



# Escape from Orchid City

PETER MADDEN

*City Gallery Wellington*  
*8 October 2006 – 28 January 2007*



# The Gentle Yamis of Orchid Island

A PICTURE STORY BY CHANG SHUHUA  
& PETER MADDEN



## Boundless

*"O God I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of infinite space were it not that I have had bad dreams."  
- Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2*

**D**OWN the end of our street is a man who never ventures out. Yet nearly every photographic-driven magazine produced that month is delivered. (His house is deep velvet.) His rubbish is prodigious. Gold flies trace the shape of tomorrow in the windows of the backhouse. Laughter from the house causes the children of the street to shiver.

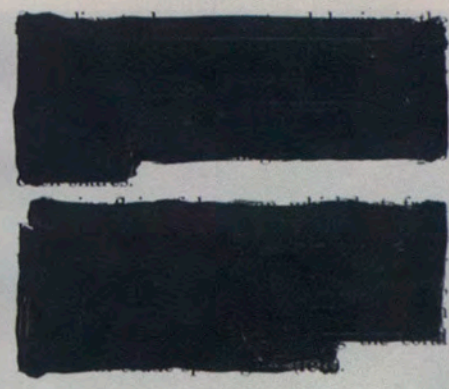
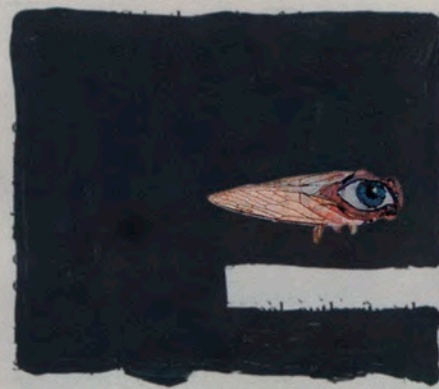
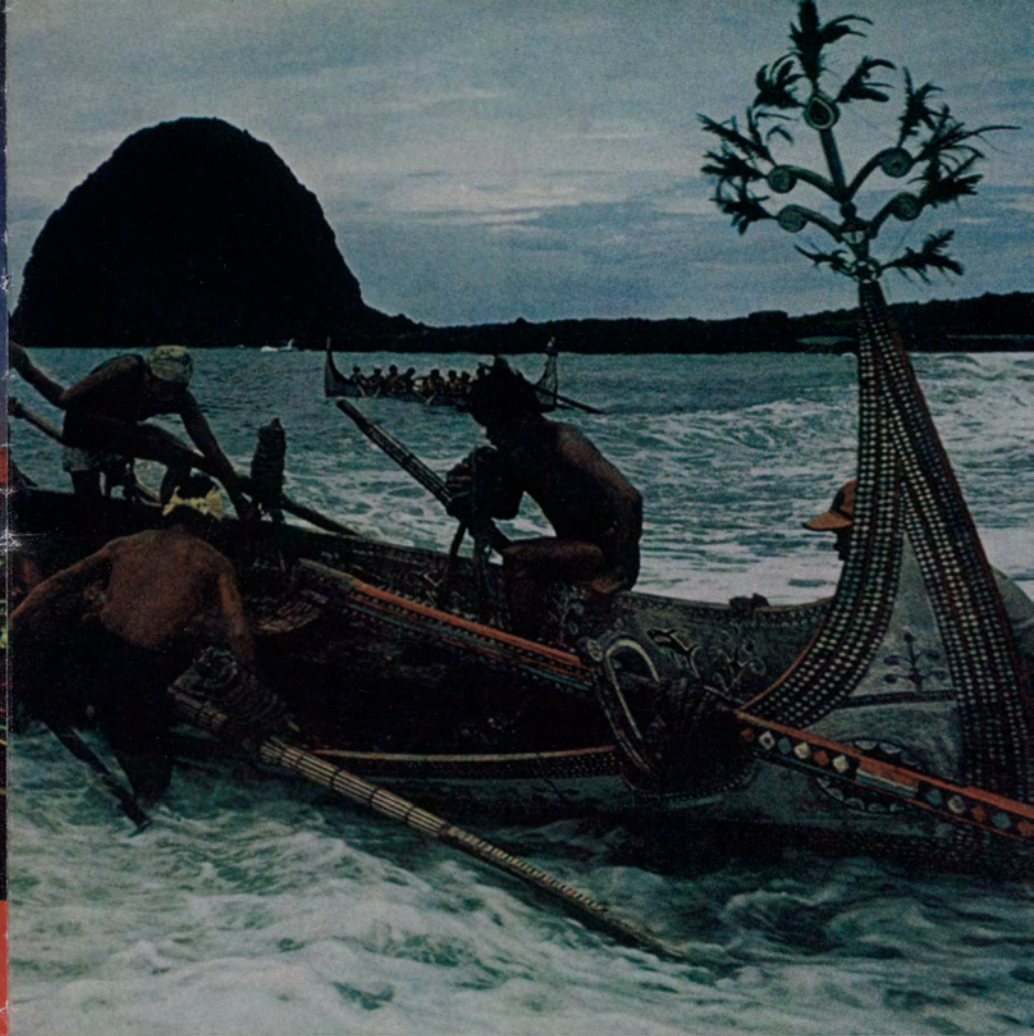
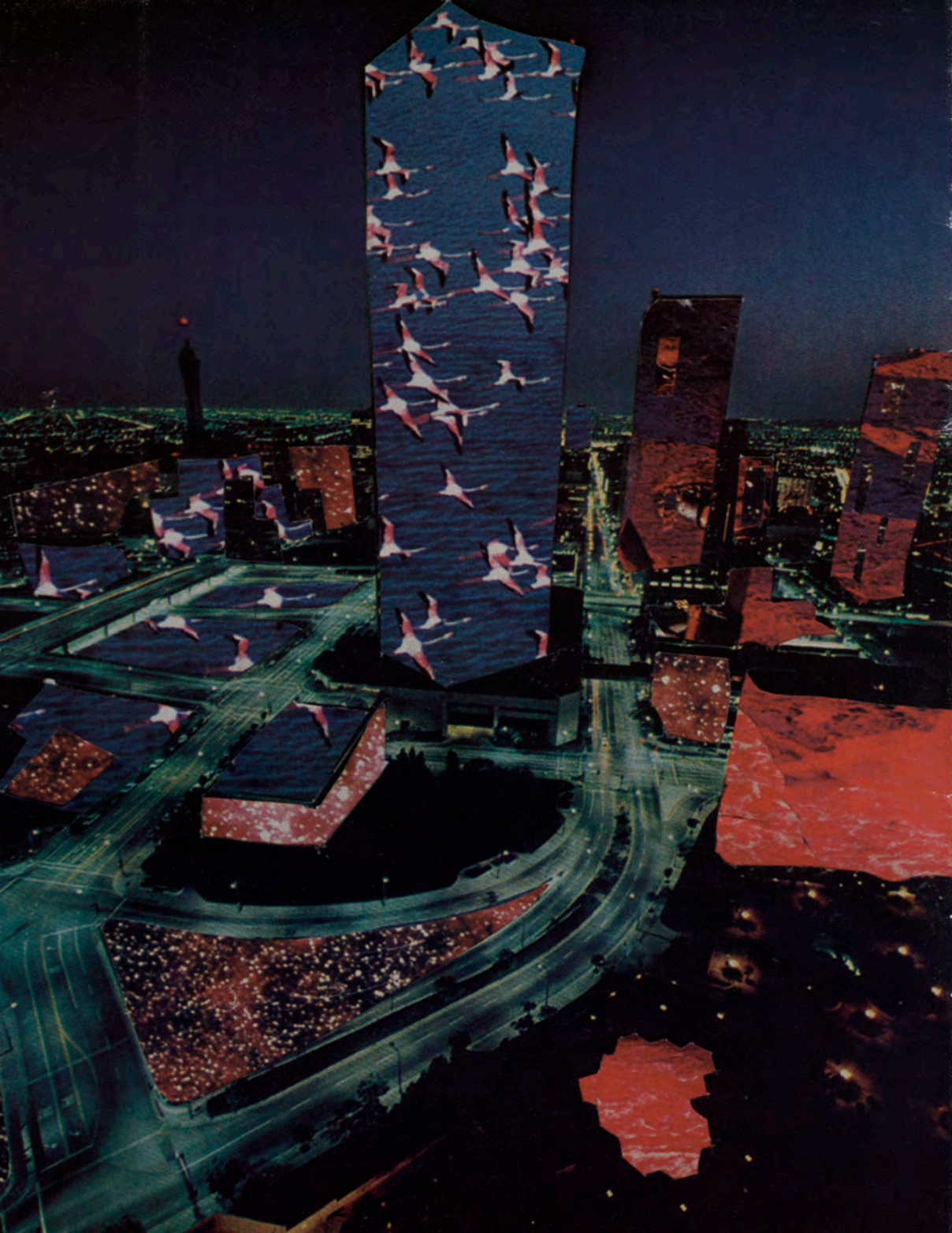
It is said that inside his house lives something abominable (something that dwells in every labyrinth). My need to enter this house caused a curiosity in me that out-rote any sense. What is produced in this house that disappears in the moonless sky? Only to reappear in my endless night? On one of those endless nights I contrived my plan to enter and discover its secret.

