

A Very Peculiar Practice

Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting



...HAUNTED, ACCURSED AND POPULATED BY SINISTER SPIRITS, REFLECTIONS OF PAST INHABITANTS' UNHAPPY LIVES. THAT'S WHY IT HADN'T BEEN DEMOLISHED - IT SURE FREAKED-OUT THE GUYS WHO OWNED IT. THAT'S WHEN I STILL HAD AN IMAGINATION, TROUBLED SOUL THAT I WAS... TO CUT A LONG STORY SHORT, I TOOK THE SUBWAY TO 125th STREET, I HAD AN APPOINTMENT WITH BEN.



BEN WAS THERE, WE SHOT THE BREEZE FOR A BIT AND HE GAVE ME THE PACKAGE...



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A Very Peculiar Practice

Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting

A Very Peculiar Practice: A User's Guide

Allan Smith

Learning to Read

Leigh Davis

City Gallery, Wellington Te Whare Toi
Wellington City Council

Foreword

Paula Savage
Director

The City Gallery, Wellington Te Whare Toi is delighted to present *A Very Peculiar Practice: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting* as an opportunity to take a fresh look at contemporary painting in this country. The exhibition is an appropriate and timely initiative, representing the Gallery's ongoing commitment to and support of the diversity of current art issues and practice.

By conducting a large scale investigation of the temper and purpose of painting in the nineties, we hope that *A Very Peculiar Practice* will help redress the relatively limited public gallery attention paid to this medium in recent years.

Painting, like any other form of art production, does not fall conveniently into set time frames. Nonetheless this rich and speculative sampling from the work of forty-one artists is an interpretative overview of the period 1990 to 1995. The exhibition does not pretend to be a neutral investigation; the curatorial philosophy and selective process is due to the independent and personal approach of Gallery Curator Allan Smith. The exhibition represents Allan Smith's first show curated for the City Gallery. He visited studios and dealer galleries up and down the country in order to base his selection on an informed awareness of what has been happening over the last six years.

The selection of artists is by no means exhaustive or definitive but reveals an intelligent assessment of a wide range of contemporary painting by mostly young and mid-career artists. The exhibition has different layers to it but follows a cohesive visual argument. We believe this exhibition shows how painting makes its own type of sense of the world and in the process adds to the aesthetic vocabulary of our time.

A Very Peculiar Practice is an exhibition that makes a thought-provoking contribution to art in this decade, opening up debate rather than offering any final word.

The Wellington City Council joins the City Gallery, Wellington Te Whare Toi in expressing our gratitude to the private collectors, dealer galleries and artists for their support and for their generosity in lending us works for this exhibition. Most importantly we offer our sincere appreciation to the artists for their continuing dedication to the practice of making art in this country.

People who live in cities become expert at making rapid subconscious decisions. At any large party, one can see people 'reading' strangers with the abstract speed of a blind man tracing over a book in Braille. Mechanical aids to such character reading are also a premium in cities. The rise of the industrial city in the nineteenth century coincided with the craze for phrenology and palmistry. At any bookstall today you can find several cheap pamphlets on graphology and quasi-scientific disquisitions on the relationship between body shape and moral character. There is a vast market for cranky guides to person-spotting, guides that correspond, worryingly closely to the charts designed for idle children showing the silhouettes of every aeroplane in the world.

Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, London 1988, p30



Cetacea distribution chart.
Michael Clark, *Mammal
Watching*, Severn House,
London 1981

A Very Peculiar Practice: A User's Guide

Allan Smith

The context of painting, however, is the world at large, wherever it is manifested.

Francesco Bonami¹

Art ceases to be a question of current fashionability and presents itself as grappling with the dread that we could forfeit all connection with other human beings, as a result of a lack of shared perceptions.

Dietmar Kamper²

Painting has an ongoing and troubled relationship with the attempt to make sense of the world. For those who pursue it and for those of us who are addicted observers of it, the practice of painting is primarily about inventing, sustaining and revising specific ecologies of meaning. That is, every form of painting produces and depends upon a very particular set of relationships with the surrounding world. Painters constantly find slightly different ways to receive, amplify or distort both accepted codes of painting practice and messages from the world around them.

The significance of painting, then, depends on more than the changing fortunes of artworld bids for eminence and hegemony. This is not to say that painting has some unchanging essence that can be held onto. Painting has nothing to gain by assuming it is deserving of attention by nature, or by right. It is always disappointing when an art practice surrenders the uncertainties of investigation in favour of a reliance on past laurels; on value by association. Exploiting its own anachronisms and uncertain status in relation to changing technologies, painting has, so far, shown great versatility in reinventing itself. In one way or another, it persists. But the history of painting provides no guarantee of an inherent, continuing value.

Painting does have a considerable history. A history chequered by periods of generative brilliance, retrenchment, contestation and swaggering self-projection. Painting once enjoyed the status of a dominant cultural institution, mouthpiece for God or State. And when it was losing ground in any shared public realm, painting was often the major vehicle for breakthroughs by an avant-garde as conventional perceptions of art and the world were radically challenged. However, just as often, it has been declared



Francis Picabia drawing from Ornella Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, Marion Boyars, London 1989

that painting is over and finished, that it is passé. Yet, despite these alterations in status and prestige painting, *so far*, has demonstrated great staying power.

This sort of legacy is a gifting as well as a handicap. The advantage of living with a huge and infamous tradition, disappearing into the past, is that once oedipal anxieties about obligatory competition with this tradition have been reassessed, then a creative irresponsibility can flourish. Painting does not always need to be crisis driven.

The weighty task of mourning its own heroic and tragic history is not painting's only option. One of the most persuasive critical fictions of modernist painting was the confidence that, if one looked from the right vantage-point, one could see into the essence of painting's destiny. Many painters now seem determined to skirt the critical modernist questions of 'what might still be done?' and 'what is no longer possible', and allow the hidden laughs and redundancies of history to converge and mingle. Belief in the momentum of painting's tightly cross-referenced dialectical history has given way to cultivation of careless attentions and sweet disorders. Reinventions can be local, low-key, small scale and subtle in their specific effects.

When so much seems to have been done already and when obsessive self-historising only extends a linear notion of history even further, then lateral moves and light-footed strategies seem more the need of the day. Perhaps it is an advantage for a painter to be like Mohammed Ali; to dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

At times the diversity of things that go by the name of painting makes them look about as mutually compatible as plumbing and trout fishing. Contrary to what the category term suggests, painting is no unified project. What has been called 'The End of Painting' is really only the end of a programmatic reading of painting as driven by historical necessity, by zeitgeist, and quest for exclusive self-definition. Yet pronouncements of painting's end may in fact help to clarify



Comic image from Moebius, *Is Mens Lekker?*, 1981. Courtesy of Leon van den Eijkel

painting's possibilities. If I can take liberties with a statement made by Felix Guattari, I would suggest that the end of painting is only a resumption of painting, a question of dismantling it so as to construct it better. The practice of painting is never a universal, it is always a question of various practices of painting, a question of accepting the need to rewrite the history of painting in terms of a new polyphony.³

If painting's abiding value lies in its continued and varied attempts to make some sense of the world, then what sort of sense does it offer? To find ourselves in an exhibition with a large number of paintings set out around the walls puts us in the position of an expectant but uncertain participant. We are inquisitive and hungry for data, but perhaps a little wary. The experience is like arriving in an unfamiliar city and having to relearn our skills of recognition and identification in order to interpret new urban topologies and the shape of a new social landscape.

One thing that learning to read a new city and finding our way around an exhibition have in common is that neither of the two endeavours can be resolved from any single point of view. Cities exist as collages of incomplete projects. They are laminates of partial schemes, hidden archives, traces of forgotten histories and, semi-decayed, fossilised systems of meaning existing in and alongside new strains of signification. And so within this exhibition we find competing sensibilities and hybrids of painting practice setting off a range of conversations which stop and start between the works. There are many different histories of style and content in these paintings, requiring us to continually adjust our looking and reading. It is not just a matter of recognising the signature of these personal styles and contents but also of recognising the special ways in which they have been customised to make them look the way they do. To read our contemporary urban world and the art that is a product of it we cannot operate like Sherlock Holmes who believed that "the facts admit of only one explanation". Our confidence cannot lie in our ability to discover a key which will conclusively open and shut the case, but more in our capacity to nominate clues and to propose connections between disparate things. It is the ongoing activity of investigative humility that we need to cherish, not the presumption of final conclusions.

A significant encounter with an arresting image has often been presented as the key moment for the confused and bemused individual in the city. This image appears like an epiphany forever caught on the threshold of revelation. Paradoxically, such a suspended epiphany does clarify, briefly, the surrounding traffic of information – but only through the force with which it declares its own inscrutability.

When the narrator of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is disorientated and "lost/amid the

moving pageant" of the crowded city, he is temporarily stopped in his tracks by the sight of a stationary blind beggar. The beggar wears an identificatory label around his neck. The narrator takes this label, unreadable by its owner, as emblematic of the world's resistance to interpretation, and as a check on any assertions of true self-knowledge.

In Edgar Allan Poe's story, 'The Man of the Crowd', the narrator feels the acute sensitivity of convalescence as he sits in a café and takes "a calm but inquisitive interest" in everything around him. Looking through the smoky window to the busy street outside he regards "with minute interest the innumerable variety of figure, dress, gait, air, visage and expression of countenance". However his talents for rapid classification of citizens' profiles are soon checked. The narrator is lured out into the street to pursue a man he cannot easily categorise and is finally forced to admit, gazing into the man's face, that what really characterises the city and its inhabitants most surely is a refusal to be read: "Er lasst sich nicht lesen" (That which will not be read).⁴



Hobo signs: You may camp here, Be good (religious), If sick will care for you, Safe camp

Artur Sammler, a character in one of Saul Bellow's novels, is an old man trying to read the braille of his city as he feels caught between the traumatic history of an old world and the incoherent desires of a new one.

A vacant building opposite marked for demolition. Large white X's on the windowpanes. On the plate glass of the empty shop were strange figures or non-figures in thick white. Most scrawls could be ignored. These for some reason caught on with Mr Sammler as pertinent. Eloquent of what?

