

# DOWLING STREET

Sam Foley

## Artist's Foreword

Now 3 years since my last Dunedin show, this exhibition is a collection of paintings in, of and around about Dowling Street.

Having lived and worked on this street for 15 years the idea was to simply celebrate this colourful, diverse and very Dunedin location. Every place portrayed is within a short radius of my studio and makes for a personal idiosyncratic look at what is probably the unofficial arts precinct of Dunedin. With 4 or 5 galleries or other art spaces on this one street, I'm sure if you crunched the numbers it would likely be the most densely populated arts area per-capita in the country. A wild claim perhaps but I think a good argument nonetheless.

I really have had a lot of fun putting this collection together. It's one those things where if you live and breath a location and have an idea for a painting, it can become so easy just to say 'I will paint that one later...' as it's literally right outside the window or front door. This exhibition pulls together the many strands and ideas about this place I call home.

Sam

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## The Heart of the City

Sam Foley is an expert at presenting ordinary street scenes in an extraordinary way. In his hands, the brickwork and plaster facades come alive, to the point where these paintings become more a portrait of a living street than a townscape.

The buildings appear empty, yet haunted with the daily lives of people forever outside the picture frame. Continuing an artistic style which has extended down from Giorgio De Chirico to Peter Siddall by way of Edward Hopper, we get voyeuristic images where the voyeur may be the viewer of the work or some figure lurking in one of the paintings' darkened windows. The night works in particular have a feeling of unease, enhanced by the garishly unnatural colours of street lights.

Between them, these factors create a feeling of instability in the scenes, as if something has just happened, or is just about to.

Foley was born in Wellington in 1977, but regards himself a Dunedinite. He completed his BFA at Dunedin's Otago Polytech School of Art in 1998 and, with the exception of a couple of years in Auckland, and continued working excursions in Europe over the last decade, has spent most of his adult life in Dunedin.

He has had over 20 solo exhibitions since his first, *Sanctuary*, in 1999, and has picked up a number of major awards over his career, most notably People's Choice Awards at the prestigious Wallace Art Awards in both 2009 and 2010, and the 2013 Kaipara Foundation Wallace Arts Trust Award.

Foley's works celebrate the places he has lived and worked, forming a grounded connection for the artist with the land. Whether it be Port Chalmers or Berlin, artist and place form a significant symbiotic relationship, the artist taking inspiration from, and in return recording the specific moments and moods of the location. The resulting works simultaneously create and capture history, adding an extra layer to the psychogeography and identity of the land.

Foley's studio for the last 15 years has been high above the heart of Dunedin, and more specifically above Dowling Street, a two-block central city thoroughfare which has over the years organically become a hub for the local arts community. Galleries have been present on the street for decades, most notably the Milford and Brett McDowell Galleries, the latter of which had previously been Marshall Seifert Gallery, and before that the Bosshard Gallery. Over the last few years more galleries have arrived - The Artist's Room, Blue Oyster Art Space, Brick Brothers - and along with them have arrived artists', photographic, television and video studios. It would be difficult to throw a stone in lower Dowling Street without risking hitting an artist.

But Dowling Street is far more than just a gathering of creative talent. It is, in microcosm, a history of Dunedin, and perhaps no inner city street epitomises the city as effectively. Dowling Street runs steeply for two blocks, cutting across one of the city's main streets (Princes Street) halfway along its length. The bottom of the street joins with the busy junction of State Highway One as it veers around the CBD.

At the top, the street crests a rise before sloping down towards Rattray Street at a point between the brewery and cathedral, an apt metaphor for Dunedin's early years. Also apt is that the upper street is lined with small industrial premises, several of them now dowdily repurposed for new enterprises. For years this was the history of Dunedin; once the old gold money dwindled, many businesses left the city, and it is only in recent times that many of Dunedin's finer old buildings have been refurbished and opened with new occupants as a new creative and business heart of the city. From the crown of the road, one can see a cross-section of Dunedin, past the open space of Queen's Gardens, across the city's old industrial and mercantile heart, and on across the harbour to the green hills and leafy suburbs of Otago Peninsula.

The street's upper half, narrow and steep, runs through its own valley created in the early days of the city as part of the massive engineering feat which lowered the top of Bell Hill. The hill's scarp still encroaches on the street's

northern kerb, and is ascended by an historic stairway. The lower half of the street is considerably more grand, encompassing many fine former office buildings and the city's original army hall. Many of the buildings are imposing, with impressive detailed exteriors, yet few people do more than hurry by without giving them a second glance. Even fewer explore the narrow accessways which lead off the street, often to attractively dingy yards where the hefty building masonry bears witness to the age and history of the buildings.

