



This twilight land on the cusp of sleep



Alastair Wallace's latest exhibitions are called "Zoo and Woodland Experiments" - which tells you not to expect conventional fields or flowers. "My work is fiction, landscape inventions," he explains. "I paint a fanciful suburban Arcadia; an imaginary other world which runs parallel to this one, mirroring aspects of reality in a highly subjective, often whimsical way. The landscape is the waking dream of a city dweller; a twilight land on the cusp of sleep."

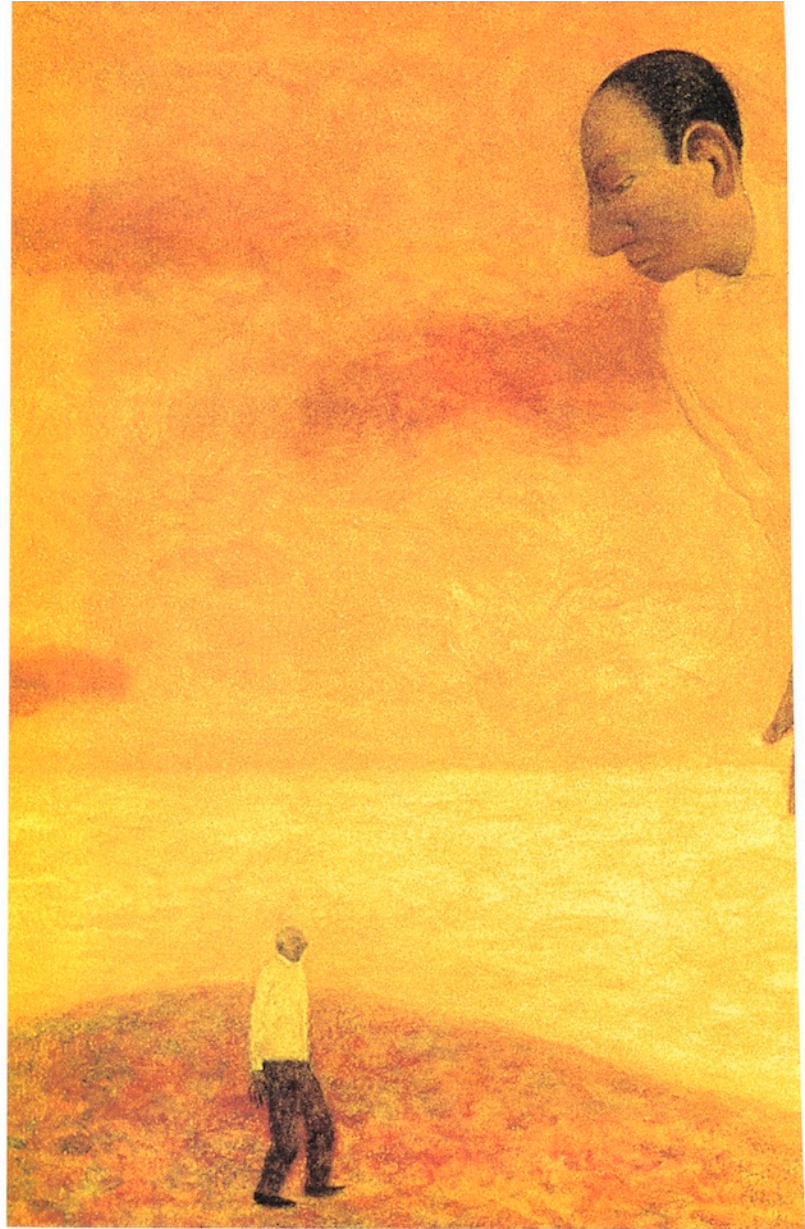
TEXT BY CLARE HENRY PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC THORBURN