It was not the behaviour that was gone. What was gone was the old words. Forms and signs were absent. . . . Utterance, sounds of hope and desire, exclamations of grief. Such things were suppressed, as if illicit. Sometimes coming through in ciphers, vague figures scrawled on the windows of condemned buildings. . . . At this stage of things almost nothing could be said. Still signs could be made, should be made, must be made.⁵

Sammler takes a measure of consolation from interpreting the illegible signs as



Adonoi symbol



Submarine score for HMS Hesperus 1943



Alchemical symbol for copper

some form of faltering expression of the world's desire to be made sense of. He also takes these ciphers as being an affirmation of the precious nature of our attempts to make signs and symbols for what we hardly know. Sammler's comments suggests the value of mute images to coax us into language, into communication.

Colin McCahon also experienced an illuminating transfiguration of the commonplace when, as a young boy, he watched a signwriter across the street outline the brilliant banality of the words 'Hairdresser and Tobacconist' on a shop window. This was an epiphanic moment for McCahon, as writing, painting and the ordinary world came together and became something else. In later life, McCahon went on to speak with regret of how the isolation of the contemporary artworld now got in the way of artists making "signs for people to live by". Certainly the paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice* have not arisen from the sort of shared symbolic order that Giotto or even Rembrandt could assume. Contemporary painting is predicated on the alienations that separate modern society into its isolated, specialised enclaves. These fractured groupings are dependent on incomplete languages of sign and symbol which are usually cut off from their original contexts of communal validation. Nevertheless all the paintings in this show are still types of signs to live by. They operate within the horizon of possible communication even if it is in negative terms of refusal, resistance and regret, or instead with a cunning playfulness.

All the works in *A Very Peculiar Practice* project themselves as intentionally structured and skilfully inflected signs. Yet to a greater or lesser extent they remain opaque. These paintings are written all over with the desire to announce and detail the problem of signification, yet the messages they relay to us are intermittent and incomplete. Every apparatus of signification is set in motion only to be stalled mid-flight.

I have tried to suggest, with this selection of works, that paintings are produced around that point when the energies of the drive to communicate and to make sense are blocked, repressed and then diverted, to resurface in the form of configurational and re-configurational imperatives. This is the point which all painting depends on, a point of divergence and transposition. At that point where the need to elaborate and intensify one's response to the world becomes acute.

Configuration and reconfiguration have first to do with the organisation and assembly of different component parts; the arrangement and rearrangement of separable elements. In most of the paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice*, this characteristic is demonstrated literally and self-evidently. In other works the look of structural disjunction or dispersed componentry works internally and implicitly. Some paintings

employ the graphic insignia of logos or identificatory text to flatten and rigidify their surfaces. Even the more abstracted and contemplative works function strongly in terms of spatial shifts, drops, reversal and displacements. They work with taut alignments and realignments inside the vertical/horizontal format and there is often a carefully adjusted attention to phrasing, pace and measure.

Some paintings employ a scriptographic mode, structuring the surface like a ruled exercise book, a musical stave, or a series of tiny shelves to relay the constituent parts up and across. The interrupted grids of maps, or patterns of computer circuitry are used in other paintings to switch the eye in disrupted shifts around the work. These works suggest that our familiarity both with screens filled by images and words, and with lines of text on screen, page or billboard, has developed a field of vision that operates in terms of repeated lines, and stripes, and the flickering of fragmentary material, shuttling back and forth across reticulated supports.



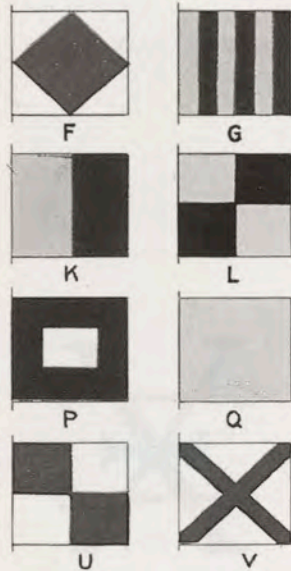
Two bars from Schoenberg's String Trio

Joining these formal, organisational functions to their blank or busy iconographies, each painting in *A Very Peculiar Practice* displays the characteristics of a 'life-world' in small scale. And there is so much affective and conceptual attention bestowed on these receptive surfaces. So much internal conversation, accentuation and elaboration goes on within their borders.

Let's look briefly at the type and texture of some of these portable life-worlds with all their differences of style, content and register. Tony de Lautour for example nurtures a sinister eco-system of comicbook nasty and poison tattoo graphics. Alternatively, Dick Frizzell's *Soft Stella* is a comicky, brittle icon of a deflated modernism. Mark Braunias investigates the strings and gristle of vision; eyeballs, lenses, rangefinders and twitching ganglia in manic sci-fi scenarios. Graeme Cornwell interrogates the arcane world of the printer's chop, the blind stamp and the printer's mark,



Special Forces skull badge.
Courtesy of Tony de Lautour



International Signal flags F-V

and fashions cunning imbrications of letter, symbol and logo.

Max Gimblett throws up a bespattered backdrop for some primal theatre, a psychomachia with skulls and a whiplash snake of white paint which rehearses its own configurational force as protection against death. Tony Lane counts out a site for ritual and reads a mystic halo around each object that he marks. Kristy Gorman demonstrates a dream-like attentiveness and illogic in pouring over disconnected fragments of decorative detail. These three artists, along with John Reynolds, James Ross, Luise Fong and Denis Watkins (and Cornwell in his melancholic mode) approach the big themes of painting – death, desire and history – through various types of brooding romanticism and lyrical meandering.

Julia Morison's hybrid symbols look both ancient and terribly modern. They suggest alternately, dizzying prospects of endless interpretation and symbol tabulation, or logos that flash past at speed, arbitrary but colourful badges of distant and impersonal powers. Fong is absorbed by spectral apparitions and the beauty of interstellar gases. Her work evokes the buoyancy of an aerated body and the fatal euphoria of bubbles in the bloodstream.

Seraphine Pick's paper-bag-head imagery implies a wilful confusion of the difference between the childlike and the childish. It suggests a type of protective refuge through regressive play-acting and is filled with a sense of hushed watchfulness. Ronnie van Hout's witty *I'm with Stupid* painting and Robin Neate's clever *Dumb Painting* play provocatively with the old saw 'stupid as a painter'. Van Hout and Neate imply a careless disregard for their own credibility and court a strategic idiocy.

Jude Rae, Megan Philips, Ruth Watson, L. Budd, Isobel Thom and Stephen Bambury all set in motion irresolvable series of shifts and jumps between focused moments of poetic intensity and blank, empty signage. They produce rebus-like formations which lock us into the puzzle-solving expectations of difficult reading yet keep us firmly this side of discovering solutions.

Barbara Tuck, Richard Killeen and Simon Morris work at different tempos but all operate within the principle of the network which Roland Barthes said characterised the mobile text, which is airy, light, open and spaced. Gordon Walters' ecology is closely related to this mode of graphic lightness and precision. His highly diagrammatic images approach a condition of elegant semaphore, and assume the reading of painting as a form of careful vexillology.

Jonathan Raban has proposed that cities produce a need and an appetite for synecdoche, for bright, sharply outlined parts to stand for the confusing whole.

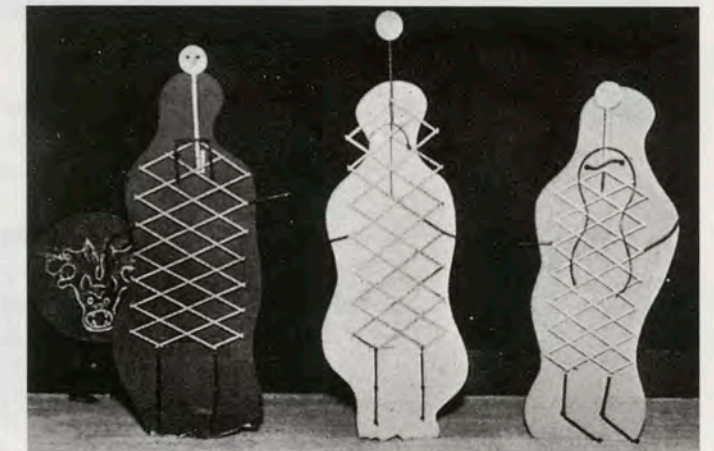
Both cities themselves and the people who live in them are subject to . . . convenient distortion and exaggeration. Both fall easy prey to that impulse, which besets almost everyone who writes about urban life, to find a fixing synecdoche, to substitute a simple lurid part for a bafflingly complex whole. In a world of crowds and strangers, where things happen at speed, are glimpsed and cannot be recalled – a world in short which is simply too big to be held at one time in one's imagination – synecdoche is much more than a rhetorical figure, it is a means of survival.⁶

The paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice* are products of an urban world which trains us to accumulate visual information in bits and bytes; through aggregation and disjunctive segments rather than holistic integration and fluid continuity. They are paintings made to be read as signs – flattened and then energised to achieve a directness and declamatory impact which will assure them of a distinctive profile in relation to their surroundings. These works adopt the tactics that Georg Simmel identified in people under threat of anonymity in a big city – the idiosyncrasies of dress and personal profile are exaggerated and clarified to protect a threatened identity and to project a new one.

For this reason the paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice* manifest what is often a staccato and discontinuous exteriority which inhibits access to an interior depth. This reading applies more completely to some works than others, but all the paintings in the show work within these conditions to some degree.

The purpose of this exhibition is not to showcase painting as a monolithic enterprise but rather to show how some painters go about the business of reconfiguring their practice and their world. Through such strategies the habitual is looked at sideways, revealing unexpected facets; previously unnoticed merits come to light. It can only be hoped that painting's differentiated practices will continue to take root, grow, branch out, die off and regenerate in irregular and independent ways.

To perceive the peculiarity of painting is to do a double-take. It is to look again and



Picasso's designs for Erik Satie's *Mercure*

to clarify the profiles of what we take for granted. It is to recognise the intricacies of feeling, concept and psyche operating within this practice. Although such double looking may cause us to puzzle over the allegiance to a venerated craft in an age of super-

technologies for seeing, we need to go further. We need to see how painting's context of familiarity, habit, convention and anachronism is a fertile breeding ground for new, hybrid and resilient forms of signification.



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Notes

- 1 "Vitamin P: The Sound of Painting", *Flash Art* 173, Nov/Dec 1993, p37.
- 2 "At the End of an Age of Mirrors", *Flash Art* 157, March/April 1991, p85-87.
- 3 Marco Senaldi, "Felix Guattari: The Aesthetic Paradigm and the Responsibility to Create", *Flash Art* 165, Summer 1992, p142.
- 4 Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, London, Chancellor Press 1985, pp339-348.
- 5 Saul Bellow, *Mr Sammler's Planet*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1978.
- 6 Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, Collins Harvill, London 1988, p31.

