

IRELAND

## WILHELM SASNAL Lismore Castle Arts

As they are talking – yet another panel discussion about painting, that undead medium, haunted by its own ghost – I am watching a looped video that plays on a small monitor on a plinth beside them. They talk about relevance, history, market forces; I watch a pair of hands tuck soft slices of white loaf between the pages of a hardback book and press them down carefully – again and again and again.

The film, *Inhuman Hunger* (2014), is a new commission for 'Take Me to the Other Side', Wilhelm Sasnal's solo exhibition at Lismore Castle Arts, in the converted West Wing of a majestic ramparts-and-turrets fortress in a verdant fold of County Wexford, Ireland. The film has the soft-edged, wrung-out palette particular to 16mm celluloid. The audio is muted, meaning I can't hear the yelping guitars of The Stooges's 'Dirt' (1970) on the soundtrack but, from my seat in the middle of the long, light, bare-beamed gallery, I can just about read the subtitles. They tell of a girl who tries to use a loaf of bread to cross a muddy puddle without getting her boots dirty and sinks into a dark netherworld. It's all very Marie Antoinette: blindness to the value of starch leads to a particularly unhappy ending. The book is *The Business Solution to Poverty* (2013), written by social entrepreneurs Paul Polak and Mal Warwick, who advocate new business models that aim to lift people out of poverty by making them better producers and consumers. Timed to The Stooges's seven-minute thrum, *Inhuman Hunger* says a lot about relevance: necessity and superfluity, and ignorance of privilege. It might be true that man cannot live by bread alone (he needs words! Culture! Painting!) but for many, even today, it would be a pretty good place to start. (Sasnal might well know this – though the protests pre-date him, it was in his native Poland in 1956 that anti-communist strikers marching through Poznań first demanded 'Bread and Freedom!')

The Irish know something about the importance of bread, too. It's said that the potato blight and Great Famine of the late 1840s occasioned the rise in consumption of the country's now-ubiquitous soda bread. Although I can't think that the Dukes of Devonshire, whose estate Lismore Castle has formed part of since 1753, have ever gone short of either bread or potatoes. Not that there seems to be any reproach implicit in the collection of paintings and two new films that make up 'Take Me to the Other Side'. In fact, Sasnal seems quite smitten with these fairytale surroundings – the body of work grew out of a memory of childhood fascination with the stories of Hans Christian Anderson and the illustrations that accompanied their 1970s Polish translations.

Illustrating children's books is a subtle art: things and atmospheres must be legible without being too easily read or simplified to the point of boredom. Sasnal – whose palette is typically bleached and languid, and whose use of shade and tone is sparing, absolutely necessary, giving forms just



enough of a contour to lift them into the dramatic space of the canvas – is an expert at this. A tiny portrait, *Valdemar Hjartvar Købke* (2013) crops a face just off centre. A shaded cheekbone, the swollen pout of a lip, a faint shadow under an eye, take shape from a background the damp brown of unfired terracotta. The piece reprises a portrait by Christen Købke – Danish Golden Age painter and contemporary of Hans Christian Anderson – of his brother (*Valdemar Hjartvar Købke, the Artist's Brother*, c. 1838). Valdemar's milk-and-rosebud complexion in the original painting has been washed out, but his serious stare is retained, absolutely recognizable in its quiet intensity. Sasnal's version of the portrait hangs next to a comparatively vast and urgently green vacant landscape (*Untitled*, 2013). It is otherworldly, sci-fi – a pop re-telling of a classic, matched only by the bright blue sky of a nearby work in which an oily black bicycle seat hangs in mid-air above a grey-green lake. The vegetation on the banks is blacked out – scrubby humps of shadow tapering to a pinched line on the horizon. The off-kilter lighting and improbably perfect sky remind me of René Magritte's painting *The Dominion of Light* (1954), in which a street scene in night-time shadow is silhouetted against a summer-blue sky; two worlds in tranquil and unexplained co-existence. The surreally suspended bicycle seat, one of a number of similarly untethered objects that recur throughout the exhibition, is a reminder, perhaps, of the hallucinatory effort needed to re-engage our child's eyes.

Fairytales usually begin with 'Once upon a time', staking a place for themselves in real rather than imagined histories. In most ways, apart from the one magical difference upon which the story turns or the canvas is centered, fairytale worlds, like Magritte's paintings, resemble our own. 'Take Me to the Other Side' is nothing if not an acknowledgement of parallel worlds and the possibility of bridges between them. Lismore Castle Arts is itself such a bridge – an ambitious and well-intentioned attempt to open up this bastion of aristocratic privilege to a wider public. But step lightly: the bread is soft, and the waters below are murky.

AMY SHERLOCK