

James Robinson

PRESS / ARTICLES

2019

Otago Daily Times
July 2019

Dunedin's artists represented strongly in prestigious contest

Nine Dunedin artists have made the shortlist of one of New Zealand's premier national art prizes. They were selected from 472 entries to join a shortlist of 70 others who were in the running to win the Parkin Drawing Prize worth \$20,000, or one of 10 highly commended prizes of \$500.

The winners will be announced on August 5.

The artists are Madison Kelly, Motoko Kikkawa, James Robinson, James Thomson-Bache, Robert West, Marie Strauss, Marion Wassenaar, Tom Fox and Emily Gordon.

Of those, Mr Fox and Ms Strauss each had two of their works selected.

In comparison, 14 Auckland artists made the shortlist and three Christchurch artists. Last year, two Dunedin artists made the cut.



An advisory panel of artist, writer, curator and Professor Robert Jahnke, New Zealand artist Darryn George, and Te Papa Tongarewa head of art Charlotte Davy selected the works.

They will be kept on display in an exhibition at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington from August 6 to September 8.

Depths... James Robinson's
'In and Out' artwork

James Robinson: Painting show digs deep Grant Smithies

James Robinson is armed and dangerous when I call.

"I'm in the supermarket right now with an axe!" he tells me via cellphone.

I picture the Dunedin artist wandering the aisles with a giant blade on a stick, and it somehow makes perfect sense.

This, after all, is an artist famous for dragging his paintings over gravel, submerging them in the sea, burning them with petrol, tearing them into pieces and sewing them back together again.

He has been known to cover paintings with cement, sand and tar, then cut into them with angle grinders. I picture him heading back to his temporary Nelson home to start hacking at his latest creation with this brand-new axe.

But no. He's going to split some firewood for a friend in Victory Square before setting up his latest show, which opens tonight in Nelson's Quiet Dog Gallery.



James Taylor, left, and Gil Starling of Quiet Dog Gallery hang artist Red Shift.

“These are works on paper this time, rather than canvas,” he tells me. “And it’s work that’s already travelled all around the world before making its way to Nelson.”

Robinson himself is also something of a nomad. He was born in Christchurch, studied in Otago, and often lives for extended periods wherever his artistic practice takes him.

He has completed artist residencies in Whanganui, Auckland, Southland, New York, Berlin, Melbourne and Canada, and just got back from a “mind-blowing” six months spent travelling around India on a motorbike.

Talented artist James Robinson with his work titled Red Shift at Quiet Dog Gallery.

Somewhere along the way, Robinson was Paramount Winner of the Wallace Art Awards in 2007 and had a major solo exhibition at our local Suter Gallery in 2010.



And now he has washed up here for a few weeks to split firewood, visit old friends and enjoy the city while hanging a show in Nelson’s newest contemporary arts space.

“This show has already had quite a history” he says. “It started life as a huge mural of 22 large panels that I made for a show in Auckland, shaped like a gate in reference to earlier works by Colin McCahon.”

That mural later won an award in Canada, but Robinson still thought something about it wasn’t quite right.

“I was really obsessing over it. I’m not sure why. In the end I realised that the piece was actually better broken apart. It was like dismantling my own ego, in a way. Here was this art-work that had won an award and been shown in Montreal and Nova Scotia and so on, but I wasn’t very happy with it as a whole so I took it apart.”

Comprising around a dozen of these panels, the Nelson show is named Subduction, a reference to the movement of tectonic plates causing earthquakes and tsunamis, and a metaphor for his own turbulent creative process of digging deep and stirring up buried material from his past.

Coincidentally, the exhibition opens the same week as the second anniversary of the Kaikoura Earthquake.

“When I conceived this show, I was thinking about that earthquake, and I watched a documentary about the enormous forces present in tectonic plates beneath the sea. The penny just dropped! I thought- Oh, my God. This body of work that I’ve made, which has already made a strange oceanic journey from New Zealand to Canada and back again, is really all about layers and strata and some sort of personal geology.”

The work was, quite literally, a testament to the passage of time, the shaping of materials, the building up of layers of meaning.

Subsequently torn, scorched, layered and stitched, the paper used to make the original Gate mural was taken from 12 years of his journals and sketch books, with Robinson then drawing and painting over the top. The paper buried underneath was rich with personal history, jumbled memories, song lyrics, half-formed ideas and symbols, scrawled down over more than a decade.

“You could say the whole thing is a sort of stratified psychological compost!”

Robinson sees this stripped-back, newly separated work as “a remix” of the original mural, a “personal mashup” in which long-term visual and conceptual preoccupations have been revisited, reworked and given new life.

“I hope people will come and check it out, because the work is raw and honest and it will make you think. It’s more than just another artist’s vanity project. Art is a kind of shamanism, I think. Whether it’s film, music, sculpture, painting or whatever, it’s a magical language humans have developed because words often aren’t enough. Art is a way to tell stories, explore feelings, make connections and comment on all the human culture that’s gone before.”

Robinson’s mixed-media collage work is often visually hectic, intense and fragmentary. There’s an almost neurotic feverishness to it, a strange chaotic beauty, with the busy gestural mark-making and scribbled text suggesting one man’s personal response to contemporary information overload.

“There are so many ideas and images sloshing around in the culture now, it gets overwhelming as it rushes past you,” agrees Robinson.

“A lot of my work has a similar overwhelming quality, because it reflects that over-saturation. This Subduction show is me trying to process all of that. It’s me having a sort of visible dream, I guess, or displaying some sort of public madness. I’m showing you my open scrapbook, really. These works are remnants of a long process of self-archaeology, and you get to see some of the stuff that I dug up.”

James Robinson’s Subduction show opens at 5.30pm on Friday November 16 at Nelson’s Quiet Dog Gallery in Wakatu Lane, with the artist present on the night. The show runs until December 15.

Robinson’s works explore the darkness of the human psyche.





At home with the devil (2017), James Robinson, Mixed Media

An artist's take on our future realm Fran Dibble

A CRITICAL EYE: The Chthulucene era is the one to come.

Our current era, Anthropocene, dates back to the Industrial Revolution and is when humans began, by their activities, to change the planet.

This future realm will be when the refugees from the fallout of environmental disaster come together, making a world of assemblages and graftings.

And in this world is James Robinson, who made it on to the raft, with a series of giant multimedia works filled with references to his own life and packed with debris – shells, buttons, nails and found things, mixed and moulded with sand and hardeners to produce a thick, encrusted coating.

The surface is pitted and embellished, as if from an archaeological dig searching for fossils, or, more aptly to go with the show's title and the Googled ravings about the Chthulucene era, a ravaged war zone. Robinson has a history of antagonised gloom, most of it pointing inwards, with those small cartooned out-rages – “angry young man” paintings, as I think of them.