With the explosion of the artist population, and with institutions, including that of art criticism, elaborating their structures, physical and conceptual, in a fury of construction, seismic pressures build up in esthetic terrain already 'struggling, slipping . . . jumping.' Quakes, minor and major, are constant, and meaning steadily 'yawns apart'. When every fragment offers itself as a clue, every configuration of clues looks like a solution – but it isn't. They are signs of dilemmas, signs that lead back to themselves in shorter and shorter loops until images of judgement are taken for judgement of images.

Carter Ratcliffe, "The Adventure of the Third Essay"

Artforum, Summer 1987



Japanese key crest

Learning to Read

Leigh Davis

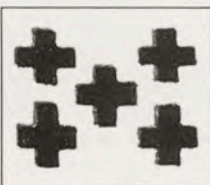
It is a dangerous thing to do, to read and then talk about artworks, because the tongue is thicker than sight and there are many dialects lined up here. But that's the risk you take when you go to the art gallery. And exposure to the problems of *making sense* (even within the shelter of your dialogue with yourself) may be widespread, as in the quote: "For now, painting is in some sort of gestating Trojan horse phase. It's huge, it's right out in the open, but no one knows what it is up to."¹

Reading is about system recognition, and a good place to try to catch the implied systems in these works is the recollection of your first impressions. Scan every work in this show steadily and without stopping and what primary impression do you take away? I sensed a massive attack. 'Massive' because of the show's dispersion of volume and movement. 'Attack' because there is no deference in its invitation to the viewer, only *difference*: the intuition that within the formal assembly of *A Very Peculiar Practice*, apparently passive and displayed for your gaze, lies a haka.

Each work commands individual attention. Doing this, painter on painter, down to the pixels, lets you feel the throat of the show, the subtle meshing and jamming of the gears of meaning.

Ronnie van Hout's *I'm with Stupid, Stupid's with Me* is something you might trip on for starters. These two fellas are short stumps of concrete with the woodgrain of the shutter still visible, with the title in naive signwriting, in two parts, one phrase per block. They appear to be a duo, expressing solidarity, talking to each other, one being 'stupid' and the other being 'I'. But the language doesn't allow that to work, the 'I' and 'stupid' cannot be represented each by a block. So strong is that mateship other possibilities emerge: is the 'I' the artist or the viewer, or the blocks? Which of the available options is 'stupid'? The play has started to work. These two bovver blocks also set up a political joke, like a Duchamp readymade. As a strange bedfellow in the gallery *I'm with Stupid* both extracts a reverence from its setting, and issues a militant challenge against it.

Field of Vision by Mark Braunias, appears to use a strategy common to many paintings in the show. Initially *Field of Vision* presents itself as a wealth of representation, with each frame in a grid of 30 frames looking like a series of studies of organic objects,



Naval signal flag

like snapshots of spores outside a bathysphere, proto-somethings. However, because the studies are not *recognisable* you start to read them as a wealth, not of represented things, but of painting: delicate line, careful paint texture, subtle differences of surface depth. As with many of the paintings in the show the huzza and body language of meaning is everywhere evident; in the precision, passion, system, plenitude, differentiation, representation you can see. But like many of the others it is abstracted from specific contents, and therefore not conventionally understood.

The Stephen Bambury work in the show grabs your eye early. The longer you look at it the more it achieves an extraordinary oscillation between the language of Bambury and the language of English. At first sight the painting says "HiFi"; there it is, English, snap. However, the monumental nature of the painting, its conformity with the recent Bambury work of alternating bars of verdigris or gold/yellow, and black, together with the vertical projection of the letters, gradually efface the word. The sign is taken over by its machinery. The power of the horizontal 'H' shape which launches the painting contains a giant quote of McCahon's *Necessary Protection* altar, and the positive weight of the black bands alternating with the gold is so different from the empty space between letters in a word. The power of the painting to defocus the word 'HiFi', to disassemble it or to bring the background to the foreground, is greater than the learned behaviour of the normal reading to keep it straight.

Chris Heaphy has another strategy in his two works. Based on the four suits in playing cards he uses allegory, screwed down so tightly the allegorical remains the merest trace of shadow on the passive countenance of the paintings. *Dirt* is a stylised, elongated group of playing card emblems, rendered 'crudely', each more or less covering four upright panels of a contiguous sixteen panel work. Above each of the emblems (reading hearts, diamonds, clubs, spades, left to right) are the letters 'D', 'T', 'R', 'T'. Like Heaphy's painting *I.D.*, *Dirt* alternates between telling a story and being a painting, since *Dirt* could be a romantic tragedy in five acts (heart, diamond, club, spade, DIRT) or a painting comprising signs so worn by use, so differently impregnated for so long, that simply to arrange them conjures the bare memory of meaning only, a gatekeeper for legibility long rubbed away, ushering the painting into the world of allegory.

Denys Watkins, in *Lemur*, has a similar strategy to Braunias, Julia Morison, and Luise Fong. Watkins uses a painter's vocabulary to create both an expectation of and a resistance to making sense. *Lemur* is an enigma, a haunted denatured painting with floated soft organic emblems. Eclipsed objects, emblems which resemble torsos, fleur-



Chinese longevity symbol



Paternoster cross



Special forces skull badge.
Courtesy of Tony de Lautour



Comic image from Wordt Vervolg, January 1984.
Courtesy of Leon van den Eijkel

de-lis, or petals, float in a steady pattern that resembles a textile print extending beyond the edge of the frame. They exist at different depths, drifting both across the surface of the painting and back into it. The horizontal shape at the top of the painting is a very curious surreal disturbance in the painting. It recalls multiple images: of a pupa, a foetus, an apostrophe laid over, arabic lettering, a cow horn. Forming a 'T' junction and extending below it is a ghosted keyhole shadow.

A stranger performance is hard to imagine. Such is the skill of Watkin's painting, with its grace, precision and balance, that the enigma is *perfect*. The painting's evident care, its drama and articulateness, gives every sign of being 'meaningful'. But it is both pregnant and vacuous with half symbols. It is mute while it resembles an act of explanation. It compels attention while resisting reading. It uses the traditional graces of painting to destroy communication. It offers, with dedication and seriousness, only the promise of a deep self. *Lemur* is endlessly absorbent.

James Ross occupies similar territory with his two works, *Enigma (Variant 4) Black/Yellow 1*, and *Untitled (Blue Period 1)*. They are both unframed 3 dimensional irregularly shaped paintings that stand proud of the wall when hung. They are punctuated by two smaller shapes, one a circle that in both cases is outside each painting but touching it, and one a similar sized square. Both paintings therefore draw attention to their progressive, formal machinery.

But both paintings are calculatedly marred, carrying archaic, disturbing imprints in the form of two irregularly shaped blue stains. Across each carefully structured surface lies a brand of pure depth, a *memento mori*, an unexplained presence with associations ranging in the two works from the painting of a skull from an elongated perspective, to the imprint of a used menstrual pad in the blue dye of a television advertisement.

And in all this the John Reynolds' *Prometheus* stands as a gate, with the Watkins, to the Classic World of painting. Its handshake with the art of depiction, as a composition in a single 'frame', is energised by classical mythology. Prometheus was the god who stole fire from Olympus and taught men the use of it and various arts, and was then punished by being chained to rock and preyed upon by vultures. There is a sublimity about the work, but it is poignant also, it has a woeful countenance, a defensiveness, focused on the elongated white lines of the cross drawn across the full face of the painting as on a knight's shield.

Most of the works in *A Very Peculiar Practice* operate with multiple elements or repeated components, whether multiple panels, repeated painted emblems or letters, or the use of chainlike linked forms. This is the show's primary watermark. The variety

and depth of this strategy gives *A Very Peculiar Practice* its critical mass.

There are many possible reasons for this use of multiple elements.

For example, it is an assertion that painting is centrifugal and everyday (rather than privileged). It stands side-by-side with all complex meaning objects and either has no boundaries or a constantly expanding set of them. It is also a signal that the world of painting is not made of stable objects and subjects. This pushes the detonation of the picture frame to a point where the traditional framed painting, or its opposition, is no longer even a relevant memory. In a show of 53 works there are only three traditional frames. One of these is an ironic insertion in Patrick Pound's *UR1 International*. Another is Tony Lane's gold leaf frame around *Branch* which exults its own artifice.

A strategy based on array and repetition also disconnects the medium from the message. It is this disconnection that is responsible for the sealed, infolded nature of much of *A Very Peculiar Practice*. It creates paintings absorbed with the internal quotation of repeated elements. This consciousness of quotation can be used for different effects. It can result in open, floating works, as in Séraphine Pick's *Untitled (Brown Bag)*, or, as in L. Budd's *Fig 1-12*, it can collapse into density. In another offshoot, this strategy can result in paintings that contain the absence of quotes (Robin Neate's *Dumb Painting* for instance). Quote-built, disconnected works share the reproducibility of all media, the formality and repetition of language and its excesses or perversions.

Reproduction and array is also a strategy for capturing the dimension of time: whether it is the timelessness of Julia Morison (where each object in *Codex* is itself static and surface-ful and the distribution of such objects is static) or Geoff Thornley; the morbidity of Watkins; the endlessness of Reynold's *Suspiro del Moro*; the atavism of Ross; the restlessness of Killeen.

In addition, the collecting, evolutionary nature of many of the works in the show tells a story about the nature of painting as a process rather than a completed action. Max Gimblett's wonderfully simplified signalling of war, *Delacroix and Caduceus*, is a particularly dramatic example. The Gimblett is based on strength of vertical dragging and the procession of rapidly painted skulls and the caduceus (a Roman Herald's wand especially as carried by the messenger-god Hermes) which moves across the painting and out.

