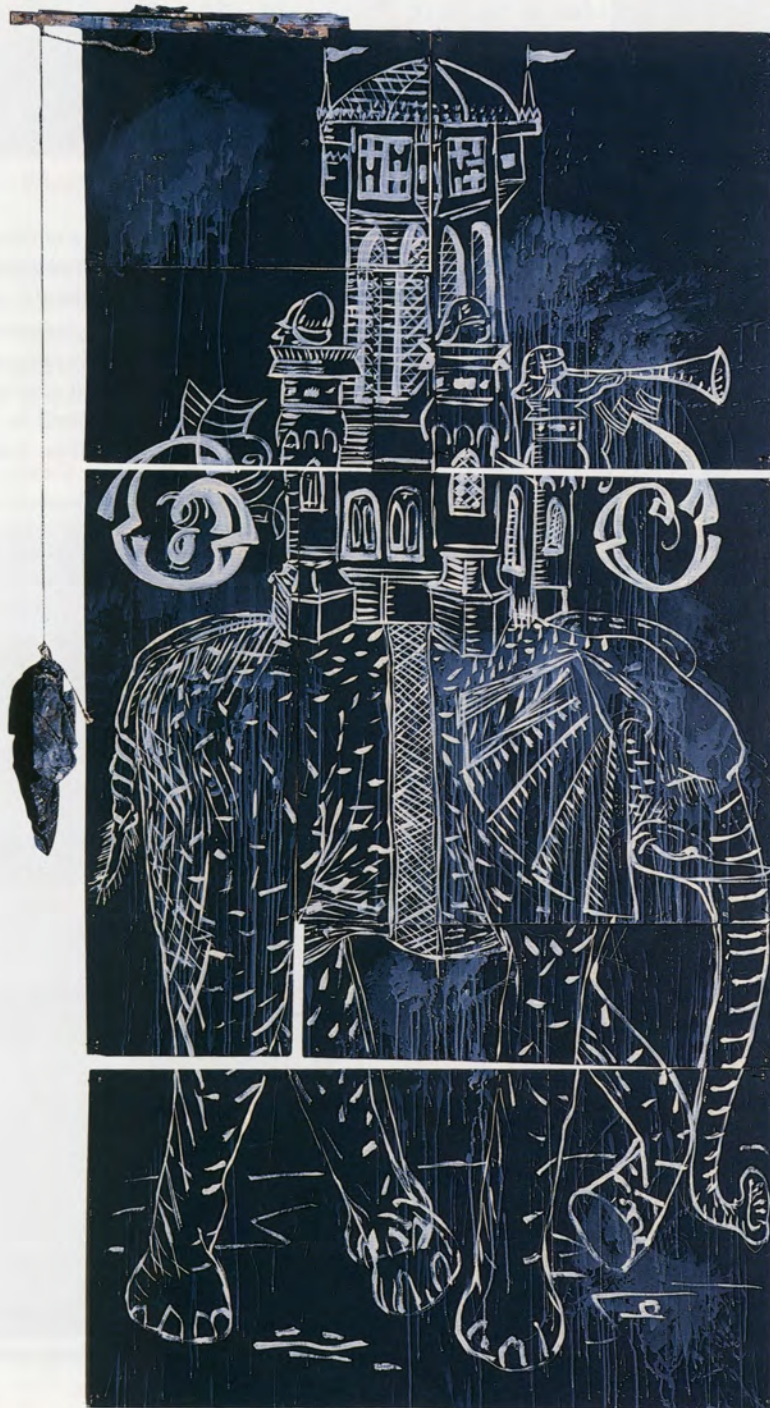


A Very Peculiar Practice

Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting



Graeme Cornwell (Re-)Mark, Printers Mark (Godfridus de Os) 1991 (2440 x 1240mm)

A Very Peculiar Practice is a celebration of the age old art of painting – a practice which has repeatedly been pronounced dead but which has returned to life, time and again, with renewed vigour. Despite the changes and developments that have taken place in the history of painting, many artists continue to try to make sense of their lives and their world through this medium. It has often been when painting has appeared to be losing ground, that it has served as the vehicle through which the avant garde have challenged conventional perceptions of art and the world. Indeed, painting has maintained its staying power through its ability to continually flourish anew. In this age of plurality, where almost anything goes, painting has reinvented itself in multiple forms. In media, support, format and theme, painting is a diverse rather than a singular practice.

The paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice* demonstrate some of the diversity present in a cross-section of emergent and established artists working in New Zealand in the 1990s. The selection, however, also illustrates certain aspects of cohesiveness.

