

# Snake Oil

\_CHARTWELL ACQUISITIONS 2002-5









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Rob Gardiner established the Chartwell Collection in 1974. It now includes more than 800 works by New Zealand and Australian artists, with more being added constantly. The Collection was always intended for public use, and its long term loan to the Auckland Art Gallery ensures that a wide audience can access it through regular exhibitions, publications, and through the temporary loan of works to other public galleries. The Chartwell Collection reflects the changing nature of Australasian art from the late 20th century to now. It provides a great opportunity to explore the similarities, differences and interchange between New Zealand and Australian work. Two major exhibitions curated from the collection demonstrated this: CROSS CURRENTS at the Waikato Museum of Art and History in 1991, and the national touring exhibition HOME AND AWAY, which opened at Auckland Art Gallery in 1999. The Chartwell Collection also represents many individual artists in depth, and in ways that dovetail with the Gallery's own holdings. The 2003 exhibition NINE LIVES drew on both collections to present mini-surveys of nine key New Zealand artists. SNAKE OIL showcases a selection from the acquisitions made since 2002. >Published by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki in 2005 on the occasion of the exhibition SNAKE OIL: CHARTWELL ACQUISITIONS 2002-5  
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# LIZ MAW

## >Satan

Liz Maw perfects noble archetypes: a woman in a suit of armour, a yellow Minotaur with an erection, an Arab soldier with oil miraculously spurting from his palms, and her boyfriend artist Andrew McLeod as a satyr. She paints her beautiful fantasy figures realistically, almost life size, and clear-cut from their backgrounds. She describes them as invented ancestors and icons. Maw's SATAN is a blonde bombshell. Half retro pin-up, half retro deity, the dualistic SATAN is a comment on Catholicism. Maw calls it

a response to the divine impregnation of Mary. The work plays on the traditional duplicity of the femme fatale. Coming at the end of an incongruously elongated, snakelike arm, her left hand repeats the gesture of the disquieted Virgin in Leonardo Da Vinci's ANNUNCIATION in the Uffizi. But her right hand holds a gun, almost to her own head as if anticipating suicide (a Catholic no-no), or perhaps to fire on the voyeur-viewer. It's feminism and sexism rolled into one.





# RONNIE VAN HOUT

## >Drunk Chimp

Ronnie van Hout's work features his animal alter-egos Sculpt D Dog and Monkey Madness. His monkey character plays on the idea that we evolved from apes, and riffs on old films and TV shows where this was a key trope: LANCE LINK, MONKEY, PLANET OF THE APES and Kubrick's 2001. Van Hout parodies the idea that apes can paint. In the 1940s Paul Schiller studied the artistic activity of chimps, and later Desmond Morris featured Congo, an ape-artist, on his television show. Morris may have been deadly serious (he was an artist himself) and yet the idea of ape-painters was frequently used to ridicule modern art, particularly abstract expressionism. Monkey Madness first appeared in Van Hout's video PAINTING AGAIN (1998), where the

artist adopted the primate persona in order to defeat his painter's block. However later videos, DRINKING AGAIN (2001) and HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN (2002), played up Monkey Madness's problems with the bottle. The sculpture DRUNK CHIMP finds Monkey Madness prostrate, holding not the wine bottle from which he attempted to find inspiration, sustenance or escape, but a video screen documenting his downfall. The video uses the opening "Dawn of Man" sequence from 2001 where a cosmic intervention allows apes to evolve into humans. However Van Hout's version spoils the idea of a great leap forward, replacing the monolith with a wine bottle; the self awareness journey becoming a road to oblivion. De-evolution.





