



## Unseen, Yet Present

### Aspects of Alan Ibell's Paintings

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At first sight Alan Ibell's paintings may seem somewhat bland and unchallenging. They do not leap out at you but instead have seductive qualities that gradually emerge as we contemplate them one by one. We start to grasp that there is a slippage between what we see superficially and what is suggested beneath the surface of these images. In notes about his show *Ascendants*, held at Sanderson Contemporary earlier this year, Ibell writes: 'One of my main interests is in creating a space within the paintings that recalls the subconscious or a psychological environment like that of a dream—a space where the strange and the mundane/domestic cohabit.' This helps us to understand, for example, *The Return*, in which a small figure is set in a foreground plane with a soft alpine backdrop behind it. There is no descriptive detail, and the figure is indicated in a minimal generic way. Looking more closely, we then find the figure is accompanied by a ghostly double and casts a long, broken shadow behind it. To read the work, we must be prepared to move between the real and the imagined, to see the phantom double existing as a subconscious memory that inflects the experience of the returning figure. A narrative is implied, but

Ibell always suggests rather than spells out his meanings.

The title of the show, *Ascendants*, has been chosen to indicate the unseen but felt content of the paintings. We follow in the steps of those who have passed before us. We are accompanied by the memories and spiritual presence of predecessors. Their past shows us our future. We are not asked simply to deal with everyday reality here but to embark on a journey that triggers off subconscious memories and associations. Ibell's concern with the 'psychological environment' explains the strangeness that emanates from these seemingly innocuous paintings and contributes to their power. By disturbing the order of his picture spaces, disrupting them and allowing escape from convention, Ibell can create a 'through the looking glass' moment when we are encouraged to enter a parallel world of the imagination that changes how we see the mundane imagery surrounding us.

To facilitate this, how the viewer experiences his paintings in the gallery space is also a concern of the artist. He notes: 'Over the past few years I have been interested in the idea of how paintings as objects within the gallery can be installed to manipulate the spaces and suggest narratives through a kind of physical world-building.' Therefore, in this exhibition,

(opposite) ALAN IBELL *The Return* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 560 x 560 mm.  
(Private collection)

(right above) ALAN IBELL *Landscape with Three Ascendants* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 775 x 970 mm.

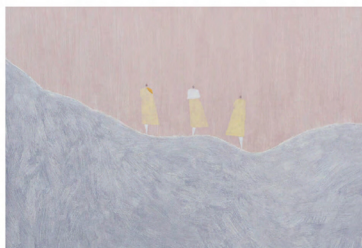
(right centre) ALAN IBELL *Landscape with Three Ascendants II* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 660 x 845 mm.  
(Private collection)

(right below) ALAN IBELL *Landscape with Two Ascendants* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 625 x 870 mm.  
(Private collection)

three of the *Landscape with Ascendants* paintings are installed on the wall in unexpected positions, two above eye level, and spaced unevenly. We need to move around and adjust our angle of vision to take in the imagery. Having the *Ascendant* figures physically above us reinforces the idea of them having gone before us, and beyond where we are standing in the real gallery space. On this same wall, a small painting *Sconce*, featuring a solitary lit candle, is hung low down near the floor and at the corner of the entrance to an adjacent gallery space. The candle is set against a dark background invoking the familiar trope of spiritual enlightenment overcoming surrounding darkness and evil. In this instance its liminal position, near the edge of the wall, suggests its value in guiding us if we pass the threshold between visible reality and the unknown realm of the subconscious.

Ibelle notes: 'A major motif in my work is the dialogue between dark and light. Under the guise of night/day I use the movement between dark and light to suggest or reinforce multiple themes: conscious/unconscious, waking/dreaming, life/death.' We find this concern in a pair of paintings in the show: *House at Night* and *House at Dawn*. Houses have occurred in several earlier exhibitions by the artist where they played out various subversive themes on the idea that home is where the heart is. His houses and buildings take on a presence that at first can seem mundane and domestic but soon requires a re-think and analysis. The two images in this pair of house paintings are similar in composition but have differences in colour and detail. One of the houses has been sliced through in *House at Dawn* and the sections slid apart. This is an example of the dislocations in the imagery that contribute to their strangeness and mystery. Interestingly these two works were not hung together in the gallery so that they could be studied alongside one another. Instead, one was in the window and the other on an inner wall. To make the comparison between them that Ibelle's dialogue requires you needed to exit the gallery, look through the window at *House at Dawn* and return inside to see *House at Night*.