I drew up to the door of the black house unwontedly. It's here that I notice the surface of the house; I mean the paint is actually deep dark blue, an allusive blue so implausible that its blueness exists only in the corner of your eye. The door sweeps open to a man of moderate build, a beard which, as I remember it now, was more small feathers than hair. My ticket of entry was a rare "National Geographic"; a misprint as it was printed backwards (the last word first). With an incredulously small print run of only 3, it was always more legend than fact. How I came across it is more fantasy than reality and better left to another time. With articles on "The Blue Tigers of Punjab" and with a special 3D section "The Lost World of the Mirror People" with double map supplement in clear cellophane unfolding to an unbelievable 100metres squared.

He showed me through a series of door-less doors to the study. We went through the motions that laid out my request and object for my exchange. It was to the basement that I was led. I read a curious detail above the door "The Municipality of Secret Silences a subdivision of the Interior Affairs Department of Shadows". I had hardly time to take this in when an object of crystalline proportion loomed out of the dark. Prisms & image cause what little light there was to dance through its body like a starry dynamo. At first I thought it was spinning then I realised that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. I saw the infinite sky and the amorphous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw a silvery spider web at the center of a black pyramid, saw endless eyes all very close. Trees loomed through this room dripping landscapes and proclaiming themselves as the start of this world.

It was as if I'd looked into the first and last camera (and all those in-between) in one object, its images captured in a frozen explosion. Time was stretched & examined; my own mortality was captured like a photo in a labyrinth of mechanical glances. But instead of being there it was left floating within me enigmatically (unlocatable). I staggered down the stairs mumbling my gratitude to the custodian/creator, all the time avoiding his infinite eyes save I lose myself in them. Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that dreaming and wakefulness are pages of the same book, and that to read them in order is to live, and to leaf through them at random, to dream.