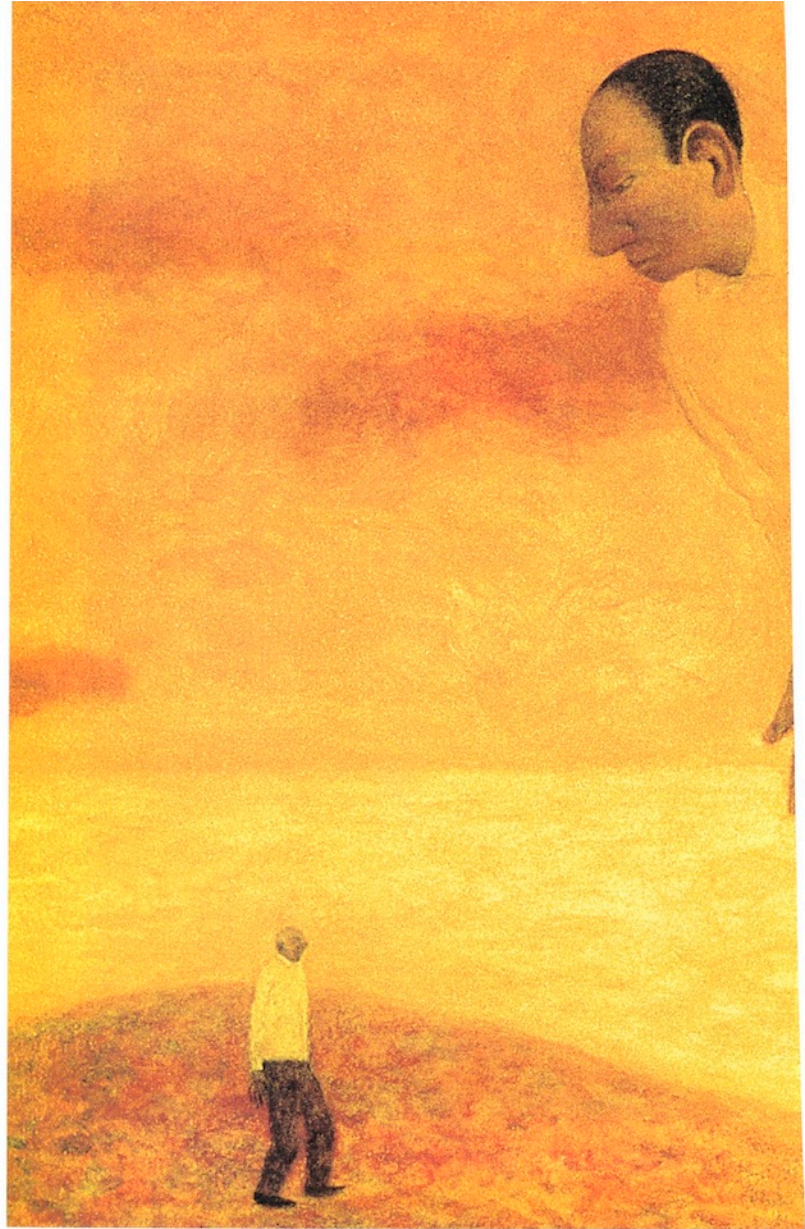
Sure enough, in Wallace's world, anything can happen. A large monkey-dog rides a child's scooter; a tiny insect-man is dwarfed by a giant drum as he tries in vain to bang it; another pyjama clad chap floats weightless in a perfect azure sky; curly-tailed long legged dogs wear boxes like overcoats; a priest aims his gun at a cocky striding crow - and is obviously going to come off the worse in the confrontation! "There's a long tradition of symbolic animals in art. Mine are anthropomorphic, mythological - but symbolic of what I'm not sure. I don't like to pin things down. All my work is ambiguous; I'm working on a visual level. There's no big message."

With Wallace we are in a weird yet witty world where, just like Alice, scale is suspect. Here giants coexist with gentle yet bizarre creatures who calmly go about their business following odd pursuits with serious intent. No rush, no fuss, ▶

TOP: "Giant or Humunculus" LEFT: "Priest versus Crow"









THIS PAGE: 'Big Drum' PREVIOUS PAGE: 'Blimp'

no overt drama, no threat. These paintings have all the objective clear detail of early Netherlandish pictures yet none of their savagery.

Wallace's grown-up fairytale narratives may lack the ominous obsessiveness of Breughel, Bosch and the Middle Ages but his warm rich red palette - or colour scheme, as interior designers say - is obviously influenced by Hieronymus Bosch's famous allegorical fantasies of death and damnation in Madrid and Lisbon. Yet in Wallace's hands Bosch's scorching hellfire heat is transformed into comforting warmth. Glowing sandy backgrounds with spiky green bushes and trees add a relaxed cheerful air to scenes like *Shy Woodland Creature*, *Red Landscape with TV*, or *Illumination*, where antler lamps, car headlights or lanterns light up the landscape. However, all these images are underpinned by acute observation.

Wallace always paints in acrylic. "I think you can do

anything with acrylic that you can with oil - although I miss the smell! Acrylic is very versatile, and you get fewer mistakes."

His pictures can begin with a sketch or doodle but more often it all happens on the canvas.

Some might initially also see these pictures as Surreal, but Wallace's images lack the intellectual tricks of mind and eye so beloved of Magritte and Dali. Wallace's singular vision has a more naive approach, strangely old fashioned, but especially endearing in the late twentieth century.

Recently he's been simplifying, weeding things out to concentrate on figures or objects on their own or within their "own little context." His litany of characters - snake boy, big head dog, maggies - remains the same. He admits his characters may be alter egos. "Sometimes I get fed up with them and try to kill them off, but back they come!" ■

"In Wallace's hands Bosch's scorching hellfire heat is transformed into comforting warmth."