The environment which the represented artists inhabit is an urban one, where the senses are constantly assaulted by a flux of images and sounds; where time is of the essence and life is often experienced through glimpses and brief moments of concentration. As such, city dwellers have come to be guided through life by a series of abbreviations – a visual shorthand of shapes, colours, signs and pictograms that can be read, interpreted and acted upon at a glance.

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.

Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, London, 1988, 30.

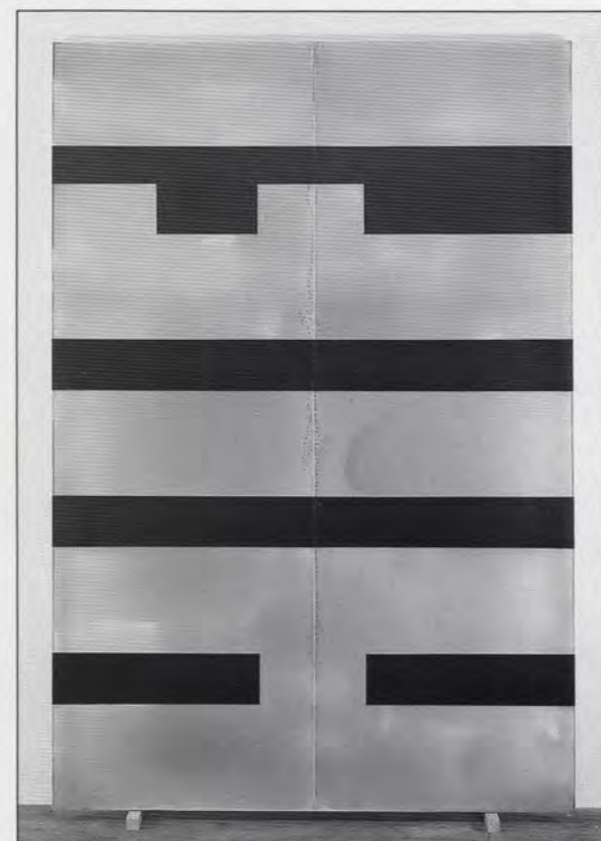
The paintings of *A Very Peculiar Practice* reflect fragmentary visions of the urban world. While many of the works may at first appear to be abstract arrangements of geometry, colour and texture; familiar forms from the street, office and screen can be detected, whether they be in or out of focus, magnified or reduced. For instance Simon Morris' black and white arrangements recall office plans or circuit diagrams, Barbara Tuck presents interconnected systems – organic or technological – akin to flowcharts. The undulating lines of Ken Heyes' paintings are reminiscent of seismographs or the human heart beat pictured on a monitor. Tony de Lautour revels in the iconography of the tattoo parlour. Amongst these signs of modernity older sign systems converse. Skulls associated with memento mori (reminders of our mortality) appear not only in the work of de Lautour but also in that of James Ross, Max Gimblett and Graeme Cornwell. Tony Lane ritualistically places a wand-like branch amongst magical stone markers and grids and Julia Morison re-presents

alchemic signs. Their presence is a testimony to the ancient history of humankind's use of sign and symbol to convey complex meaning, and also demonstrates that cities exist as collages of signs, many of which are now forgotten or only half recognised, from varying time zones and cultures.

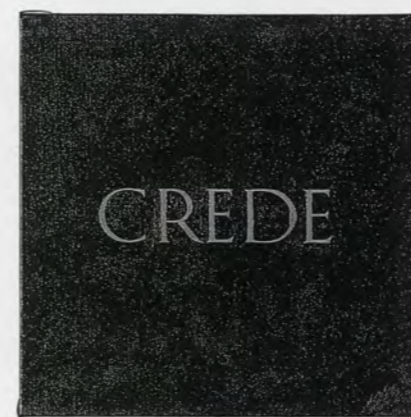
Visual slogans from pop philosophy, street culture, T-shirts and tats, industry and commerce emerge to become emblems in themselves.

Evil I AM
STUPID'S WITH ME
934 HIFI

Other works are fragments of cityscapes, recorded once more in shorthand rather than narrative. John Hurrell wittily captures the English personality of his home city of Christchurch though his recreation of motifs from street maps. High-rises, rhythmically punctuated by windows, and viewed through venetians and streaks of rain are suggested by Glenys Brookbanks. Inspired by the marks and stains examined by forensic scientists, Luise Fong explores the



Stephen Bambury *Ideogram (II)* 1995 (2970 x 2000mm)



Jude Rae *Foresight* 1991 (330 x 1000mm)



captivating effect of light crossing a dark surface. The smeared and reflective surface is also evocative of the illuminated city. Concentrated and magnified images such as these illustrate that amongst the cursory glances, our eyes periodically come to focus upon sights which are momentarily arresting.

