

THE CHARTWELL COLLECTION: RECENT ACQUISITIONS
12 FEBRUARY - 30 APRIL 2000

Chartwell

The Chartwell Collection



The Chartwell Collection

INTRODUCTION

At the end of its 25th year the Chartwell Collection has long attained its own critical mass, a body of work in continual reaction to many of the ideas and images which have fuelled our recent art history. So much so that there is rarely an exhibition of contemporary art in this country that does not include one of the Chartwell Collection's more than 600 works of New Zealand and Australian art. Chartwell, through both the Collection and the work of its Trust, has established an increasingly important place in New Zealand's visual cultural life. Its work is being continuously renewed by an always lively dialogue between contemporary art and its audience.

At the end of its third year of formal association with the Auckland Art Gallery, the Collection has been the subject of three new

acquisition surveys. Each of them, including the complex black and white shifts registered in curator Allan Smith's *Eloquent Polarities*, has been built on a persuasive theme of recent practice and collecting interest. Added to that is the major collection-in-review exhibition and publication project – *home and away* – which the Gallery presented in 1999 and which will tour nationally until 2001. Each provides a fine but distinguished strand that elaborates the vision of founding trustee Rob Gardiner.

In this, as on so many occasions in the recent past, my sincere thanks go to Rob Gardiner for his support of this project; to the Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton, for their continuing support and assistance; and to Allan Smith for his highly considered work in curating this exhibition.

Chris Saines Director

Kathy Temin

Home (1 of 5) detail of

Model homes 1996

wood with enamel paint, fur
overall dimensions approx.