This exhibition reveals that the 'line in the sand' separating what you can see and talk about, and what you can't, has been pushed out to a new position. Along this line the signifiers don't connect with signifieds, just yet. You remain so alive to the 'signing', its speed and dexterity, the extent to which it insists and implores, looking you in



Asdic range recorder trace of submerged submarine

From Bilal, *Lady in Blue*, 1986.
Courtesy of Leon van den
Eijkel



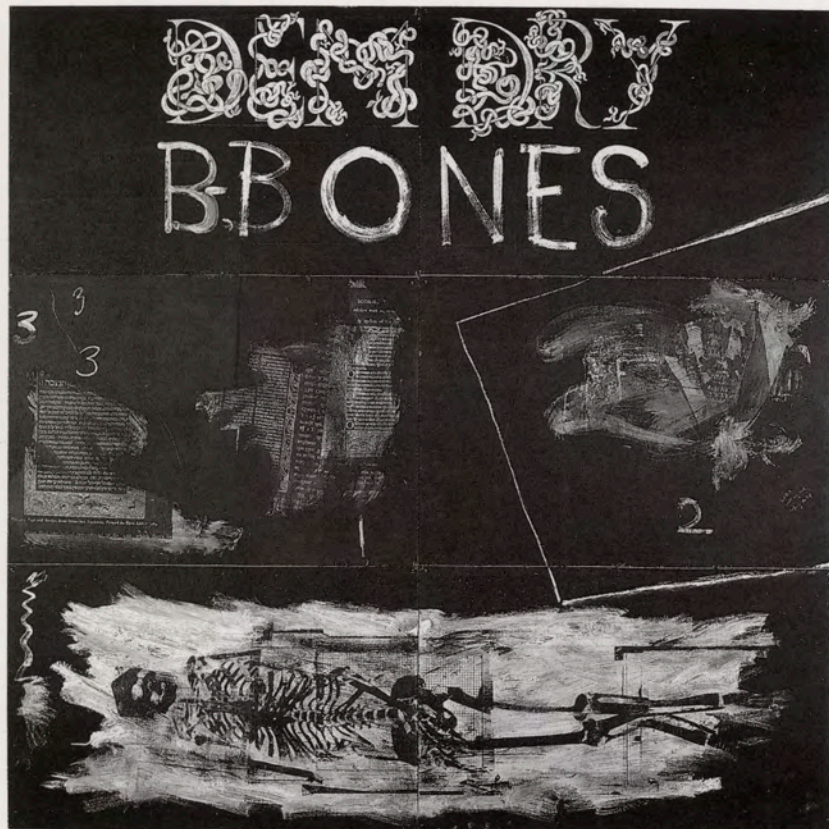
the eye, nodding, pointing, beckoning, cajoling, gesturing encouragement, veiling, withdrawing, but leaving you, in the midst of all this plentitude of communication, the paintings' mute companion, onlooker, approximate reader, and accursed. It is the companionship in this haunted space that will bring you back to the gallery several times – the strange asdic, the allure, defeat and perfect unreliability of meaning you can't fix. This is the process of learning to read, *and it is one you share with the also-mute painters*, who are themselves caught in the strange looped binary cycle of production-adoration-production, the endlessness and torment of which forms *A Very Peculiar Practice*.

Notes

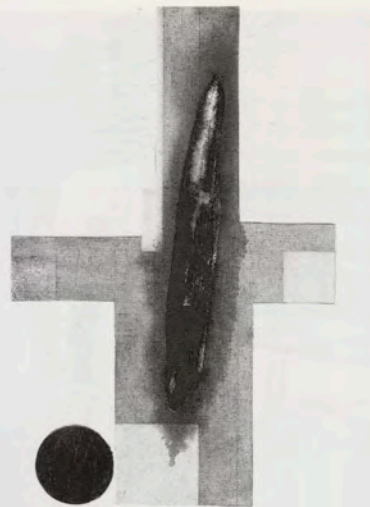
- 1 Jerry Saltz, "A Year in the Life: Tropic of Painting", *Art in America*, October 1994, p91.

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FIGURES	○●●●●○●●
LETTERS	○●●●●○●●
LINE FEED	○●●●●○●●

Marking and spacing impulses
of teleprinter code, 1946



Graeme Cornwell (Re-)Mark. Valley of Dry Bones 1991



James Ross *Untitled (Blue Period 1)* 1993



James Ross *Enigma (Variant 4) Black/Yellow 1* 1993



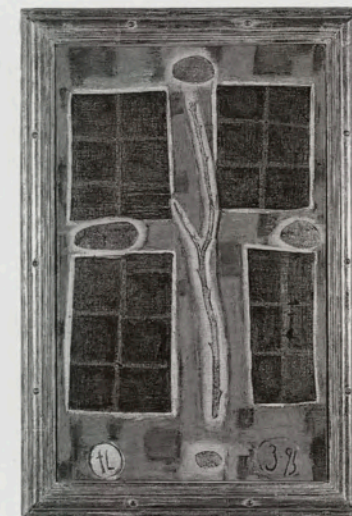
John Reynolds *Prometheus* 1992



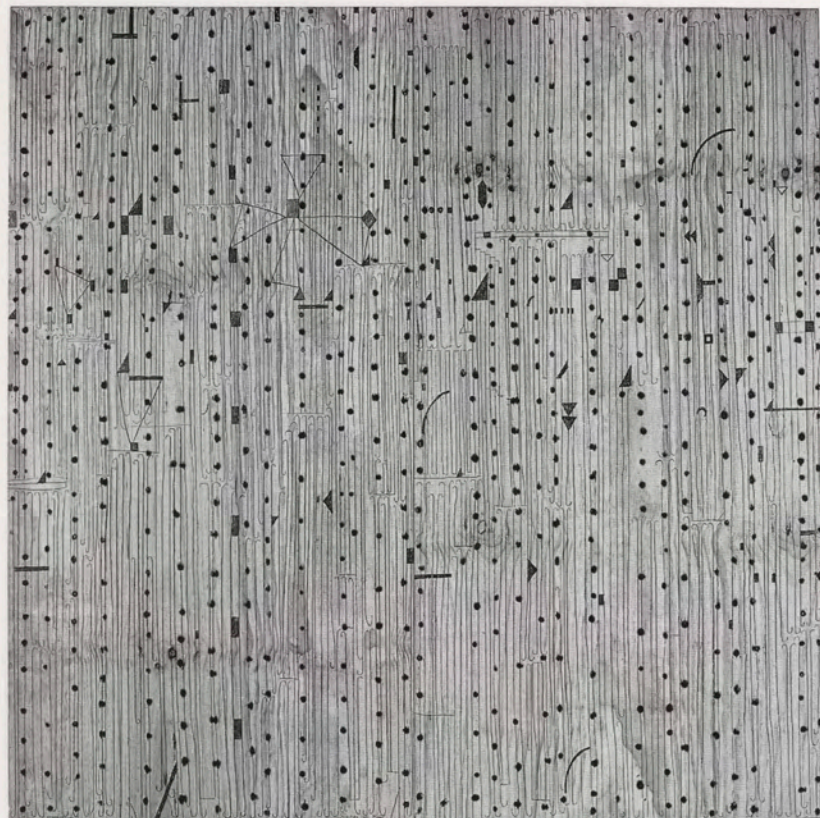
Luise Fong *Apollo* 1994



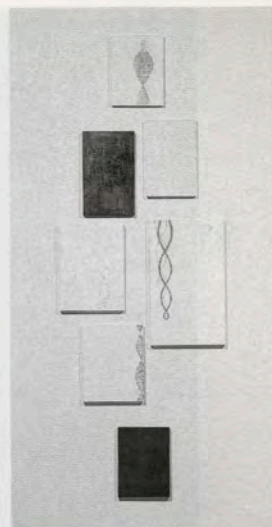
Max Gimblett *Delacroix and Caduceus* 1994



Tony Lane *Branch* 1995



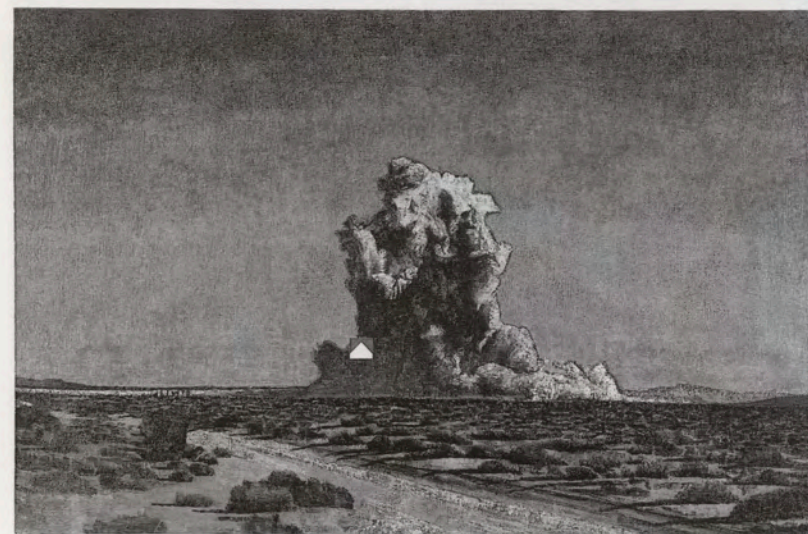
John Reynolds *Suspiro del Moro* 1993



Kristy Gorman *Untitled 'Twist'* 1995



Denys Watkins *Lemur* 1994



Michael Stevenson *Double Negative Under Construction* 1994

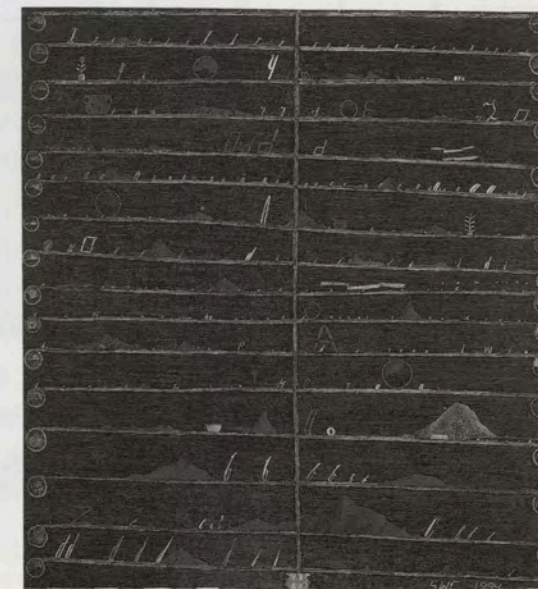


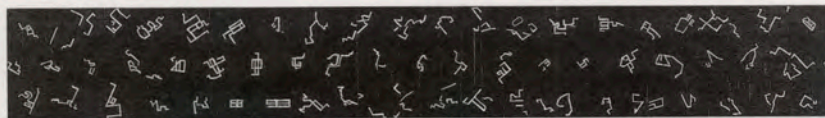
Michael Stevenson *Double Negative Under Construction* 1994