A vacant building opposite marked for demolition. Large white X's on the window panes. 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?

Saul Bellows, *Mr Sammler's Planet*, Harmonswoth, 1978, 209.

The fragmentary nature of vision and perception presented in *A Very Peculiar Practice* is also reflected in the structural compositions of the paintings, many of which are made up of several components such as Kristy Gorman's meditation on a twist of thread or Megan Phillips' dynamic collision of red puzzle blocks. In other works the components are combined internally, on a single canvas. Although carefully and purposely aligned by the artists, arrangements often appear to be temporary, subject to displacement and change. The paintings' segmented compositions are not only influenced by the fractured and often illogical way in which the human eye and memory selects and associates information, but also the way in which information is presented to us. Formats may be compared to diagrams, the vertical and horizontal divisions of newspaper columns and cartoons, musical staves or flat busy screens.

Like the above formats the paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice* are meant to be read. They need, however, to be approached with an open mind, for although the eye can detect familiar signs and symbols, they have been recontextualised and personalised by the artists. Their connections are not always obvious or logical. For instance

the Marlboro cigarette logo used by Michael Stevenson in conjunction with images of land art from the 1970s, represents not the company but the rebel artist, often photographed with cigarette dangling, as cowboy, drawing in the desert with motorcycles and D8 Caterpillars.

In other cases, signs remain in existence while their meaning has been lost to history. Rather than acting as aids to communication, they have become puzzling enigmas. As the curator, Allan Smith writes

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 discontinuous and incomplete.

Allan Smith has tried to suggest with this selection of works, that paintings are produced when the desire to communicate and to make sense is "repressed and diverted" and subsequently resurfaces "in the form of configurational and re-configurational imperatives". It is on this point of divergence and transposition that all painting depends.

It is up to the viewer to give these paintings more than a cursory glance, to act as a detective or archaeologist and to nominate clues, draw together fragments of meaning, to unravel the snatches of broken communication in order to propose possible connections and narratives.

To think about the peculiarity of painting is to throw into profile what has become a very familiar practice. It demonstrates that although painting is an age old tradition, often viewed as outmoded amongst more modern and instantaneous media such as video and film, artists continue to be drawn to the possibilities of painting, investing in it great "emotional and intellectual care". In doing so, they have proven that painting continues to be a rich ground for artistic endeavour.

Claire J Regnault
CURATOR OF EDUCATION

A Very Peculiar Practice

Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting

10 June – 3 September 1995

Public Programmes Continuum City Cinema

Thursday 15 June 6.00pm

A Very Peculiar Practice: A User's Guide

Curator **Allan Smith** will give an illustrated introduction to the many ways of looking at and accessing the paintings in *A Very Peculiar Practice*.

Thursday 29 June 6.00pm

The Artists in Conversation

Auckland artist and inaugural 1989 Moët and Chandon recipient **Stephen Bambury**, will join 1994 Moët and Chandon prize-winner, **Judy Millar**, who has recently returned from Europe and the United States, to discuss aspects of their practice and issues concerning international painting.

Thursday 6 July 6.00pm

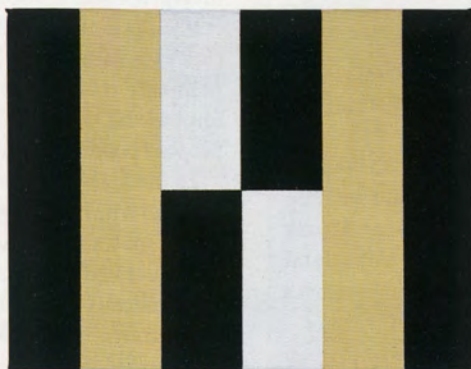
Making Sense of Painting

Tony Green, Professor of Art History at Auckland University and Wellington poet, writer and critic **Ian Wedde** discuss ways in which we might make sense of contemporary painting practice.

Enquires to the Education Department Tel. 801 3964.

The City Gallery, Wellington would like to gratefully thank all of the artists and lenders involved in *A Very Peculiar Practice* for their co-operation.

A fully illustrated catalogue will be available



Gordon Walters *Untitled* 1993 (360 x 460mm)



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