1700 x 4000

cover

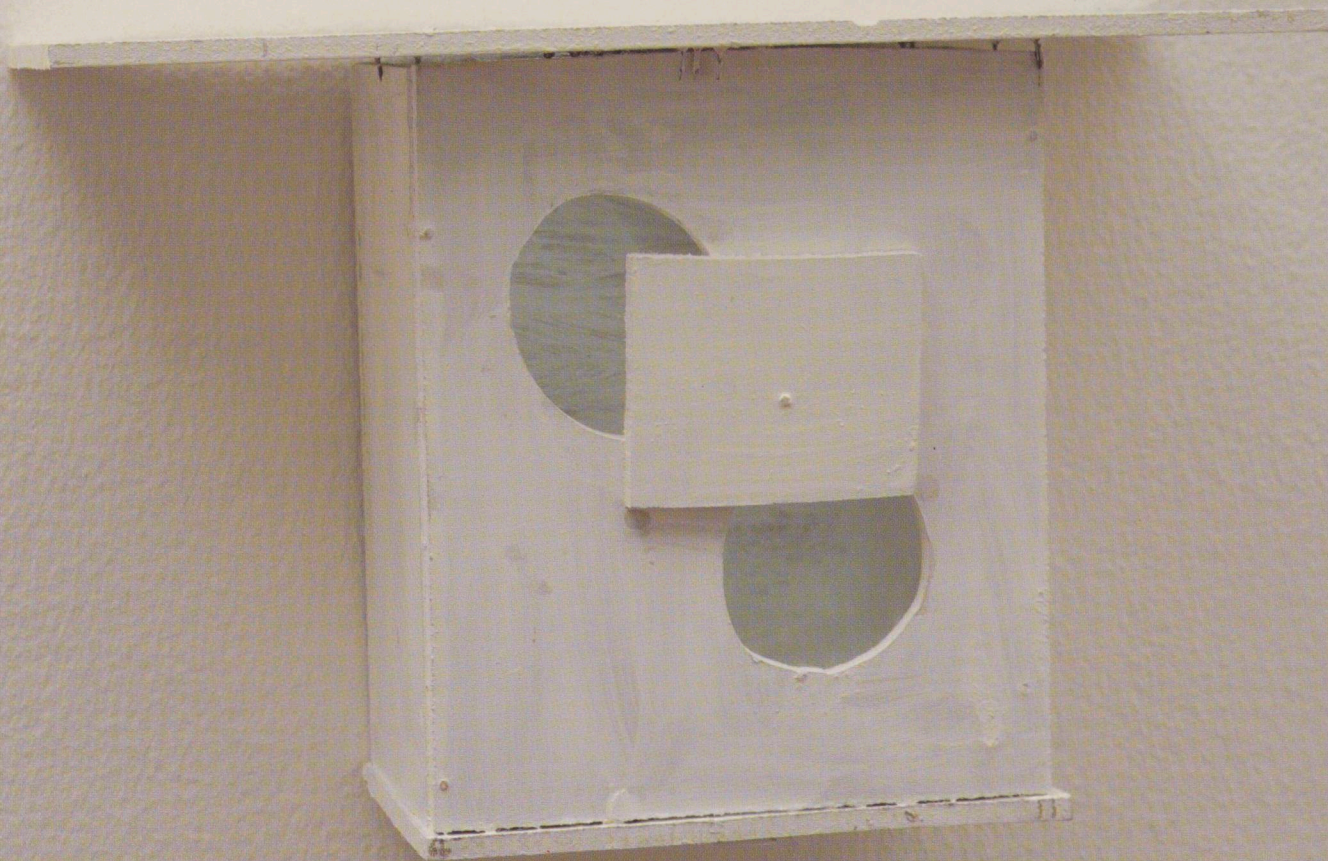
Shane Cotton

Kenehi (Northern Light I) 1998

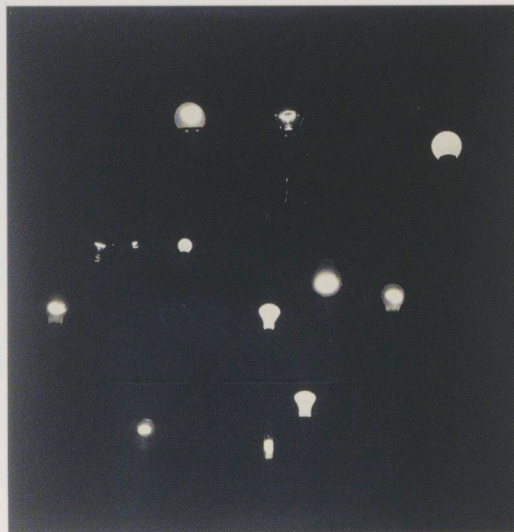
oil on canvas

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Bill Culbert

Standard lamps day, night 1995

black and white photographs

on canvas

1248 x 1230 each piece

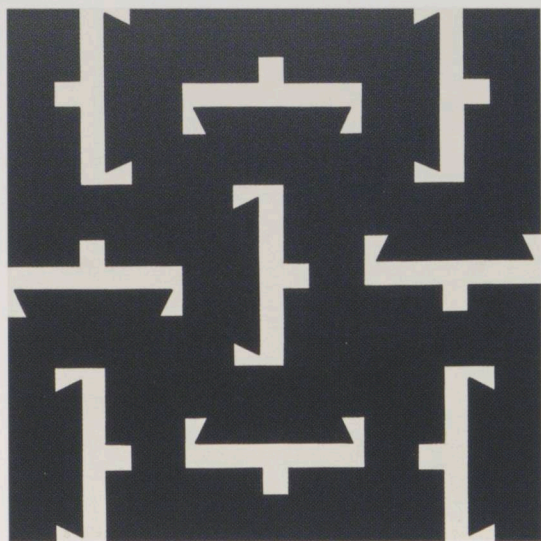
ELOQUENT POLARITIES

Picture this: you dream you are inside a pure white modernist art gallery. You feel trapped on the set of a film you don't want to be in. Reverent, decorous and dressed in black, members of the local artworld rehearse arcane witterings about the true meaning of a pair of jandals on a canvas. You understand instantly that contemporary art is all empty posture, and that its magic spell can only be broken by the voice of authenticity. Fortunately for you, as the scenario unfolds of what turns out to be a beer commercial, you are rescued, before anything worse can happen, by the refreshingly honest call for a Lion Red.¹

If your average life-style magazine is anything to go by, then variations on black and white dress appear *de rigueur* for many designers, architects, and artists. This is not so new. Since the 19th century, black and white has been central to the look of modernity. Reporting on the 'heroism of modern life' in 1846 the French writer and art critic Baudelaire talks of the ambivalent appeal of the ubiquitous black frock-coat which has become a 'uniform livery of grief', 'a mark of perpetual mourning'. But, says Baudelaire, although it seems that colour is denied in the modern city, individuality can still be defined by careful

variations in cut and finish. In art also, great colourists are learning 'the secret of creating colour with a black frock-coat and a white cravat and a grey background.'²