One work from this show, Dada Prosser, harks back to earlier studies, stylistically more typical of the period when Robinson won the Wallace award in 2007.

It is a series of pieces of paper, string linked and hung, each one a small rambling of his ideas of the moment, gaining strength in their collective grouping.



Dada prosser (1992-2007), James Robinson, mixed media on paper, 2100 x 12400 x 100mm.

Most of the exhibition is substantially different to earlier work. The scale and some of its qualities are modelled on artists like Rosenberg, the 1970s American artist who put a bed in one of his paintings, and German abstractionists like Beuys. They are made for the spaces of a big gallery – gallery sized, large and imposing, giant and courageous. The supports of these textured layers are not just canvas shapes, but found objects – old doors and curtaining, pieces of wood with burnt patches creating holes.



Mental health faerys (2017), James Robinson, mixed media



Post consumer (2017), James Robinson, mixed media

They are practical foundations, but also, conceptually, they fit in with the ideas of framing entrance points – gateways to move from one time to another.

The surfacing, the mixed-up “Robinson porridge”, gives them an interesting texture that you can move your eyes across, taking in the landscape.

They are paintings enacted mostly by instinct, a strategy that is difficult to master, where in a sense you work blind, using trial and error and celebrating the “happy accident” and trusting impulses rather than using rational logic.

The show rates as the best Robinson show I have seen to date. It is a sign he has successfully made the move from the aggressive adolescent striking out to more mature and considered practitioner.

Robinson has a bit of a reputation of being an “enfant terrible” in art, but it is a pretty full room.

There is something interesting about art – it’s an odd concocted intimate sum of a person, but, somehow, it manages to be something quite separate, standing above all the stuff of people and personalities, something to be viewed and reviewed as completely separate.

“Strata”, Mary McFarlane and James Robinson (Mint Gallery)

Pairing works by Otago artists Mary McFarlane and James Robinson, Strata is one of the strongest curated exhibitions I have seen at Mint Gallery. McFarlane and Robinson’s bodies of work complement each other, as the title Strata suggests, by accretion, by layers of meaning, and multiple cross references.

On one level both artists’ work can be approached through an eco-critical or eco-philosophical lens: McFarlane for the collected concretions of shell and rock sediment she has joined to form shrine-like sculptures, and Robinson for drawings and text references to Donna Haraway’s most recent eco-philosophical book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

Robinson’s most impressive work consists of 44 rows of A4 drawings (one for each year of his life) that are seven A4 pages long (every seven years we are recomposed). Suspended from nails, the rows of drawings are variously hung flush with the wall or forward, which lends a sculptural quality to the installation.

In his trademark rough, sketchy, mixed media, self-interrogative style, Robinson’s drawings and aphorisms cover every subject from globalised capitalism to ecological crisis, colonisation, spirituality, and the politics of self-construction.

McFarlane’s sedimentary sculptures capture deep time. Various concretions hold fossils of crabs, small shells, empty pores that once contained tiny bones, and casts of evacuated sea creatures. McFarlane uses concrete to join the concretions in quietly elegiac forms.



2017

The Press
Tuesday February 14 2017

Paintings and works on paper at the Ashburton Art Gallery by New Zealand's most uncompromising expressionist artist James Robinson's are seriously surprising in their beauty.

Stranger Attractor has been described by arts commentator and gallery dealer Warwick Brown as revealing a new maturity in Robinson's work. His previous pasting, gluing and wiring of materials together into works that sometimes seems to be struggling to share time with one another are over.

Stranger Attractor is an exhibition of works on paper and canvas, warmly fabricating and exposing their strange and compelling splendour for all to see.

Warren Feeney



Ten galleries to visit in February

From Afternoon Delight to Smoke on the Water - **Warren Feeney** look at exhibitions and works you must see this month.

It's February. The month when galleries repeat with their first exhibitions for 2017. What to expect? Colour seems louder, immovable less subtle and seeing and believing even more inseparable.

PG Gallery 115 opens with *Afternoon Delight*, new works by Alka Robinson and Grace Wright, who are sharing the exhibition's title of a hit song from 1976, famous and infamous for its lyrics by the Scotland Vocal Band.

Robinson's mixed-media work on paper, *Like the Birds and the* and the colourful painterly *Allyrith of Wright's Man's Best Friend is Actually A Ginger Fox* are visual delights to behold. *Afternoon Delight* runs until March 3.

No expressionist painter Ewan McQuagall's *Double Time*, at Chambers Gallery also raises the volume levels on the colour charts. The artist's perennial dance-unit, you'd say, is a 14-year-old, elongating stick figures embody his former spirit and life as a rock musician in an exhibition whose title also refers to the artist's previous incarnations as a 14-year-old time freezing worker and, later, as a 14-year-old "roughneck".

McQuagall comments that "double time" is how about the pleasure of painting and being a working and exhibiting artist. *Double Time* closes on March 4.

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NEXT Gallery in St Asaph Street opens in the last week of February with the group exhibition, *From the Heart*, with work by three 2012 Masters graduates from the School of Fine Arts: Michaela Cox, Alex Porter and Robert Hood all decided to "cross paths again".

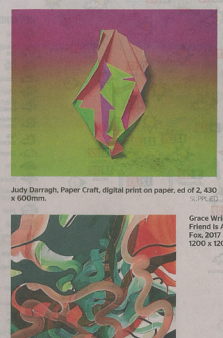
Taking its name from the 1967 sci-fi cult movie *From the Heart*, which alluded to the possibility of human experience in an undetermined chaotic universe, all three artists have made previous work that has touched upon the vacuum of assumed realities.

From the Heart is scheduled to run from February 25-28.

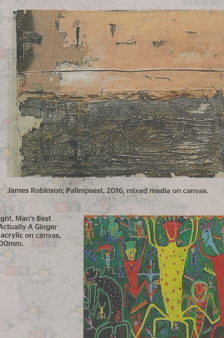
In *Edwards' Double Agents*, a network that never sleeps, at 50 Works Gallery in Lyttelton, glimpses and fragments of a world are revealed that remain in a continuing state of transformation.



Seraphine Pick, *Untitled (Gather)* 2015. Digital print to self-adhesive polyester film from a watercolour. Courtesy of the artist and Hushh McGee Gallery, commissioned by Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiheke.



Judy Darragh, *Paper Craft*, digital print on paper, ed. of 2,430 x 600mm.



James Robinson, *Man's Best Friend is Actually A Ginger Fox*, 2017 acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 1200mm.



Ewan McQuagall, *Double Time*, 2016 Oil on Canvas.

Unum and Pete Wheeler's *Blue Sleeps Foster then Tuesday*. If both titles seem elusive, the experience of the work is similarly hard to pin down.

