

## Living in a Zoo Some blanket statements on the cool of drawing, the rise and rise of animals and new spaces to do art in Wellington



“They’re making a fool of us, they’re living on nuts and berries.”  
— Talking Heads.

Though we seem to have moved away from fads of making knitted and miniaturized art, and as we slowly float around in work concerned with science and imagining the panicked urban and the dead-pan suburban, as we get sick of someone else’s spew on utopia, I look out and see a sketched forest filled with animals that just keep on roaring. Maybe it’s just that everyone has finally learned to dream in the same language as Michel Harrison, but it seems drawing is still the staple of cool and its elephants, tigers, dogs and winged bears that the medium is raining.

The popularity of drawing will no doubt reach its New Zealand climax with the up-coming drawing competition co-run between Artspace and The Physics Room. It is good to see that creative opportunities have been well extended from the limiting colouring-in competitions of the past. Yet this sense of childishness is an intriguing one. Is it a lust for naiveté that is governing the production in pencil of many a pet? Drawing is a craft that hovers between the goofy and the highly technical, and yet nearly all hand drawn work has a hyper-personalised feel, often leading the looker into some alternative dimension of imagination.

You had to be there; SH\_FT rewarded its visitors with the possibility of an aerial view and an oral experience. What appears like dead bugs on the bench were in fact the carefully placed tuning forks and bridges connecting the strings of McCarthy’s drawing-come-instrument installation. Image care of James McCarthy.

Currently at Peter McCleavey Gallery, Andrew McLeod shows a large (painted) drawing, reminiscent of an underwater Bill Hammond. Floating in this bubble paradise is a selection of fish, an octopus or two, but don’t fear, the birds are there too. In other works sparrows face off with monster minimalist twigs, and a nude lady lounges over the forms. Her presence makes me wonder if the popularity of animals is simply because people are harder to draw; it’s easier to draw a dog than a woman. Maybe large breasts are just the next big thing.

It is interesting to see the dribbling of personal galaxies in contrast to digital design and drawing. It has been said that the popularity of certain computer programs leads to everyone ‘drawing’ the same style. There was the Photoshop look that brought an influx of colour gradations and the iterated/stamp repeated image. I believe Macromedia Flash was one part of the *flat plains of colour sliding around the web page* problem, and yet digital drawing and the illustrated net cause more than aesthetic irritations. The straight text of

the traditional web page can usually be converted to sound, enabling the bad sighted and blind access to net information. No longer – if Flash has been used to construct the page, audio translation is not possible, the blind are out of luck. Decoration has overrun the minorities.

When the traditionally private act of reading is transferred to reading on the web, we under go the act in one of the most public spaces possible. As computers change the notion of public space, the insular imagination depicted in drawing becomes increasingly popular. Drawing offers a quick, straightforward and finite plain on which to engage the viewer. Looking at drawings in many ways is like stroking a dog. It is a pleasant feeling but the fleas rarely invite you to their fun fur parties.

To step into an entirely new space is what the first (and hopefully not the last) installment by SH\_FT, *The Ouse Project*, offered us Wellingtonians. Organised as a temporary exhibition site, in the car-showroom part of town, perhaps the most exciting thing about the SH\_FT experience was moving through the space while not knowing where it began or ended. Like a well decorated industrial flat warming, the project allowed us to sniff around. Yes, apart from the Tiger beer we were the only animals.

James McCarthy used the left over relics of the office space, a wooden side-bench acting like the hull/body of a guitar, to create his instrument. The charting of an otherwise unremarkable space through the decoration and amplification of its surface is what SH\_FT best achieved. Through site-specific and site-complementary works, we were given the chance to marvel at the quality of concert and wood veneer. Reagan Gentry collected a swarm of ironing boards together and bolted them into a platform that was able to take the weight of a huge pile of rubble. This pile of dust and rocks had the sensation of a levitating mountain, and imbued its corner of the room with a stillness one expected any minute to give way to avalanche volume.

The lack of animals was made up for through the most intriguing aspect of McCarthy's work. His instrument's use of the existing bench top was also the surface on which he constructed a one-point perspective image of the space using guitar strings. Strings representing, walls, beams, and lines of sight were interwoven with tuning forks and bridges. As James played his drawing, both illustrated and actual space reverberated, creating an occasion. The success of this work was ultimately how it collected people not rats, how it rendered the space but also renewed its function.

The examples are few but the feeling is here, there is a soft figuration in the air.

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