



LAST LIGHT
IN THE GARDEN

New works by Sam Foley

It became clear very early on that I was simply going to have to ask Karl Maughan if he'd mind if I painted a botanical series. It's not that he owns the sole rights to paint botanical scenes, but he has most certainly popularised the 'archetypal rhododendron dell' within the New Zealand visual arts landscape, in the same way that Grahame Sydney has with his Central Otago landscapes, and perhaps as I did early on in my career on a more local level, with Dunedin's Town Belt.

I've always wanted to put together an exhibition of works that explored the upper gardens of the Dunedin Botanic Garden, specifically, the labyrinthian paths of the Rhododendron Dell; after all, I've been exploring them in the physical sense, my whole life. One of my earliest memories, in fact, is of going there regularly with my parents. Now I'm there all the time, whether on my weekday runs, or on the weekends with Emily and our daughter Frankie.

And so, the cycle continues. There's always something new to see every season and it's my favourite Dunedin location, which says something, Dunedin being the city I love and will always call home.

The problem was, whenever I tried to paint this subject, there'd be one thing that always got in the way. Maughan is widely considered New Zealand's premier painter of botanical landscapes and it always felt as if I'd be ripping him off. The feeling came to a head when I was running through the Botanics one sunny morning and started daydreaming, musing to myself, "Oh well, I guess I'll just have to wait till Karl dies... I'm younger so it should be alright". That's some pretty morbid thinking right there! It also struck me that we never know what will happen in the future, and if Covid has taught us one thing, it's that. My mind then went back to a talk by Dick Frizzell at the

Milford Gallery, at the opening of his exhibition after his Central Otago arts residency. He was talking about the same thing; that whenever he tried to paint Central Otago he ran up against the feeling, as he put it, that 'Graham Sydney owns that landscape', to the point where he drove to Sydney's place in St Bathans, knocked on his door and asked permission. Now, he's actually mates with Sydney, so while he did describe a somewhat odd encounter, it had a positive outcome.

Having thought it through, I decided there was nothing else for it but to set up a studio visit, travel to Wellington and meet with Karl. Having only met him once before a decade ago, it wasn't going to be easy, but through a mutual friend, Christian Kasper, I was able to make contact. On the morning of the meeting, Emily, Frankie and I visited Wellington Zoo. We watched the sea otters, played 'spot the tiger's tail' in the back of the enclosure, and later began the long, mostly downhill walk through Newtown and into the city, with Karl's studio as the destination. So far so good, but the Wellington wind was doing its thing and it soon started blowing gale force up the valley. This amplified the anxiety I was beginning to feel, giving Newtown and its inhabitants a real edge, and heightening our discomfort to the extreme. We had to abandon the walk as Frankie was soon howling as hard into the wind, as it was blowing back. She was not yet three at the time, so thankfully, promptly fell asleep in the quickly acquired Uber that swept in to rescue us from the imminent hurricane.

Somewhat disheveled but still intact we turned up at Karl's. After welcoming us into his studio, he enquired, "Is it windy out?" with the understatement only Wellingtonians can offer. He kindly showed us around and after a while, was no doubt wondering about the purpose

of our visit. I blurted out my question... "Look Karl, this is a bit awkward, but you'll be familiar with the Dunedin Botanic Garden? Yes, well I have been going there all my life... blah blah blah... favourite place... blah blah blah, would you mind if I painted a few botanicals? I'm not going to start only painting botanicals, but really just for this upcoming show..., etc., etc.", whereon I probably turned a little red. His face fell, and it occurred to me that I had pretty much ambushed the man, and he most likely thought it was a strange thing for me to ask. I watched his face and could almost see the idea pass through his mind, percolating for a few seconds. I waited anxiously, and to his credit, he quickly recovered any composure he may have lost. He replied, "Yeah sure, no worries, paint heaps. Go for it". He then went on to tell us about another artist doing very similar works to his, who had never mentioned that Karl was an influence on their work in any articles or interviews. Nix, nada, nothing.