A preference for black and white over colour is interpreted by many as a sign of psychological repression, or life denying asceticism. The blacks and whites of Puritan Reformers come to mind, or the sobriety of dark suits, the white sports clothes and white paint finishes the high priests of Modern architecture prescribed for their ideal society. It has been argued that the impersonal processes of modernisation made inevitable the virtually



Simon Morris

A place in time 1996

ink and acrylic on aluminium

200 x 200

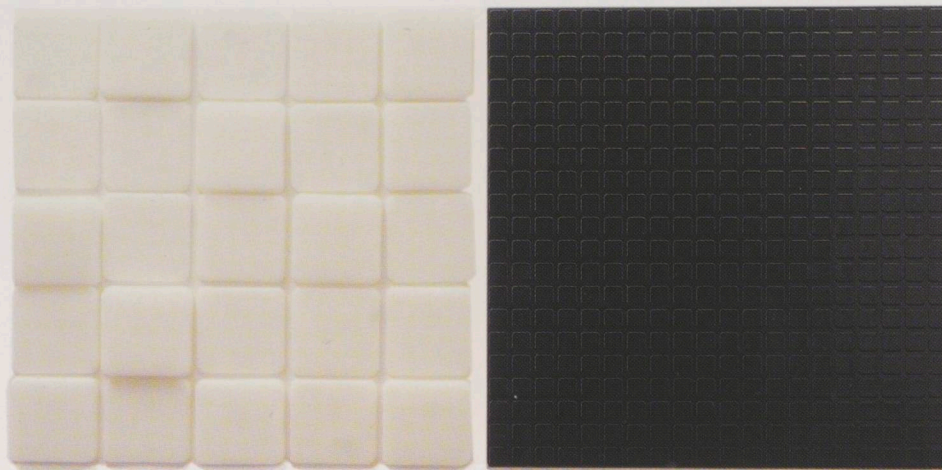
universal relinquishing of the peacock's chroma of male attire for the sobriety of what is known as The Great Masculine Renunciation. Black and white attire certainly seems a logical camouflage for an industrial age. In a mechanised, anonymous, functionalist epoch this renunciation eventually came to effect all the arts and all dress codes at the expense of the feminine, the chromatic and the sensual.

The thirteen works in this exhibition have been selected from the recent additions to the Chartwell Collection. They have been chosen for their monochromatic simplicity, for the eloquent

chic of their chromatic ascesis.³ If we take time with these works, and give our eyes a chance to adjust to their darkness, or to the brightness of their whites as it were, we will come to see that their apparent limitations conceal a full spectrum of emotional and conceptual possibilities.

In the works of Brent Harris, Richard Thompson and Shane Cotton, the legacy of Colin McCahon's luminous melancholy is variously felt. Harris lives in Australia but grew up in New Zealand and for much of the last two decades has been reworking key ingredients of McCahon's art. The sonorous architectonics of

Harris' work from the late 1980s, which was strongly McCahon referenced, has now shifted into something more sinuous, lyrical and idiosyncratic. The graphic clarity and whimsical ambiguity of *To the forest (no. 7 small)* also recalls early Gordon Walters' optical formalism with its equalisations of figure and ground. Each year Richard Thompson paints a new version of this black/brown cross on a black ground. The format, the hues and the tonality are generic, paying simultaneous homage to the crosses and the different blacks of Ad Reinhardt, Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere. In this case the black palette is a



Denise Kum

Norament 1998

rubber, MDF, ethylene vinyl acetate,
liquid acrylic

1002 x 2045 overall

way of silently cloaking the painter's subjectivity.

Shane Cotton's work stands very much in the tradition of McCahon's scripting of the prophetic voice, which continually speaks across the land in long or short orations. In Cotton's work language comes into light from the plenitude of darkness; it threads and laces its white skeins across space like a spider's web and keys itself into place with tiny braces and brackets.