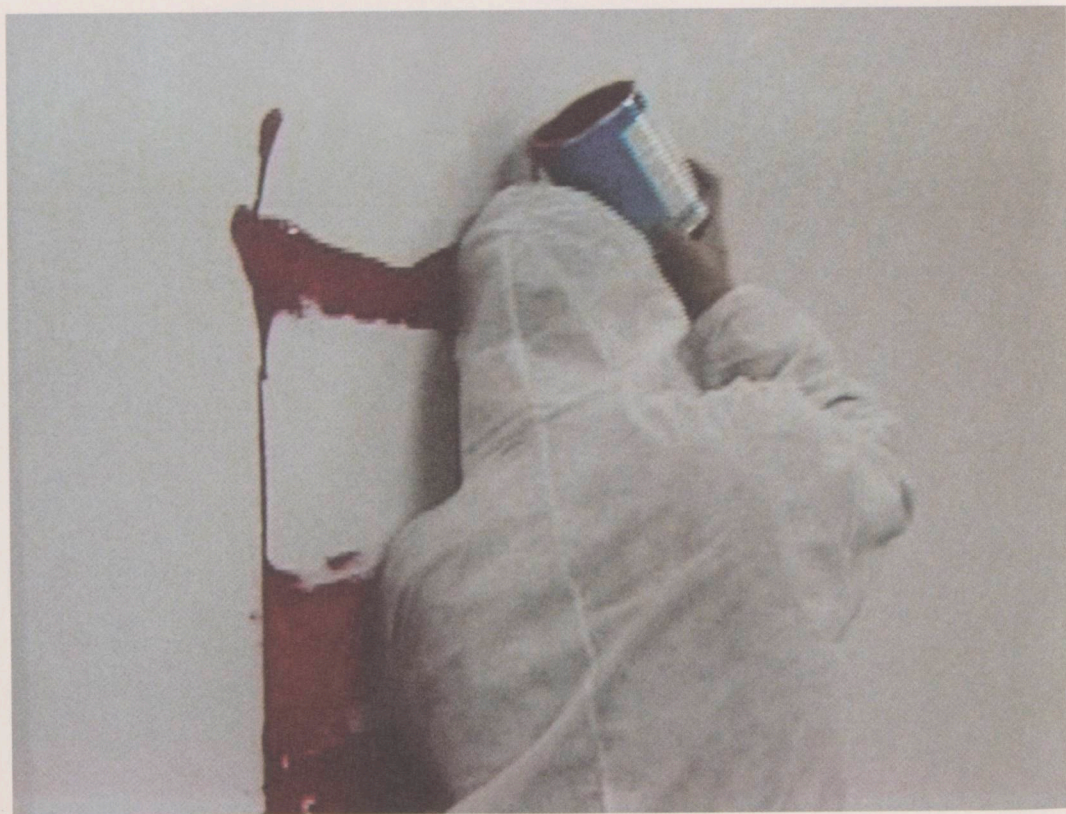


# GUY BENFIELD

## >Head Painting

History returns as farce in the work of Guy Benfield. His campy video-performances and installations mix references to a 1970s Sydney bohemian lifestyle (witnessed first hand as a child) with references to sensational avant-garde art of similar vintage. The video HEAD PAINTING shows Benfield pouring paint on himself while dragging himself down the gallery wall, leaving paint-trails where his head and shoulder make contact. The performance recalls

Paul McCarthy's famous 1970s performance, painting a line on the floor using his head as a brush. What Benfield leaves on the wall looks like Zen-inspired action-calligraphy after Max Gimblett (whose recent New Gallery show telling featured a video of the artist in action). However, Benfield's behind-the-scenes document presents his creative act as not heroic, expressive or meditative, but routine, abject, forlorn.





# GIOVANNI INTRA

## >Untitled

Giovanni Intra's studded suit is a belated tribute to punk style. Needing an outfit for the Elam art school ball, he took an op shop suit and decorated it with metal studs, imitating the look punks originally borrowed from bondagewear. "The outfit was a huge success – even if the fastenings did leave the bare-chested Intra lacerated and bleeding by the end of the evening", reported Kelly Carmichael. Later Intra hung his suit on the wall to recall the way Joseph Beuys displayed his felt suits. The contrast was telling. Where Beuys cut himself a dour grey felt suit to exemplify his job of artist as healer, Intra's uniform was dazzling. Part punk, part S'n'M, part Liberace, and very K Road, it sponged up all manner of associations, folding fashion into religion. As Bridget Sutherland imagined it, Intra's "suited yet absent figure presides over some debased ritual – a science-fiction priest who wallows in the glamour of a low and aggressively vulgar materialism. Like a devilish performer, he conjures for us the breakdown of reality into dream, object into fetish."

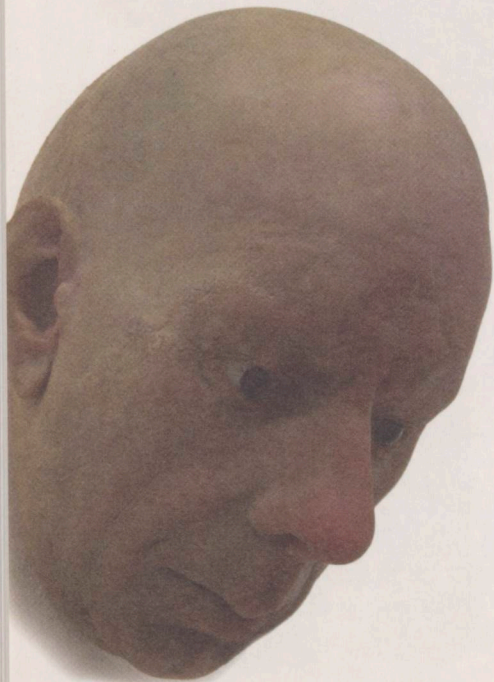


# STEPHEN BIRCH

>Cosmos

Stephen Birch cast friends' heads in silicon, and installed the casts hither and thither across the wall, like stars in the night sky. The line up, all fellow artists and art workers, includes Mikala Dwyer, Matthys Gerber, Rosemary Laing and Birch himself. The work could be considered positive. The field of heads is like a constellation of like minds, a thinking community, Birch's personal art universe. Like stars, the heads could operate as kindly guides to navigation or support more metaphysical inquiry. On the other hand, they might be cast negatively, as severed heads, creepy death masks, or trophy heads for the collector's wall. The heads could be seen as ethereal spirits (as heads hovering happily in space with no need of the body)