This actually set me thinking further on why that might be. It's hard to believe that any New Zealand painter would be unaware of Karl's paintings as they are popular in the extreme. I've always been fairly transparent about my influences. Happy to confirm that yes, I'm very much aware of Sydney's, Maughan's, Hight's, Smart's, and the work of any other artist who influences me. Closer to home; Collis, Wheeler, Sinclair or Greaves, to list a few immediate contemporaries. I know that I, in turn, have influenced them. It's obvious, and anyway, what's the big secret? It seems (to me) that in this country, it's not the 'done thing' to admit to being influenced by a contemporary New Zealand artist, and yet it's okay to list international influences. The latter serves to make an artist appear more urbane, more traveled, more 'cosmopolitan', but to admit anything closer to home seems something of a faux pas. What's with that? I mentioned this recently

to Bridie Lonie, then Head of School, Dunedin School of Art, and she murmured something about 'the cult of originality' that emerged from the late 60's and 70's with the now titans of recent history within the NZ art scene; the likes of McCahon, Hotere, and more recently, Hammond. It's an inherent hang-up worth reflecting on.

Back in Karl's studio, Frankie woke up from her nap. This helped lighten the mood considerably and Karl kindly gave her a small Thomas the Tank Engine toy that was sitting on one of his heavily laden book shelves (she still remembers this). After leaving, and on the street outside, I turned to Emily and said, "Well, I think that went pretty well, it wasn't too awkward and he seemed to appreciate the gesture, at least". Emily laughingly replied, "Yeah it was pretty awkward but he did seem to appreciate it. What a lovely guy!" I was left with feeling I had done the right thing (in my own mind, at least) but not without a degree of residual guilt for hijacking the poor fellow. Anyway, what was done was done.

Our next destination was Willis Street – a visit with an old friend and contemporary, Craig Freeborn. On relating the encounter to Craig, his reaction was, "Yeah but he doesn't own Rhododendrons!", with my reply, "Well, in my opinion he actually does. How else can I explain my own feelings when I paint rhododendrons?" The discussion continued and I'm not sure we reached an agreement, but it was good to talk through the experience with another artist. I suspect he thought I was being overly sensitive.

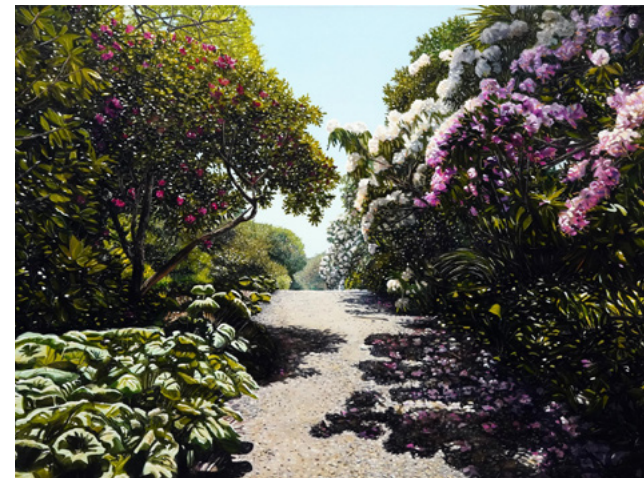
On my return to Dunedin, I started two new 'botanicals'. With the first I went full Maughan with *Rhododendrons (after Maughan)* and with the next, I returned to a familiar thread of investigation based around my 2003 painting *Full Moon, Queens Drive*. I usually paint bright daylight with contrasting shadows and areas of searing light or alternatively, lit street scenes luminous against dense textured shadow. Interestingly, the latter of the two fell somewhere in between. I had it! The direction for my new series and they wouldn't even look that Maughan-like, with the distinct notion that this felt more 'me', more 'Sam Foley', for want of a better term. So, with a look back to the past and a big nod to Maughan, I was away, with a new colour palette to explore in rich dark greens, blues, purples and reds, happily painting up a storm, full steam ahead, and experiencing a sense of freedom, having dealt with the mostly self-inflicted stumbling block of needing to first ask Karl's permission.

Exploring the Dunedin Botanic Garden as a subject also set me to thinking about how important public gardens are, how they serve the community so unassumingly, and how much they really mean to me and must mean to others. Whenever I visit a new city, one of the very first things I enjoy exploring (after the galleries) is their Botanic Garden. Being reasonably well traveled through Australasia and Europe, at least, I can attest that the Dunedin Garden holds its own and is superior to many I've visited. Without a doubt, it's one of the jewels in this country's botanical crown.

