

Sanctum Viridis

Sam Foley is a painter of absences. There is much to see in his canvases but what they show is what is not there. At a fork in the way along the path through the trees (*Sanctum Viridis 2*) the question is suggested, "Which way?" Also there's the sense someone has been here before. At a place where a path seems to peter out, (*Sanctum Viridis 4*), there's a feeling of bafflement. "So why did it stop just here?" And again there's a sense that others have been here before. The images conjure disquiet. The leaves and debris scattered where the path fades out cover what? Has the ground been disturbed? Is there something beneath it? What would anyone bury here? The view from a place where one path joins and another descends ought to be reassuring. (*Sanctum Viridis 1.*) We can see the way to the exit. But what is waiting down there and who has come this way before? This is urban parkland, not any country idyll, and the mind strays to kidnap and murder. In the 21st century the sylvan setting has become a locus for anxiety. Foley deals in the theatre of unease.

Another Sam, Sam Neill, referring to New Zealand's film tradition, spoke about the 'cinema of unease' putting his finger on a recurring theme. Somehow New Zealand life with its apparent openness and simplicity, its unlayered landscapes with single buildings of recent history surrounded only by industrial detritus - a rusting tractor, a corrugated iron water tank, nothing suggesting any complexity of time or tradition - makes a compelling stage set for anxiety. It is as if this very simplicity, in fact the banality of what is placed before our eyes, moves the mind to contemplate possibilities of horror.

Something like this was put to work by Alfred Hitchcock in his benchmark movie *Psycho* where the banality of a small town American motel was the setting for a journey to the depths of psychological disorder. Foley probably couldn't paint the banal if he tried. Everything his brush touches emerges with an enhanced glow as if newly seen and appreciated. But with that freshly discerned foliage and newly scanned bush floor litter he almost lovingly places before our eyes, there is a comparable sense of the unseen, the perhaps sinister significance of a tree leaning strangely in the middle of a track. (*Sanctum Viridis 3.*) In his sylvan urban settings Foley has conjured a comparable menace.

This doesn't mean his painting is about the danger of life in modern New Zealand. He is not joining in the confused debate about how much more dangerous life here is than it used to be, if it is, or what to do about it. He is painting an aspect of universal human experience: the disquiet we sometimes feel when there's no very good apparent reason we should. Is it the mind responding to subliminal hints? It may well be that is what lies behind such real life experiences: our perception prickling at what might be a grave, or a place perhaps not so deserted as it seems. But there are larger artistic purposes in conjuring such feelings than just the fun of momentarily reliving the shivers.

Foley's programme can be seen as ultimately descended from surrealism, less the dream-simulating imagery of Dali than the haunted townscapes of De Chirico. It is something which painting is more suited to achieving than photography because the medium lends itself to intensifying and enhancing the subject while the camera is constrained by its

flatter emotional affect. Much of Foley's work to date has been an exploration of such possibilities as he experiments with different types of subject. His studies of urban parkland are a relatively recent development. These works' concentration on daylight reflect his present focus. They work in a subtler way.

A lonely car parked beneath a lamp on a road traversing urban bushland is inescapably sinister if you don't know who's car it is. There really might be a predator around. A path petering out in the daylight is different. There might be something buried there but probably it's only rubbish. The images in *Sanctum Viridis* do inspire unease despite their relatively benign settings. But then the disquiet settles into acceptance, again traversing real experience.

If we sometimes prickle as we walk through inner city bush, on a day that is sunlit and where of course we know people regularly pass, our experience of unease usually resiles into a shadow of the sinister which just colours what is still an idyll. This is the flavour of reality, at least for the imaginatively alert. Foley's images capture it with unusual precision. He is not a simple terror monger nor is he stirring some metaphysical stew with dark gobbets of disturbing apocalypse. He is capturing finely nuanced experience. This is how his work transcends surrealism and advances to a different territory.

Foley's real subject is not the apparent motif, the paths and trees his paintings depict so luminously, but the apprehension of these by the unseen but ever-present implied observer. That is not us, the audience, but the eyes and mind of the invisible other whose vision we sense this is. While Foley might show us a scene as apprehended by a mind full of terror, or burdening concern about a world out of joint – as De Chirico did – he chooses instead to show us the perception of an acute, appreciative, but ultimately unperturbed observer. The result is both challenging and enriching.

At a time when a lot of New Zealand art deals in irony Sam Foley's goes for something more elusive: the subtlety of cognitive visual experience. His likely penalty is misapprehension; our reward is his unusual and curiously compelling vision.

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