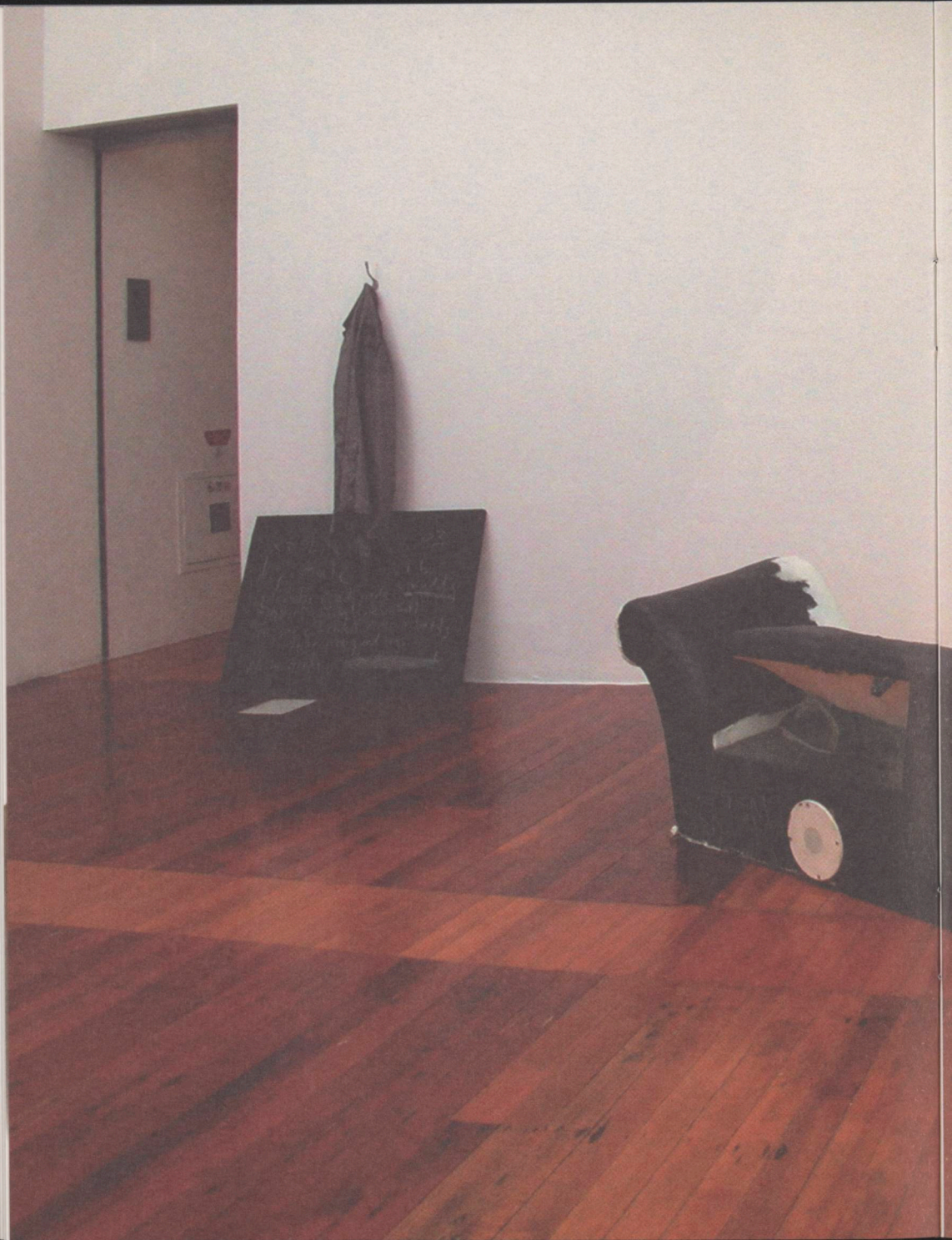
or as abject waxworks (as bald, uncanny, and grossly physical). Heavenly or base, it's your call. Birch produced this, his second version of COSMOS, to use in a collaboration with Rosemarie Laing. In ONE DOZEN NATURAL DISASTERS IN THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE she photographed the heads in the Australian desert. They appear in mid air (perhaps raining down) and littered around poisonous salt bores (as if that's where they landed or finally expired). The photographs could be a comment on the 19th century explorers that lost their lives attempting to map the Australian interior, but there's equally an echo of Nicholas Roeg's THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH, of aliens who crash-and-burn.













# p mule [dr] et al.

## >The Creative Act

When et al.'s Marlene Cubewell was installing her 1992 solo show at Peter McLeavey's Wellington gallery, the eminent dealer left her in charge. When he returned he discovered she had blonded his beloved *chaise longue* using white paint. McLeavey cancelled her show, trucked Cubewell's work back to Auckland and sent the furniture in for repair. Subsequently this other dilapidated couch began appearing in et al. installations as a tribute to this instance of vandalism. On one occasion the interior was speckled with fly pupae, suggesting the artist had opened a can of worms, or some-

thing similar. More recently it has been transformed into a speaker box, playing an antique recording of Marcel Duchamp delivering his famous lecture "The Creative Act", noting the role the viewer plays in the completion of the art work. It is as if et al.'s work were still haunted by His Master's Voice, the father of conceptual art beamed to us from beyond the grave. Resonating within the couch, it is hard to know if the patriarch is being offered as the analyst or the bleating patient. Either way the work looks gothic – it's a vampire's coffin.



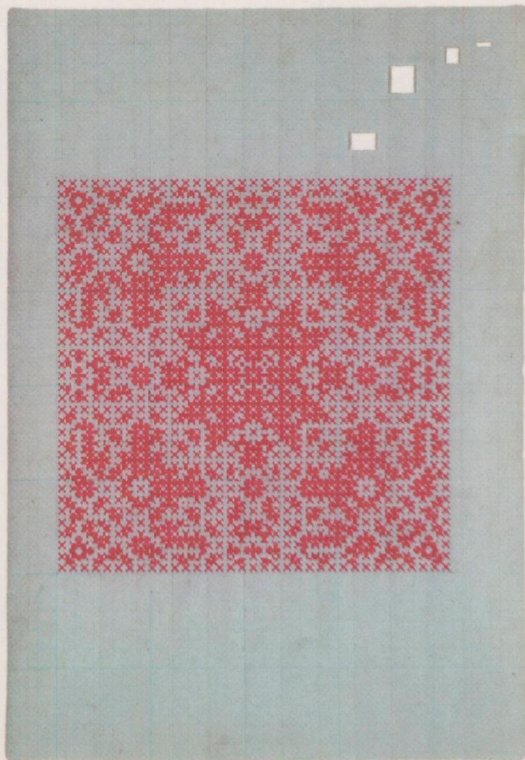
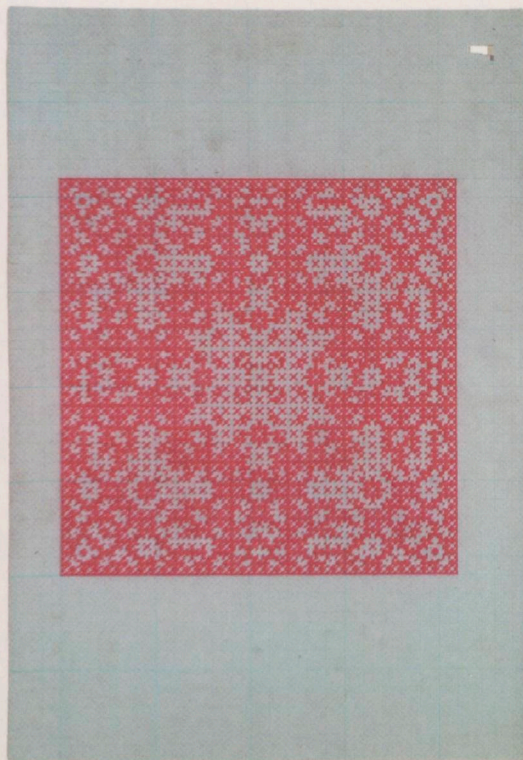