Darragh's digital prints of colourful original designs leave the gallery visitor believing that they have experienced the reality of such works. Unum could be Darragh's question about the impossible and complex nature of seeing and believing.

Wheeler's paintings also share something of this spirit. *Stop Covering Your Face* by *My House* behaves like an emotional reality confronting the gallery space it occupies. Darragh and Wheeler have control of the Jonathan

Smart Gallery until February 18. City Art's group exhibition, *Tin and a Half*, features the work of 15 artists and without the space to name them all, it has to be said, that this is a wholly rewarding exhibition.

The range of responses to different materials and subjects is countered and complemented by a feeling that the work of all these artists look pleased to be alongside one another.

Although reluctant to pick favourites, Mark Reunias brings new life to a 1940s art rock classic, *Smile on the Water* and works by Kim Lowe, Kathryn Madill, Kay Hunter and Francis van Hout any similarly blessed. *Tin and a Half* closes February 18.

AGAINST THE TIDE

James Robinson is an expressionist, but not in the original figurative sense. Nor is he an abstract expressionist. There is far too much abstraction in his work for the former and too many personal, figurative and text elements for the latter.

We are presented instead with combined gestural records and mind diaries.

His art breaks all the rules.

It may be torn, burned, ruptured, stitched up, or accreted with paint, gunk, nails and debris.

It may be dark and threatening or pastel pink and quite pretty.

His art flows on like a tide, picking up debris, expunging old marks, meandering, retreating, advancing again.

Like the tide, Robinson is a force of nature and, like nature, his art is capable of sublimity and terror, of tranquillity and turbulence. Just as the retreating tide arranges jetsam on the sand at random, but with a sense of the absent power that placed it there, so Robinson's art confronts us with a record of swirling activity.

Warwick Brown



James Robinson's art flows on like a tide, picking up debris, expunging old marks, meandering, retreating, advancing again. Like the tide Robinson

is a force of nature, and, like nature, is capable of sublimity and terror, of tranquillity and turbulence.

The works on paper in this exhibition offer an excellent introduction to Robinson's evolved styles for viewers who have not previously encountered his work.

Among them can be found echoes of his earlier huge ruptured canvases, stitched up, burnt, heaving, accreted with nails and debris. Torn paper fragments, tiny figures and dots, and lines of inked text appear, most carefully rendered, demanding to be taken seriously. These refer to much larger works in which these elements predominated. Blacks, sombre greys and burned areas are contrasted here and there with pretty pinks and blues, as seen in some former series of paintings. The artist's trademark black holes will also be found; alarming terminal elements in fields of complexity. All of this will resonate strongly with Robinson aficionados, but should communicate forcefully with everybody who takes the necessary time to engage with each and every one of these

Robinson is an expressionist, but not in the traditional figurative sense, nor is he completely an abstract-expressionist. There is far too much abstraction for the former and too many personal, figurative and text elements for the latter. We are presented with combined gestural records and mind diaries.

Robinson's past paintings have often contained suggestions of landscape. In this new body of works these hints of landscape and the real world seem much stronger. Although superficially abstract, these are very structured paintings. The earlier sense of wild abandon, of struggling with the materials, of wrestling with compositional issues, has been replaced with a more methodical layering and building up of the picture plane. This more disciplined approach marks a new maturity in Robinson's work. Many added elements that in earlier work were gratuitous here can be read as buildings, boats, cliffs and streets. Depending upon one's fancy one could be looking obliquely across a valley, frontally at a hillside, or vertically from a low-flying aircraft. For example, in SA1 we see what could be a detail of a Rio favela, with close-packed shanties and an open doorway. In SA2 a majestic waka is propelled through the mist beneath stratified cliffs by vigorous warriors (perhaps). In SA6 a railway traverses precariously across a steep hillside, with smoking factories behind, while at the foot of the spoil-clad hill mining shacks cluster together in the scarred, treeless land (or maybe not). Contemplation of SA4 reveals an apocalyptic scene as a Mad Max-type barge, armoured with battered metal plates, runs ashore in a dirty, wave-tossed cove, either carrying rapacious ferals or harbouring terrified innocents (could be). SA12 and SA13 lend themselves to both vertical and horizontal readings as run-down urban areas. Somehow these visions keep asserting themselves, making it very hard to see the paintings as pure abstractions.

The artist notes: "This series was reconstituted from fragmented remains of studio ecology, over the autumn and winter period of 2016 in my Port Chalmers studio, Dunedin. The collage, sewing and painting all occurs in old parts of my practice, so the sense of time is real, however rearranged. New

techniques were discovered – hot metal and coals from the fire outside, rain-weathered surfaces, angle-grinder and washes, sand, all lightly done with attention to detail in a mix of graphic and expressionistic modes, but with a personal vocabulary of making that intrigues me as I discover it. There's my usual fears, dystopias and human condition musings, however I'm pleased with this set as that background in content is overwhelmed by the process itself ... the regenerative force of creation ... the ancientness of papatuanuku ... not necessarily benign or convenient to our immediate needs." The artist's willingness to be carried along by a voyage of discovery through a sea of found material is given an extra drive by his philosophy. "The context is the terrain we are all in on the biosphere and the inner terrain of mass-colonising digital media and what we may even consider the individual self. We are at pivotal and never-before-seen edges of our civilisation and my work seeks to bear witness to the 'anama mundi', a Sufi term meaning 'the world soul'."

If all of this adds a mystical, spiritual side to Robinson's work; that is as it should be. His art has always seemed loaded with indecipherable meaning; no matter how chaotic, everything seems to be linked and interdependent.

Warwick Brown, August 2016



“Exorcise/Exercise”, James Robinson (Mint Gallery)

James Robinson could perhaps be described as Dunedin’s best-known neo-Dadaist/Merz artist, though to use any pigeonholing description may be oversimplification. Perhaps he is best described simply as James Robinson - in a class and style of his own.

