



What *dreams* may come



Dean Johnstone makes his mark with technical prowess, masterful brushwork and boundless imagination.

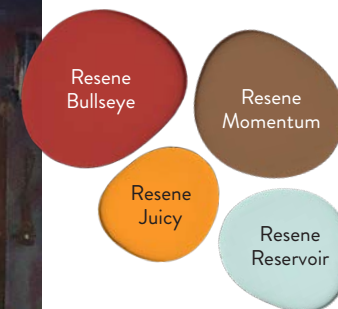
Before we had access to the printing and laser cutting technology we rely on today, signs were made with paintbrushes wielded by the steadiest of hands. At that time, being able to create anything needed, at any scale, in a way that's endlessly repeatable would have seemed unimaginable. Instead, a craftsman could only rely on their own practice, care and skill as they pursued perfection.

Today, there's only around 14 master signwriters left in New Zealand – but they continue to be in high demand. Some are contracted for bespoke painting projects where clients are after their particular kind of artisanal charm, and others are kept busy working on film and TV sets. Dean Johnstone does all of the above.

“Being a signwriter by trade and having been taught the old-fashioned way with a stick and a brush, it's become almost like a circus act; people love to come and watch as they don't see it anymore and there's not too many around that can still do these things with a brush now,” says Dean. “In the old days, when you were an apprentice, you

left: Dean brought the jungle to Corianders restaurant in Christchurch with his impressive tiger mural, which features Resene Juicy, Resene Ayers Rock and Resene Limerick.

-  Resene Limerick
-  Resene Ayers Rock



far left: Dean Johnstone airbrushes a viper on to a Dodge Viper pickup truck using paint from Resene Automotive & Light Industrial.

left: Key colours used to give an edgy look to this bowser-themed private bar included Resene Reservoir, Resene Momentum and Resene Bullseye.

would drive around and approach shops to signwrite their Christmas windows to get a bit of cash to buy all your gifts.”

Aside from six months in Wellington while working on the set of *King Kong* and a few short stints in Queenstown, Texas, Los Angeles, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, Dean has always called Christchurch home. He started out with an apprenticeship at Pilgrim Displays back in 1984 before starting his own business in 1989.

“Starting my own business was a lesson in life in its own right,” he laughs. “But I’m so glad when I look back now that I did an apprenticeship, because even though I now have access to all the latest tools that you can have in a sign studio, it seems to have come full circle as I’ve gone back to so much hand painting.”

“There was also a small gap where I went through what I think a lot of young people go through – where you think you’ve had about enough of the boss and then you find yourself wanting to break away from what you’ve been taught – and that’s what I did. I went and worked as a contractor for a landscaping company as a concept artist, which I loved, and I would draw what their landscapes would look like in 20 years so that their clients could visualise them. That was a big deal to that company at that time.”

But Dean is glad he came back to the rewarding work of painting. “I’m 55 now, and when I look back, mine has already

been a pretty colourful artist’s life so far – especially when you start talking about opportunities like being flown out to America to signwrite on a superyacht,” he says.

“I’ve also been able to work on a number of major movies, too. *King Kong* was one that I had quite a bit of work on. I was the chief signwriter, which was right up my alley, because I had to study what the period signs, fascias and façades in Times Square would have looked like back in 1932. I appreciated that the production team on that project recognised that hand-rendered art has something more to it than digital does.”

“My team and I also worked on *10,000 BC* for Roland Emmerich, a German director that’s known for doing a lot of disaster movies. That was cool. We built all the woolly mammoth bones up in Wanaka in the snow. And it’s always exciting to take your kids to those kinds of movies and say to them, ‘I built that.’”

For Dean, it’s themed environments that he most looks forward to working on. “For those projects, I get to be the designer, builder and painter. With a lot of big movies, you’re just another number. But with the theming, you design it, create it and build it – and even better when they have the budget to be able to let you do really cool stuff with it. Most of the time, the budget is tight. you’re trying to make it look like a million dollars but you’ve only got \$27.90 to spend.”