# MARTIN THOMPSON

## >Untitled

Computers reduce big picture complexity to simple yes/no decisions, albeit millions of them. Martin Thompson works similarly. He makes drawings on graph paper, filling in on or leaving blank the squares according to a mathematical plan, generating beautiful, often trippy patterns in the process. Our appreciation of his works does not simply reside in enjoying the patterns, but in

recognising the manual and mental processes by which they are generated. The works are also rich in association. Stella Brennan is reminded of "stars, Pac-Men, and snowflake-patterned knitwear", Stuart Shepherd of "complex quilts, radiating mandelas or patterns of pixilated TV static". But these are parallels rather than reference points for the artist, whose interest surely lies in the abstract logic of it.



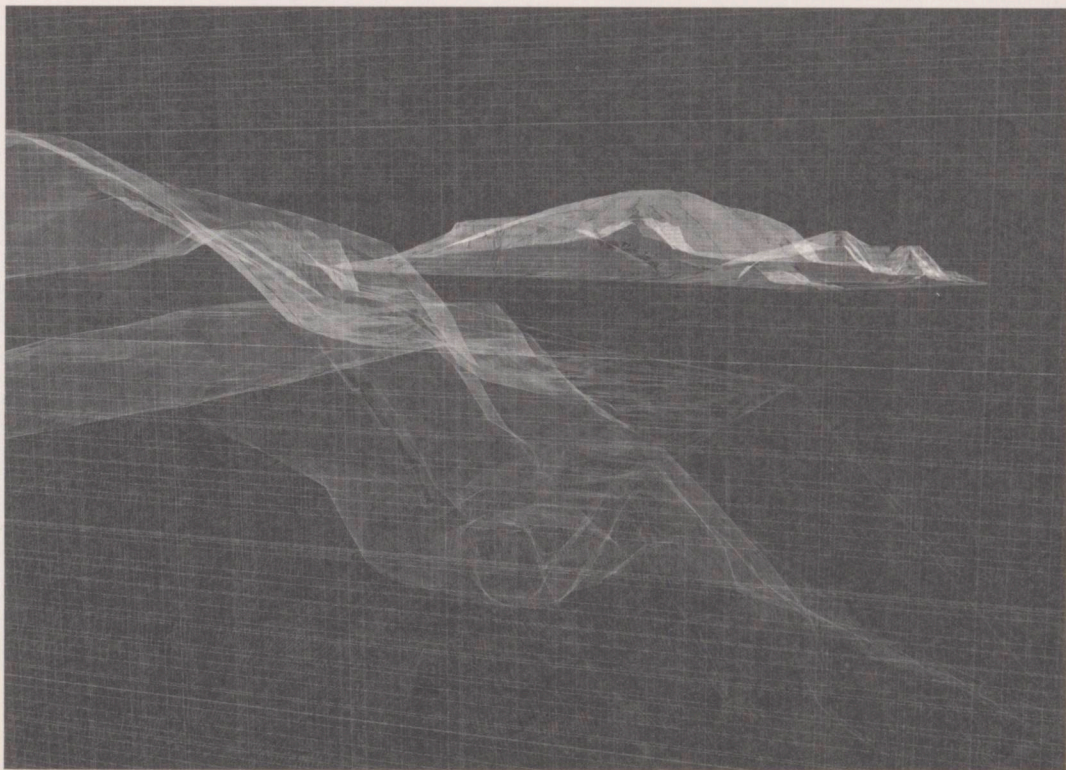


# MLADEN BIZUMIC

>Hauturu.Doc

Long ago visionaries created the Pyramids in Egypt and the Colossus of Rhodes. But contemporary art also has heroic projects designed to kick ass and up the ante, from James Turrell's RODEN CRATER and Christo's WRAPPED REICHSTAG to Matthew Barney's CREMASTER CYCLE. Such projects set the scene for Mladen Bizumic's grandiose proposal to relocate Little Barrier Island (Hauturu) – the nature reserve that protects many of our rare native bird species – from the Hauraki Gulf to the harbour of Venice. It's colonisation in reverse. The proposal plays on New Zealand's

desire to make a splash at the Venice Biennale, and stakeholder expectations that our presence reinforce national identity and serve Trade and Industry interests. Bizumic's absurd proposal might keep everyone happy. The video here, a wire-frame CAD animation imagining the island on the move, makes you think for a second it might just be possible. Its languid soundtrack is an orchestral cover version of the Rolling Stones' UNDER MY THUMB slowed down. The question hovering over Bizumic's proposal: how rock'n'roll is it?