PETER MADDEN



# Sleight of Hand

Peter Madden's 'Escape From Orchid City'

*A touch of the hand and this burning would, on the instant, beautifully reverse itself .... Out of the chars and ashes, out of the dust and coals, like golden salamanders, the odd years, the green years, might leap; roses sweeten the air, white hair turn Irish-black, wrinkles vanish; all, everything fly back to seed, flee death, rush down to their beginnings, suns rise in western skies and set in glorious easts, moons eat themselves opposite to the custom, all and everything cupping one in another like Chinese boxes, rabbits into hats, all and everything returning to fresh death, the seed death, the green death, to the time before beginning. A touch of the hand might do it, the merest touch of a hand.*

*"Unbelievable." Eckels breathed, the light of the Machine on his thin face. "A real Time Machine."*

**T**HIS is one of the opening scenes in Ray Bradbury's sci-fi short story 'A Sound of Thunder' (1952).<sup>1</sup> In this story the character Eckels pays to go on a Time Travel Safari—'You name the animal. We take you there. You shoot it.' He decides to go back to the Jurassic era and shoot a Tyrannosaurus Rex. A group of five men enter the Time Machine and the Safari Guide lays down the rules: you must stick to a pre-approved path and can only kill the one specified animal, which is marked with red paint. The consequences for not following these rules are heavy fines, because, as the Safari Guide explains: 'A Time Machine is a finicky business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, thus destroying an important link in

a growing species.'<sup>2</sup>

Peter Madden's artist project 'Escape from Orchid City' has a number of parallels with Bradbury's story. Madden invites us to consider a world that is both close and familiar, and frighteningly foreign and distant. His source material is the textbook, the social science magazine (*National Geographic* is a favourite), the encyclopedia, the museum display.<sup>3</sup> Madden's installations collapse history, bringing together the general and the specific, the cosmic and the minute, to create a kind of endless present. In one collage work we see cut out shapes of dolphins leaping from the ocean and in their negative space we are shown a glimpse of the galaxy. I can't help thinking of Marcel Duchamp: 'One day in the near future, the whole galaxy of objects will become readymades.'<sup>4</sup>

## TROPHY HUNTERS

Nothing says 'I came, I saw, I conquered' quite like a mounted animal head. The essential decorative element in any hunters' lodge, pub or men's club, the trophy head is a ubiquitous symbol of the triumph of man over nature. On my first meeting with Peter Madden, we sat at a table beneath a mounted deer head. This seemed fortuitous at first, then I realised that Peter had probably chosen to meet there deliberately. He claimed it was an impressive animal; twelve pointed antlers are rare. 'Escape from Orchid City' includes several mounted animal heads, both fictional and real.



Returning to Bradbury's story, a crucial aspect was that the hunters aren't allowed to take any trophy of their kill back to the present. Instead, the Safari Guide offers to take a photograph of them with their spoils. 'Escape from Orchid City' incorporates a community of taxidermied huia—a New Zealand bird that was famously wiped out in the early twentieth century. Madden is interested in the story of the huia, whose demise was rapidly hastened by the desire of museums around the world to own specimens of this rare bird. Madden posits the theory that, had photography been more widely accessible in early twentieth century New Zealand, the huia may have stood a better chance at survival.

*National Geographic* magazines have been described as presenting a kind of 'imperialist nostalgia, that is, mourning the passing of what we ourselves have destroyed.'<sup>5</sup> Madden is drawn to the contextually loaded history of this magazine: '*National Geographic* is a product of white American culture and can be seen really as a smokescreen on the truth', he says.<sup>6</sup> In her article 'The Living Dead', writer Tessa Laird discusses Madden's use of *National Geographic* magazines in relation to criticism of the magazine's editorial focus over the years. She notes: 'Power, as exemplified by *National Geographic* is revealed to be seething with Dionysian disorder beneath a well-kempt veneer of paragraphs, captions, and white space...'<sup>7</sup> While she comments that 'Appropriation of appropriation does not necessarily equal liberation', she feels confident that 'Madden has partially solved a difficult equation by making it more difficult'.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

In Bradbury's story the hunt doesn't go exactly to plan and Eckels, alarmed at

seeing an actual T Rex, strays from the path in his rush to reach the safety of the Time Machine, leaving the others to slay the beast. When he and the others return to the present, he discovers a crushed butterfly in the thread of his shoe's sole. It is 'very beautiful and very dead'. Although the death of this one butterfly is tragic in itself, its consequences in relation to the story are more far-reaching and deadly—it has changed the course of history and the present is irrevocably altered.<sup>9</sup>

Peter Madden has frequently chosen to incorporate butterflies into his collage assemblages—from simple, understated works such as *Butterfly rule* (2004), *Escape into Order* (2003) and *Leave* (2004) through to his more opulent and elaborate constructions where butterflies swarm amongst flowers, birds and skulls.