Shane Cotton *Te Kau Mia Ono* 1994



Michael Shepherd *Excavating the Historical [Landscape with classical ruins]* 1991

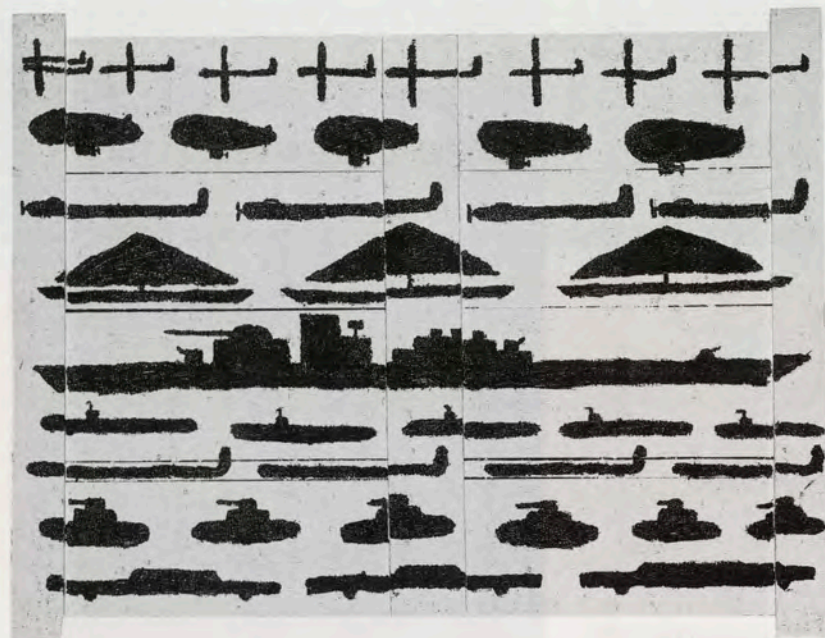




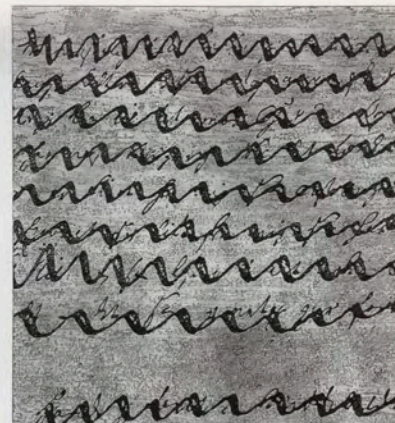
John Hurrell *Graticular Field (Weeded)* 1995



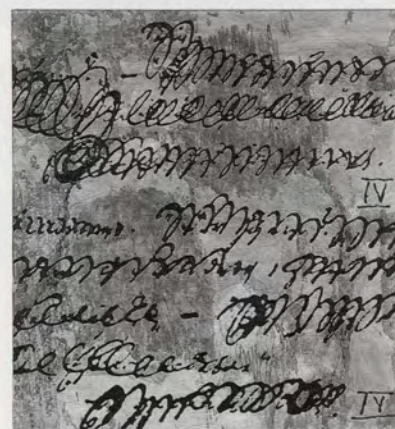
John Hurrell *Attracted to What?* 1995



Peter Robinson *100%* 1994



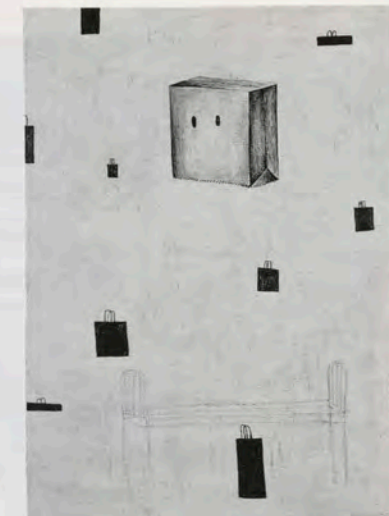
Ken Heyes *Untitled III* 1993



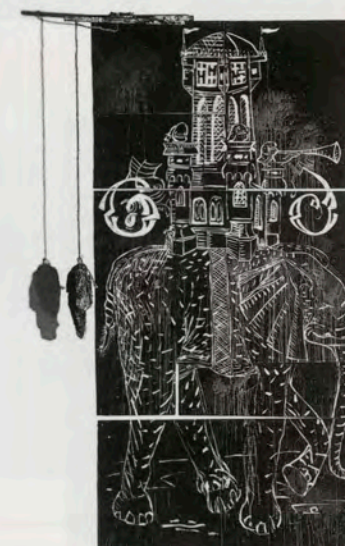
Ken Heyes *Untitled V* 1993



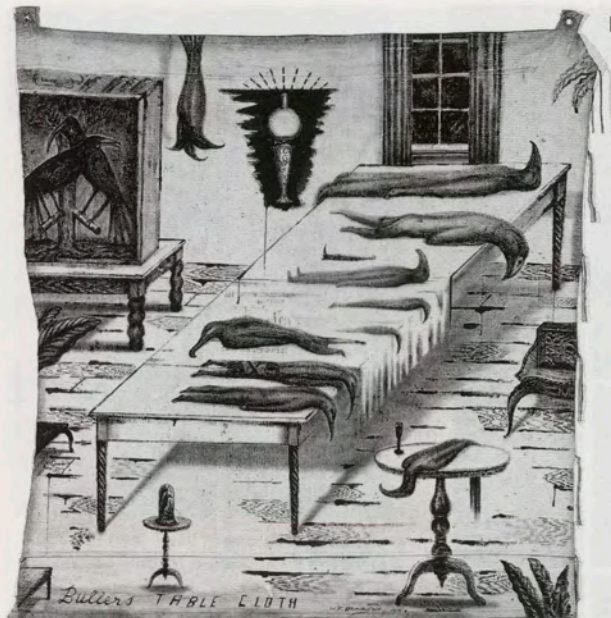
Mark Braunias *Field of Vision* 1994



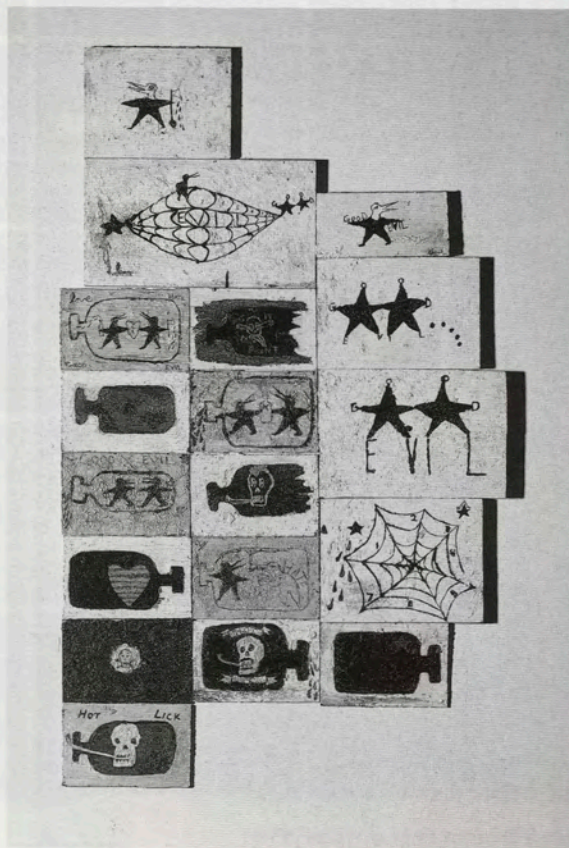
Séraphine Pick *Untitled (brown painting)* 1995



Graeme Cornwell *(Re-)Mark. Printers Mark (Godfridus de Os)* 1991



Bill Hammond Buller's Table Cloth 1994



Tony de Lautour Skulls, Hearts, Stars and Bottles 1994/95



Simon Ingram Who (Who?) 1994



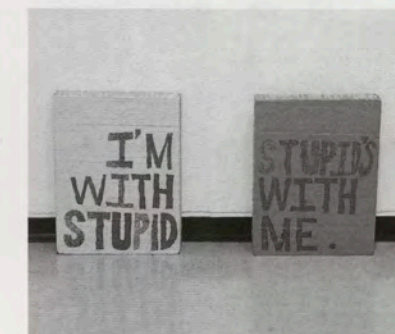
Chris Heaphy Dirt 1994



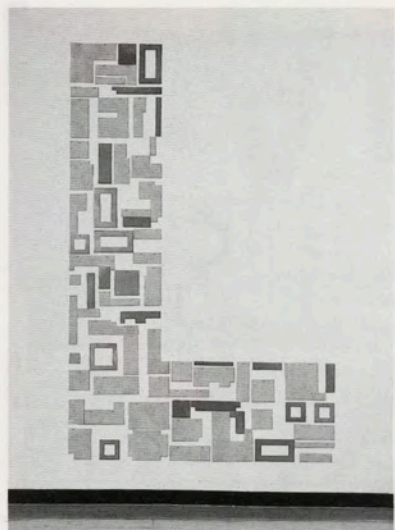
Bill Hammond G.S.T. 1994



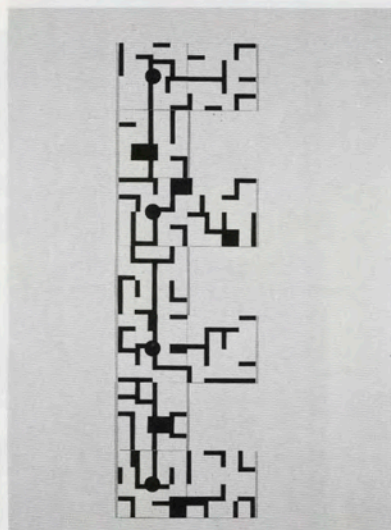
Chris Heaphy I.D. 1994



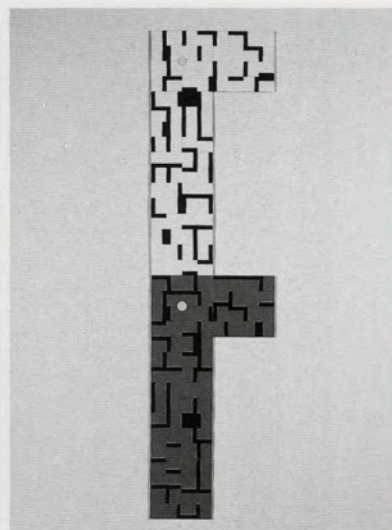
Ronnie van Hout I'm with Stupid, Stupid's with me 1993



