

The Subtle Art of Theatrical Realism

My work is structured on the belief that we are story telling machines beholden first to an emotional response who only occasionally, and perhaps reluctantly, are forced to think. I present my work in that order. An image that is striking in some emotive manner that then hints or suggests an underlying interplay of narrative threads that weave a tapestry of the heightened reality where theatre thrives.

Every work, though, is an honest fraud. Everything is staged and created bespoke for that image. Many objects are artificial props, the fish are handmade models, other items are repainted or rebuilt for that specific work. But despite that artificiality they all existed together for one fleeting moment in a carefully arranged fabrication that we can yet feel genuine on some intuitive level.

I use iconography and imagery that has endured through time and continues to resonate with us. There is almost always a hijacking and rerouting of our shared visual language that repositions their meaning to highlight the historicity, and absurdity, of our own modern conventions.

Those images become a contemplation of ourselves through the objects and symbols that have survived and evolved and continue to define us. It further allows for a shared understanding but a personal meaning. The viewer can directly interpret the work with little recourse to outside authorship.

I take visceral delight in repurposing the motifs of ancient Greece and Rome. The debts, both good and bad, western society owes to Greek and Roman civilization allow their use free of the shadow of cultural appropriation. Particularly when considering Rome's utterly unrepentant and wholesale appropriation of others' culture to give their own militaristic empire the sheen of civilized conduct.

In the gloaming of these fallen civilizations exists a strange narcissism endemic to the human condition that we are the generation living through the end of times, and I seek to exploit that feeling wholeheartedly.

These still-lives are about finding the beautiful, the resplendent, the unusual and putting it on display. Further, contained within these images are a complex maze of subtle, hidden, and lost meanings. It lends, I hope, the work a gravitas that exists beyond any notional beauty or base meaning and elevates them into a theatrical reality.

Finally, throughout my work there has always been an air of stillness. It was perhaps inevitable that my journey as an artist would come to rely more and more on the still-life as a means to condense a tale from the most subtle vapors of narrative suggestion.

Jonathan Dalton, 2023



Back Image:
Jonathan Dalton
*The Captain's
Other Mistress* 2018
Oil on linen
120 x 91cm

Front Image:
Jonathan Dalton
*Talking to (A) God on the
Big Red Telephone* 2023
Oil on linen
122 x 137cm



The Subtle Art of Theatrical Realism: A Ten-year Survey of Jonathan Dalton



**UNIVERSITY
GALLERIES**

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Jonathan Dalton
Cataloging Swans 2023
Oil on board
60 x 70cm

Jonathan Dalton Ten-Year Survey

Jonathan Dalton was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1977. It was a challenging time in a country that has never had it easy. Upon completing his schooling, he studied philosophy at University College Dublin before relocating to the USA and Spain for extended periods. Arriving in Australia in 2012, he set up a painting studio in a building I shared with other painters in Redfern, Sydney. It was a light-filled, vibrant space positioned above a mechanic workshop and opposite one of the lesser lights of the Sydney pub scene.

It was here that I first witnessed Dalton's relentless drive to be the best painter he could be. Meticulous in every aspect of his practice, he would paint seven days a week, well into the night. To watch him work was a marvel to me and my ADHD tendencies. His brushes would move with a surgeon's precision—layer upon layer, carefully constructed realities would emerge over the weeks and months.

