

Alan Young's paintings are parables. Well, parables of a particular kind, anyway. They tell stories: down-home stories about day-to-day occurrences. And they tell them in a simple, stripped-down language of colours, signs and elementary marks. In fact, I would go so far as to say that they have something of the biblical about them. For, as their tongue-in-cheek titles suggest, they are morality tales, each with its lesson to convey. Alan takes as his starting point an individual (someone he knows or just someone he has observed in passing in a bus or on the street) and annoints that person as the Everyman. Or, noting an event, perhaps something quite inconsequential, he injects it with significance. He is the earthy chronicler, and the clever transmuter, of the mundane. Ordinary objects – a wine glass, a car, a set of traffic lights or a packet of cigarettes – are happily co-opted as symbols for his modern-day morality plays.

Alan says he is influenced by graffiti and, in particular, by the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat, a New York street artist who was catapulted to art-world fame and fortune in the 1980s before dying of a heroin overdose at the age of twenty-seven. Basquiat is something of a hero to young artists who admire his rawness and primitive energy. Nevertheless, I think Alan's paintings have a longer and more solid lineage. They take us back to Picasso's appropriations of African tribal masks and the French artist, Jean Dubuffet's fascination with children's art. They build on a centuries-old fascination with rudimentary mark-making and simplified symbolic languages. What they remind me of most, however, are the stained glass windows of European medieval churches. They share the same luminous colours, the same tightly outlined shapes, and the same concern to communicate a story directly and without elaboration.

There is, however, one crucial difference. While the medieval church artisan was retelling well-known stories in order to reinforce them in the minds of parishioners, Alan puts down his personal observations, inviting us to form meanings for ourselves. I noted earlier that these are parables of a particular kind, which is to say that they are fractured, discontinuous and prismatic. To paraphrase Jean Luc Godard, they are stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, although not necessarily in that order. It won't take us long to latch onto some part of an image that appears to provide a key: the boy on the skateboard in the sardonically-named *Mr Invincible*, for example, who appears to be heading for a disastrous encounter with a car. But, as we follow his trail, it gets absorbed into some other, apparently unrelated, incident and we lose the thread. These are stories for the age of channel surfing and the sound bite, for people with short attention spans, for a society that doesn't entirely trust stories any more, let alone moral lessons. Alan's paintings tease. They promise to entertain and beguile, they appear to be leading somewhere, then, just when we think we've got them pinned down, they veer off in some other direction, leaving us behind to gather together the pieces. Think of them as being like jigsaw puzzles from which many of the pieces are missing.

And once you get past the bright seductive colours, the rumbustious application of thick, luscious paint, the apparently unaffected *joie-de-vivre*, then something altogether darker begins to emerge. Childlike delight gradually gives way to sombre reflection. These carnivalesques are suffused with death. Contrary to appearances, their energy not entirely innocent. Having sucked us in, they hit us from behind. The more carefully we look, the more crosses, coffins, tombstones and death-masks we are likely to find. There is anger, sarcasm and cynicism here behind the celebration and these two opposing sides

– the ego and the id, the yin and yang, the good and the evil – are held in precarious balance.

A balance that is mirrored in, and underlined by, the paintings' designs, which are nothing if not crowded, offering no spaces, nowhere for the eye to rest. So much is going on that the paintings can hardly breathe. It can all be a bit overwhelming. Figures merge with their backgrounds. Shapes that appear important to the moral or to the story are treated identically to those that seem merely to serve as embellishments. No visual hierarchies can be discerned. This *horror-vacui* is something these works share with graffiti and it speaks volumes about our collective aversion to silence, emptiness and rest, our need to constantly fill up our existences with noise and activity, for fear of what we might have to face if it stops.

So don't let the carefree anarchy fool you. There's more going on here than meets the eye, and a great deal of it might be thoroughly discomforting.

Peter Timms