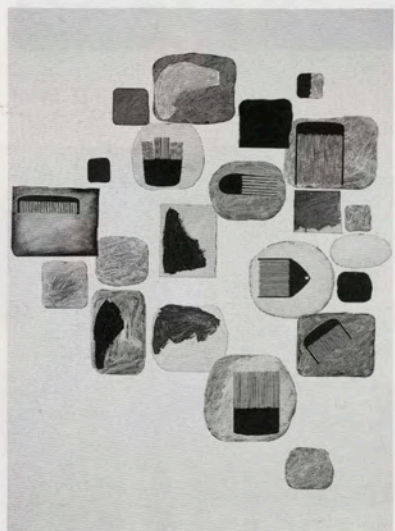
Ronnie van Hout *Dimensions Variable* 1993



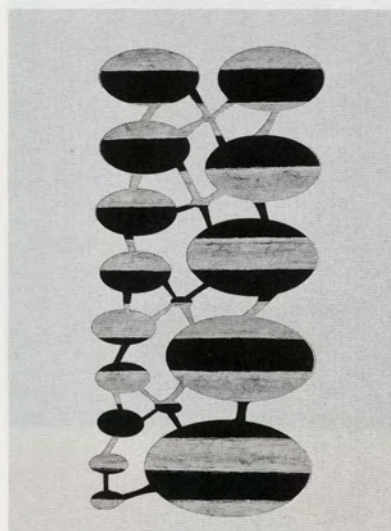
Simon Morris *Protean* 1993



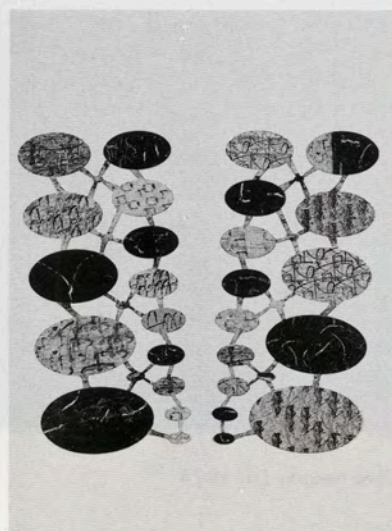
Simon Morris *Drive* 1993



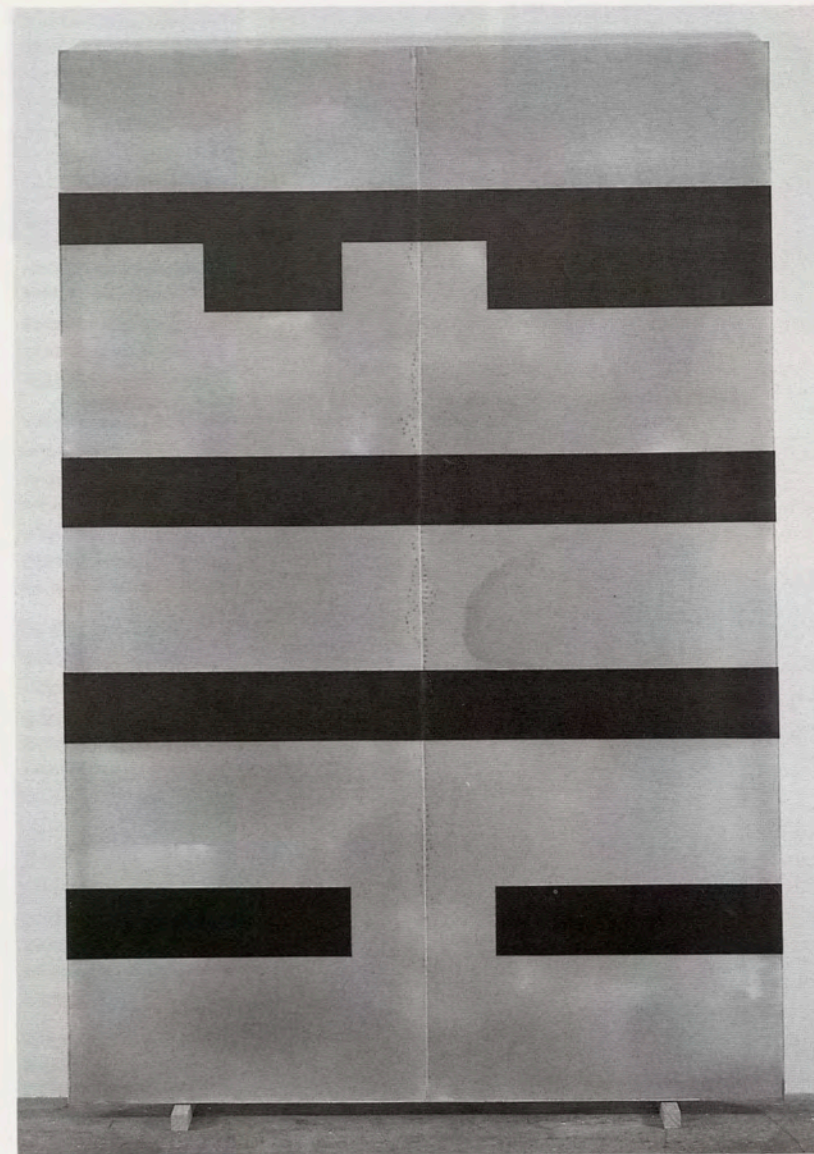
Richard Killeen *7 Blacks Combs* 1991



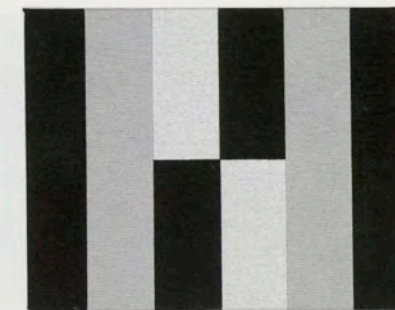
Barbara Tuck *Sensorial* 1994



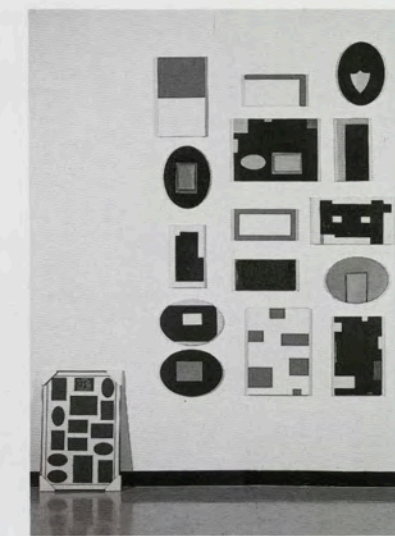
Barbara Tuck *Letter to Vermeer* 1994



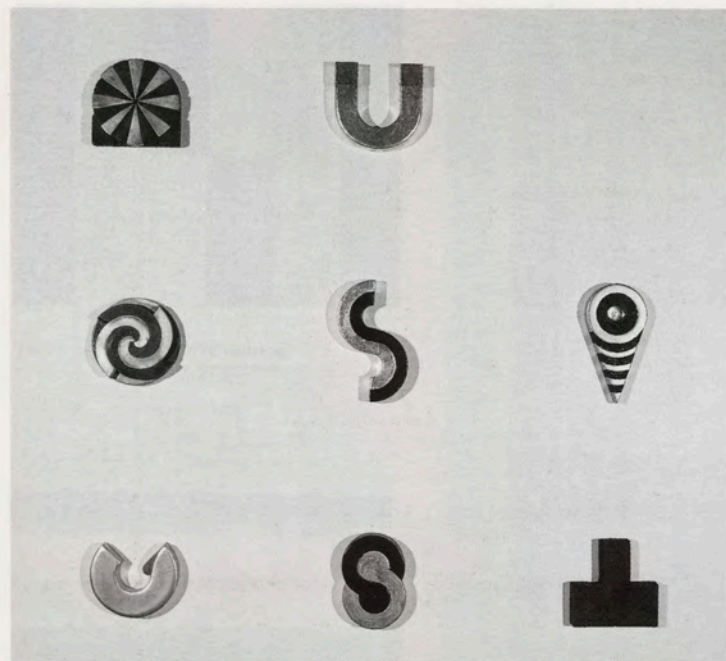
Stephen Bambury *Ideogram (II)* 1995



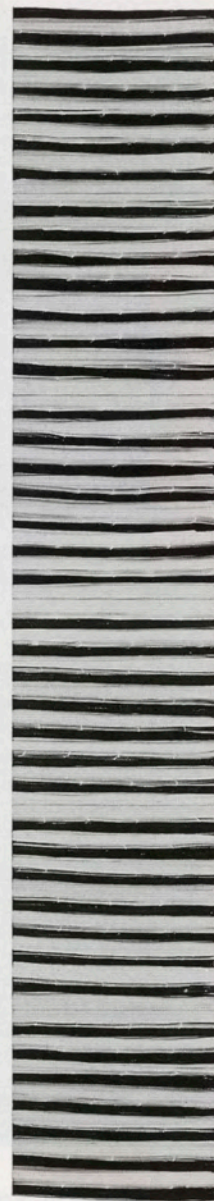
Gordon Walters *Untitled* 1993



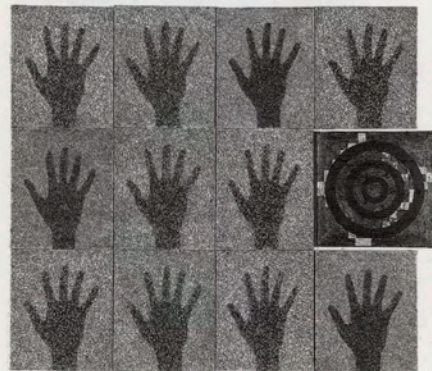
Patrick Pound *UR1 International* 1994



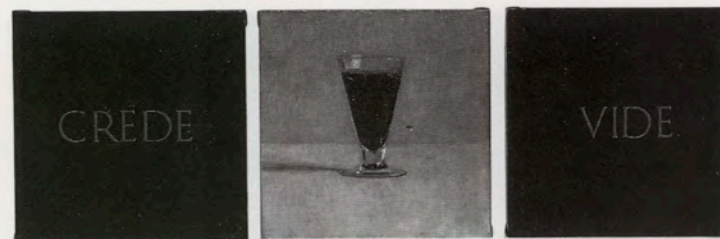
Judy Millar Strum 1994



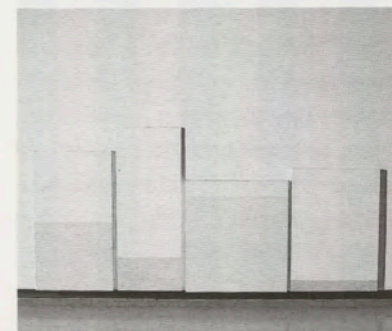
Julia Morison Silver & lead; silver & blood; mercuric oxide & reflection; blood & reflection; reflection & silver; reflection & ash; excrement & ash; excrement & reflection from Codex 1993