Butterflies are a symbol of fragility and the transience of life. In *nature morte* (also known as still life) paintings of the seventeenth century, butterflies and flies are shown alighting on full blooms and over-ripe fruit as in Jan Davidz De Heem's painting *Still Life with Lobster* (late 1640s). Still life painting traditionally ranked fairly low on the hierarchy of painting genres, well behind history or landscape painting. While these other genres were perceived as edifying, still lifes were seen as trivial, bourgeois and decadent. A subset of the still life genre is the *vanitas* painting, which consisted of objects carefully selected for their symbolic value: a skull, an hourglass, rotting fruit, flies, a candle—all referencing the passing of time and imminent death.

#### A CITY OF THE DEAD

There is a definite death instinct throughout Madden's work—take for example *Necropolis* (2004), *Death* (2006) and his numerous skull paintings. His use



*The Gentle Yamis of Orchid Island*





of skulls, in particular, recalls the Mexican tradition of Day of the Dead where people gather together to celebrate the passing of their loved ones and the skull symbolises both death and rebirth. This festival takes its origins from the Aztec belief that life on earth is merely a dream and that in death one truly awakes to reality. For his work *White skull on world* (2006), Madden chose to locate a skull over the Americas, with its spine replaced by South America. Madden's miniature skull work *Death* resembles Mexican Day of the Dead dolls, as well as Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco's *Black Kites* (1997)—a sculpted human head whose contours are traced in a graphite chequerboard pattern.<sup>10</sup> Madden's *Death* skull has a little knob at the top to potentially raise the cranium and expose the interior which, if it's anything like the earlier *Golden Skull* (2005), might contain brain matter comprised of rose quartz and beeswax.

#### THE MIDAS TOUCH

Peter Madden has talked about seeing an exhibition of Aztec artefacts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in which it seemed an entire room was full of gold, every surface gleamed. In Madden's work, you often come across gilded objects: a bike seat, a bat, an axe and a skull are but a few examples of objects which have met with the Midas touch. I'm sure that Madden is aware of the Greek myth of King Midas, who apart from being an avid rose gardener, is famous for having the (mis)fortune of everything he touched turning to gold. Golden surfaces have an allure about them, they identify something as precious and lasting. The golden vitrine in Madden's installation is a gleaming, shimmering container—the ultimate treasure box.

Madden's project can be compared

to that of other artists who have sought to draw upon museological traditions. Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers' project, *Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department* (1968-72), was a fictitious museum; Joseph Beuys' *Block Beuys* and *Palazzo Regale* (1985) are other important precursors. In the *Palazzo Regale* project, Beuys gilded museum cases (although he left the glass untouched) and placed framed rectangular gilded panels on the surrounding walls.

A local precedent is the exhibition 'The Oriental Room' which was exhibited for a short time at the Auckland Museum in 1996. Madden's gold encrusted vitrine case would have sat easily in that show. A pertinent comparison from that project is Yuk King Tan's work *Showbusiness* (1996) which shares Madden's interest in the theatricality of museum displays and the power of presentation.<sup>11</sup> *Showbusiness* was a museum case lined in reflective black plastic sheeting which, when its Hollywood-style lights flashed intermittently, revealed an abyss of infinite mirror patterns.