# MICHAEL HARRISON

## >Magnetism

Michael Harrison has always been the odd man out: a "watercolourist" in a time of digital-biennale-project-art, a mediaevalist who prefers the occult to art theory, an artist who explores tender feelings in an age of ironic distance. His understated images of faces, women, couples, nudes, landforms and heavenly bodies nod to art history, classical mythology and Hollywood. Modest in scale, light in touch, they transport us into a realm of dreams and desires, of melancholy beauty. In the early 1990s Harrison's output was low, as he laboured to distil singular images. But through the decade he sped up, increasingly worked in open series, permutating leitmotifs, arranging and rearranging them in endless variations. The cats and birds that dominate

his recent works invite all manner of readings. Cats and birds are earthbound and airborne; predators and prey. They have long symbolised aspects of ourselves: playing anima to our animus (or vice versa). Harrison's bird riffs on the bird in the Ace of Cups card in the Waite Tarot deck; it also could suggest the soul, the Holy Ghost, a harbinger. The cats meanwhile suggest familiars, and nuzzling purring feline sensuality. Harrison's cast are less birds and cats, more bird-signs and cat-signs; his heraldic images hovering between operating as 3d scenes and 2d ciphers. And while they suggest allegories, they are ultimately inscrutable. Harrison likens them to dream images, whose significance is obscure even for – especially for – the dreamer.



M. C. Harriss 1906





# HANY ARMANIOUS

## >Untitled Snake Oil

Traditionally casting has been used to reproduce sculptures, but today sculptors are addressing the process in its own right. In 1969 Richard Serra cast the space where wall meets floor with molten lead. (In Matthew Barney's 2002 film CREMASTER 3, he parodied himself, using molten Vaseline instead.) In 1997 Mark Quinn cast his head in his own blood, frozen solid. Rachel Whiteread has

made an entire career from casting neglected spaces, under chairs and within to-be-demolished houses. Hany Armanious has put his own spin on the process in a series of works using Hot Melt, a miraculous and versatile casting vinyl. Armanious calls it "snake oil", suggesting an elixir, a wild-west cure-all (perhaps a fix for all his sculpting problems). The nickname also suggests a hoax,





something bogus. Sometimes Armanious pours Hot Melt into space, forming inchoate blobs and folds that betray the material's qualities: its viscosity, the speed at which it sets. However, here he pours it into glasses, casting the space that a drink – a magic potion – would take. He turns out the solidified volumes like jellies or cupcakes, perching them atop the inverted glasses as dainty

plinths. They are a family of curious comic characters: some blunt, some pointy; some graceful, some squat. Surveying their differences one notices odd things: for instance a stalk cast in a long necked glass slumps under its own weight. Recalling the metallurgists, alchemists and charlatans of old, Armanious' piece invokes the magical potential of casting.