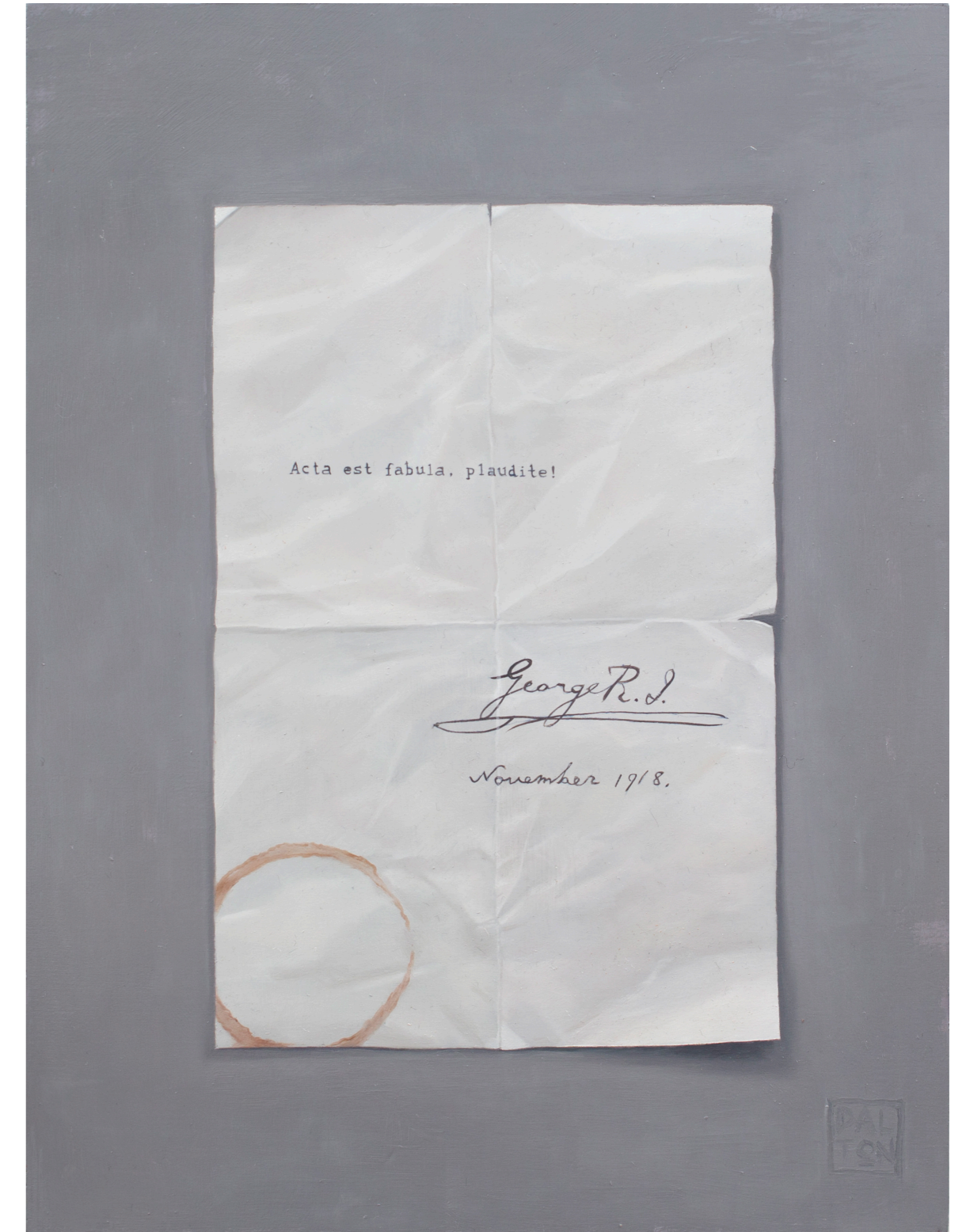
Dalton's photorealist paintings, (or theatrical realist, as he prefers), have a quality that is often missed in the genre: the feeling of being composed for the sake of painting itself rather than a slavish recreation of a photograph. Dalton's paintings are, in every sense, passionately alive and possess all the verve of the expressionist artist.

Jonathan Dalton is an enigmatic person. Growing up in Ireland imbued him with many endearing qualities. His love of storytelling, tinkers' tricks, and card games have charmed all he has met. However, importantly, they have informed the very nature of his practice. Narrative and playfulness are intriguing subtexts of his investigations into history's foibles. When coupled with his scholarly philosophical mind, the compositions become turbocharged.

Dalton's practice over the decade, since arriving in Australia, has many thematic directions that sit alongside his beguiling portraiture work. Throughout this period, his work resonated with delicate observations, nuanced drama, and subtle symbolism. Each painting expresses a charged moment—often ambiguous, frequently mysterious. The works are stories that refuse to submit to closure. He provides us with enough visual information to become comfortable before turning the world—as it exists in his composition—on its head. Consequently, we find ourselves in a place where everything is not as it initially seems. The paintings are metaphor-rich; his narratives are drawn from history's endless supply of contradictions, absurdities, and failed truths.

Jonathan Dalton has been a six-time consecutive finalist in the Archibald Prize and has become one of the country's most sought-after contemporary painters since his first solo exhibition in Australia in 2016. This exhibition draws upon work from the early Redfern studio days, the Archibald Prize, and private collections from around the country. The exhibition highlights an artist's career shaped by a unique and important visual articulation and commentary on contemporary society.

Ralph Hobbs, 2023



Jonathan Dalton
A Resignation Letter 2019
Oil on board
30 x 23cm