

## I don't think much of myself, but I think about myself all the time

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***I've Abandoned Me: Ronnie van Hout at the New Gallery, Auckland Art Gallery, 13 December 2003 – 29 February, 2004***

It was 1996. At the end of my first year at art school, a couple of my new university friends invited me, and some other like-minded colleagues, to participate in a show in an empty space at the back of a rather distasteful bar, that was sometimes used for parties, in the illustrious city of New Plymouth. This being my first visit I remember the shiver down my spine as we drove in our beige Toyota Corolla that we bought especially for the road trip around the wrong side of Mt. Taranaki and saw the hellish plumes of flame emanating from the oil refinery or bondage bar or whatever that thing is. Our show was well received by the surfer community, as well by the city council guy and concerned parents who where present etc. After the more responsible people left the opening there was a huge round of oil spots on tinfoil that left me admiring the big string of coloured lights that were always on because someone had secretly wired them directly to the power line in the alley.

Anyway the upshot was that while I was there I had the pleasure of seeing Ronnie van Hout's Govett-Brewster residency exhibition, *I'm OK*, which was on there along with another show of 'women's painting' that had what I now recognise as the cringe-and-groan-worthy title *Skirting Abstraction*. The van Hout show was a revelation to my barely post-teenage sensibility: it was bright and light and kind of messy. I remember an old wood-grain TV playing a video of the artist nailing bits of wood together at random; a pathetic little silver UFO hanging from the ceiling; a drawing of a stag's head rendered in a thin line of coloured plasters; orange strawberry planters with pink latex heads with plastic carrots; a silver space suit; a small model of a rocket launcher, rendered in a monochrome white; piles of gouty body parts a wooden stand with words formed from clay: "help me I'm in the land of the giants". The installation weaved its way round the gallery like a drunk. This was a show that stuck in my head and rubbed off a little on my own sensibilities, funny and without being stupid and light without being unimportant.

*I've Abandoned Me*, the recent survey of van Hout's work, curated by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's Justin Paton, seems a little better behaved by comparison. Based on the premise that van Hout's constant references to himself form some kind of explosion of his identity, a profusion of, as Justin Paton put it, meta-Ronnies and semi-Ronnies. But the overwhelming impression of *I've Abandoned Me* is one of almost single-minded consistency. The idea of van Hout as splintered-if-not-schizophrenic self seems a put-on, a mask, a disguise or a surface that conceals the super-consistent (and judging from the show, pretty well-organised) good-guy underneath.

Concentrating on self-portraiture, the exhibition does a good job of presenting a potentially unhealthy

level of self-absorption, but leaves out work by the artist that doesn't fit in to this scheme so neatly (for example countless military models executed with a straight face – I'm sure there are others but no list springs to mind). Museumification has seemingly ironed out many of the idiosyncrasies (conscious or unconscious) in van Hout's presentation strategies. Slick bracketless shelves replace DIY style hardware store brackets, botched fiberglass body parts give way to hyper-realistic silicone body casts almost in Duane Hanson hyper-style. (I noticed during his floor talk that van Hout and one of his figures had matching shoes.) This presentation strategy, while providing a sense of cohesion, gives the show a sparse, half-empty feel, and ironically raises each work to the level of some kind of masterpiece; a sentiment echoed by Chris Saines, director of the Auckland City Art Gallery, during the opening speech, saying that van Hout should by now surely be thought of on the same level as that other New Zealand art hero, Colin McCahon. I guess like brown, beige or fluoro being the new black, anti is the new hero. I guess without any kind of hero there are all of a sudden some problems for curators – who do I put in a show? How do I know what is good? And how can you be an artist without being some kind of hero or anti-hero? Perhaps these questions have been a bit hard, or not really. Whatever, the effect is to swap one romantic notion of what an artist is for another.

To see just exactly how today's romanised notion of what an artist is gets played out I shall turn to the exhibition at hand. Set out in a vaguely chronological fashion the starting point for the exhibition appears to be a copy of van Hout's high school leaving report, in which he apparently does well despite his eccentricities and is well liked (or was that tolerated?) for of his absence of malice.

Nearby are a series of embroidered canvas panels, including some that advertise for prospective band members. These are truly of their mid-nineties time, one looking for a member of 'Devon' carries on the then (and perhaps always) important task of deriding the eighties, and another looks for members of an 'alternative' band, perhaps one not far from his own, Into The Void – alternative art-rock, dumb but glam; the cool of rock music was another 90s NZ art trait, one that seems to smell of hero worship for the cooler than thou, karaoke style.

