



The Fiery One
four free hanging banners, mixed media on canvas andessian, 500 x 250cm, 2009

**JAMES
ROBINSON**
THE LIGHT
WANGANUI WORKS
March 28 - June 21, 2009

James Robinson: The Light



I'm Bigger (when you're with me)
mixed media on canvas and bessian, 250 x 250cm, 2009

WANGANUI WORKS

Painter James Robinson completed a six month residency at the Sarjeant Gallery's Tylee Cottage from July – December, 2008. Since then Robinson has stayed on in Wanganui, completing an impressive body of work. Prior to arriving in Wanganui he had completed a residency at the McCahon House in French Bay, Titirangi and a residency in New York with the International Studio and Curatorial Programme as the winner of the paramount award at the James Wallace Art Awards, 2007.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

They're in James Robinson's paintings. The monumental works produced during and after Robinson's residency at Tylee Cottage from July – December and since then are wild. Epic in scale and content, with the largest work *Flood* consisting of multiple panels running for over seven metres. Robinson commented on the scale of these works, "Big says I really mean it", but big doesn't come with a self-assured confidence: these works seem to be as much about their maker being certain as afraid of what he is making.

Each painting has evolved over days, weeks and months, and they have been added to and subtracted from, seen the light and in the dark. Each is a diary of Robinson's work as a maker, a visual soup of the everyday; objects, sounds and colours scoured, scavenged from the real and virtual world.

So where do you begin? In the middle of Maurice Sendak's children's book *Where The Wild Things Are* there are three double paged spreads where the protagonist Max conducts the wild things in a "wild rumpus", where there is no text, so as a reader you have to improvise. You could quietly flick through the pages but I always find it more appealing to compose a spontaneous noisy din for my three year old daughter. Robinson's paintings have a similar noisy din and words fail them. They are physical works, full of the world and its junk and treasures, glass and nails, coffee and tea, they make us think about the value of a painting and Robinson also does this by literally throwing money at the works. Coins and notes find their way into and onto the surface of these works, entombed in a sea of paint, grit and polyurethane.

BODY WORK

These works are fleshy, the palette is softer and although they are a continuation of the expressionistic style for which Robinson has become known, they are a refreshing departure. When first visiting these works it was initially their colour that marked them as being distinctly different from their predecessors, however it's not just the colour, it's the freedom of it. The shift in tone and physical scale of these works has revealed a new approach for Robinson, one that seems lighter in its mood and presence.

You can still find the characteristic wounds present on the surfaces, and they could hurt: nails, glass and grit threaten to scratch you, but the flood of colour dilutes their menace. As though the anxious hermit has discovered the joys of sunbathing, these can be seen as images born from the light, rather than the dark. When Robinson first arrived in Wanganui at Tylee Cottage he spent a good amount of time settling in and amassing a large pile of drawings, collaged, dense and double-sided, a visual overload in a consistent format. And then the studio happened.

From the relatively small confines of the lounge at Tylee Cottage, Robinson started working in a former wool store building. This enormous upstairs space couldn't be more of an extreme contrast, filled with light and cold, physically demanding. There is only one kind of work that could have and has taken place in that space and that was big, dirty physical work. The light from skylights overhead has informed the palette of the works.

The floor has literally become like walking through and on a Robinson canvas. Moving the heavy canvases around the space with the artist it was difficult to see where the works began and finished, with the only cue being vertical divisions in each of the large scale pieces, defining a break, another day, a page in the visual diary.

These works can be read horizontally and vertically, the eye charting a visual cruciform, although the infinity symbol as tagged by Robinson in each panel of *Flood* is perhaps a more appropriate symbol to encapsulate the artist's approach. Each work has required a leap of faith from the artist and does so from the viewer, each a deluge and infinite in its possible readings. That's what makes these works such a mental challenge, they are not just of some 'thing', they are of everything. Of the body, they are as delicate as DNA, brittle as broken bones and as violent as a choke or a cough.

SCAPES

Landscapes, mindscapes, moonscapes and escapes, they are all present in this body of work. Each image encourages us to look at the bigger picture, to stand back and view as well as get so close you can sniff the polyurethane. One of the aims of the Tylee residency programme is that the incumbent engages with this place. While others have photographed the river, or touched on local stories and mythology, Robinson has done so on a much more personal level by letting us be immersed in his state of mind: the artist as a local landscape.

Included in this exhibition is a collaborative animation that Robinson has made with Rowan Wernham. Both Robinson and Wernham have made models for the film and 'x o genesis' is an activation of the two-dimensional world of Robinson's work - all the marks, stitches and detritus of the paintings have escaped and formed an alien tribe. The animation draws on the history of sci-fi films - *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* and *2001 A Space Odyssey* are all there with a touch of *South Park* and *Thunderbirds* thrown into the mix.

FLOOD

The disaster of a flood, the disorderly behaviour of water when it gets too big for itself is evident in these works. A sea of paint and polyurethane has washed up an orchestra of unlikely elements, depositing objects both inside and outside the comfortable home of memory. Yes, that small plastic head from a McDonalds toy should be attached to an appropriately striped plastic body but instead it looks like it has been caught alive by a James Robinson painting. Another work *Kelly* has a plastic helix-like object emerging from its surface - Robinson has created a slit in the surface and a little bit of biology has erupted.

The Whanganui River is present in these works, expansive and murky, running through them all, but it's not what's in the water, but what's down at the bottom and caught at the edges in the mud.

Greg Donson
Curator / Public Programmes Manager

BIOGRAPHY

James Robinson studied at the Otago School of Fine Arts, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2000 with a major in painting. Until mid 2007 Robinson was based in Dunedin and from July – September, 2007 he was artist-in-residence at the McCahon House in French Bay, Titirangi. In September 2007 Robinson was the winner of the paramount award at the Wallace Art Awards, as recipient of this award James undertook a residency in New York with the International Studio and Curatorial Programme. Robinson returned to New Zealand in 2008 to be artist-in-residence at Tylee Cottage in Wanganui for six months between July – December, 2008. Since that time Robinson has chosen to stay on in Wanganui whilst completing the body of work that is included in the exhibition *James Robinson: The Light* at the Sarjeant Gallery.

Robinson has exhibited extensively both in New Zealand and overseas. He has had numerous solo shows at many public galleries in New Zealand over the last decade, most recently at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch and Lopdell House, Titirangi in 2007.

Robinson regularly exhibits with and is represented by Bath Street Gallery, Auckland, Mark Hutchins Gallery, Wellington, Judith Anderson Gallery, Napier and Paper Graphica in Christchurch. His work is held in the collections of the Hocken Library, University of Otago, Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Manawa and the Eastern Southland Gallery in Gore as well as private collections in New Zealand and overseas.

This catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition *James Robinson: The Light* at the Sarjeant Gallery from March 28 – June 21, 2009.

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"I love making South Pacific mongrel painting" James