In his series of poignant and attractive portraits of the street, Foley aims to right this wrong. His studio and loft lie in the former Hallenstein Brothers' factory, a building shared with a large second-hand bookshop and, inevitably, art galleries. From his eyrie, Foley has views across the rooftops and alleyways, and in his daily travels he has made detailed observations of the lie of the land. His strong representational images display this nether-street, with views such as *Alley behind Les Mills*, a vertiginous assessment of the area surrounding the artist's studio. This work and the connected *Rooftop Domestic, Milford House* remind us that these are not simply business premises, but that people live their lives in apartments within the heights of the buildings. The yellow-pegged washing line and view through the window of an artist's studio make these works both intimate and personal images. Despite this "lived in" quality to the

works, as is usual with Foley's paintings, people themselves are defined by their traces but are physically absent from the ghostly scenes.

Other works show the Dowling Street well-known to Dunedinites, with its imposing edifices such as the Imperial Building and the memorial cross in Queen's Gardens. We also see the dowdier side of the street, with the old industrial heart of the city along the thoroughfare's upper half in images such as *Back of Speights* and *Carter Car Services*. These nocturnal works also show a dark walkway leading away into the night. There is a triple mental darkness here - the uneasy feeling of walking through a deserted industrial zone has its parallel in the concept of walking away from the beaten track, and the dim street-lit exteriors also project a similar dysphoria.

Foley has continued his innovation of projecting moving images over his painted canvases. Begun after an artistic tour of northern Europe (in which Foley was inspired by video art), the artist began painting exact scenes using projection. Upon these, video of the same locations is projected, producing a ghostly veneer of activity. The haunting traffic of *Cross* and wind-blown-leaves of *Macrocarpas with Church* add an extra dimension to the works by bringing both depth and life to the already strong scenes.

The Dowling Street paintings provide both a continuation and extension of Foley's practice. The works form

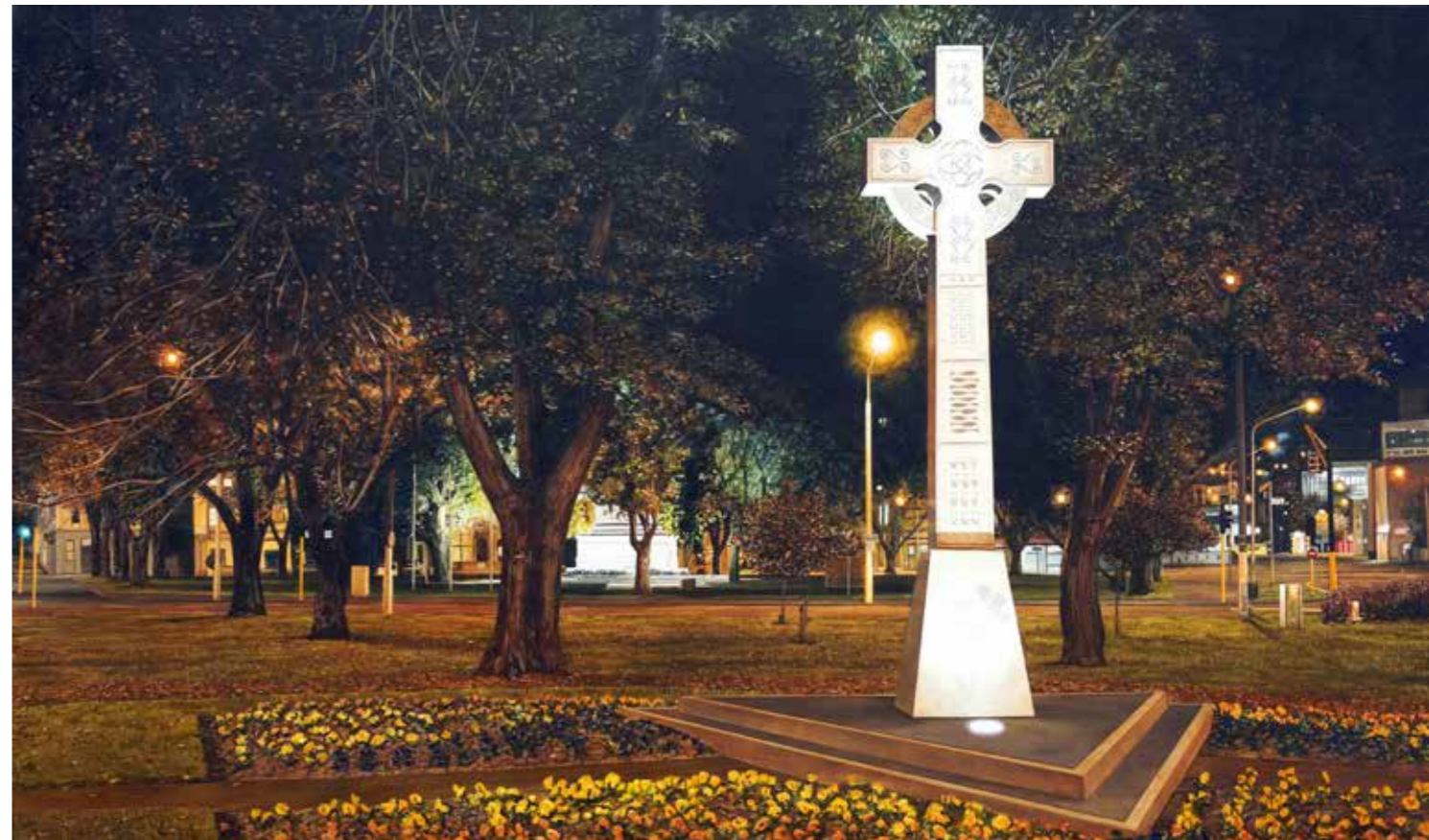
a cohesive series, documenting one of Dunedin's more notable streets whilst simultaneously depicting Foley's loving connection with the locale. They also provide marvellous examples of the painter's deft skills and artistic eye.

