

# A Vermeer in our Sumner Midst:

An interview with Kees Bruin Super-realist painter, Sumner.



**Retrospective exhibition,  
Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu  
17 February – 20 May 2006.**

We can blame Bill Sutton for Kees Bruin's painting career. In the early seventies Bruin was studying at the Canterbury School of Fine Art in sculpture and Sutton (then Head of Painting) persuaded him towards brushes. "My grades were as good, if not better, in sculpture, but he and some of the other staff encouraged me to take to painting." It's just as well he did. The painter has produced 30 years of exquisite works since, most often reflecting Canterbury landscapes (particularly Sumner and surrounds), now held in collections all over the world. As such, he is an important contributor to, and ambassador of, Canterbury's story of art.

Bruin, just turned 50, has been painting seriously for over two decades, a fact acknowledged by the Christchurch Art Gallery's planned retrospective exhibition of his work in early 2006. Born in Roxborough, he was educated in Christchurch graduating with a Diploma of Fine Arts (Hons) in painting. He also received a Teaching Diploma and a Certificate in Film Production. He has exhibited frequently since 1977 and has won a number of awards, including:

- first prize 1977 NZ Royal Commonwealth Overseas League Art Award
- first prize 1983 Tauranga Art Award
- finalist 1986 Montana Lindauer Award
- finalist 1993 James Wallace Art Award
- finalist 2001 Cranleigh Barton Drawing Award

After a series of paintings using an ascendant bride image (usually over Christchurch landscapes) as a metaphor for the Bride of Christ (his 'bridal series') Bruin turned to more figural

allegorical motifs. *Vanitas* (2004), *Reading* (2004) which critiques Vermeer and was an entry in the 2004 CoCA Art Awards, and *Achilles' Halo* (2004) are all ambitious oil on canvas works that demonstrate a widening interest and empathy in the emotional life of chosen human subjects. Viewers are still incredulous that Bruin's works are not photographs, but his work remains 100% brushed. There is no Photoshop at work here.

**JS. Was there a progression of thought between your recent work and your 'bridal series'?**

"Only very slight. In the background of *Vanitas* there is a nude on a couch. She is a metaphor for one of the foolish virgins, one of the brides not ready for the Bridegroom in the biblical parable. She's resting, not there with the other brides. Before, I was painting larger landscapes with smaller figures in the tradition of the German romantic landscape painters. In my recent work the figures have become more dominant, more centred, than the environment in which they are placed."

**What are you heading towards?**

"The main development I wanted was a more obvious emotional response from my paintings. I was satisfied with *Reading* being a contemplative work harking back to Vermeer's tradition of women reading letters. I introduced contemporary aspects, like the Picasso work on the cover of the *CS News* that she's reading as well as historical references. My latest work is a woman in profile in front of a Christ by Caravaggio. When you view my latest work, compared to *Reading*, the subject is more emotionally engaged and engaging. Reading is more passive and restrained."

Bruin was approached by the Christchurch Art Gallery for a 30-year retrospective of his work. The Gallery holds over five of his original works, including *Elizabeth and Goldfinch* (1994) which depicts Bruin's fiancée who died of cancer before they could marry [The Collections catalogue, Christchurch Art Gallery, p. 90].

**What are you hoping to achieve with the retrospective?**

"I'm looking forward to presenting an overview of my career for the first time. It will be a difficult task as we can only fit perhaps 25 works from the hundreds I've painted over the years, perhaps from a pool of 130 to 150 canvases."

Because of the intricate nature and scale of his work, Kees Bruin is only able to complete between five or six paintings a year, three of which go to a gallery in Amsterdam. With a waiting list for commissions, he can now choose what he wants to paint. In recent years a partnership has formed with dealer Cheryl Kinder (Kinder Bruin) to pioneer high class giclee reproductions of Bruin's work, such as are used in museum galleries in Europe (like the Louvre) to



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protect originals which are kept in storage. This allows admirers to have copies of his work at a fraction of the price of originals which now sell for sums beyond the reach of many.

"A few years ago I looked at reproducing my work using normal litho reproductions to make them available to people who had expressed interest in prints. *Christchurch Bride Number Two* was the first work I reproduced and it sold hundreds. Then I met Nathan Secker at Windsor Gallery who put me on to Andrew Budd, a specialist giclee printer in Ohoka. It grew from there."

Kinder Bruin recently represented his work at an international art reproduction trade fair in Atlanta where connections were made with industry distributors in the United Emirates, Europe, South America and Canada.

**You've always been a close supporter of the Chrysalis Seed Trust and are quite open about a personal faith. How does Christianity express itself in your work? Is it important to have a Christian narrative in your art?**

"I'm a painter who happens to be a Christian but I don't know what I'd do without my faith. I consider my beliefs to be Truth in an objective sense. Before I started painting, prior to art school, I was a very mixed up person. I never knew what the truth of life was. That affected my art a lot, I didn't know what to do, how to paint or sculpt. My art now is an expression about the truth of life.

"My faith is absolutely essential to my painting. If I didn't know what I believe the truth to be I would be very confused about why or what I should be painting. Now I'm confident about what I'm doing, why I'm doing it and what I'm trying to achieve.

"Since becoming a Christian I've grown in a knowledge of the Bible and Christ, which I'm extremely grateful for, as I feel I've got this huge storehouse of ideas and images, themes and theology to offer my painting, to draw upon, in a hidden kind of way. I do feel it should be a bit hidden. My latest work is quite obtuse that way."

**How did Elizabeth's untimely death affect your art making?**

"Oh dear. That particular painting was formulated before she passed away and wasn't meant to be a requiem of her, it just so happened she did die while I was painting it. In a way the painting does reflect her pain and death, inadvertently, because of the way I work, which is to be very exact and accurate about what I'm depicting.

"It's a bitter sweet picture. She - also being a Christian - was sure about where she was going, and very excited about that, but at the same time she was bitter and hurt about what she was leaving behind, like her two young boys, and our marriage and future together."

**John Stringer, October 04.**

Freelance contributing writer for CS News, and independant arts advocate

*Reading*, Kees Bruin, 2004, oil on canvas, 610 x 560mm, private collection.



*Vanitas*, Kees Bruin, 2004, oil on canvas, 3000 x 920mm, private collection.

