

Acrylic, pencil on board 200 x 150mm.

Woman 2015

Acrylic, pencil on board 230 x 195mm.

Trapped Crow No. 2 2015

Acrylic, pencil on board 175 x 150mm.



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

ARTICLES: '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*, August 2009; 'Young Artists Ex-cite' by Catherine Wellington, *The Star*, Nov 2007



Self Portrait With Bookshelf and Long Arms 2014 (detail)

Acrylic, pencil on canvas 505 x 605mm.
Collection of the Wallace Arts Trust.