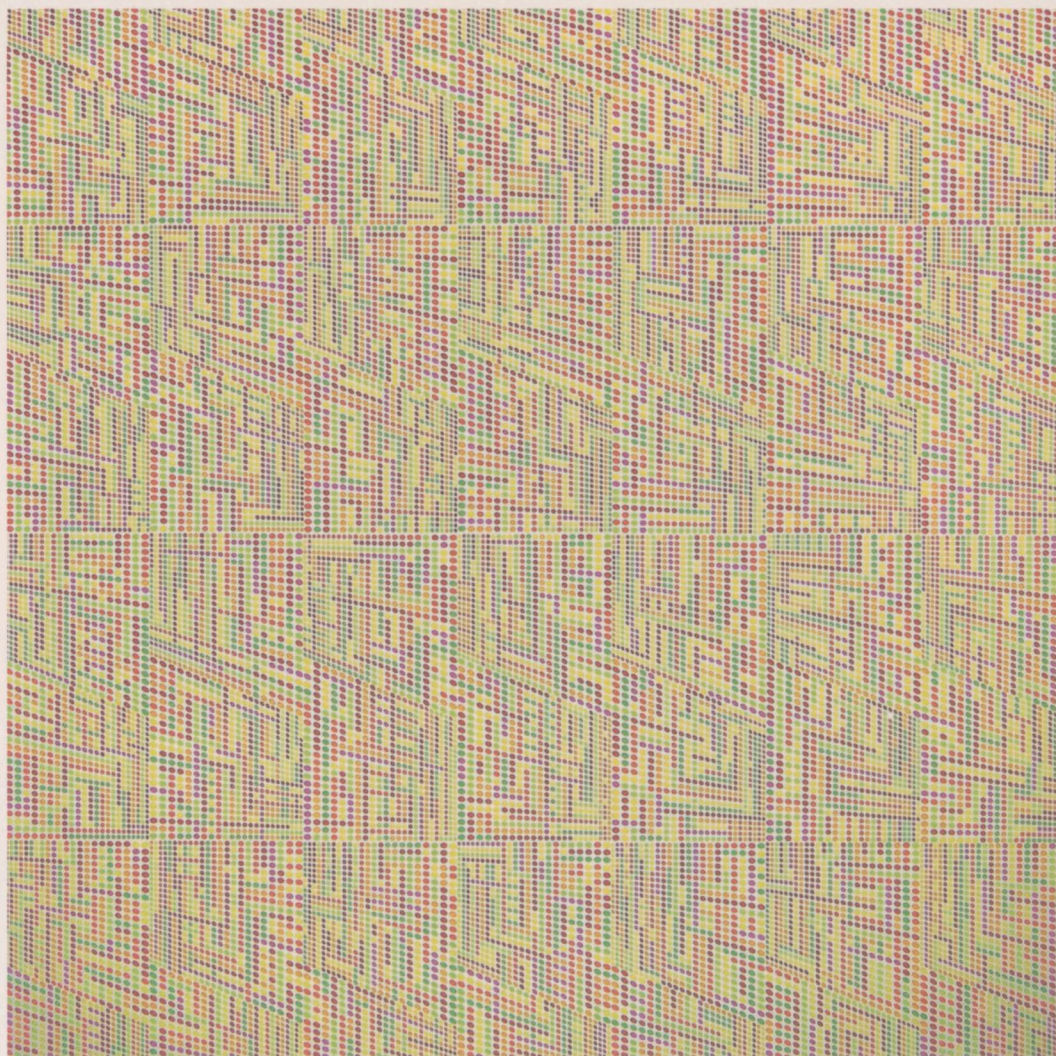
# SARA HUGHES

## >RAM

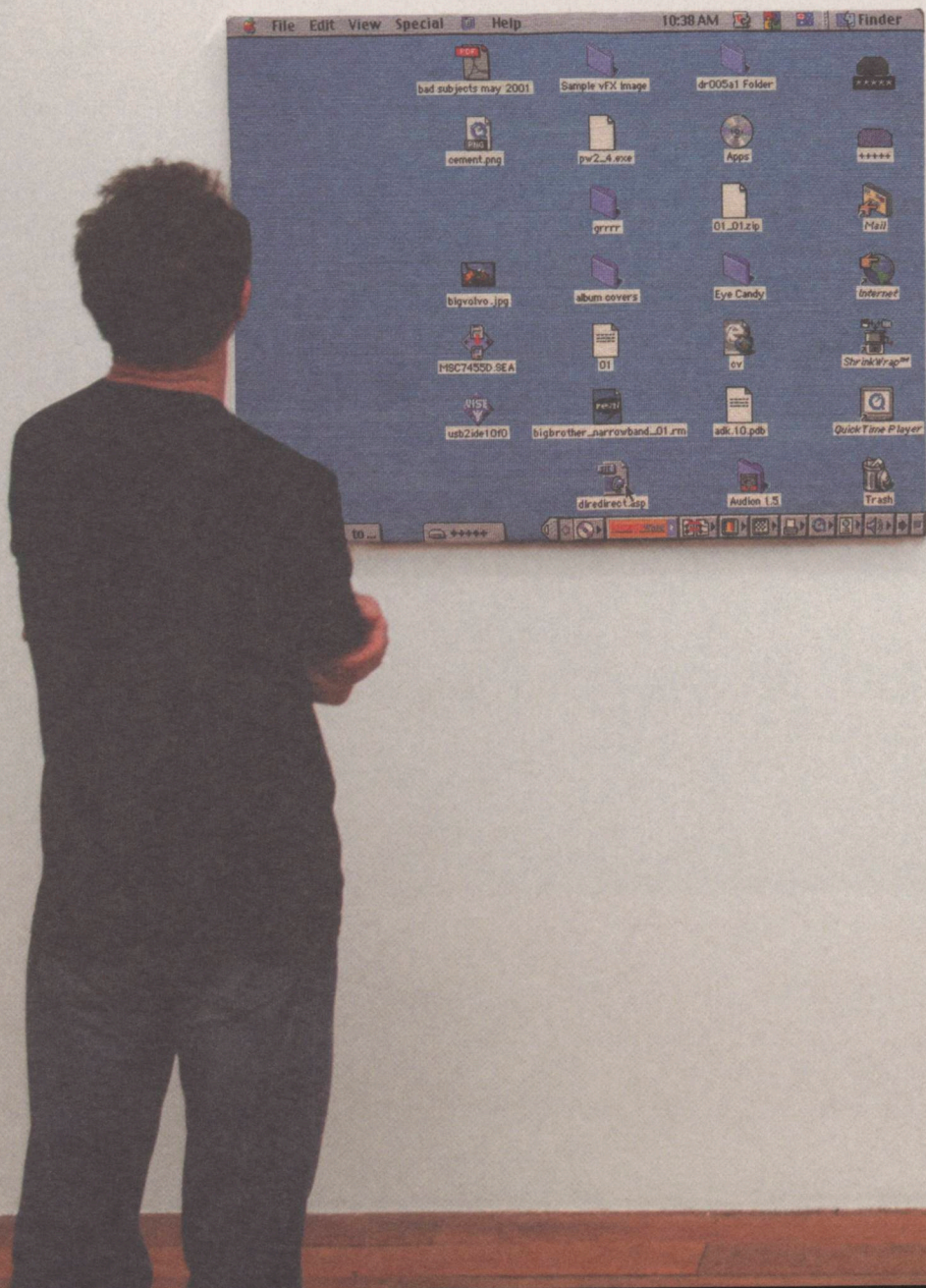
Back in the mid 1960s, Op artist Bridget Riley was gutted when her abstract paintings inspired wallpaper and dress-fabric patterns. Her finely honed experiments in perception became a fashionable look, destined to become equally unfashionable. The Zeitgeist seemed to trivialise her enquiry. Today, Sara Hughes is mining Riley territory, but the landscape has changed: Jean-Paul Gaultier's op-art inspired "Cyber" print fabric has already been reappropriated into art by Sylvie Fleury. Hughes' Op-Pop dot paintings may engage with raw perception, but they court connections with décor, fashion and the kinds of associations Riley considered extraneous. Take RAM. It's based on a rectangular module

split diagonally; each module has the same dot pattern in a different colour arrangement. There's a tension between the perspective cues in each module and the overall grid which flattens the painting. The title suggests computing (random access memory) and the image itself recalls punchcards, casino lights, illuminated disco dance floors, pixilated digital imagery and the cinema's use of flashing light arrays to represent awesome computer brains. Riley's paintings were painstakingly handmade, which was a mark of her seriousness. Hughes however makes a point of her use of the computers and vinyl cutters that make the job easier. She's interested in the phenomenology and the semiology equally.