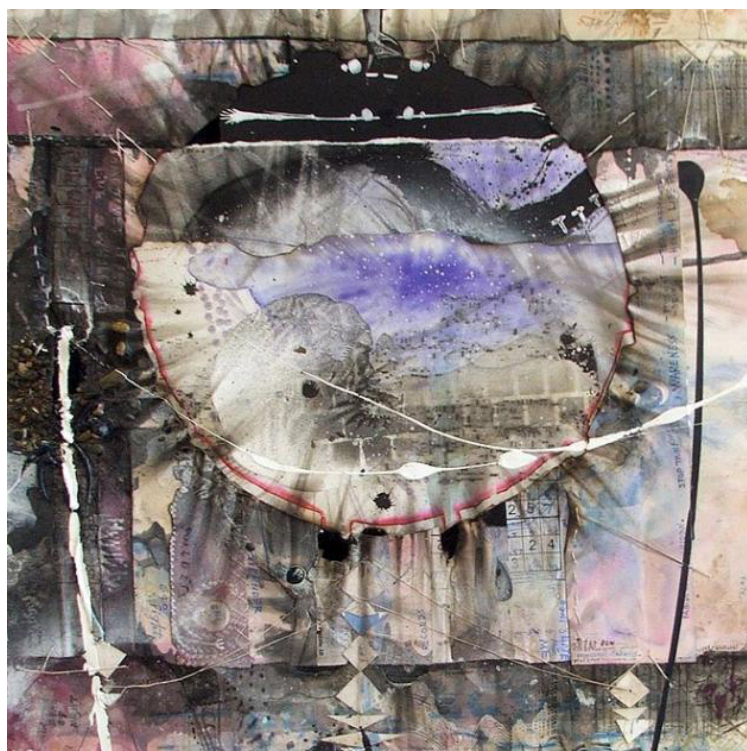
Best known for his large-scale canvases, which have been distressed, burnt, spindled, mutilated, inked, scrawled over and otherwise besmirched, he has created disturbing works which are like roadmaps of a questing psyche.

In his current installation at Mint Gallery, Robinson has downscaled and slightly softened his approach, producing paper works which could almost (dare I say it) be described as friendly.

Robinson’s attempt with these works is to somehow express the dichotomy of the information age: the ability to have the world’s knowledge at our fingertips, and the simultaneous lack of personal privacy this entails.

The message is somewhat overtaken by the medium, though that overwhelming still leaves powerful works which live up to the exhibition’s title, as both the application of skill and mental exertion and also the expelling of a mental or paranormal agency.

The works are effective abstractions, with the real message revealing itself only after repeated viewing - and with Robinson’s work, repeated viewing is essential as there is so much in them.



'THE STRESS FRACTURES OF THIS SOCIETY'S BODY POLITIC COMING APART ON US.'

(DAVID EGGLETON)

James Robinson's paintings recombine shards of a vision, the representation of which has required its own destruction, to create works of resonance and maturity.

Something has happened here under the surface: a battle or a riot, leaving debris. Destabilising forces of anxiety driving clashes of paint and canvas are countered by an art that channels chaotic raw materials into vibrant fields of balance and control.

In Southland, the relationship between man and nature is of primary importance, nature being the loveliest as well as the harshest thing we know. The artistic terrain of this work might be said to be of southern character: discerning, uncompromising, resilient. Respectful of the authentic, grounded here.

The idea of 'home' suggests recognition and belonging, a secure location that connects with, and provides shelter from, the outside world. If 'home' is Southland, to look inside these paintings might take us to the core of Robinson's art, as if to the heart of the landscape.

Art takes place in the here and now. Robinson's artistic development is evident in the 'shedding of skins', a process of getting to the point and taking responsibility. There's a desire to rejig, to simplify. The paintings pare away what is unnecessary in a search for integrity and harmony.

What you see in a painting is your business. It's good business, a vital circuit running between the observer and the thing observed, continuously created and resolved by our interactions with the art. For instance, these ad hoc constructions of pre-stressed materials gathered from the extreme edge of experience: tracking inwards, we might find we're looking at some minutiae of nature and human life magnified way out of scale. Stepping back, it is apparent that the fragments compose themselves into coherent fields.

The poets of Te Waipounamu have in common an uncompromising attitude, clarity of vision, discipline and an enduring relationship with the land. I think the poetry of Richard Reeve makes a good accompaniment to the flavours offered here. The quotes in italics are from his 2004 collection, *The Life and the Dark*.

What you make of a painting depends on where you're coming from. 'Entry' could be read as a fragment of ruined mural of great antiquity, a palimpsest through whose layering intention and meaning have become blurred and rendered inaccessible. On the other hand, a very different imaginative journey might be prompted by the poet's perception: 'this rained shadow of ourselves, set free/ Like sunlight among reeds,/ Quivers among the forest and the rock.'

The title of 'Oblivion' suggests catastrophe and annihilation or, conversely, the intimate patterns and colours of rock or gemstone inside the earth, 'locked in its state/ of inscrutable/ being'.

Fortuitous, minute treatments of texture in 'Datastorm' convey a comment on the frenetic digital environment. Or they represent some patchwork satellite photography of strange terrain, on earth or elsewhere. Or they are simply intuitive and pragmatic arrangements of natural elements, their shapes and shadows (the view is fractured) in colours of water, air and rock. Lessons in 'unlearning the diocese of mind'.

The cut, distressed surface of 'Crisis' is like the skin of an abraded, scarified survivor, a shocking remnant of collapsed civilization, in a work operating at the margins of aesthetics and sense. Yet Reeve's lines, 'each drubbed, bare stump is perpetual,/ part of the coeval/ light/ that/ is' bring to mind the weird light of deep bush, the hard going, natural muck and effort of encounters with the land, core mysteries of time and matter. That light 'flickering over drought-runted rocks/ its there-am-I, faceless/ investigations:/ grinding, grappling the rust-pricked pleat/ in alluvial granite/ ore'.

Robinson's vocabulary of textural accident reflects the intense engagement of the artist with perennial questions of how to live, paint, be. Whether his works are read as abstract metaphysical forms or as elemental mark-making, as chance arrangements or as sophisticated explorations of technique, the subtle rhythms of his elements produce an overall impression of natural elegance.

Questions raised by encounters with wilderness deepen understanding to bring about a grounding, of sorts. The sloughing of skins allows new growth. Robinson's art is resilient, intuitive and able to discipline the impulse to put colour, line, texture and shape there, like this. Harsh conditions, as our fishermen know, breed a toughness of soul and a feeling of 'home'.

CILLA
MCQUEEN



Bridget Railton

Experimental 'caveman's view on the world today'

A dynamic mashup of a variety of mediums large enough to span an entire wall length, the Eastern Southland Gallery's latest offering, Rainbow Serpent (Psychic Skins) is an exhibition determined to depart from the cultural norm.

And artist James Robinson would not have it any other way. "It's my way of making art that is rooted in the core of human nature, Not Western, not modern, but to break down the core meanings."

The exhibition opens today at 5.30pm.

He described his work as a "primitive take on the information age" or, in layman's terms, a "caveman's view on the world today".

Rainbow Serpent is a large, multi-layered mural created over a five-year period.

Constructed from a series of shedded experimental painting, it incorporates a variety of text, collage, sewing, gluing, ripping and nmending techniques.

Inspired by history, geology, and language, the exhibition is fluid, and with no set sequence: no one display was the same as another, he said.

Robinson, the current William Hodges Fellow in Invercargill, has exhibited regularly in private and public galleries nationally and internationally.

An artist of many styles, he has a wide range of work.

