

Dean Venrooy

b.1962

Self-taught

The hills around Lyttelton Harbour look grey and moody. They are shrouded with cloud and misty with imminent rain. Against this backdrop, Christchurch artist Dean Venrooy presents a miniaturised tableau (a carefully arranged group of static figures) rich in mystery, ritual, Christian and pre-Christian symbolism.

Known for his tiny, often circular or oval canvases (some as small as a cameo brooch) Venrooy takes the traditional idea of the picturesque landscape and uses it like a stage set for imagery that is surreal, mystical and spiritual. The resulting works are small and jewel-like, something to peer into and wonder at, something to search for small clues and hidden meanings.

Open Season is a formal composition executed with fine brushwork. The careful arrangement of the books, the almost heraldic symmetry of the canopy draped like an altar cloth over what appears to be a table, even the positioning of the oars – all contribute to a theatrical scene so ethereal that it seems it could be dashed away at any time by the natural world. There is, too, a gentle romanticism here. The soft colours, the indistinct focus and miniaturised format suggest a childhood innocence or idealised purity. The swallows on the twisting banner are a common symbol for spring and resurrection. In some mythologies the duck – here the New Zealand paradise duck – represents emerging inner strength. Even the sugary wedding cake imagery indicates a wistful simplicity. Yet the individual elements and the beauty of the landscape are all infused with a sinister undercurrent far removed from any notions of innocence. The sanctity of the altar is undermined by the presence of the eels writhing out of the blue urn, and the patterns on the sand could be a magic spell for bad as much as for good. And while there is no human presence in this work, the artfulness of the scene implies a magical hand at work, whether it is that of an unseen wizard, a supernatural being, or the eye of the artist himself. Who arranged the books in such a way? Who placed the blue urn

in the centre of this contrived display? And why do the two birds appear to cower within the darkness of the canopied tent (consider again the title of the work)?

Like many New Zealand artists – Don Binney, Shane Cotton, Bill Hammond – Venrooy uses a vocabulary of birds (kingfishers, kererū, shags, wood pigeons, ducks, swallows and fantails) but rather than representing New Zealand history or cultural identity, he alludes to an older symbolism in which birds are messengers or peacemakers, urns are vessels for the soul, fish are symbols of Christianity. This ancient language of animals and artifacts leads us into a strange, dream-like world of magic-realism, not far removed from Surrealism: a world that barely whispers in this small, muted painting.

Sally Blundell

Galleries and museums:

www.campbellgrantgalleries.co.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

Articles:

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.

Web search:

Don Binney

Shane Cotton

Bill Hammond