James Dignan MSc, BA  
November 2017

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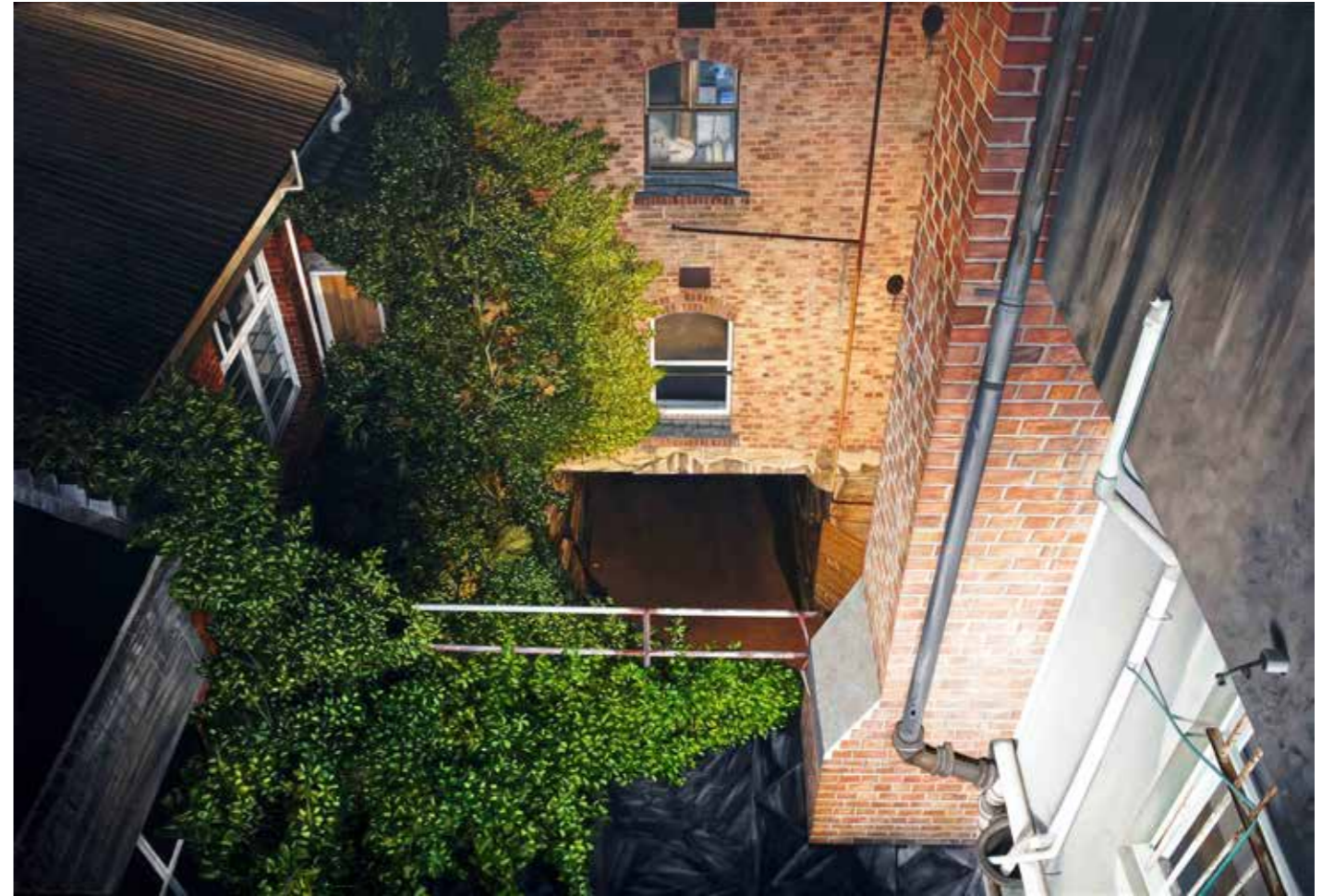
**Cross**, oil on canvas, 200 x 118cm