"I make my 'tidy' paintings to get by, and I love them too, but this is my experimental exhibition... my imaginings of the apocalypse [and] the revolution of the information age."

In 2007 he was awarded the prestigious Wallace Art residency in New York and in 2008 he was artist in residence at McCahon House Titirangi, and he was resident artist at Tylee Cottage, Whanganui, later the same year.

Robinson's work is held in numerous public, private and corporate collections throughout New Zealand and Australia, such as the James Wallace Trust Collection, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, Eastern Southland Gallery, Te Manawa Museum, Otago Universtity and the New Contemporaries collection, Sydney.

Rainbow Serpent (Psychic Skins) is his second solo exhibition at the Eastern Southland Gallery.

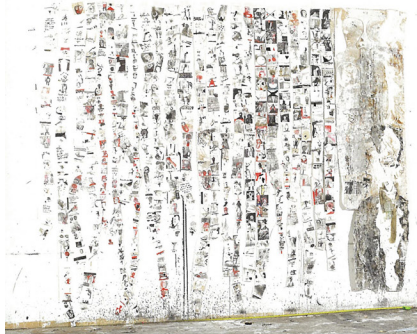


a closer look at James Robinson

James says ...

**"Be yourself if you are brave enough;
it could be very beautiful too."**

Born in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1972, James completed a Foundation in Fine Art at Nelson Polytechnic (1990). In 1996 he obtained a Diploma in Art and Craft from Hungry Creek School of Art and Craft and in 2000 he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Otago School of Fine Arts (major in Painting, minor in Printmaking). He was the Paramount Winner of the Wallace Art Awards in 2007 with the work, *taniwha/dragon (qi gong notes, spirit bones)*.



James Robinson: *taniwha/dragon (qi gong notes, spirit bones)*, 2007
Mixed media on paper (sewn) and mixed media on canvas
2500 x 3000mm

CHARACTERISTICS OF JAMES' DRAWINGS

Combines a wide range of mixed media, both wet and dry

Uses combinations of conventional and unconventional drawing techniques

Expressive spontaneous drawings, doodles, designs and accidental mark-making

Often assembles many smaller drawings into one larger work

Why is drawing important to you?

Art is organic, just like feelings and intuition. Art, and drawing in particular, is a process first, rather than an object. It is a way of reading and defining marks, meanings, causes and effects that are present in all life. My drawing is like talking to myself in a freestyle form of note-taking, doodling and story-making.

How do you use media and techniques to express your artistic intent?

My approach to materials is instinctive, and expresses the way I feel and fit in the world; like a rough edge that doesn't fit into a neat package. Ripping, burning, gluing, mending and repairing are reflections of what humans do to each other and themselves, and my art is a record of this. I collect things like little abandoned bits, or bric-a-brac from op shops, or strange wee mementos of receipts, tickets, magazines, etc; anything that has a trail or is part of my own journey. My work can be a bit autobiographical.

What process do you work through when you assemble your large, multiple piece, collaged drawings?

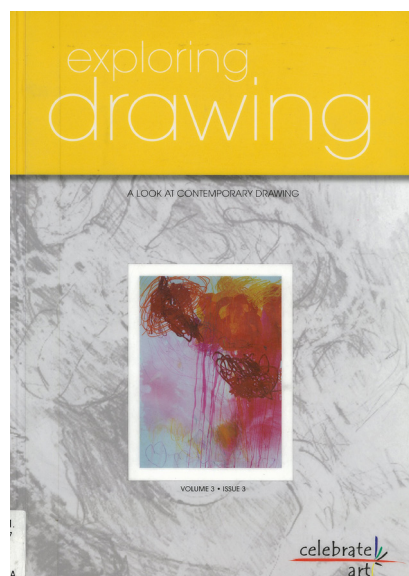
I am caught up in a lot of narratives when I'm working; it's like listening to a whole lot of MP3s on random. But my heart and mind are subconsciously processing and working out all the information, stimulation and sensory input. When I put lots of little pieces together into a larger work, it makes an effect that is bigger than the small parts; like all the little moments adding up to something really profound.

Combining many small drawings into a larger artwork, can create more impact.

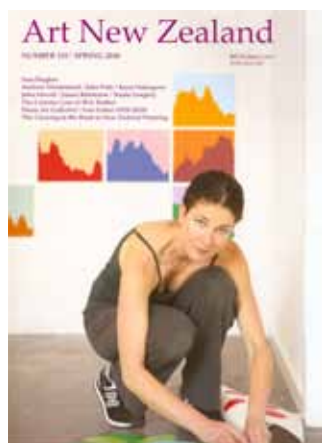
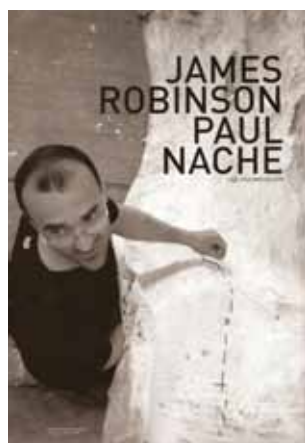
For James, ripping, burning, gluing and mending reflect humanity and the ways in which we treat ourselves and each other.



James Robinson: *back pack shaland drawing*, 2008
Mixed media on paper, A1



Art New Zealand
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Between Chance & Control

The Improvised Art of James Robinson

DAVID HALL

'Chaos is the score upon which reality is written.'

Henry Miller

Some art begins with an idea, the final product being the catalogue of its fruition. Other art begins with no end in sight, the final product being the traces left in blind pursuit of one. It is this latter category to which James Robinson belongs, to an art that is characterized—if not dominated—by process. Beginning with nothing, he finishes with a great deal, the scaffolds left in place.

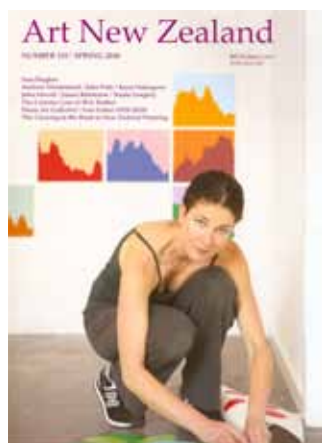
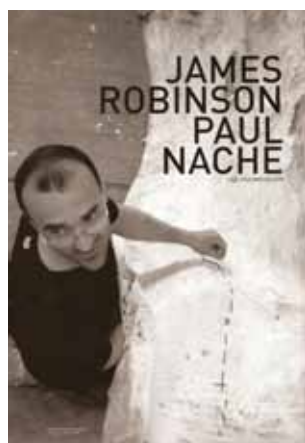
Witness, Robinson's recent show at the Suter Art Gallery in Nelson, surveys work from the last few years, an eventful period for the Christchurch-born artist. Since winning the 2007 Wallace Art Award, he has spent time in New York City, Whanganui, Thailand, Nepal, Berlin and finally Wellington, all the while producing work for a string of shows at regional and dealer galleries around the country. Predictably for such an expressive artist, Robinson's drift in from the artistic fringes has heralded a shift in the tone of his work, a move away from the bleak achromatism of his Dunedin-based paintings. The larger paintings, such as *Haps Contraction* blush with pink, peach and yellow, with lavender and azure, with fragrant wafts of colour that infuse the incipient shades of milk and smog. Furthermore, earlier experiments in mixing paint with gravel and coal (à la Jean Dubuffet) have expanded into full-blown assemblage, including chess pieces, handsaws, CDRs, and Christmas tree decorations. In the pseudo-organic setting of oil and acrylic paint, these bright shiny things recall the drifts of refuse that decorate the world's beaches and riverbanks, a plastic cacophony already sinking into the apocalyptic bog, soon to become the fossils of tomorrow.

