

# Dean Venrooy

b.1962

Self-taught

Sometimes an artwork's title contains a clue for how the artist intends us to see and understand their work. The title of Dean Venrooy's *Fable* suggests this painting presents a story with a message or a moral. But what is his message and how is the story told?

Venrooy presents an arrangement of objects and animals that are staged for the viewer's contemplation and interpretation. As the scene is artificial and painted from his imagination, we must assume that no detail of the painting is incidental, and everything is included for a purpose. Venrooy uses objects and animals as symbols to convey an idea, deriving his iconography or vocabulary of symbols from the history of art and common cultural understanding. It is our job as viewer to decipher these symbols and piece together the story and the message.

*Fable* features, as its backdrop, the hills of Lyttelton Harbour, where Venrooy lives and works. This is an ancient landscape, and the human inhabitants of this region are only the most recent arrivals. The sky is thick and threatening above the foreground, yet the clouds have parted in the distance, letting in light that illuminates the scene and signifies hope.

Birds are symbolic of the human soul and operate in this painting as our guide. A white-fronted tern lifts the veil of the sea to reveal towers of books that represent knowledge. A loosely arranged pile of books above the surface suggests recent human knowledge. This contrasts with the ordered stack under the sea, although the neat tower of books is precarious as one spine out of alignment threatens to topple them all. A length of chain restrains a smaller pile of books, suggesting hidden information that remains unknown and undiscovered. Relative to the small number of books above the surface, much more is unknown to us than the small volume of knowledge we use to organise the world.

In traditional fables, an animal figure operates as a stand-in for humankind. Here it is the shag, or cormorant. Known for its ability to capture and eat surprisingly large fish relative to

its size, it is shown here guzzling a small shark. At first glance, the shark appears as symbol of danger, but the species portrayed here is the dogfish, most familiar to us as in fish and chips. Because of its vulnerability to over-fishing, we pose a greater threat to this species than it does to us. The cormorant is perched inside a vase, a symbol for life, nourishment and fertility. It consumes the shark for its own satisfaction and through its activity threatens to topple the tower of knowledge, taking with it the pot of life. This is suggestive of the instability of our system of knowledge and the danger posed by excessive consumption.

The dark recesses under the sea conceal fathoms of information and history unknown to humanity. The natural world is our agent in accessing this information and should be protected. Venrooy's *Fable* is a warning: a message of caution to consider our position as newcomers to this land and to accept the limitations of our knowledge.

## Christine Whybrew

### Galleries and museums:

[www.campbellgrantgalleries.co.nz](http://www.campbellgrantgalleries.co.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

### Articles:

[www.listener.co.nz/issue/3297/artsbooks/352/the\\_ocean\\_is\\_bleeding.html](http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3297/artsbooks/352/the_ocean_is_bleeding.html)

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Peers, R. (2008). 'Finely Crafted Paintings'. *The Press*, p. D3.

### Books:

Hall, J. (1994). *Illustrated Dictionary Of Symbols In Eastern And Western Art*. London, John Murray.