# STELLA BRENNAN

>Tuesday 3 July 2001, 10:38am

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Stella Brennan's stitch-per-pixel embroidery of her iMac OS 8 desktop took over a year to do, and she needed help. A sewing circle of friends and family helped her complete it. By the time it was done, it was obsolete. Brennan had a new computer, running OS X. Translating the digital into the pre-industrial, the work yokes opposing values: the computer's currency and speed with craft's traditionalism and laboriousness. The woven computer screen can be read as daft, like an expressionist painting converted into paint-by-numbers. It becomes deft when it prompts us to consider more subtle historical

connections, like the use of punch cards to control Jacquard weaving looms during the industrial revolution, and Ada Lovelace's proposal to use them to programme Charles Babbage's analytical engine, the 19th century proto-computer. While its title suggests an instant, the piece enfolds time: the time taken to make it, the time taken to view it, and the stretch of technological, economic and social history from the Bayeux Tapestry through the industrial revolution to the Macintosh. Brennan certainly puts an interesting spin on On Kawara.

# YVONNE TODD

>Chlora

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"There has always been on the one side the minority of the powerful, and therefore the cultivated, and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor, and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch." So said Clement Greenberg in 1939. Perhaps times have changed. Yvonne Todd's CHLORA may typify the manufactured sentimentality of mass culture, but it was among the works that won her the prestigious Walters Prize back in 2002. Todd's impossibly perfect, dewy rose recalls Hallmark cards,

designed to facilitate off-the-rack emotional response. Her big photo suggests amplified sentimentality: intimacy and tenderness WRIT LARGE. The classy egg-shaped vignette hints at fertility and pregnant pauses. The rose could be a marker of love or death. Either way this highly visually and culturally processed sign attests to the conventionalised forms our feelings take. Does CHLORA recuperate kitsch? Is it sincere, a piss-take, or a bit of both? Perhaps it points to something real at stake in the cliché. Greenberg would turn in his grave.







# SIMON INGRAM

>Frictionless Painting (Social Colour) \_i: Space Painting #9 ii: Monochrome in C

Simon Ingram complicates the commonplace idea of painting as a direct expressive act. He uses computers and painting machines in designing and executing his paintings, distancing himself from the old romantic idea of the painter in his studio, passionate intensity, the smell of turps. FRICTIONLESS PAINTING, a two-part work, uses cyan, magenta and yellow, the "process colours" used in offset printing but rarely in art. We don't

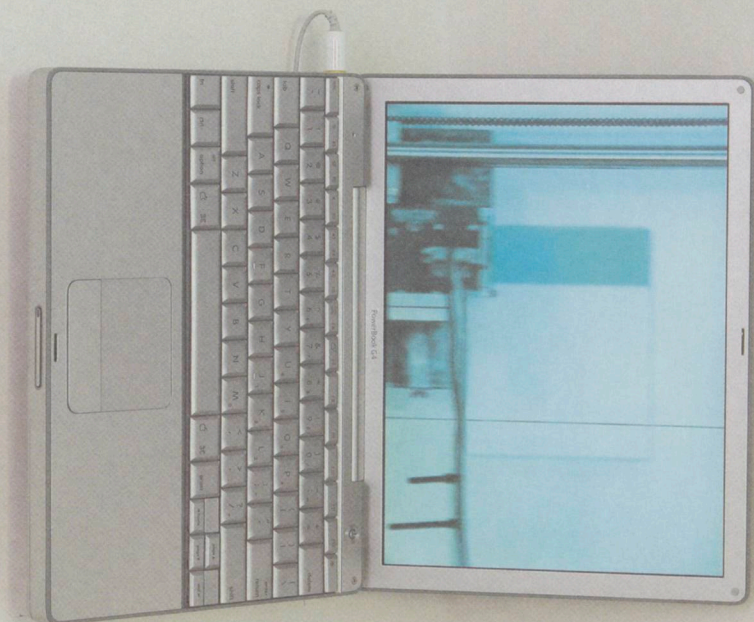
think of them as natural colours – colours of things in the world – even though they are used to reproduce them. Ingram calls them "social colour". Part one, SPACE PAINTING #9, looks like a massive enlargement of a moiré pattern. Ingram used a computer 3d rendering programme to make patterns of tilted squares, softening their edges using a "watercolour" effect (computers can be "sensitive"). He then had a painting machine





— a computer controlled airbrush — spit out the patterns in magenta on a yellow canvas. He overlaid two variations on the pattern in successive passes, suggesting patches existing on two distinct planes. Part two, MONOCHROME IN C, a diptych, juxtaposes a nondescript cyan monochrome against a G4 Apple powerbook screening a video of it being made by the painting machine. The painting is a small thing, yet suggests a sublime transcendent

beyond. Maybe its metaphysical implication is downplayed when you see a machine generate it, maybe not. Ingram installs the powerbook in the corner of the room as a homage to Malevich, who planted his BLACK SQUARE in the corner, the place reserved for the icon, as the eye of God, in the Russian Orthodox home.





# SEUNG YUL OH

## >The Ability to Blow Themselves Up

Seung Yul Oh is something of a prankster. He filmed people — mostly fellow Elam students and Elam staff — blowing up balloons until they burst, capturing their inevitably startled expressions at that moment. He edited together the portraits in quick-fire succession. Most shots start right on the explosion; the balloons bursting before we have a chance

to really see them. He loops the sequence, occasionally playing it sound-only against camera black, making the syncopated explosions sound more like gunfire. THE ABILITY TO BLOW THEMSELVES UP is addictive viewing. Everything happens so fast that you constantly compare what you are seeing with how you remember just seeing it. It's an endless action replay.