The peculiarities of Robinson's recent work, however, are just a variation on a theme, an oscillation

in the distinctive style that he has developed over two decades of habitual art-making. The most useful analogy here, as Robinson himself has said, is music, especially that brand of experimental noise that thrives in New Zealand—think *The Dead C*, *Mrytu*, *Peter Wright* or *Flies Inside the Sun*. Such musicians subordinate technical virtuosity to concentrate on other facets of sound, using effects pedals and incidental noises—feedback, fret buzz, speaker hiss—to estrange instruments from their popular reputations. Robinson, similarly, is a painter of effects, captivated by the way that paint sings when it's burnt, by the pestilent swarms that coffee grounds create, by the perfect circles of acrylic that form on paint-tin lids. His is an exploratory strategy and his finished products are both full of mistakes and free of error—because any practice that accepts mistakes as necessary is somewhat immune to being wrong. This open attitude was crystallized recently in a show at Russian Frost Farmers in Wellington which consisted solely of the backs of his works, an exhibition that reclaimed the unintended consequences of the creative process as part of the very thing itself. For Robinson, as for the improvising musician, every mis-step is a success for creative reconnaissance, every failure a negative victory.

For this invitation to chaos Robinson is often linked to the Abstract Expressionists. To sharpen the association, however, Robinson's strategy is an inversion of theirs, a tilt away from—rather than toward—abstraction. After all, the original aim of Abstract Expressionism was to make a break with art's figurative past; the general strategy was to stretch and break the limits of representation and set adrift an indecipherable image. In Robinson's work, however, the abstract is a starting point for representation, a generator of landscapes, figures, moods and text. From blind foundations, from marks unconscious, random or arbitrary, Robinson works with ever greater self-awareness toward a final considered

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(opposite) JAMES ROBINSON *Threshold* 2009

Mixed media with found objects and various collaged materials on canvas and wood, 3430 x 1200 mm.

(right) James Robinson's *Witness* at the Suter Art Gallery, Te Ara o Whakatu, May 2010.

(below) James Robinson's *Palimpsest* at Russian Frost Farmers' Gallery, Wellington, June 2010.

decision to stop. Along the way, he gives free reign to the Gestaltian capacities of the mind, indulging its anthropomorphic tendencies, finding resonances and reiterations within the textures, building the painting up with a multitude of free associations, little decisions, and unpredictable outbursts. With their eventual balance of chance and control, of instinct and action, Robinson's finished works are closer in strategy to the forebears of Abstract Expressionism—to the psychic automatism of the Surrealists, or the work that Mexican muralist David Alfonso Siqueiros produced in New York during his Experimental Workshop, circa 1936. In Robinson's work, abstraction serves as a launching pad for representation, a perversion of the *Ab Ex* cause.

What Robinson aims to represent—it seems to me—is thought behaviour. His paintings and drawings are mind-maps, mergers of emotion and cognition where these different modes of thought are able to regulate each other (as indeed they do in human consciousness). The abstract emotional component of his work acts subliminally, setting the mood in the same mysterious way that certain melodic scales sound sad or defiant. The collage, text and figures represent the cognitive auto-critical aspect, imposing form and order on more primeval impulses, laying bare the artist's epiphanies and anxieties about art and life. And it is *his* experience that is most important here, for these are emphatically the mind-maps of James Robinson, steeped in his personal history and responsive to his particular nexus of identity. The distressed and worried textures

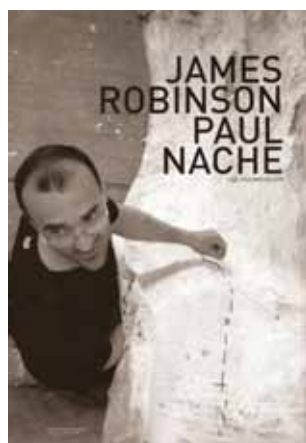


of his work reflect not just the profuse nature of human thought, but the *especially* profuse nature of Robinson's thought.

Biography is unavoidable here, not least because it is tattooed throughout his work: the broken home, the absent father, the youthful penchant for intoxication, and the suicide of his younger brother Martin. In this context, the obvious visual analogies are usually appropriate: the crusted sutures, the primordial bile, the exozing bukkake—these are all expressions of Robinson's inklings about injury, recovery and creation. To be sure art plays a therapeutic role for Robinson (among other things) and it's a role that the art profession seems to treat with unease these days, as a squeamish diversion from the purity of the discipline. His designation as an 'outsider artist' is as much a reflection of this institutional discomfort as a reflection on him. After all, he has an art education (a BFA from Otago), an ongoing (if fragmented) relationship with dealers, and a clear (if unconventional) conception of his place in contemporary art practice. Clearly this 'outsider artist' is far from being wholly out of the loop. Rather, Robinson embodies an attitude exhorted by the American idealist, R. Buckminster Fuller: 'Dare to be naive.'² Of course, the truly naive—like the



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true outsider—could never utter such a statement, could never get beyond their own naivety to see it as something worth preserving. Similarly, Robinson's ingenuitiveness is a quality that he owns and chooses not to resist. For him it really is about honest self-expression, and that is why he views outsider art, and indeed primitive art, as important sources of inspiration and affirmation. His exhibitionism is a



challenge to himself and to his audience, a twin role that is captured by the ambiguity of the show's title. *Witness* is both a mission statement and a demand; he wants to report on everything he has seen, and he wants the audience to bear witness too.

