

## ***A Human Voice***

### ***Works by Lee Shanahan***

*Unit 28 MacDonagh Junction  
Kilkenny*

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Comprising ten canvasses, 'A Human Voice' depicts figures across a mix of scenes. The word 'figure' has two meanings, referring to a working or figuring out, and also, the distinctive shape that illustrates a person. And here, both are relevant. In *Fallen Horses, Dead Horses (2020)* for example, we see a woman watching on as horse-shapes emerge within the landscape. In *Macbeth and Banquo Approach the Witches (2021)*, the title is used to refer us to Shakespeare's famous Scottish play about treachery; while in the painting itself, a family dog looks out to us as ghostly dancers in white gowns drift towards two figures marked with black. Dreamlike in their arrangement – in both works imagination is at play and meaning is never quite revealed.

These figures were first encountered by the artist in his studio. And as we view them, their assumed character is all that points to their reason for being. We may wonder what is the woman thinking in her mind that she sees horse-like formations in this earthy landscape. Is she looking for a way through? A way back in? Gestural marks provide her with clothing and the hair falling from her crown is portrayed with a tenderness that brings her closer to us, but not a face by which she might be identified. In *The Winter Coat (2020)*, a figure in a room is shadowed by a second figurative aspect: a phantom by the door appearing as echo, torso filled out and head hung low, mirroring that of the standing figure. It is only the absence in that place where legs would be which hint that this is an unbodied form; and while its shape describes something similar to the male figure next to it, its placement in relation to the door suggests that it may just be a coat, perhaps wet from the rain, puddles below creating a reflection that picks up on light from the room. The question then might be is the figure alone and of course he is not, at least not as long as we are looking at him. There he is, white hands, white face, short on detail and shadowed by an absence – and yet strangely a gold coloured pocket placed on his chest where his heart would beat tells us something about him and to which we can only relate.

By way of making a picture, a correspondence between subject and medium takes place. Figure and ground both formed of the same material, it is the artist's process which brings the figure out from their conditions – in this case oily, dense, even grubby marks of paint applied to canvas. Sometimes we might wonder if action is the the only thing which sets us apart from our surroundings, as if to pause is to become immersed in but also removed from

the world. The philosophy of Heidegger et al seeks to inform us that this is not a trait specific to certain types of people Yshy, like the figure in the room; or even dreamers, like the figure in the landscape. In fact, he suggests, this is a phenomenon of the human condition, a result borne of how the mind makes intelligible its environment, a consequence of being. When it comes to looking at figures in a painting, it is this relationship of a common understanding which allows them to tell their individual stories.

Asking the viewer to see past the paint, to enter into the world of a psyche Yit is here that the painter does his work. Imbuing a sense, if not simply an atmosphere of light, he draws us closer to his figures; and using just the highlights of his described forms, creates a sense of depth and interiority, if not also an enclosure. Altogether, this demonstrates the model of theatre that Shanahan sets out to achieve. Each canvas is a stage and scene, each hosting its figure from which to draw relationships. With casting provided by the exhibition's curator and no attempt to force a unifying narrative, the work is allowed simply to stand for what it is. Thanks to his handling of light and dark, and use of the picture space to contain the tension which his figures often demand, Shanahan's painting's touch an emotional register that is neither formal nor strictly narrative based. There is not enough detail offered for us to know his figure's circumstances, paint providing broad strokes where needed, but there is no less a keen sense that in each figure a mind is at work, that there is a self knowledge which marks them out as distinct. It is this developed identity which serves to establish his figures apart from their surroundings, so that even when it seems that the paint remains just paint and the figures appear either isolated or conflicted, they are undeniably present.

While *Interior (2020)* demonstrates a use of light, space and quiet contemplation, if not solitude, the colour palette of fire-engine red and a transparent, almost icy blue which marks out the window frame and travels across the far wall, each underline that Shanahan is a painter who wants to learn from his figures. What is that misshapen shadow on the wall if not a fiction of the sitter's own mind – set apart from her as she gazes beyond the window, the trees calling back to she in the red dress. Not everything has to be conscious for it to make sense when seen as a whole, and this is something that painting is always showing the painter who cares to look.

If in its exposed vulnerability and cool desire this picture recalls a scene from Ibsen, the 19<sup>th</sup> century playwright will recognise also that a hundred or so years later, defiance shapes female experience even as identity remains the greatest challenge to her escape. This is not least because identity is formative, shaping both how we are seen, and at a very deep level, who we become. But before she is woman, she is girl, and so perhaps the most striking of all the works is a picture of two such girls on a bed, red and green dominating an otherwise neutral composition, each of the girls partnered with a rabbit. Where the girl in green check sits upright, her face in view but no less

downcast, and reluctantly cradles hers, the other girl lies back away from us, kicking her foot up so that the bottom of her shoe meets the viewer face on, one hand set loosely around her own tubby rabbit.

In this painting there are two figures but only one face that we can see. The features of that face express a look of concern. Her face also suggests she's not particularly interested in the rabbit which sits in her arms and so it is worth noting how this face is one of few that we meet. 'A Human Voice' is not only about appearance however, and so in *A Foolish Game* (2021), the faces of male and female figures are masked, both monstrous and piteous disguises alluding to their story and relationship. Sat under a picture frame that is largely out of sight, it is their shadows cast on the wall behind that offers a different view. Overall, there is an underlying darkness which tilts this series into the psychological, the weight of a brooding sky repeating as imagery and emotion converge in ways that are controlled but also heavy for the fact. Of *Sisters*, Shanahan states that it is "the playful, innocent nature of children in the middle of a serious situation they have no control over", and that it is this which he wants to show.

On suggestion of the curator, and in keeping with the sentiment of his work, Shanahan has presented his paintings in a series of affordable prints, with half the income going to Amber, a refuge for women and children. Credit goes to Sinead Keogh, current curator in residence, with administrative support from Kilkenny Arts Office. The work of Lee Shanahan was selected from an open call and Sinead will deliver new projects to run in conjunction with Kilkenny Arts Festival 2022.

*Review by Darren Caffrey*