

## All this gives me the mean reds

---

***The Bed You Lie In*, Artspace, Auckland; and *Milky Way Bar*, Michael Hirschfeld Gallery, City Gallery, Wellington**

This year's annual new artists show at Artspace was a show about "examining the role of the art world as a social institution". Curator Tessa Giblin spoke about her desire for *The Bed You Lie In* to be the kind of show that positioned the participating artists in relation to one another. The kind of show you might be able to use for laying claim to a larger, more collective style reflected by the combined work of the artists involved. As a participating artist, it leaves me to think on the others in the show, the connections that may span across our work, and the choices Giblin made in putting us together. Featuring Eve Armstrong, Kah-Bee Chow, Daniel du Bern, Finn Ferrier, Rachael Grant, Kim Paton, Marnie Slater, Tao Wells and myself, it is interesting to then note that five of these eight artists, again including me, are Wellington-based and of the same peer group. Here we found ourselves in a show about political relations as colleagues, friends and enemies all at once.

No doubt though the curator knew what she was doing when she invited, essentially, the cream of Enjoy to present their own versions of the challenges and failings of the art world. The potential for our work however to display such an inbred nature sadly seemed to be lost in the design of the exhibition, and for a show that claimed to give rise to a self-defined context through the work presented, why did I feel mostly empty and bored by the display of work? And different from other common kinds of apathy, I experienced rather an overwhelming sense of divorce. Admittedly, these feelings are clouded by a general institutional distrust, and one that fuels my practice as much as dampens it; however, shouldn't I feel more from a show apparently showcasing a significant concern of my own practice? My experience has left me wondering such things. Along with, what purpose do these shows serve anyway? What does it mean to be new? And do group shows always have to be such a letdown?

Happy co-incidence was to help my enquiries, when four weeks later I found myself, along with half my bed-fellows lined up under a different slogan; this time for the City Gallery's version of 'new' in *Milky Way Bar* (named after the Bill Manhire poem). With an even tighter association of artists (admittedly due to the local agenda of the show), socio-political likeness was again also the theme: "...connected by time and place... its about what these artists are making, thinking and communicating now".

I was happy enough with this simplicity of connection, and it's true pretty much. Marina Cains, Ryan Chadfield, Regan Gentry, Greg Sharp and the double dippers, Kim Paton, Daniel du Burn, Marnie Slater and myself once more, have all studied or gotten drunk together at some point.

"The Artists in *Milky Way Bar* are united by their shared

experience of being an emerging artist in Wellington now". Emerging. This must be a close first on the list of cringe art terms, with its over-used emptiness evoking an automatic disregard for whatever seems to follow. New is slightly better; new at least seems to imply a shifting relevancy; however, this too seems to be getting a little lazy in its use.

It is this idea of use that becomes particularly illuminating when you consider who is behind the choice of term; in this case, young curators acting in their own particular institution's good faith. Of course someone needs to make the call – who's new, what's hot – but please, just with some thoroughness, with a little extended integrity.

This leads on to probably my main gripe. How do these gestures of inclusion by the Institution show a support for emergent practices and not just emergent artists, or, even more bluntly, emergent art? All I'd like is for my work to exist beyond a group show trinket, for some more talking and some more time. In the case of both shows there was a two-week turn around between invitation and installation. And while Artspace shouted some plane tickets and material costs for those asked for it, the Hirschfeld offered shiny posters in place of an artist's fee.

If I return to *The Bed You Lie In*, was this show trying to ask a serious question about what art might be? Or was it simply an easy well-used theme, used once more, as an excuse to raise the flag for the young and up-and-coming punks out there? Finding myself photo-shopped *in bed* with the other artists on the flyer seemed to bring this home. Just like advertising, sex, and youth, sells.

Overwhelmingly these shows feel like branding exercises. Between the political agendas of *The Bed You Lie In* and the particular aesthetic drive of *Milky Way Bar*, the artists and their chosen work operate a little too much like cut-outs, advertising the currently desired new.

But for all of this moaning, it has been satisfying and revealing in many ways more personal and tangential to find myself in two high-gloss shows with some of my friends. Indeed a significant motivation for this article was to air some of these gaps in discussion and to be able to raise agendas relative to (how I perceive) our own positions as new artists. Acting on an opportunity to review my peers seems analogous to this and I hope still that the point of these shows really is to begin a discussion of such ideas, of what our practices may share. And perhaps as a kind of extended version of the *Milky Way Bar* press statement, localised snippets of trivia such as CDs we might swap (the Silver Jews for the Tindersticks) or that we all either make or drink the coffee at the same café seem as interesting and of appropriate connectedness as our sharing of a the same learning institution and the particular culture of Wellington's project space, Enjoy.



Group effort: (Left to right) Daniel du Bern, Tao Wells, Louise Tulett and Marnie Slater, installing Daniel's work for *The Bed You Lie In*, Artspace, 2004. Image courtesy of Artspace.

While curatorially the two shows played off politics against aesthetics, collectively the work often oscillated around performativity. Marnie, with her Hirschfeld installation in particular, reduces so well an imaginative theatricality present rather strongly in both Kim's and my own work, to a point of idiosyncratic rigour. A slightly lumpy, but beautifully shiny, white model mountain reaching knee-height sits between two steps, one functional and one not, to conceal a three tier ladder. Protruding upwards and a little precariously to the side is a driftwood flagpole, flying the suitably fitting hand sewn statement, "now". Placed in front and to the right of Daniel's work, there was a bleeding of surfaces, activities and sounds between Marnie's small monument and Daniel's video of flying cabbages that offered possibly the greatest poetry within the wider installation of the Hirschfeld show.