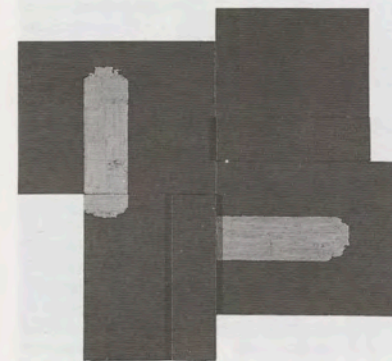
Sanjay Theodore Myth of the Eastern Man 1994



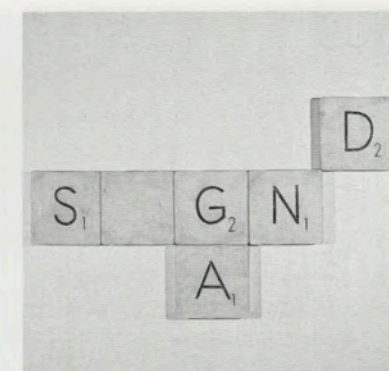
Jude Rae Foresight 1991



Isobel Thom Untitled 1994/95

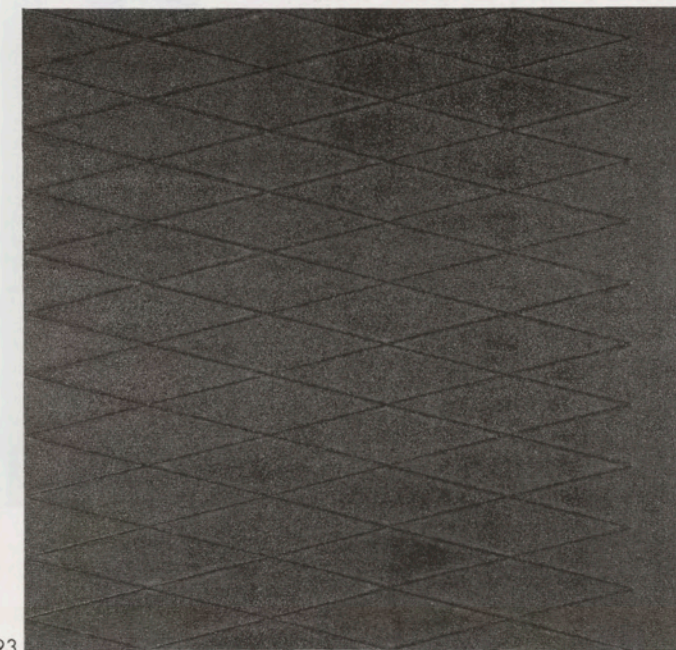


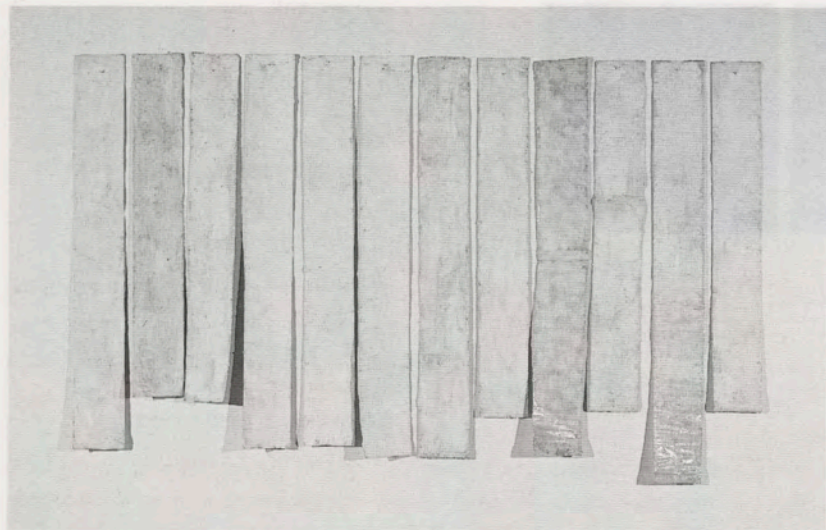
Megan Phillips Rebis 12 1994



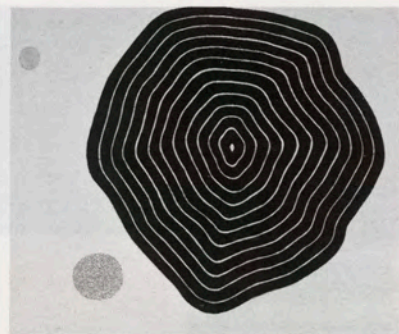
Ruth Watson S_GNDA 1992

Geoff Thornley Rubicon No.1 1993

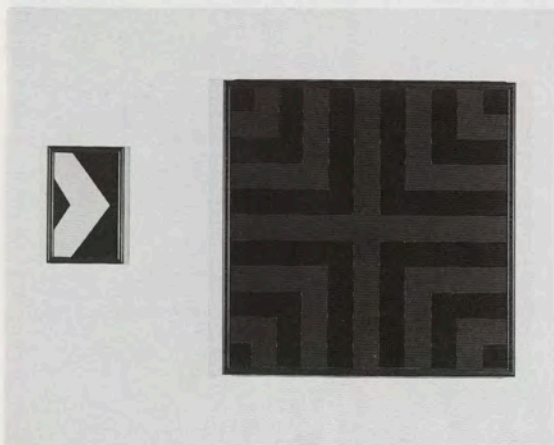




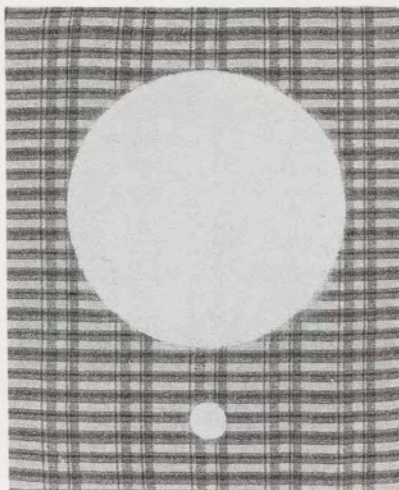
L. Budd Fig 1-12 1990/93



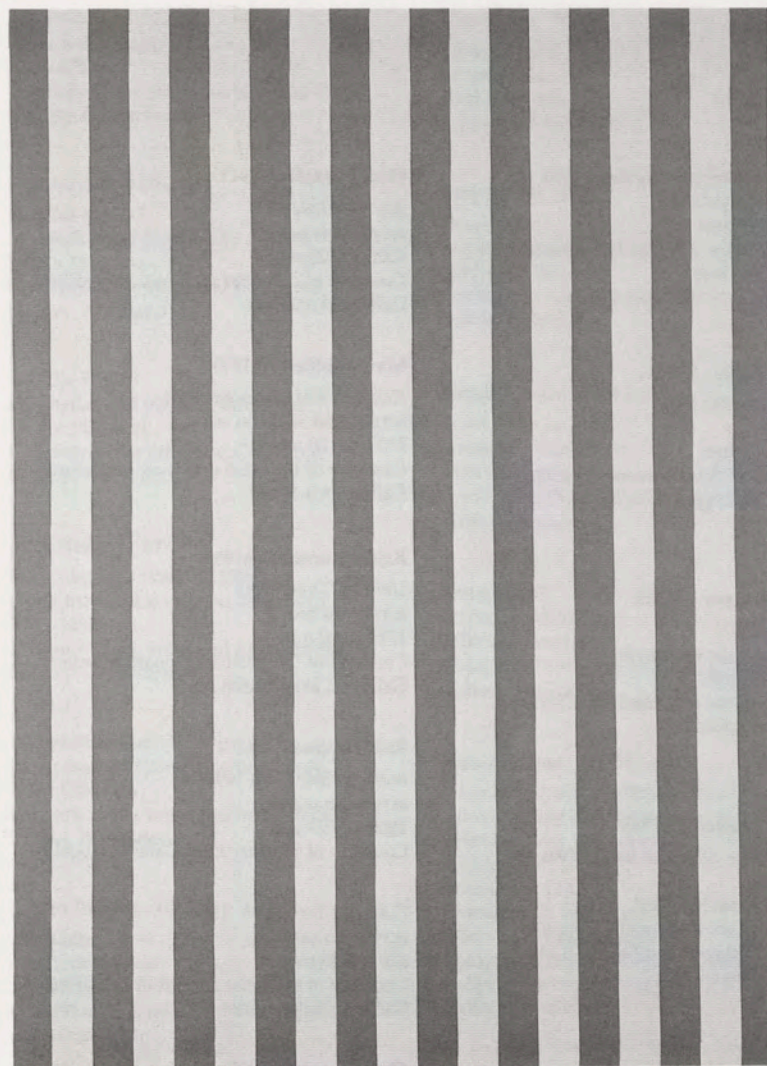
Dick Frizzell Big Soft Stella 1994



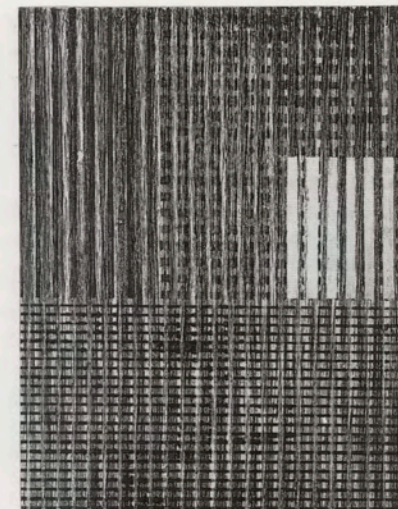
Richard Thompson Untitled 1994



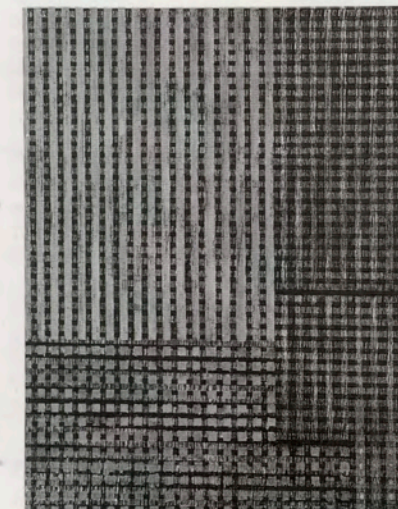
Robin Neate Dumb Painting 1994



Julian Dashper Untitled (1992)



