

# JULIAN BELL



*paintings*

steven harvey fine art projects

208 forsyth street, new york, ny 10002

917-861-7312 · info@shfap.com

www.shfap.com

# Julian Bell

## *Paintings*

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**RIGHT:**

*Swanborough Coomb*

1995, oil on canvas, 30 x 45 in.

**COVER:**

*Grazia (detail)*

2008, oil on canvas, 30 x 54 in.



## Mirroring the Contemporary World: Julian Bell's Elusive Subjects

*by David Carrier*

Julian Bell's writing is very well known to American audiences. We read his exhibition reviews in *The London Review of Books* and *The New York Review of Books*. And many of us know his *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art*. But his paintings are not yet familiar to us. When a renowned art writer also makes art, it is natural to look for some relationship between his writing and his art. Knowing that Clement Greenberg made figurative drawings may change how we understand his championship of Abstract

Expressionism. Seeing Meyer Schapiro's portraits confirms that he was an extraordinarily perceptive close-looker. And learning that Arthur Danto did expressionist woodcuts should affect how we evaluate his aesthetic.

Bell is a figurative artist—in his own words an “all-purpose representer”—whose subjects come from contemporary life. He paints landscapes, *Swanborough Coomb* (1995) a hollow, near Lewes, done on the spot in late summer is one. He shows urban scenes in England, *The Foot of the Tower* (2002) is on Broad Street in the City of London and abroad—*Lalezar Ave., Tehran* (2007) depicts Khiyabun-e-Lalezar, which was Tehran's entertainment district in pre-revolutionary days. And he does nudes, *In Here* (2011) is an example. As an art writer, he has marvelously far ranging tastes in contemporary art. But as a painter, his paintings may at first blush seem safely traditional.

Painting has been beleaguered in New York for several generations. Installations, performances and videos very often are said to be more powerful. And figurative painting's long-time rivalry with photography has become ever more of an issue with the advent of easel-painting sized photographs and the development of youtube, which allows the easy production of mass-produced moving images. Some contemporary figurative painters think of themselves as heroically resisting these new media. They seek to create a place for what Bell calls “narrative-free objects of contemplation”—a space which images from mass culture cannot enter. Bell himself does not: “Why turn your back on storytelling when it's the mainstream of human self-understanding?”

*Lalezar Ave., Tehran*  
2007, oil on canvas, 30 x 18 in.







*A Stop for Rehearsals outside Skotoprigonyevsk*  
2008, oil on canvas, 29 x 57 in.







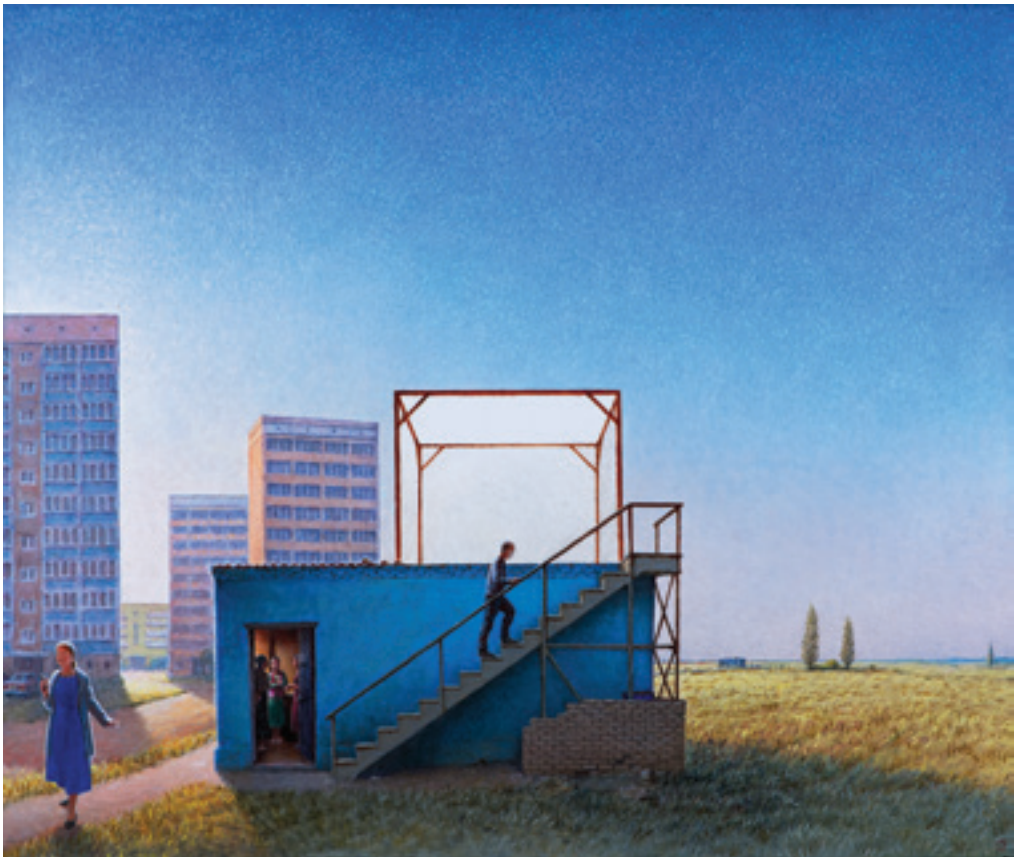
*In Here*  
2011, oil on canvas, 34 x 28 in.