The title of the exhibition, 'Last Light in the Garden' refers to the mythological expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. It's also a meditation on my feelings of anxiety relating to the climate crisis.

Wherever you look across all forms of media, it appears we are facing the very real threat of compounding species extinction, and therefore, the looming expulsion of the human race from Planet Earth. 'Last Light' meaning 'Last Chance to fix the problems we all face'. A sombre topic, yes. I hope the works are beautiful but not without an undercurrent of apprehension, of the immovable weighted shadow. And anyway, who's to say that the end of the world wouldn't be a beautiful cataclysm?

Sam Foley
2022



Rhododendrons (After Maughan), oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm

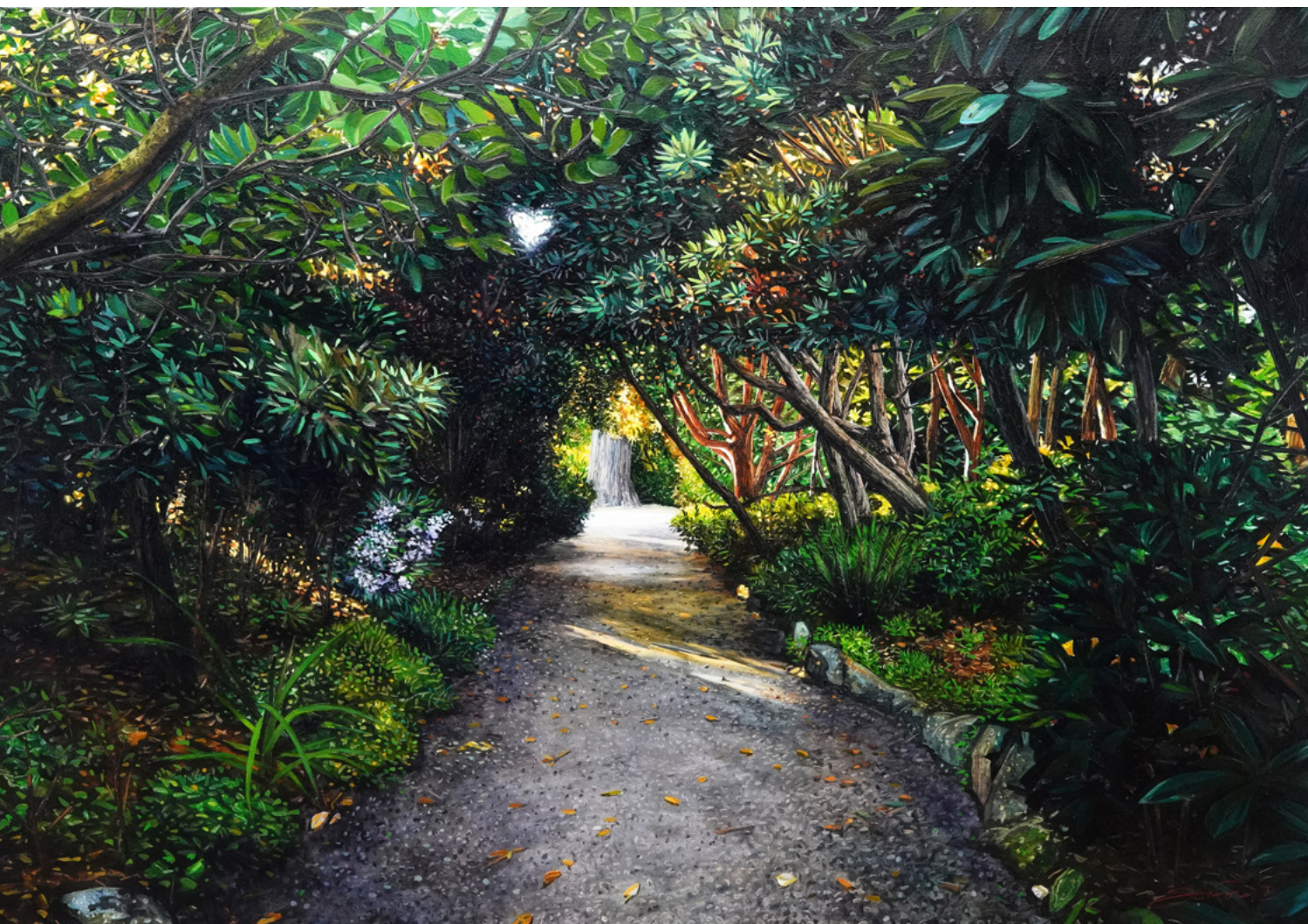


Full Moon, Queens Drive, oil on canvas, 114 x 101.5cm

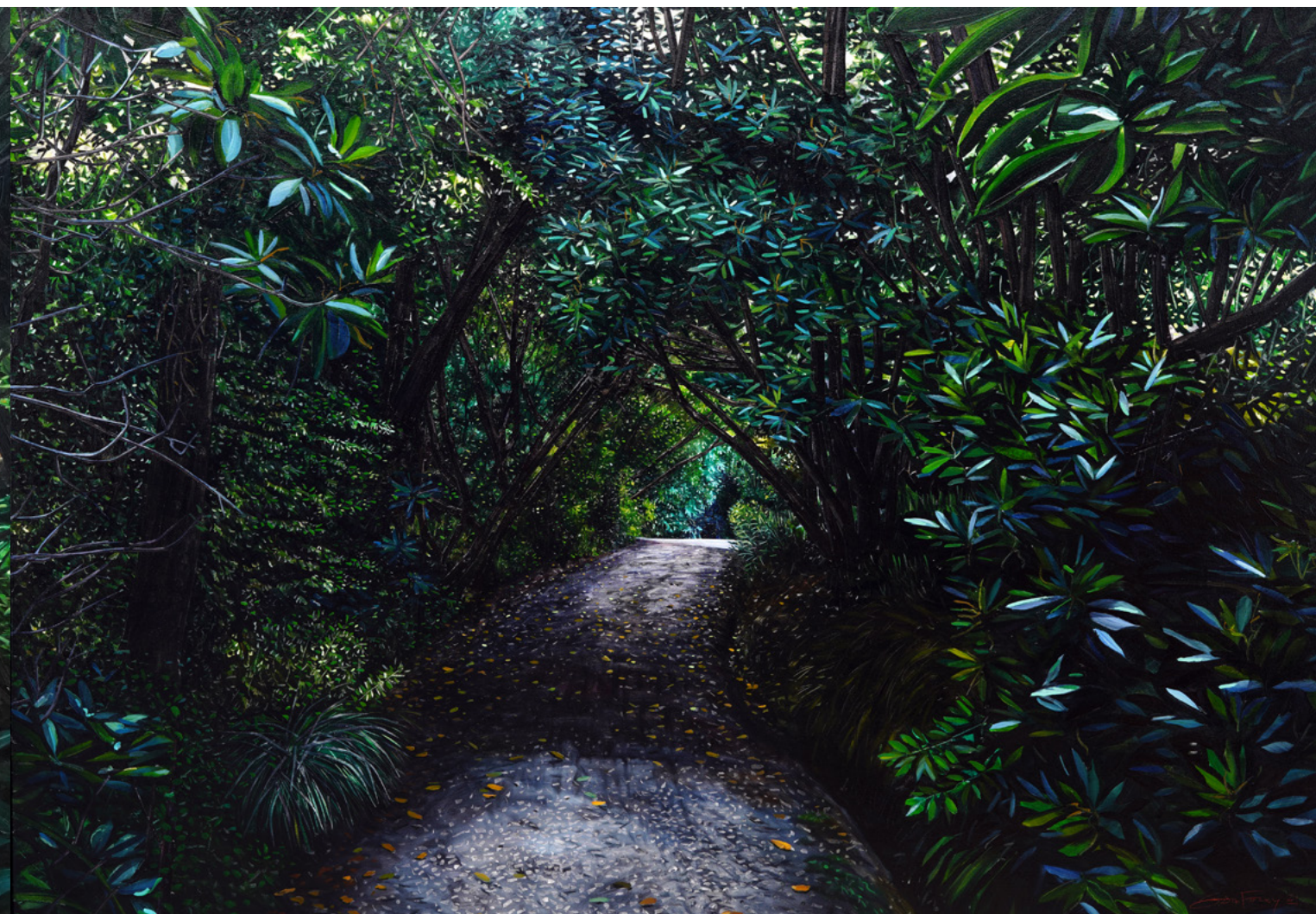


Last Light, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm

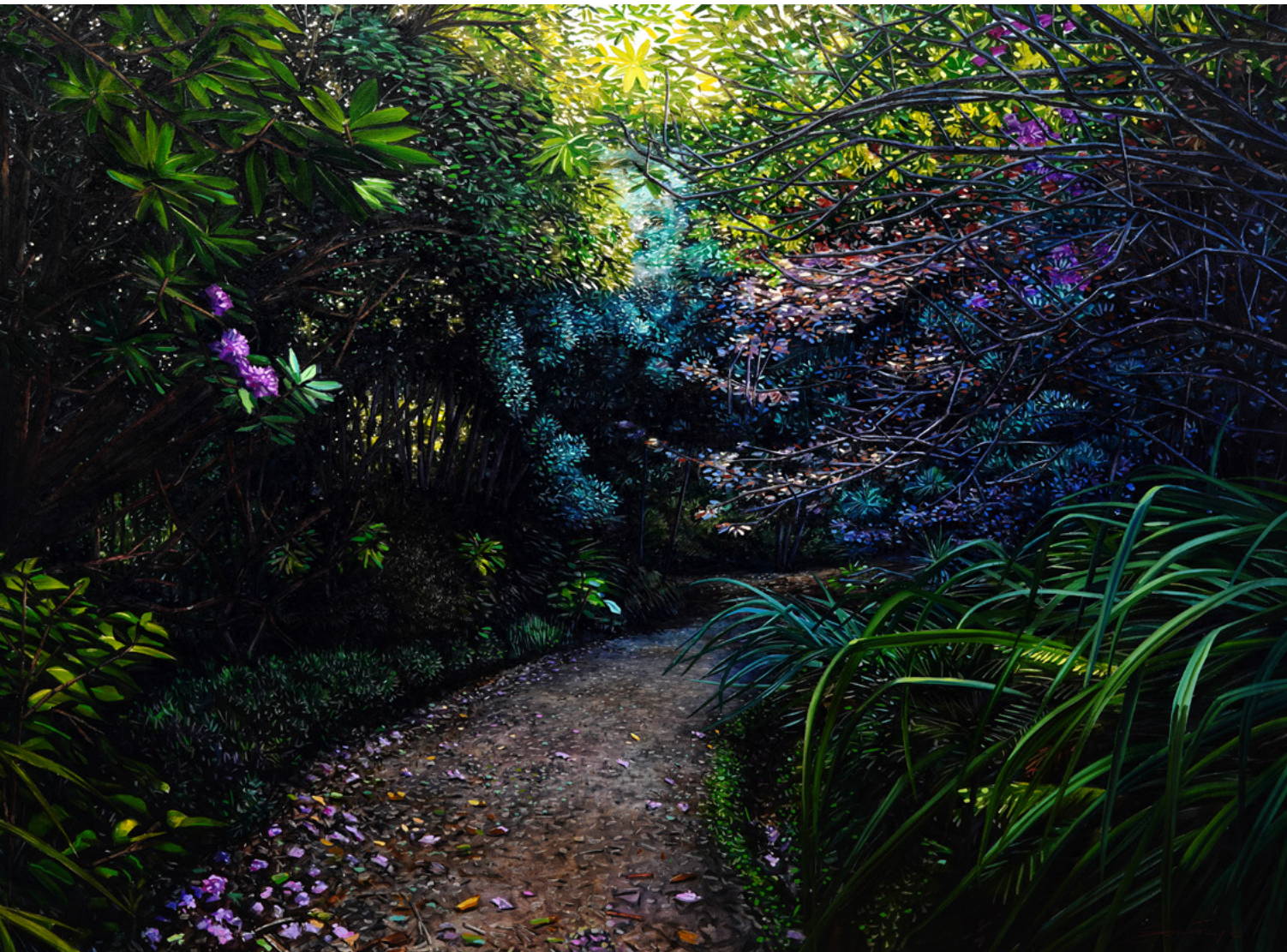
Last Light II, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