A number of works incorporate video, in a number of different ways. *Psycho House* (1999) was the first of these to appear in this show, a model of the house that featured in Alfred Hitchcock's seminal film, complete with a tiny video monitor set in to an upstairs window that shows the artist himself pacing backwards and forwards with a knife. Low droning music emanates, a kind of antidote to the stabbing high-pitched psycho theme. It seems like he is waiting for something to happen. I want to leave before it does.

In *House and School and UFO* (2001), a model of



Ronnie's own primary school is rendered in plywood with a very bat-like UFO looming ominously overhead. New Zealand's standardised prefab classrooms have always been creepy at night, perhaps something to do with the sparseness and openness of the buildings, a spaciousness not unlike van Hout's current installation style. This work is indebted to Mike Kelley's *Educational Complex*<sup>1</sup> (1996), which recreated every educational institution the artist ever attended only enhanced by the vaguery of his own memory, mapping the phantasised spaces recovered from the memories of the alleged sexual abuse; van Hout's speaks of his fear of UFO abduction, a type of paranoia not uncommon in his home town of Christchurch, where one might recall the civic crèche scandal, an example of the type of mass hysteria that Kelly's work is critical of.

The relationship that van Hout's work has to international art magazines is an area that seems ripe for discussion, especially in its relation to art post-*Helter Skelter*. Perhaps that is what curator Justin Paton is referring to when his points to the semi-Ronnies, both not entirely Ronnie fixated on Ronnie and a lax and out and wasted kind of detachedness that you might find in a Brett Easton Ellis novel. (I remember in *The Rules of Attraction*, characters tended to bracket everything in terms of semi, as in 'I'm semi-turned-on,' or 'I'm semi-stoned.' Perhaps Van Hout is saying 'I'm semi-ripping this off but it fits the situation.')

Judging from its absence from the discussion of van

Ronnie van Hout, *Monster* (1999) photograph, collection of the artist.

Hout's work, originality is perhaps the hardest thing to talk about in New Zealand art. Perhaps one of the strangest things that I have noticed in the New Zealand art world in general is way in which the sources that New Zealand art draw from are often ignored, especially if those sources include work from elsewhere, transposed via international glossy art magazines<sup>2</sup>. But doesn't the discussion of the work take place on a more interesting level if the things that the artist's are interested in and inform the work are also mentioned?

Chris Saines suggest that we mention van Hout in the same hushed reverential sentence as van Hout, I mean McCahon, so I'll give it a go. [Cue the Mists of Time...] I remember dimly back in 7th from art history being told that McCahon's early influences were modernists seen over here only in the then equivalent of the glossy art magazines. And then there was the Mondrian, the Abstract Expressionism and the black paintings he saw travelling. This of course was couched in terms of some kind of heroic identification with a revolutionary spirit, and once given the original impetus spouted profundities from his very soul; and that his quotes from various sources didn't mean any kind of lack of originality on his part. I guess New Zealand art history can be so easily overwhelmed by reverence and awe that some of the more interesting questions are never asked. Perhaps instead of thinking of van Hout as



being like McCahon, we should turn it around and reconsider McCahon in light of van Hout. McCahon as obsessive hobbyist fanboy... McCahon as drunk chimp painter (I AM drunk)...

The other point, also from dim 7th form memories, is the importance, drummed into us throughout many art classes, of having an artist model, so that the markers (mysterious people) could tell if your work was good or not via its resemblance to an international or local precedent. This is the system that van Hout came through and the significance of which is pointed out by their inclusion of his leavers reference from Mairehau High School. One wonders if it is an attitude adopted at all levels of the New Zealand art institution, producing an odd dilemma for the New Zealand artist – a need for originality and authenticity left over from modernism combined with an academic conservatism prepared only to vouch for the idea received via a recognised international precedent.

That New Zealand art is seldom discussed in terms of its international context reinforces its parochial nature, and traps it in its own adolescence, that state of awkwardness where the idiosyncrasies of the self are formed through unutterable aspirations, much like the teenage concerns that emerge from van Hout's oeuvre. I think it is his adolescence that makes van Hout an important and influential figure in the New Zealand art world. Van Hout champions the wonders of the geekiness of your classic third former and the embarrassed awkwardness of the fourth former, like the New Zealand art world in the nineties – self-absorbed but with low self-esteem, more reactionary than revolutionary?

Ronnie van Hout, *Monkey Madness, Self-Portrait, Sculpt D. Dog* (2001) photographs, courtesy of Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

#### Notes

1. See Anthony Vidlier, "Deep Space/Repressed Memory: Mike Kelley's Educational Complex" in *Mike Kelley: 1985-1996*, Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona.
2. Robert Leonard writing a partial list of artists that van Hout has drawn from isn't exactly in-depth discussion.

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