Subsequently there is a conspicuous lack of self-censorship in Robinson's practice, a tendency toward the intemperate and over-gorged, especially in his paintings. If he is a curator of impulses he is often an errant curator, employing a loose hand to reveal the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' that underwrites human experience. In itself, this isn't a problem—to judge his art by the standards of minimalism would be like judging rugby league by the rules of soccer, to bemoan the physicality of the game and the absence of set plays. Moreover, his best paintings overcome their complexity by organizing themselves into various scales. At the microscopic level, his paintings are proliferations of detail—of unusual collage, obsessive mandalas, Rorschachian smears, stick figure armies, and text that ranges from profane to profound. Standing back, however, this detail emulsifies and the works acquire a peculiar tranquility, like satellite pictures of the earth's surface, of landscapes slumped into river valleys or cities huddled around transport networks, the confusion reduced to a few geographic currents. From this macro-perspective the canvases exist as fragments of texture, as petri dishes of psychic atmosphere, the atoms and strata out of view. The analogy with music is apt here too, for one can compare their frenzied calm with the super-saturated sounds of Birchville Cat Motel or Merzbow, their drones layered so densely that they create a negative space, a cavern of pure noise.

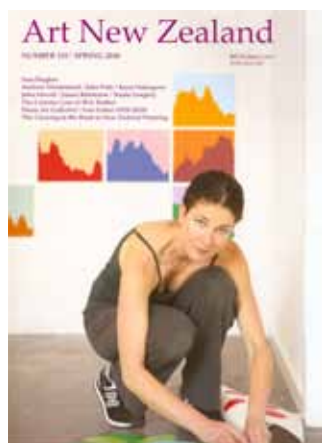
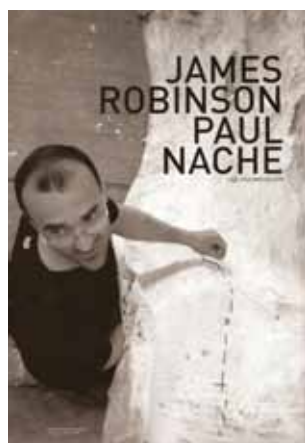
Yet if his individual works can sustain their own hyperactivity, this is more challenging for an entire body of work. Alone on a white wall, his paintings are impressively dense, but in a room already heavily laden by others, the effect is diminished, the individual works asphyxiated by the hyperventilation of their neighbours. Furthermore, there is the question of quality control, all the more pressing for a highly prolific improviser who must select from a mass of finished work rather than a clutch of as-yet-unexecuted ideas. No doubt Robinson has a sense of ranking—as do his curators too—but it is not always enforced with the necessary brutality, the better works diluted by the more ambiguous.

Given Robinson's commitment to catharsis, a more discerning hand is perhaps beside the point; the real thing is the risk, the failure, the glorious mess of self-expression. For a painter who sees himself as a perpetual student, this may well be the right approach. Yet at some point, uninhibited freedom can become a trap in itself, oppressive to other aspects of art and nature. The surfaces of his paintings might invite comparison with Anselm Kiefer or (increasingly) Robert Rauschenberg, but Robinson lacks the underlying structure or narrative of either artist, his anarchic process sometimes serving no other purpose than itself. He could get around this by deciding more clearly what he wants from a painting

2010

James Robinson
Art New Zealand

Art New Zealand
No#135 Spring 2010



Wild Tomato
Magazine Nelson 2010

By MICHELLE PHILL, Photographs by DANIEL BOZIE

CREATIVE ONE

Paint Skank

James Robinson is a dirty painter stuck between sculpture and canvas with a nice line in social commentary

It's not often that I'm propositioned to conduct an interview in a motel room. Picked, I've also never seen an artist pick paint off his own painting during a solo show at the Suter Art Gallery. The latter is the reason why I'm here, fully clothed, and in a candid discussion with Nelson exponent James Robinson.

I struggle to define Robinson's work as painting. It's got every bit of detritus that Robinson can lay his hands on, from nails to photographs to every bit of slunk in between. He dissects. "Well, it's not true. It is painting. But that's only because we think painting has to be representation. I think painting is more about a series of processes and trying to introduce some kind of balance rather than image."

"We're proud of the Fastest Indian, we're proud of Peter Jackson, we're proud of the All Blacks, but will give them a hell of a kicking if they don't perform well. New Zealander's are very neurotic. We're still struggling with our Englishness, so I do see my role as a painter as being a cultural shit-stirrer."

Avoiding an argument, I further explain what I mean; that 'painting' is usually indicative of a two-dimensional picture plane, which Robinson often shatters. "I never wanted to be a relief painter, but you're right. I'm stuck between two worlds and actually I do want to make 3D stuff, but it just becomes so impractical."

His work is a stark contrast to the pristine galleries in which it finds itself. Nicely refreshing, considering how easy it is to make pleasing yet uninteresting work for the masses. "A lot of that stuff is made in a really rough big shed, so it's going from outdoors and cheap to the gallery world. I don't really like art or the art world like some, whispering) but I love the human experience."

At the point, Robinson realises I'm recording, he appears self-conscious, yet still asks, "So why didn't you take the actual hotel room for the interview process?" We laugh. "I think it's part of the Kiwi character. We are shy people, who have this dynamic potential we want to realise. We're proud of the Fastest Indian, we're proud of Peter Jackson, we're proud of the All Blacks, but will give them a hell of a kicking if they don't perform well. New Zealander's are very neurotic. We're still struggling with our Englishness, so I do see my role as a painter as being a cultural shit-stirrer."

What I'm not a fan of, is 'self-indulgent art'. Art that is best left in someone's diary than put on display on gallery walls. Robinson is quick to respond: "Do you think my work is self-indulgent? Not even a big mural, five metres long!", "No", I say... but he won't hear: "That's really nice of you, but I suspect that it's a hell of a lot of self-indulgent, romantic art."

Like his art, Robinson doesn't hide behind façade. "The work has become more and more real as my life has become more and more normal. I'm not as afraid of public attention, and yet my work is more gregarious. I'm not sure where it's going, but it's nice to realise an aspect of my purpose in another dimension called painting. It sort of is an issue of ego, but if you've got a truck, you should deliver things around. There's no point in having a truck if it's just sitting in a yard not transporting shit from town to town."


James Robinson
Paint Skank

The Air New Zealand, Flight Magazine
July 2010



the real world

STORY MATT PHILP
PHOTOGRAPHS MIKE HEYDOON

JAMES ROBINSON IS a party-crasher, an artist happily out of step with the glib posturing and clinical surfaces of so much contemporary art.

At a recent showing in Nelson, Robinson hand-scribbled a manifesto across the white walls of the Suber Gallery that read like something from another art age, making wildly unfashionable claims for painting as a record of a life lived with conviction.

With Robinson, 37, it's all feeling and viscera. "I'm trying to embody associations and memories, searching for meaning," he says. "The only way for me to do that is to portray real things from my life."

The result is art that is both wilfully antagonistic and tenderly exposed — often in the same painting. "Beautiful, harsh and weirdly tender," wrote critic David Eggleston of an early show in 2003. "These canvases are so raw you want to reach out and staunch the bleeding."