#### ESCAPE FROM ORCHID CITY

I'm intrigued by Peter Madden's obsession with orchids and floral details. Perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised after reading that orchids, like gold, 'have an irresistible appeal once one has come into contact with them' and that 'many are worthy of, and receive, our unlimited adoration.'<sup>12</sup> Orchids are notoriously difficult to grow and there seems to be something perverse in the plethora of orchid varieties on display in Madden's *Escape from Orchid City* (2006). They symbolise perfection, which suggests Orchid City is a beautiful but highly artificial place—a place you may well want to escape from.

This work brings to mind Yvonne

Todd's photographs of roses—for example *Chlora 2001*—which are deliberately too perfect, too engineered and too contrived in their presentation. I suspect that Madden took great delight when he recently extracted Todd's roses from their backgrounds and replaced these images with a sketchy drawing of a rose and a mass of skulls with red paint as part of his recent artist project at the Auckland Art Gallery.

### A SOUND OF THUNDER

At the end of Bradbury's story, Eckels must pay the price for straying in the past and accidentally killing the golden butterfly. He pleads to the world: 'Can't we take it back, can't we make it alive again? Can't we start over?'. All that's heard is a sound of thunder.

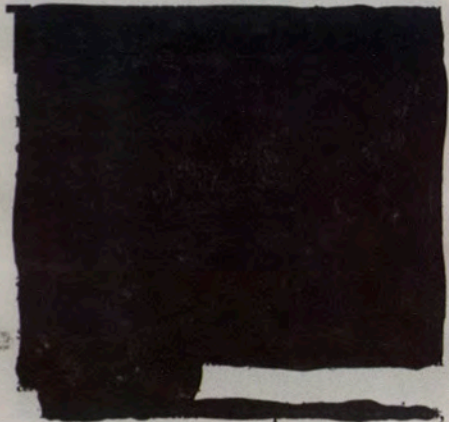
In 'Escape from Orchid City', Madden presents history as an archive to trawl through at will, although perhaps not without some trepidation. Through his careful cuts, his dissection, the line between fact and fiction is blurred; objects become released from their explanations, and meaning becomes a matter of free association and interpretation. 'In my work,' he says, 'I'm cutting into a body of knowledge, poetically releasing the images.'<sup>13</sup> Tessa Laird has written that Madden steals back 'the frozen moments that the *Geographic* has locked in time...'<sup>14</sup> Through his works, Madden allows us the opportunity to go back, to explore these 'frozen moments'—what he might call 'time crystals'—and consider an alternate future.