Last Light III, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



Last Light IV, oil on canvas, 180 x 125cm



Last Light V, oil on canvas, 180 x 130cm



Last Light VI, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



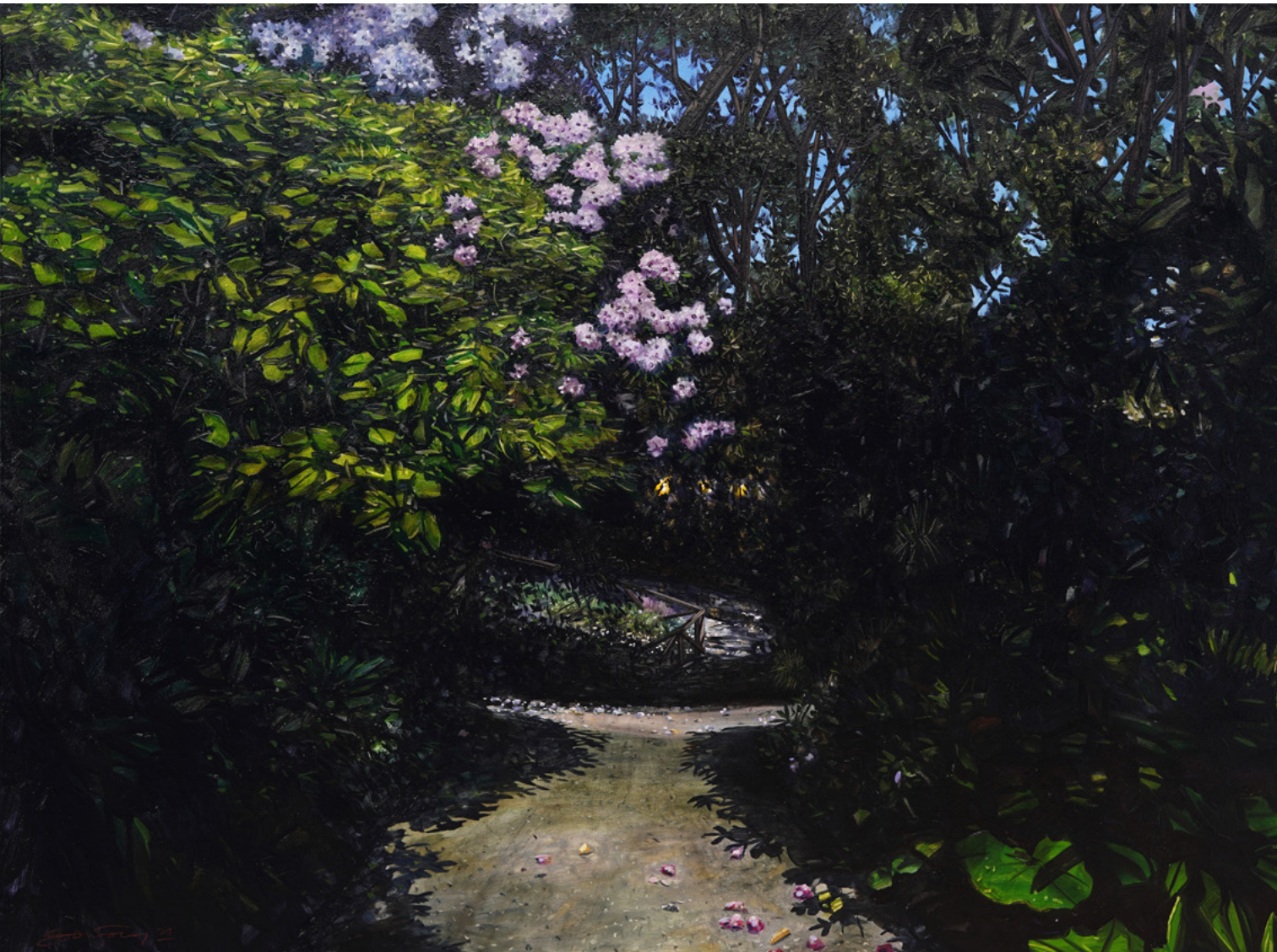
Last Light VII, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