One of the biggest challenges Dean faces in his work is not being able to access time-saving products and materials that are available overseas, but he says that it leads to plenty of creative problem solving. “We just simply don’t have the same range of options here, so we have to do it a different way. It takes some creativity and you have to work out how to get the same look with what’s available – which might be only 10% of the options someone else might be able to use in another country. For instance, I have a job in Queenstown where I have to create a filigree wrought-iron sign. I can’t just cast that from one piece of metal, because it would be too heavy, so I need to laser cut it and router the edges to create the same sort of look.

“For movies, you end up making stuff that would be really heavy out of materials that are really light, because they need to be able to move them around. For instance, you’ll make an I-Beam that realistically looks like it weighs about a tonne and a half. But when people see it, they don’t realise it only weighs about eight stone and is made out of polystyrene.”

Dean says that Resene products are one of the most important things he relies on for his work. “When you’re doing outdoor murals, you absolutely can’t beat Resene Lumbersider – and the Resene colour range is fantastic. I have lots of favourite Resene colours that I find myself going back to. But when I go into









far left: To create the aged metal effect on this 'cryo chamber' within The Oasis gaming development in Christchurch's The Palms mall, Dean used Resene Wrangler, Resene Ayers Rock and Resene Mission Brown.



left: Dean relied on favourite Resene colours like Resene Turbo, Resene Curious Blue, Resene Bright Red, Resene Black and Resene White when painting this mind-blowing fresco for the ceiling of Dennis Chapman's 'castle'. Painting and images by Dean Johnston.



	Resene White		Resene Bright Red		Resene Curious Blue
	Resene Turbo		Resene Ayers Rock		Resene Black

our Resene ColorShop, I pick up Resene Turbo, Resene Bright Red and Resene Curious Blue. Those are the ones I go straight to first, because I know I can build just about any colour I need in a pinch by mixing those, and I always have those three with me in my van.”

“There’s a Resene ColorShop we frequent in Christchurch and they’ve just about stopped asking me what I’m planning on doing with what I pick up. I invite the staff from the counter to come down and see what we’re working on because it helps them understand what products are being used and how they’re being used. We built a whole *Blade Runner*-style town scene that they came by to see and they were just blown away by it – which was cool feedback.”

A number of commercial projects that Dean has had a hand in over the years have also won Resene Total Colour Awards, including Waffle Haus in Christchurch and Saigon Kingdom restaurant in Queenstown, but being recognised by the New Zealand Sign and Display Association (NZSDA) as a Master Signmaker in 2018 was a crowning achievement.

“My company, Dream It, has humbly done very well in the NZSDA Sign Display Awards for years, and I’ve always really enjoyed the competition. We’ve done incredibly well with gold medals and we’re really proud to be a part of the NZSDA – and to be recognised by them as a Master Signwriter is a very cool

thing. The people who have been awarded that designation find themselves educating and teaching the younger ones coming through and trying to keep up the calibre, class and ability to lay stuff out and design it without needing a computer or digital aids.”

Dean is also a member of New Zealand’s Letterheads chapter, which is part of an international organisation of letterwriters, pinstripers and mural painters. “The people involved in it are real artists, and they support the resurgence of all these old techniques. For me, right now, that’s something really important to be a part of. Kiwi signwriters and display artists are as good as anywhere else in the world and hold their own, which I’m very proud of.”

For those wanting to follow in Dean’s footsteps and take up the trade, he recommends patience and perseverance. “It’s not going to happen overnight, and it’s not going to happen the way you want it to all the time. But if you keep at it and keep the quality of your artwork high, you’re going to get there. No one ever said it’s going to be easy, but the feeling you get when you get there is off the chart.”

“Don’t think that you can’t become a professional artist in New Zealand, because if I can, you can.” **BW**

To see more of Dean and his team’s incredible work, visit www.dreamit.kiwi.nz.