SARAH FARRAR

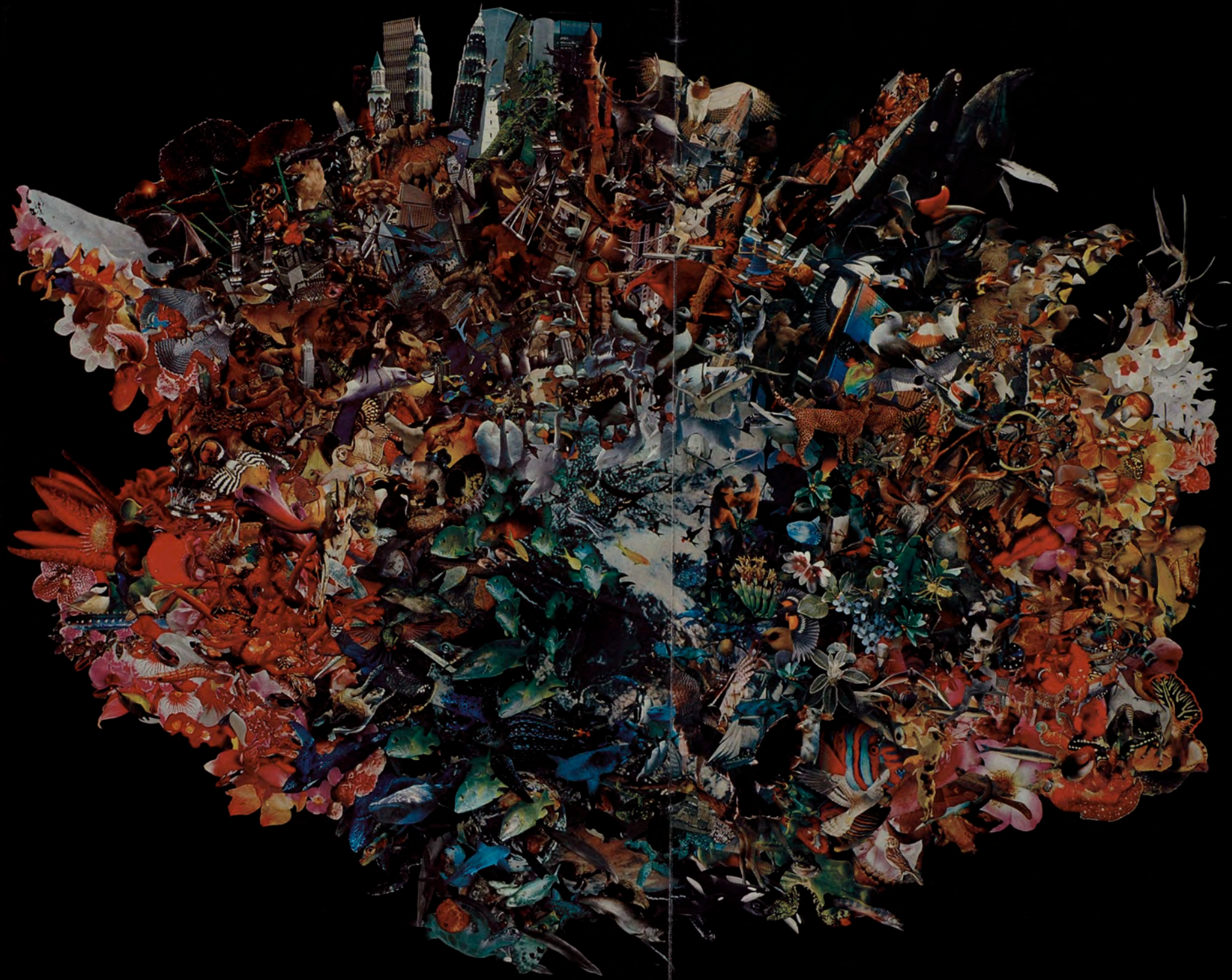
### Notes

- 1 Ray Bradbury, 'A Sound of Thunder', *R Is for Robot*, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968.
- 2 Bradbury, *ibid.*, p.82.
- 3 Interestingly, these reference materials frequently appear anachronistic and very much of the time in which they were produced. Think of the encyclopedias and old, well thumbed *National Geographic* magazines that are a common sight at your local op shop or church fair.
- 4 Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, 'Cosmic Reification: Gabriel Orozco's Photographs', *Gabriel Orozco*, London and Köln: Serpentine Gallery and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004, p.75.
- 5 Catherine Lutz & Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p.97. Quoted in Tessa Laird, 'The Living Dead', *Natural Selection*, 2, 2004, p.11.2. (*Natural Selection* is an online publication: <http://www.naturalselection.org.nz>)
- 6 Peter Madden, quoted in Sue Gardiner, 'The unbuilt realm', *Art News*, Autumn 2004, p.53.
- 7 Laird, *ibid.*, p.11.1.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.11.3.
- 9 The phrase 'butterfly effect' came after Ray Bradbury's story and is attributed to the work of American meteorologist Edward Lorenz who gave a speech in 1972 which was titled: 'Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?'. The scientific reasoning behind the 'butterfly effect' is the idea that small changes to initial conditions can have large variations over time. In popular media, the term has come to be related to the concept of time travel, where the presence of time travellers in the past would have unpredictable impact on the future.
- 10 Orozco has also made a series of works on paper called *Butterfly Effect* (1998).
- 11 Other examples of New Zealand artists who have examined museum display in their work include: Laurence Aberhart whose 'Nature morte' series documented various museum displays in New Zealand museums throughout 1986; Terry Urbahn's museum case works; Fiona Pardington's photographs of taonga from museum collections. To read more about work of this nature, consult: Priscilla Pitts & Robert Leonard, *Exhibits: the museum display and the encyclopedia plate*, Auckland: Artspace, 1988.
- 12 Brian & Wilma Rittershausen, *Orchids in Colour*, Poole: Blandford Press, 1984, p.8.
- 13 Madden, *ibid.*
- 14 Laird, *ibid.*