Glenys Brookbanks Brown and Cream
Tempera Panel 1994



Glenys Brookbanks Brown and Blue
Tempera Panel 1994

List of Works

• Stephen Bambury b1957

Ideogram (II) 1995
resin, graphite, fabric and timber
2970 x 2000 mm
Courtesy of the artist

• Mark Braunias b1955

Field of Vision 1994
mixed media on paper
1550 x 1320 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gregory Flint
Gallery, Auckland

• Glenys Brookbanks b1948

Brown and Cream Tempera Panel 1994
tempera on gesso on board
720 x 550 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

Brown and Blue Tempera Panel 1994
tempera on gesso on board
720 x 550 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

• L. Budd b1953

Fig 1-12 1990/93
mixed media
2245 x 3650 mm installed
Private Collection, Wellington

• Graeme Cornwell b1954

(Re-)Mark. Printers Mark (Godfridus de Os)
1991
acrylic on plywood
2440 x 1240 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

(Re-)Mark. Valley of Dry Bones 1991
acrylic on plywood
2440 x 2440 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

Shane Cotton b1964

Te Kau Mia Ono 1994
oil on canvas
1800 x 1650 mm
Collection of Brian Sweeney and Jane
Vestey, Wellington

• Julian Dashper b1960

Untitled (1992)
sprayed acrylic on canvas
2100 x 1430 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Sue Crockford
Gallery, Auckland

• Tony de Lautour b1965

Skulls, Hearts, Stars and Bottles 1994/95
oil on panel
1045 x 630 mm installed
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland and Brooke | Gifford
Gallery, Christchurch

• Luise Fong b1964

Apollo 1994
acrylic, ink, gouache and flocking on board
2040 x 1900 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

• Dick Frizzell b1943

Big Soft Stella 1994
oil on canvas
1520 x 1825 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gow Langsford
Gallery, Auckland

• Max Gimblett b1935

Delacroix and Caduceus 1994
acrylic and silica on canvas
2100 x 2100 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gow Langsford
Gallery, Auckland

• Kristy Gorman b1969

Untitled 'Twist' 1995
acrylic on board
1725 x 600 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart
Gallery, Christchurch

• Bill Hammond b1947

Buller's Table Cloth 1994
acrylic on canvas
1600 x 1700 mm
Courtesy of Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland

• G.S.T. on Tea Towels 1994

acrylic on canvas
620 x 1230 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Brooke | Gifford
Gallery, Christchurch

• Chris Heaphy b1965

Dirt 1994
oil on canvas boards
1420 x 1200 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart
Gallery, Christchurch

• *I.D.* 1994
oil on 6 placemats
435 x 875 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart
Gallery, Christchurch

• Ken Heyes b1952

• *Untitled III* 1993
oil, shellac and pigment on canvas
1920 x 1830 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

Untitled V 1993
oil, shellac and pigment on canvas
1920 x 1830 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

• John Hurrell b1950

• *Graticular Field (Weeded)* 1995
paper map and acrylic on hardboard
240 x 1650 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart
Gallery, Christchurch

Attracted to What? 1995
paper map and acrylic on hardboard
270 x 1200 mm
Courtesy of the artist and New Work
Studio, Wellington

• Simon Ingram b1971

Who (Who?) 1994
acrylic on canvas
297 x 210 mm
Collection of Wystan and Sue Curnow,
Auckland

• Richard Killeen b1946

7 Blacks Combs 1991
acrylic and collage on aluminium
1460 x 1460 mm installed
Courtesy of the artist

• Tony Lane b1949

Branch 1995
ink and oil on board
1300 x 800 mm
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Millar b1957

Strum 1994
acrylic on board
3120 x 520 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gow Langsford
Gallery, Auckland

• Simon Morris b1963

Drive 1993
acrylic on aluminium
2400 x 600 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gregory Flint
Gallery, Auckland

• Protean 1993

acrylic on aluminium
2100 x 600 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gregory Flint
Gallery, Auckland

• Julia Morison b1952

*Silver & lead; silver & blood; mercuric oxide &
reflection; blood & reflection; reflection & silver;
reflection & ash; excrement & ash; excrement &
reflection*
from *Codex* 1993
mixed media and wood
1450 x 1450 mm installed
Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Jensen
Gallery, Wellington and Jonathan Smart
Gallery, Christchurch

• Robin Neate b1951

Dumb Painting 1994
enamel and acrylic on fabric
1120 x 920 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Hamish McKay
Gallery, Wellington

• Megan Phillips b1967

Rebis 12 1994
ink and oil on canvas
1150 x 1225 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Gregory Flint
Gallery, Auckland

• Séraphine Pick b1964

Untitled (brown painting) 1995
oil, pencil and crayon on canvas
1677 x 1220 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

• Patrick Pound b1962

UR1 International 1994
acrylic on canvas
2240 x 1420 mm, 755 x 510 mm
Collection of Tony Chamberlain and Helene
Quilter, Wellington

• Jude Rae b1956

Foresight 1991
oil on linen
330 x 1000 mm installed
Collection of William Somerville and
Felicity Lynch, Auckland

• John Reynolds b1956

Prometheus 1992
mixed media on board
1980 x 810 mm
Collection of Jim Fraser, Otago

Suspiro del Moro 1993
graphite and burns on board
2400 x 2400 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Sue Crockford
Gallery, Auckland

• Peter Robinson b1966

100% 1994
oilstick on wood
1230 x 1610 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Peter McLeavey
Gallery, Wellington

James Ross b1948

Untitled (Blue Period 1) 1993
oil on canvas
690 x 443 mm installed
Courtesy of the artist

Enigma (Variant 4) Black/Yellow 1 1993
oil on 3 panels
670 x 327 mm installed
Courtesy of the artist and New Work
Studio, Wellington

Michael Shepherd b1950

*Excavating the Historical [Landscape with clas-
sical ruins]* 1991
oil on board
790 x 1200 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

Michael Stevenson b1964

Double Negative Under Construction 1994
oil on canvas
900 x 1370 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Hamish McKay
Gallery, Wellington

Double Negative Under Construction 1994
oil on canvas
700 x 900 mm
Collection of Leonora Boyack, Wellington

Sanjay Theodore b1967

Myth of the Eastern Man 1994
spice and mixed media on canvas
920 x 1030 mm
Courtesy of the artist and New Work
Studio, Wellington

Geoff Thornley b1942

Rubicon No.1 1993
oil on canvas
1410 x 1485 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Vavasour/Godkin
Gallery, Auckland

Isobel Thom b1965

Untitled 1994/1995
oil on gesso on board
841 x 1785 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Claybrook
Gallery, Auckland

Richard Thompson b1965

Untitled 1994
paving paint and reject enamel on board
1200 x 1200 mm, 500 x 325 mm
Courtesy of the artist

Barbara Tuck b1943

Sensorial 1994
oil on aluminium
1200 x 560 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Peter McLeavey
Gallery, Wellington

Letter to Vermeer 1994
oil on aluminium
1180 x 1450 mm installed
Lowe Collection, Auckland

Ronnie van Hout b1962

Dimensions Variable 1993
spraypaint on board
2800 x 1780 mm installed
Courtesy of the artist and Hamish McKay
Gallery, Wellington

I'm with Stupid, Stupid's with me 1993
pencil, sulphur and ochre on concrete
380 x 680 x 50 mm installed
Private Collection, Christchurch

Gordon Walters b1919

Untitled 1993
oil on canvas
360 x 460 mm
Private collection, Auckland

Denys Watkins b1945

Lemur 1994
oil and wax on canvas
2300 x 1700 mm
Courtesy of the artist and Sue Crockford
Gallery, Auckland

Ruth Watson b1962

S_GNDA 1992
mixed media on board
1200 x 2000 mm installed
Collection of Tony Chamberlain and Helene
Quilter, Wellington

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *A Very Peculiar Practice*,
10 June – 3 September 1995 at the City Gallery, Wellington Te Whare Toi.

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Back cover: detail from Patrick Pound's *UR1 International* 1994

Inside cover: comic strip from *Wordt Vervolgd*, March 1993. Collection of Leon van
den Eijkel

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Wellington City Council
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Wellington, New Zealand

ABSOLUTELY
POSITIVELY
WELLINGTON
Tureke Pōneke
Wellington City Council


City Gallery
WELLINGTON
Te Whare Toi

...HAUNTED, ACCURSED AND POPULATED BY SINISTER SPIRITS, REFLECTIONS OF PAST INHABITANTS' UNHAPPY LIVES. THAT'S WHY IT HADN'T BEEN DEMOLISHED - IT SURE FREAKED-OUT THE GUYS WHO OWNED IT. THAT'S WHEN I STILL HAD AN IMAGINATION, TROUBLED SOUL THAT I WAS... TO CUT A LONG STORY SHORT, I TOOK THE SUBWAY TO 125th STREET, I HAD AN APPOINTMENT WITH BEN.

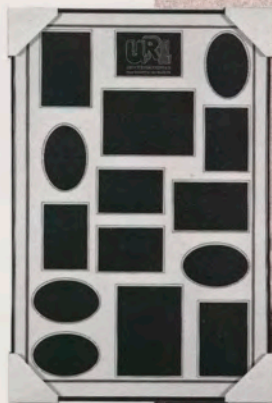


BEN WAS THERE, WE SHOT THE BREEZE FOR A BIT AND HE GAVE ME THE PACKAGE...



AFTER THAT I WALKED BACK TO THE PARAMOUNT





City Gallery WELLINGTON
Te Whare Toi