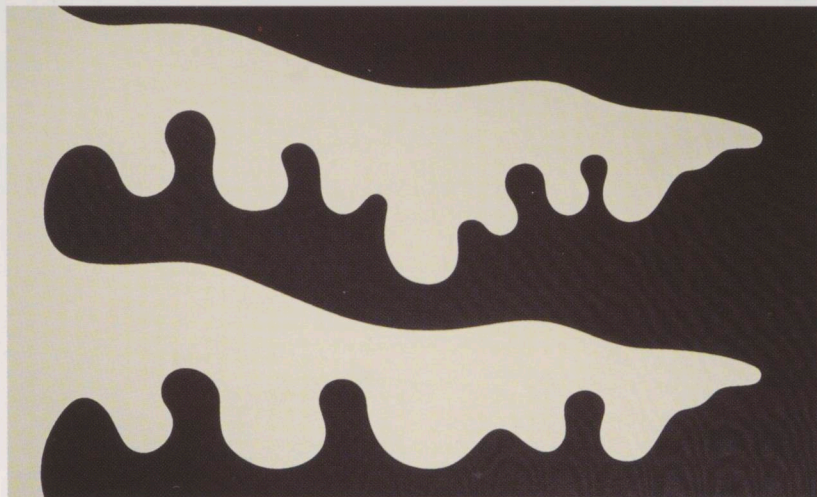
Bill Culbert examines a similar romanticism of light effects in his photographic work *Standard lamps day, night*. Through a split-screen effect, one image, taken in

the daylight, shows us the lamp-stands and fittings that sustain the companion image's apparition of floating bulbs constellated in the dark. This is nocturnal magic with the lights on; a form of *mysteria interruptus*.

In both Cotton's and Culbert's works, visionary purchase, though differently conceived, seems dependent on straddling a transitional seam between darkness and light. From this perceptual border we imagine we can see into the mechanics of visual metamorphosis.

Simon Morris exploits gridded alternations between dark and light as a binary coding, an on/off sequencing

which calibrates the visual field. The ideality of vision is continually tripped up; through their schedule of tiny halts, jumps and shifts in direction, Morris' planimetric compositions produce an optics of intermittence. Or do they instead accent an irregularity that is always present but rarely noticed? Denise Kum also sometimes works with altered grids; but she destabilises the ordered system through the strangeness of her materials and textures. The imagined toxicity of her multi-form plastics, rubbers and foams permits the dark nastiness of industrial processes to breed in the immaculate language of geometric



Brent Harris

To The Forest (No. 7 small) 1998

oil on linen

640 x 1040

abstraction. Her wet black and nacreous white surfaces ask to be touched but threaten contamination.

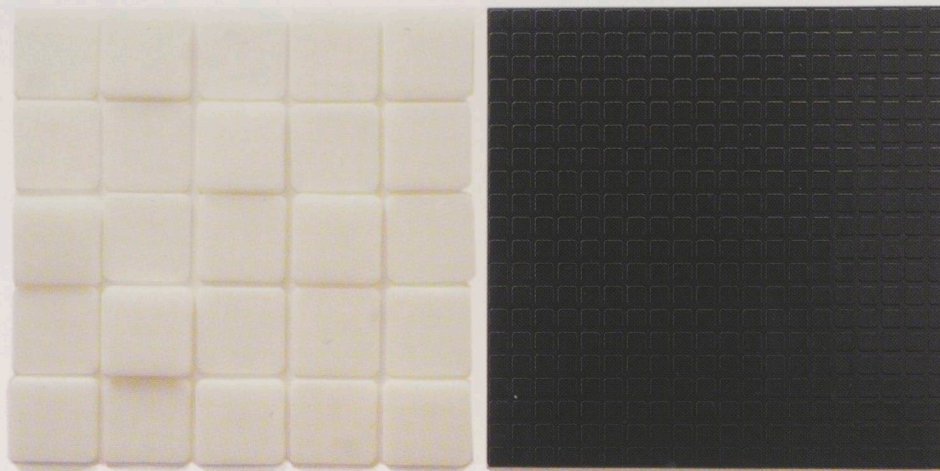
Both Kathy Temin and Julian Dashper use humour to leaven their aesthetic programmes. Temin uses faux naivety and wilful clumsiness to construct parodic modern architecture. Her white-walled houses turn the utopian hopes of the *Weissenhofseidlung* into a series of badly painted birdhouses, or flat roofed cottages for rodents. The smoothly textured planes of international style modernity are degraded by unevenly applied enamel paint, ill-fitting panels and patches of fun-fur. With typical deadpan

elegance, Dashper endorses a small drum with a grey zero. Read one way the drum's circle gets doubled with a difference by this stylish sign of banal hermeticism. Read otherwise, the branded drum releases a stream of ironic takes on the circulating of opinion in the artworld, the packaging of reputations and the grooming of the players.