Last Light VIII, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



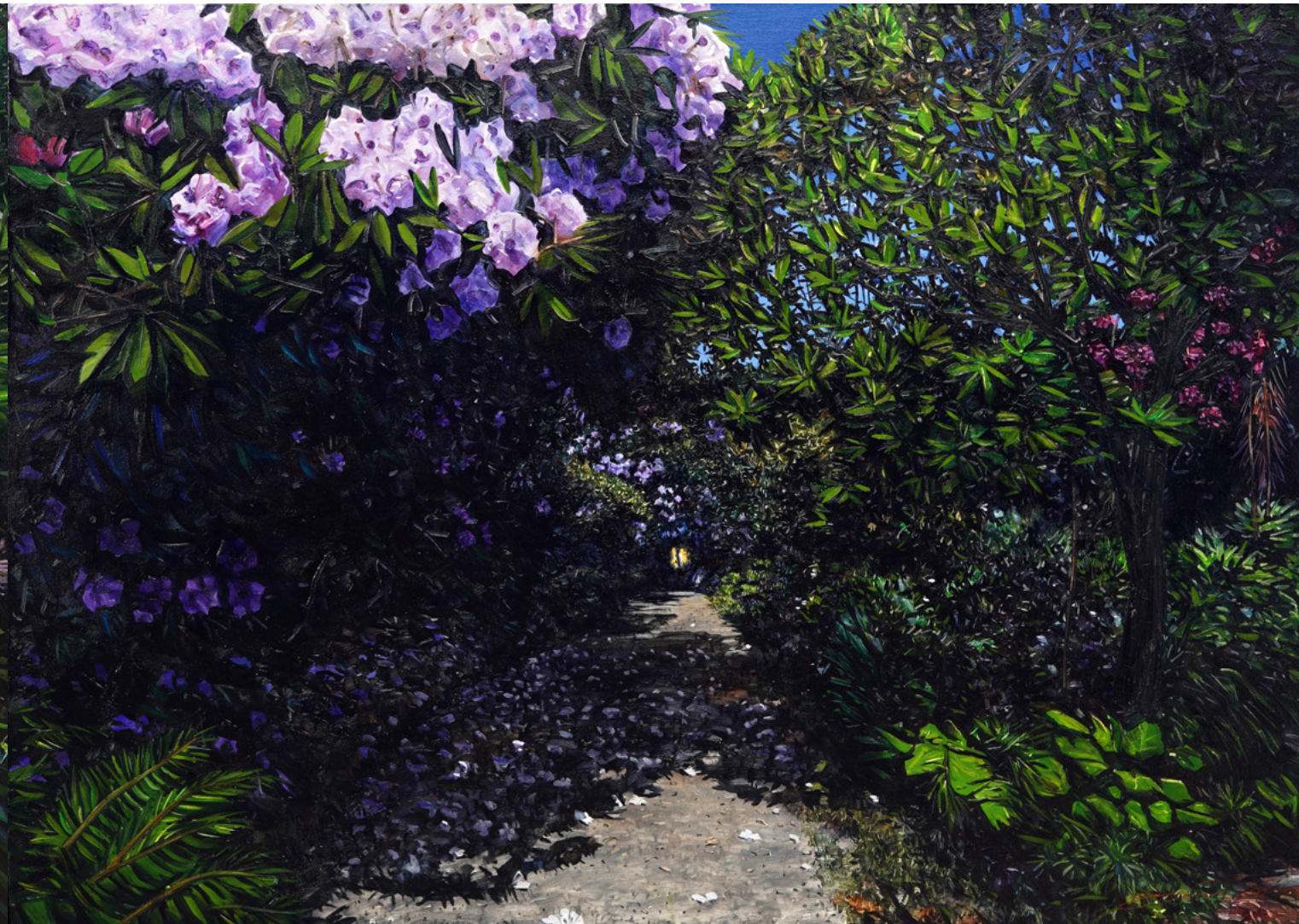
Last Light IX, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



Last Light X, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



Last Light XI, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



Last Light XII, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



Last Light XIII, oil on canvas, 150 x 110cm



Last Light on the Upper Gardens, moving image painting with interactive projection, 200 x 112.5cm

For more work and information about the artist visit: www.samfoley.co.nz

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