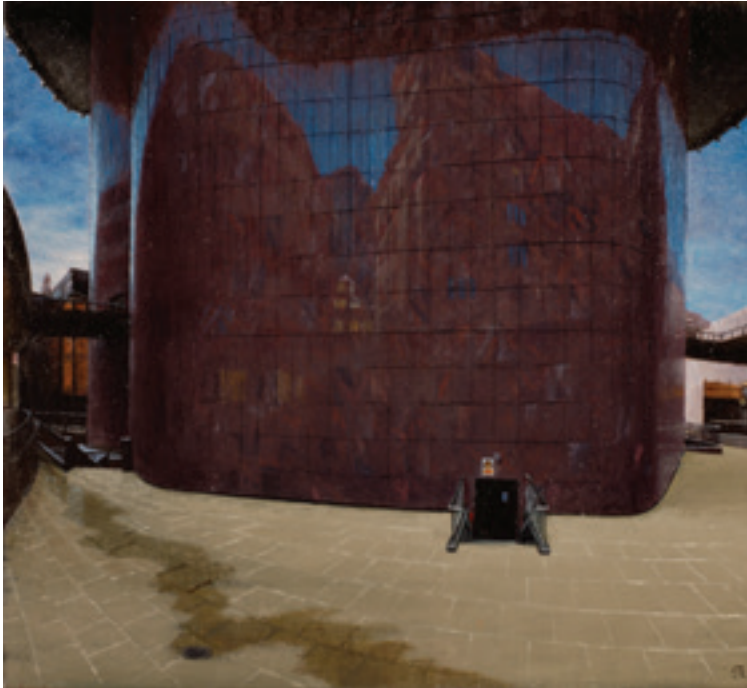
**RIGHT:**  
*He Climbs the Stairs*  
2011, oil on canvas, 36 x 42 in.

Many of the old master figurative painters presented in *Mirror of the World* are storytellers. Mostly these artists tell stories from sacred texts or the classical literatures. Bell's storytelling works in a radically reversed way, which defines his contemporaneity. Look, for example, at *A Stop for Rehearsals outside Skotoprigonyevsk*. "There you had a whole complicated backstory I made up for fun after painting the picture, the picture determined it rather than vice versa. I thought:



where do these figures of mine belong? Let's say they've pulled up outside the nowhere-ville in which *The Brothers Karamazov* takes place." This procedure means that his pictures raise many unanswerable questions. What play are these actors rehearsing—and what role does the *commedia dell'arte* figure have? The scene in *He Climbs the Stairs* may initially look more banal. Perhaps housing at the edge of this town in Oxiana, Uzbekistan is not so very exotic. But in the lower left hand corner, what is the woman





*The Foot of the Tower*  
2002, oil on canvas, 20 x 21 in.

doing with the large old-fashioned cellphone? *Grazia* (2008), which could be a magazine stand anywhere, has all the uncanny informal grandeur of Watteau's *fête galantes*. Knowing that Bell's title's the name of a popular women's magazine—"I imagine it's what the protagonist is browsing"—does that help us interpret that mysterious scene? As for the figure in *In Here*, how puzzling is her posture!

Instead of subordinating images to texts, Bell's images challenge us to find words to match his subject. Normally we read an old master painting by discovering its

textual source. If we cannot find such a text, then that picture is “an inherently ambiguous image...a poesia.” Nowadays, however, we understand visual ambiguity differently. Many modernists and their successors are often said to present puzzles—frequently art writers say that this offers critical commentary on the uncanny social relations of late capitalism. Bell isn’t doing that. In *Mirror of the World* he speaks of being preoccupied with “a way of making things that involves looking intensely at, and in.” That’s the best way, I think, to look also at his paintings. Knowing that you must construct a story from what you see should inspire close looking. “The visible world confronts me,” Bell has written, “as a miracle that is at once too huge to represent and too huge not to; the challenge becomes to develop a composition that isn’t a composition, a rectangle that curls and bends.” What thus interests him is something other than traditional aesthetic contemplation. “It isn’t coming to a point of rest that these pictures are about, it’s tipping things towards a narrative momentum, a mental oscillation in the beholder.” The scenes (and people) that catch his eye are not conventionally beautiful. Because they are puzzling, prolonged looking is challenging. What’s going on? It’s up to us to answer that question. Bell has conjured up for himself an oddly undersubscribed position—he is an untraditional traditionalist. Right now that’s a most interesting place for a painter.

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*My quotations come from Mirror of the World; from an interview <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/may/01/art-painting-narrative-julian-bell>; and from our correspondence.*