# STEVE CARR

>Tyson

Steve Carr's short films show him enjoying himself. They are about how he gives and takes his pleasure. He hands out ice creams as Mr Whippy. He plays cowboys and indians with little kids and lets them win; they tie him to the clothesline and squirt him with water pistols. He has a pyjama-party pillow fight with cute young girls, and demolishes an old van with skater-boys. In scuba gear, he checks out bikini babes treading water.

TYSON, a motionless movie, has him on all fours in a Mexican standoff with a dog over a drool-drenched tennis ball. Tyson left his ball on the ground to tempt Carr, assuming the artist would value it as highly as he does. Carr plays along. Neither will move first, remaining frozen, locked in an endgame scenario. Carr mocks man's best friend and empathises with him, sharing in Tyson's pleasure.





# ROHAN WEALLEANS

## > Quiet Rocks

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Rohan Wealleans is known for his "layer" paintings. He makes them by applying coats of paint, then cutting into them, peeling and pinning them back like a surgeon, exposing candy-coloured flesh. Wealleans' work is an exploration of the physical stuff of painting. But the work also engages adolescent gynaecological interests (it has been called "pornographic abstraction"), artworld in-jokes and psychedelic effects. QUIET ROCKS is one of Wealleans' more serious – or pseudo-serious – works. He

collected paint chips excavated in making layer paintings and pinned them in evidence bags to a notice board; sorted from smallest to biggest. Beneath each specimen, Wealleans made a contour line drawing of it for the record. QUIET ROCKS is part of a series of Wealleans' works related to a fictional Planet Earth Geology Department (PEGD), whose members scour the galaxy collecting rocks for scientific analysis. The title riffs on Wealleans' 2001 notice board work, IN SPACE NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU COLLECT ROCKS.







# PETER MADDEN

>Leave >Ram Mount

Sue Gardiner writes of Peter Madden: "In his secret and possibly idealist worlds there is a marriage between danger, romanticism, strangeness, reason and sentiment... the fear of catastrophe is always delicately balanced by beauty." Madden's sentimental surrealism recalls the work of Joseph Cornell. In RAM MOUNT a kitschy plastic animal head, a trophy on a heraldic wall plaque, has been feminised with the addition of long eyelashes, blackened eyes and black tears. It's a little Marilyn Manson. No horns are visible, seemingly usurped by a crown of nesting *trompe l'oeil* butterflies. These images have been cut from encyclopedia plates and folded to

resemble real butterflies, although alternative texts on their undersides give the game away. In LEAVE a pair of discarded brown brogues has also been colonised by butterfly-images, the spaces once occupied by sweaty feet providing an ideal habitat. Butterflies start as caterpillars, and while their winged stage is marvellous, it is also brief. That's how they come to symbolise transformation, transient beauty and ultimately death. Madden lingers on death – a recent installation is titled NECROLOPOUS – but ultimately as an affirmation of life. Death only makes sense to the living.







## >List of Works

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Hany Armanious b.1962 Australia UNTITLED SNAKE OIL 2003 Hot Melt, oil paint, drinking glasses, various heights from 100 to 290mm, cardboard box 1000 x 1000 x 1000 Guy Benfield b.1964 Australia HEAD PAINTING 1999 video Stephen Birch b.1961 Australia COSMOS 2003 silicon and synthetic polymer resin, installed dimensions variable Mladen Bizumic b.1977 New Zealand HAUTURU.DOC (WITH "ADAGIO UNDER MY THUMB" BY THE ROLLING STONES) 2003 video Stella Brennan b.1974 New Zealand TUESDAY 3 JULY 2001, 10:38AM 2001-2 embroidery 860 x 1140 Steve Carr b.1976 New Zealand TYSON 2002 video Michael Harrison b.1961 New Zealand HOT PURSUIT 2001-2 acrylic on paper 295 x 210 MAGNETISM 2002 acrylic on paper 295 x 210 ROCK CHICK 2001-2 acrylic on paper 295 x 210 Sara Hughes b.1971 New Zealand RAM 2004 acrylic on canvas 2000 x 2000 Simon Ingram b.1971 New Zealand FRICTIONLESS PAINTING (SOCIAL COLOUR) 2003 i: SPACE PAINTING #9 oil on linen 1520 x 1220, ii: MONO-CHROME IN C oil on linen 500 x 400, video on 12 inch G4 Apple powerbook Giovanni Intra 1968-2002 New Zealand UNTITLED 1990 metal studs on found wool and polyester suit 1600 x 560 Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, purchased with assistance of the Chartwell Trust Peter Madden b.1966 New Zealand LEAVE 2004 collage on shoes 100 x 280 x 285 RAM MOUNT 2004 collage, false eyelashes, paint on plastic 300 x 250 x 200 Liz Maw b.1966 New Zealand SATAN 2003 oil on board 1800 x 1400 p mule [dr] et al. New Zealand THE CREATIVE ACT 2003 mixed media installed dimensions variable Seung Yul Oh b.1981 New Zealand THE ABILITY TO BLOW THEMSELVES UP 2005 video Martin Thompson b.1956 New Zealand UNTITLED n.d. felt pen on graph paper 390 x 560 UNTITLED n.d. felt pen on graph paper 390 x 560 Yvonne Todd b.1973 New Zealand CHLORA 2001 colour photograph (LED print) 990 x 835 Ronnie Van Hout b.1962 New Zealand DRUNK CHIMP 2002 mixed media installed dimensions variable, 400 x 3000 x 2000 approx Rohan Wealleans b.1977 New Zealand QUIET ROCKS 2004 mixed media 1650 x 1220 x 70