*House at Night* is set upon a plane of dark grey, almost black, which surrounds the building like a compound rather than a suburban section. In this case, as with its companion, the compound is completely featureless and sterile. To add to the overwhelming feeling of bleakness there is in both paintings high brick walls that enclose the compound and houses with no visible means of entry or exit. There is seemingly no escape. No figures can be seen in either of the buildings, implying that their



inhabitants are confined as if in a prison, perhaps of their own making. There are indications of windows and a central opening like a door, the shapes of both indicated by dark rectangles of tone with no domesticating features. As was the case with earlier series like *Enclosures* (2019) and *Night Stories* (2020), the houses and buildings appear to hide secrets rather than celebrate life and domesticity. Some writers have seen what is called the Antipodean Gothic in the way these secluded homes conceal what happens inside which we feel may be at odds with their outward appearance. We sense disquiet. To enter these premises would require courage and a permit. Ibelle's houses appear perfect facilities for social distancing in the time of the Covid pandemic. We are given the barest ingredients for a narrative but one in which memories, anxieties and the unknown play a role.



Paradoxically, what appear at first as depictions of the domestic house emit vibrations that can be troubling and contemporary in overtone. They become symbols of confinement, both physical and spiritual, from which escape is difficult and challenging.

Where Ibell fits into the New Zealand context needs some consideration because he appears as an independent painter, one, as he notes, with a European influence. He looks back to early Italian masters such as Giotto, Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca—painters who had a more innocent and fresh approach to drawing and painting than those who followed. His figures and buildings are deliberately stripped of artifice and illusionistic effects. For it to work, his imagery has to appear simple and readily usable for his purposes. He does not want distractions brought about by technical

virtuosity. Regarding New Zealand painting he thinks he connects to the stylised figurative works of artists such as Jeffrey Harris, Rita Angus and Doris Lusk. However, he avoids most of their regional subject matter and sense of place. He is not trying to be identifiable as a Kiwi artist.

Alan Ibell studied originally at Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin where he had interests in film / video, printmaking and ultimately painting. Some residues of his printmaking background can be felt in his paintings with their flat patterns, subtle tones and surface marking. He singles out Kushana Bush as the tutor who had some similar approaches and concerns to his own, although her style is quite different with pronounced ethnic components in imagery and drawing. At art school he also had musical interests and played for a time in his own band. Even now he is still involved with recording his own music, which he creates using electronic soundscapes, rather than playing instruments.

His own early works were small and in black and white. The drawing was more conventional and descriptive with identifiable costume, features and backdrops. However, his propensity for unusual subjects and liking for word play between titles and the imagery appears quickly. Gradually he dispensed with the illustrative dimension of his figures and backgrounds and moved away from realistic details and settings. It seems as if he embarked on a programme of reduction, trying to find the most minimal or economical way of depicting his subjects without becoming completely abstract. He pared down his drawing to the slightest indication



(opposite above) ALAN IBELL *House at Night* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 1080 x 1425 mm.

(opposite below) ALAN IBELL *House at Dawn* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 985 x 1310 mm.  
(Private collection)

(right) ALAN IBELL *View From a Window 1* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 415 x 550 mm.  
(Private collection)

(right below) ALAN IBELL *The Medium* 2021  
Acrylic on canvas, 1130 x 1575 mm.  
(Private collection)

of elements by patches of tone or colour with no modelling. Heads of his figures become dots and it is hard to make out male from female. The distinction between them is subtle and a pair of legs in trousers or a torso in a blouse are all we have to work with. This allows a certain openness in our interpretation because the more he takes out the more we must put in to complete the work. He manages to get his figures to register effectively even on a large scale as in *The Medium*, where one figure of a woman seen from the back against a dark opening and casting a shadow holds the whole meaning and structure of the image perfectly together. We need no more to gain the full effect he requires. The painting appears like a stage with a drawn curtain that suffices to allow a feeling of recession and mystery in the image. Ibell evokes perfectly the idea of a threshold and a step from the known to the darkness of the world of dreams, memory and the subconscious.

*Ascendants* is a small show of only ten paintings, several moderate in size. But it is a considered exhibition that builds on a series of solo shows



stretching back some ten years. In *Ascendants* Alan Ibell demonstrates that he is an individual artist who has built his own imagery into a vehicle that allows him to express his themes and interests in an accomplished and assured fashion. His art is subtle, refined and effective and occupies its own space in the crowded field of contemporary painting.

