



Kees Bruin

Christchurch artist Kees Bruin was born in Roxburgh, Central Otago, in 1954. He studied sculpture and later painting at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts from 1974, graduating with honours – his teachers included such leading Canterbury artists as William A. Sutton, Rudolf Gopas, Ted Bracey and Doris Lusk. Bruin also holds a Diploma in Teaching and a certificate in film production. He has worked as a professional artist for almost three decades, participating in solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand and internationally.



Vanitas
Cover image: Twilight Sumner (detail)

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Allusion & Illusion

KEES BRUIN



10 February – 7 May 2006



"I like my paintings to give the illusion of being like a big photograph without the major inherent distortions. I try to incorporate an underlying symbolic message within the painting, although this does not always happen. When it does, I am concerned with expressing it as subtly as possible – as Jesus Christ said, the Kingdom of God is like buried treasure that one must search for in order to find (Matthew 13:44)." Kees Bruin

After three decades, Kees Bruin has had time to hone his skills and establish a unique identity within the framework of New Zealand realism. On the surface, his paintings seem quite simple and straightforward, but on closer examination it becomes apparent that the reverse is in fact true. Each work is a carefully organised composite imbued with symbolism, illusion and allusion – a construct of ideas, places, people and images from the artist's own invention. These layers of symbolism and meaning often relate directly to Bruin's Christian faith, although his paintings also refer to other personal interests such as skateboarding and surfing.

The works in this exhibition represent a number of ideas that have recurred in Bruin's work in different guises. One of these is a concern with the illusion of real space and allusion, often metaphorically, to elements from both time and space and Christian theology.

Bruin's least esoteric imagery can perhaps be found in his landscape paintings of Sumner, which reveal his deep knowledge of the area where he lives. This knowledge gives his paintings of the Sumner foreshore in particular a heightened reality. Paintings such as *Cave Rock at Night* and *Sumner Landscape* reveal Bruin's interest not just in physical nature but also in how atmospheric effects and light can change a simple, almost mundanely familiar landscape into something with grandeur and presence.

Since the mid-1990s, Bruin has explored the potential of the symbolic figure in astral space. The remarkable 'Bride' series epitomises this particular concern, alluding to the spiritual symbolism of the brides of Christ, from the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In works such as *Imminent harvest*, figures levitate above local landscapes on their journey within the firmament. Each painting has its own message, sometimes simple and subtle but often more complex, as in *Christchurch Bride no. II*. In this work, an almost Resurrection-like figure leaves the earthly plane, carried aloft out of flames and water, symbols of purification, as she is summoned by Christ from the turbulent Baroque sky above.

By contrast, Bruin can also contract the picture space so that the work operates within a closer

interior expanse. In *Restored Eve no. IV*, for instance, the shallower space gives greater intimacy both to the viewer and to the figure of Eve turned away to confront the metal wall symbolic of the division between life and death. This barrier also appears in the *Hope in the Door* triptych, which, with other related paintings, seems to allude simply to Bruin's interest in skateboarding but in fact has greater significance. The metal door is a symbol of the doorway to Christ, beaten by the hope of those who want to enter it.

Since the 1970s, Bruin's work has regularly dealt with the ambiguities of reflected spaces, often created through mirrored imagery. One of the earliest is *Self Portrait in Armagh Court Window* in which Bruin, then 23, painted his own reflection as a photographer in the mirror image of a window. The viewer is placed in the disconcerting position of seeing what is before and behind the camera. *Aotearoa* uses the same device, but with greater subtlety. Across the barrier of the almost surreal contents of the antique shop window the artist effectively manipulates the ambiguities of reflected space to tease and challenge the viewer.

In another way, *Vanitas* explores the effects of interior and reflected space juxtaposed in the same composition: the result is a kind of spatial tour de force, loaded with allegorical symbolism related to time and mortality. The *memento mori* emblems borrowed from 17th century European art allude to the transience of life and are used to heighten and reinforce the painting's narrative elements.

In other 2004 and 2005 works, Bruin alludes even more directly to 17th century images, several of them conceived in such a way as to be almost enigmatic. The powerful and mysterious *Witness Caravaggio* is a prime example. Elements of reality and unreality seem to co-exist in an ambiguous statement of time and space where Caravaggio's dramatic 16th century masterwork *The Taking of Christ* holds a dominant position. The overall meaning of the painting is no less intriguing than many of Bruin's other works, but one factor is evident and constant: very little that Kees Bruin paints is not directly linked to his Christian faith.

NEIL ROBERTS



Witness Caravaggio

List of Works

All measurements are height by width.

LANDSCAPE

Twilight Sumner 2001

Oil on canvas, 1000 x 1300 mm
Private Collection

Cave Rock at Night 1985

Oil on canvas, 900 x 1200 mm
Private Collection

Sumner Landscape 1994

Oil on canvas, 450 x 900 mm
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

Imaginary Garden 1990

Oil on canvas, 910 x 1220 mm
Private Collection, Tauranga

Norwest Arch, Christchurch 1986

Oil on canvas, 500 x 1000 mm
Private Collection

Baptism of Christ 2005

Oil on canvas, 510 x 510 mm
Private Collection

THE FIGURE IN SPACE

Tim 1978

Oil on canvas, 910 x 1520 mm
Private Collection

Christchurch Bride no. II 1998

Oil on canvas, 800 x 600 mm
Private Collection

Musterion 2000

Oil on canvas, 600 x 1200 mm
Private Collection

Imminent harvest 2003

Oil on canvas, 700 x 1200 mm
Private Collection

Achilles Halo 2004

Oil on canvas, 800 x 840 mm
Private Collection

Surfer and self portrait 1992

Oil on canvas, 820 x 1200 mm
Private Collection

Hope in the I Door 1990

Oil on canvas, 1400 x 1060 mm
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

Door to door 1991

Oil on canvas, 1400 x 1400
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

Hope in the Door II 1990

Oil on canvas, 1400 x 1060 mm
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

INTERIOR SPACE

Restored Eve no. IV 1996

Oil on canvas, 800 x 500 mm
Private Collection

Elizabeth & goldfinch 1994

Oil on canvas, 650 x 550 mm
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

REFLECTIONS

Aotearoa 1994

Oil on canvas, 1000 x 1300 mm
Private Collection

Self Portrait in Armagh Court Window 1977

Oil on canvas, 1520 x 1220 mm
Private Collection

Vanitas 2004

Oil on canvas, 1005 x 1095 mm
Private Collection

HISTORICAL ALLUSION

Reading 2003

Oil on canvas, 610 x 560 mm
Private Collection

Witness Caravaggio 2004

Oil on canvas, 500 x 550 mm
Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

Is that you Caravaggio no. II 2005

Oil on canvas, 500 x 700 mm
Private Collection

The doom fulfilled and the Light of the world 2005

Oil on canvas, 510 x 510 mm
Collection of the artist

Helen and Giorgione 2005

Oil on canvas, 360 x 550 mm
Private Collection