Such performative offerings were generally a little quieter in Wellington's sideline galaxy. More on show seemed to be, what I find myself increasingly referring to as, the "New Massey Minimalism" (there's that word again). It's not so surprising though given the staff at the hub of it all, New Zealand minimal heavy weights, Maddie Leach and Simon Morris. Add Karin van Roosmalen, Anne Noble, Gavin Hipkins and Eugene Hansen, and a clear local brand of influence arises. As four new artists, Daniel, Kim, Marine and I are certainly influenced by such conceptual and stylistic tropes. Minimalism has touched us all, with It's preoccupations with materials, surface, potential and performativity.

*Milky Way Bar* saw such ideas expressed through

craft. Kim's meticulously crafted European style toboggan, waiting patiently on a slab of white, was successfully taunting in its denial of use. Likewise on an opposite wall, my painstaking installation of 50 meters of fairy lights bent and tacked to the wall in an almost self defeating proclamation: No small wonder.

And for all of us the work in *Milky Way Bar* was somehow quieter and cleaner than *The Bed You Lie In*. Well, quieter at least. For *The Bed You Lie In* Kim presented a scaled version of her locally infamous project staged late last year at Enjoy, where she built an entire new set of gallery walls 60cm out from the existing ones, creating a looping circuit around a unobtainable space. The sheer phenomenological experience of the work, let alone it's questioning of the expectations and performance of its audience harks to an interpretation of minimal strategies consistent to all of us.

Daniel is probably the most forthcoming amongst us with theorising his own work and would no doubt dispute his position within my band of the new minimalists. However, within his fascination-come-obsession with re-interpretations of the landscape, his results often come up trumps. Especially given our current situation where the transparent appropriation of strategies from earlier periods of art could be said to sum up a number of new contemporary shifts,

Daniel's appropriation of minimalism is more one of style than content. To recall something from earlier in his repertoire, and from Massey's first ever graduate show (2003): a large, upright, rectangular, crate-style plywood construction with a single entrance via one-side, that offered the choice to step onto, to jump up into, to jump up and feel ridiculous as you managed to catch the glimpse of some weed like thing creeping around a shelf as high as two meters above you. It is Daniel's silliness that often saves him, and it is the case with such similar tactics at play in his Hirschfeld work. *Back to Nature* (featuring Greg Sharp, also exhibiting in the show) projects a static frame of a young guy sporadically running into shot to hurl a cabbage into the sprawling bush. It's possible that the only minimalism here at all is the clean lines, white on ply, materials kind of minimalism; it is such stylistic definition though that makes for a clear eruption of a new minimal from its original.

It's a good thing though that not all of us are so serious about such a minimal type of enquiry, and the subliminal strength of more absent friends should also be acknowledged. Ryan Chadfield, currently somewhere in Sydney and possibly the glam-kid king of new, has managed to consistently mark his place. As well as exhibiting a work this year in *Milky Way Bar* that debuted in the 2003 Artspace new artists show *Follow The White Rabbit*, he also arranged a backdoor pass to *The Bed You Lie In* via Tao's collaborative project.

Ryan's work produced for Tao's project *Winning Teacher* was commissioned as a better duplicate of my own. Ryan turned up the day prior to the shows opening with a four-bin filing cabinet, a lump of wood, a potted dish of human nails and a badly cared for photograph of a boy in his paddling pool. The next day there was an addition of tape and a pungent, unavoidably bodily smell.

I find myself a little too implicated to uncover exactly what Ryan's comments on my work here might be, although I am able to approach the relationships between us as artists, where it is easiest to look within my own process for possible answers. My work presented at Artspace was part documentation, part reconstruction of a solo project staged earlier in the year at Enjoy. Titled *I've given up on you*, it consisted of an oversize place-card reading "No show", a telephone on the floor that never stopped ringing and a man-hole built into the ceiling with its lid pushed back, showing a blank and ominous slit of black. My unannounced opening performance perhaps lived beyond all of this though. Arriving late, and in ridiculous disguise I attempted to go un-noticed, while being noticed more than ever. Between blatant stares and requests for the "drunk woman" to be asked to leave, it was suitably confusing for all of us.

Ephemera of the performance and a new trap door became *I can't help myself*, and I think, is it the battle of longing against self-loathing that Ryan and I share most? Is it our autobiography that relates us most strongly? This would also make sense given *Winning Teacher's* rationale.

Tao's work for Artspace, as a presentation of a strategy, is the most generous and successful of places to find myself arriving at in my own discussion of the themes in this article. When negotiating his

involvement with the show, Tao proposed to make better versions of all the other work to be exhibited, which would then be ranked for display by Artspace. He in turn handed this task of reproduction over to, mostly, his teaching colleagues (Massey again). What ensued was a wonderful and unsettling battle of authority, authenticity, and institutional critique, along side a whole of lot hurt egos and inflamed artistic temperaments. What Tao so eloquently bought to the surface though were the core social relationships of showing within groups. Thankfully Tao managed defiantly to carry all of the comparative and competitive spirit for all of us.

Again, since all of this, I've found myself in yet another group show. This time though I decided to have a little more fun. Collaborating with Shay Launder, we erected a trip wire across the entranceway to one of the gallery spaces. And while no-one fell flat on their face, the knowing pop of the cork leaving its jam and the caught steps and awkward laughs seem to sum up most poetically perhaps all of this sad, but annoying angst.

---

**Louise Tulett lives in Wellington where she throws a daily dice between Enjoy, Massey University and general research into the world. She especially likes finding the time for her pressing hobby as producer of concept bands and learning to wait for things that may come.**