The philosopher Theodore Adorno, claimed that black in art has a terrible pertinence to this age of suffering and cultural impoverishment and that love of colour, in fact, is childish and inauthentic.⁴ It is this sort of escape from authenticity that Paul Simon admits to in his plea,

'Mama don't take my Kodachrome away', as 'everything looks worse in black and white.' Comparing the philosopher's and the songwriter's comments we may conclude that the desire for fullness of colour stems from the maternal and the feminine part of our psyche whereas the cult of black and white operates under the stern law of the Father. Fashionable chic, sign of restraint, emblem of authenticity, or aid to clearer vision - however we interpret the language of black and white in this exhibition, its eloquence is due, in part, to its capacity to stimulate a polarity of strong responses.

Allan Smith Curator



Denise Kum

Norament 1998

rubber, MDF, ethylene vinyl acetate,
liquid acrylic

1002 x 2045 overall

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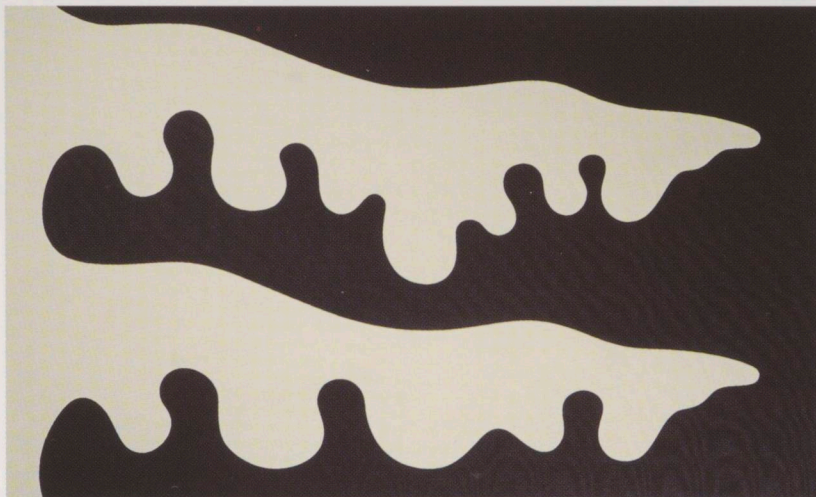
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Allan Smith Curator

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Kathy Temin (born 1968)

Model homes 1996

5 pieces: *Dream home*, wood with enamel paint, fur, plastic part; *Shared home*, wood with enamel paint; *Budget home*, wood with enamel paint and acrylic paint; *Home*, wood with enamel paint, fur; *Ideal home*, wood with enamel paint, fur. overall dimensions approximately 1700 x 4000

Brent Harris (born 1956)

To The Forest (No. 7 small) 1998
oil on linen
640 x 1040

Julian Dashper (born 1960)

Untitled (zero) 1998

vinyl on drumskin with drum
405 x 615 x 610 (irregular)

Richard Thompson (born 1965)

Untitled 1998

acrylic on jute
1310 x 910

Shane Cotton (born 1964)

Kenehi (Northern Light II) 1998

oil on canvas
560 x 1020

Simon Morris (born 1963)

Blink 1998

acrylic on canvas
1065 x 2130

Simon Morris

A place in time 1996

ink and acrylic on aluminium
200 x 200

Bill Culbert (born 1935)

Standard lamps day, night 1995

black and white photographs
on canvas
1248 x 1230 each piece

Denise Kum (born 1968)

Norament 1998

rubber, MDF, ethylene vinyl acetate,
liquid acrylic
1002 x 2045 overall

NOTES

1. My reference is to one of Saatchi & Saatchi's recent Lion Red advertisements.

2. Charles Baudelaire, *Selected writings on art and literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet, Penguin Books, London 1992, pp. 105, 106.

3. Two other very recent Chartwell purchases - works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Patrick Pound - also employ predominantly black and white palettes.

4. See Charles A. Riley II, *Colour codes: modern theories of colour in philosophy, painting and architecture, literature, music and psychology*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London 1995, pp. 55, 56.

All dimensions are in millimetres, height x width.



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published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Auckland Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Waikato Museum of Art and History in presenting this exhibition.

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