## IMAGE CREDITS

The following images are page works by Peter Madden:

(listed in order of appearance)

- p98. *The Gentle Yamis of Orchid Island* 2006  
mixed media  
Featuring selected pages from Chang Shuhua, 'The Gentle Yamis of Orchid Island', *National Geographic*, January 1977, pp.98-109.
- p2. *Untitled* 2005 (detail)  
collage
- p3. *Machine for Making Stars* 2005 (detail)  
gouache on found image
- p4. *Ur-World* 2006  
mixed media  
Photograph: Ryan Moore
- p5. *Frog-architecture* 2006  
gouache on found image
- p6. *Untitled* 2005  
gouache on collage

## BIOGRAPHY

Peter Madden was born in 1966. He studied for a Bachelor of Visual Arts, Auckland Institute of Technology, Auckland (1992-95), and a Masters of Fine Arts, Elam School of Fine Arts, Auckland University, Auckland (2002-04). His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions including in 2005: 'Uncanny', Artspace, Auckland; 'Snake Oil', Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland; in 2004: 'Manoeuvre', St. Paul St. Gallery, Auckland; 'Downtown Frown', Special, Auckland; 'In Flower', Pataka, Porirua; 'Remember New Zealand', São Paulo Bienal; São Paulo, Brazil. Recent solo or collaborative projects include in 2006: '5.4.3.2.1. Auckland Artist Projects', Auckland Art Gallery; 'The Deep End' (with Sam Sampson), te tuhi - the mark, Pakuranga, Manukau City; in 2005: 'Silk Cuts'; and in 2004: 'Forever Present', both at Michael Lett, Auckland. Peter Madden lives and works in Auckland.





Published on the occasion of the exhibition 'Peter Madden: Escape from Orchid City' at City Gallery Wellington, 8 October 2006 – 28 January 2007.

Principal Sponsor: **ANZ**

© City Gallery Wellington and contributors  
First published in 2006 by City Gallery Wellington

ISBN-10: 0-9582704-1-4  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9582704-1-0

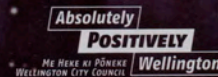
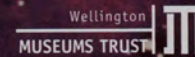
City Gallery Wellington  
PO Box 2199, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand  
www.citygallery.org.nz

Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced without permission.

All images reproduced with the permission of Peter Madden. All works appear courtesy of Michael Lett, Auckland unless otherwise specified.

Huia and other taxidermied bird specimens have been kindly loaned for this exhibition by Te Manawā, Palmerston North and Whanganui Regional Museum.

City Gallery Wellington is managed by the Wellington Museums Trust with major funding from Wellington City Council.



City Gallery Wellington Director: **PAULA SAVAGE**.  
Exhibition Curator and Publication Editor: **SARAH FARRAR**.  
Editorial Assistance: **GREGORY O'BRIEN, JESSICA REID**.  
Publication Manager: **HEATHER GALBRAITH**. Publication Designer: **WARREN OLDS, STUDIO AHOY**. Organisation and Installation: **KAY BENSEMAN, ALEXANDER BISLEY, ANITA HOGAN, JULIA HOLDERNESS, TRACEY MONASTRA, PHILLIP ROBERTSON, AMY SCHULZ, NEIL SEMPLE, MEGAN THOMAS, NICOLA WOODHOUSE, KATE WOODS**. Texts: **SARAH FARRAR, PETER MADDEN**.