**Rooftop Domestic, Milford House, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm**



**Alleyway behind Les Mills**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



**Up Periscope**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm

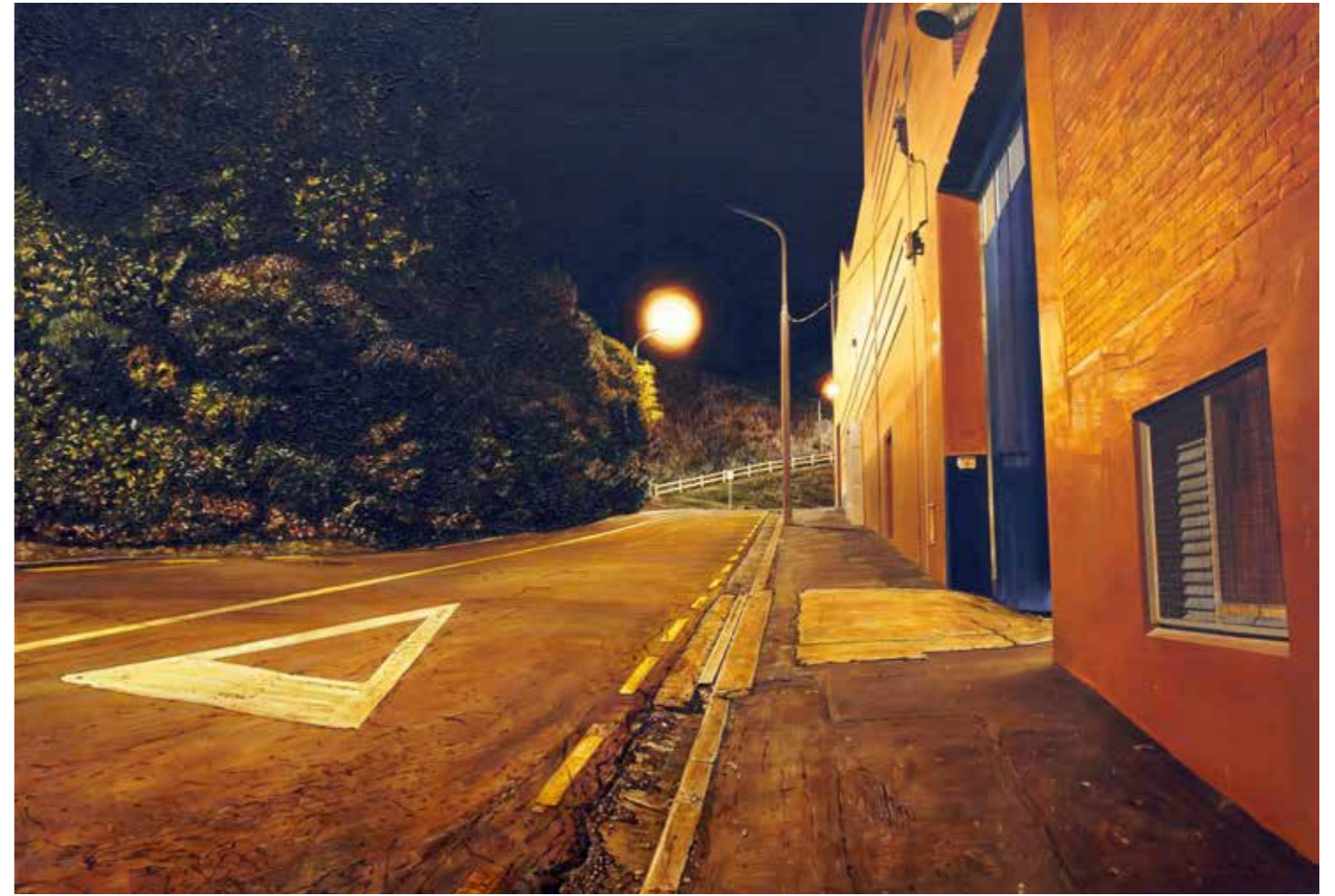




**Alley from Moray**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



**Back of Speights**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



**Carter Car Services**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



**Imperial Building**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



**Milford House**, oil on canvas, 160 x 110cm



**Macrocarpa with Church**, oil on canvas, 200 x 118cm



[samfoley.co.nz](http://samfoley.co.nz)

