

MARTIN BELL

Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti* 2024
mixed media on wooden panels, overall size 2.8 x 11.4 metres

Bell makes his painting debut in his fifth solo exhibition with one monumental work on 75 ply panels arranged in a 5 x 15 formation, overall size 2.8 x 11.4 metres.

Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti is a grand history painting executed in a free and vigorous cartoon-like style.

Installed on the longest wall in Gallery 1, the painting synthesises scenes and images borrowed from myriad sources.

These include written accounts of the 1629 shipwreck of the Dutch East India Company's *Batavia* in the Houtman Abrolhos Islands off the coast of Western Australia, and the horrific and depraved mutiny that followed.

Also, the series of three fresco panels known as *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government* 1338–40 by 14th-century Sienese painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Bad Government*, 1338–40



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti 2024* (detail)

And *The Massacre of the Innocents* c.1628, a classicising history painting by Nicolas Poussin, as well as arguably the most significant of all sculptures surviving from classical antiquity – *Laocoön and His Sons*, which dates to 40–30 BC and was excavated in Rome in 1506.

Bell became interested in the history of the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or Dutch East India Company, while undertaking a French Connections residency in Paris in 2018-19 made possible by the Australian Print Workshop, the National Gallery of Australia and the Collie Print Trust.

"I was especially intrigued by the tragic story of the *Batavia's* shipwreck, which degenerated into a Lord of the Flies scenario, with more than 100 of the 280 survivors murdered," he recalls.



Massacre of the survivors after the shipwreck of the *Batavia* in 1629. Plate 3 (detail), from *Ongeluckige voyage, van 't schip Batavia, nae de Oost-Indien*, by F. Pelsaert, F., & Vliet, J., 1647

In Bell's painting, the ship is represented by the repeating motif of a triangle – suggestive of a mainsail, headsail or mast – which helps to unify the composition's pictorial elements alongside coloured circles and zigzags.



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, After Lorenzetti 2024 (detail)

Meanwhile, the tropical palette of yellow, orange, green, grey and blue corresponds to the sand, sun, vegetation, sea and sky of the islands where the atrocity occurred.

“As colourful in gore and as psychologically deranged as the situation on the Houtman Abrolhos Islands was, parallels can be made between the incident and the activities of the VOC in the Spice Islands, now known as the Moluccas, where the ship was headed,” Bell explains.



Petrus Plancius, *Spice Map*, 1617, Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth, 2014

“The VOC was the world’s first publicly listed multinational company, and it colonised with military brutality whilst benefiting shareholders,” he says.

“It played a considerable role in the genesis of global capitalism and the stock market, and in the establishment of corporate models of public companies,” he says.

Bell introduced the dancers from Lorenzetti’s fresco *Effects of Good Government in the City* to underscore the intent of Siena’s governing Council of Nine, who commissioned the frescoes for the walls of the Sala della Pace (Hall of Peace), where they met to run the self-governing republic.

“Lorenzetti’s frescoes include depictions of war, tyranny and a ruined city with empty streets and no commerce,” says Bell.

"It's a clear warning which finds its equivalent in the greed and colonial violence of the company that sent the *Batavia* to the Spice Islands, and the subsequent gruesome tyranny visited on its survivors," he says.

"I also included the dancers, which I've placed in the centre of my painting, because I enjoy the touch of ambivalent pagan ritual they have about them," he adds.



Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government*, 1338-40, (detail)



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti 2024* (detail)

The figure of Laocoön struggling with flesh-eating snakes can be seen a little to the right of the ring of dancers.



Laocoön and His Sons, 40–30 BC



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti* 2024 (detail)

"The dramatic, oceanic nature of the punishment given to the Trojan priest and his sons can be likened to that of the Predikant or minister on the *Batavia*," says Bell.

"Like Laocoön, he endured torture without any redeeming umbrella of martyrdom – their suffering was as futile as their torture," he says.

The Massacre of the Innocents – created around the same time as the shipwreck – makes an appearance to the left of the dancers. Bell included Poussin's highly emotive interpretation of the biblical story on account of King Herod's murderous paranoia, which reminded him of the grisly fate met by the victims of mutineer Jeronimus Cornelisz on the islands.



Nicolas Poussin, *The Massacre of the Innocents* 1625-1629



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government, After Lorenzetti* 2024 (detail)

In addition, the painting encompasses characters drawn from the comic books and animation series of Bell's childhood.

"Many of the figures, large and small, are derived from *He-Man*, *Voltron* and *Planet of the Apes* action figures," he says.

"People call them toys but I think of them as archetypes, gods, even gladiators. They're in the painting as subjects that can speak for themselves, not merely as references," he adds. "They are there to help tell the story."

Panel by panel, Bell built up the painting over a period of 12 months, moving between oil, acrylic, oil stick, crayon, ink and pencil, and using brushes, spray cans and an air gun.

"For the overall design of the work, I was thinking about maps from the medieval and Renaissance periods, when mythic narrative held the same value as known fact," he says.



A chart of the coast of Java from Bantam to Batavia



Martin Bell, *Batavia, an Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, After Lorenzetti 2024 (detail)

Bell has made a name for himself as a gifted practitioner of large-scale drawings that have found their way into the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of SA and the Art Gallery of NSW.

So what sparked the move to painting?

"I've done little watercolours and paintings, just for myself, but nothing has ever been resolved," he says.

"Committing to something large allowed me to sketch out hypothetical compositions, do tonnes of preparatory drawings and essentially put everything through a filter. Hopefully, what's come out is something people can relate to."

— Tony Magnusson, October 2024