Pegged as an angry primitivist outsider, the self-named Dunedin painter was, for some, the surprise winner of the 2007 Wallace Art Award, with its \$35,000 residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Programme in New York. There have been other awards and residencies along the way, including the McCahon Art Residency in Timaru and a spell in Berlin.

Robinson credits that recognition, along with a new interest in meditation, for a more uplifting quality to his recent work. "Winning the Wallace, living in New York, I've been living my dream!"

Still, you could never accuse Robinson of making nice with his audience — although there has always been a definite, if often unacknowledged, element of black humour to the work. The emotional palette may be more varied, there may be more use of colour, but the canvases are still fantastically brutalised and shredded, in some instances barely held together by a cross-stitching of nails and needles.

The obvious metaphor is of wounds — Robinson's upbringing was tainted by family trauma and mental illness, his early adulthood by drugs and drink — and his art feels organic, almost fleshy.

On some of the bigger works, found objects such as tools, circuit boards, even knitting, would be half-buried in thick crustings of paint and resin, as if they've been ingested by the canvases. But the other way to read the work is as archaeology or geology: the objects more in the process of being uncovered than subsumed, like so many fossils.

And perhaps discovery is the better metaphor. "It's a complex world and I try to take a lot in and process it. I probably take it too seriously."

Main image: James Robinson has been pegged as an angry outsider — a title not always justified.

Inserts: Work from a recent exhibition at Mark Hutchins Gallery in Wellington.

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profile » JAMES ROBINSON

but that's why there is so much information going on in the paintings," he says. "I'm working out my heart and my head, pulling things apart only to put them together again."

The residency in New York went some way to clearing up a confusion of identity he's always felt. Living in Harlem, the other side of Central Park from the studio, he took in great lungfuls of art and culture, from the Museum of Modern Art to Japanese alternative rock bands and Chinese art. He left feeling more than ever an artist of the South Pacific.

"In America I saw that anything is possible, but I also saw a lot of meaninglessness when art and culture become only about the market. In the end, what I identified as being important to me about painting was that it must have a real sense of place and belonging. It made me want to invest in home."

"The other thing was, it made me see that the path I'd been walking in New Zealand, with showing and self-touring – my whole DIY ethic – was valid. I'm the one hanging it, transporting it and making catalogues. I get help, but really you do it yourself in this country."

Robinson's artistic heroes include the abstract expressionists, the Beats, the likes of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, and he feels a strong tie to his "cultural forefathers", particularly Colin McCahon and James K Baxter. "I'm taking full licence from that outsider canon."

But his art is just as indebted to music. Among the graffiti-like messages scrawled like so many public toilet come-ons across his canvases, you find snippets of lyrics by the Ramones and others. Robinson references the sprawling, fractured soundscapes of legendary New Zealand noise act The Dead C as a particularly potent influence. "If anything I'd like to move more into that purely abstract realm."

Robinson is clearly ambitious – not so much for sales or fame, but to make his mark and have his say. "Success for me is about showing and getting an audience. Public gallery support is really exciting for that reason, because it means I'm walking in the path of my ancestors."

"Really, all you can expect of good art is that it mirrors the psyche of the person who made it," he says. "That's all I can give. It's all about leaving an interesting story."



"Success
for me
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showing and
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2009

**Arts New Zealand
Mark Hutchins Gallery
March 7, 2009**

2009

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Mark Hutchins Gallery
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March 7, 2009**

James Robinson , in his exhibition at Mark Hutchins Gallery, the first showcasing his body of work produced since 2008 residency in New York, continues to push at the edges of painting as media. While artist such as Judy Millar are engaged in the process of conceptually unpacking the nature of painting as physical object and the act or 'gesture' in and of painting, Robinson is caught up in a post-romantic artist syndrome, where painting remains the ultimate act of expression of self. These canvases are typically grungy and raw, but there is a withdrawal from explicit references to subject matter. They both entice and repel in there excessive use of paint which drips, swirls and coagulates on the surface. The presence of biro pen text and drawings, stitched surfaces and found objects - Cassette tapes, records and computer chip boards - draws the external world into the painting. "You've always been a runt son", 2009 and other canvasses,

are also ripped or torn and roughly joined back together with over size nails that extrude, almost aggressively, into the viewer's space. Yet there is a lyrical edge to several of these works, such as Traveller, where Robinson's palette radiates with pastel blues and pinks that cut through the existential angst, breaking out of introspection into something that invites engagement and a less frenzied contemplation. Perhaps this signals a maturing in Robinson's oeuvre, suggestively indicated by the exhibition title. "Painting towards the light" if this is the case, then the eye-opening experience of New York, experienced by Robinson as a sinkhole of trash desire based consumerism and endless hungry ghost of ego and need, was undoubtedly a positive one, one that possibly 'saved' him from being eternally caught in an introspective vortex.

[illegible][illegible]

James H. Johnson, as they called him, at the Black National Gallery. The first showcasing his study of work produced over the 1980s residency at New York, continues to grow at the edges of painting, as media. While white isn't as fully White as engaged in the process of a minimalist, something like what's going on as physical work and the act of "gesture" in act of painting. Sublimation to create a group-mind, and a social structure, where the artist, as a social structure, is a social structure.

[illegible]

But there has been a radical change in the attitude of these states, such as in Texas, where Redmond's job has suddenly become much more difficult. He has to go through the state's redemptive system, a process of intense self-examination and self-cleansing that is more rigorous and more thorough than anything that Redmond has experienced in his previous life. He is now, in a sense, a "new man," and he must live up to the standards of the new man. He is now, in a sense, a "new man," and he must live up to the standards of the new man. He is now, in a sense, a "new man," and he must live up to the standards of the new man.

Class IIa: *Neolythron*—controversial for challenge the conception of public institutions with a theme of justice.

[illegible]

1. For later research, referring to the records: <http://www.museumoftheamericanindian.org/AMIDigital/AMIDigital.asp?ID=17> and <http://www.museumoftheamericanindian.org/AMIDigital/AMIDigital.asp?ID=18>



2009

Artist Breaks isolation
for open studio week-
end John Maslin
Wanganui chronicle,
March 7, 2009

John Maslin Wanganui Chronicle, March 7, 2009

Former Tylee Cottage-artist-in-residence painter James Robinson will hold an open studio this weekend at the Bedford Ave studio he has worked from for the best nz nine-months. Holed up in the vast upstairs studio of a desolated Wanganui warehouse is expressionist artist James Robinson hard at work with paintbrush and canvas. The multi-award-winning and grant recipient artist has worked in complete isolation at the studio for the past nine months, with only his thoughts to keep him company. This weekend, however, Mr Robinson is obliterating his privacy by opening the Bedford Ave studio to the public - an opportunity for people to look at his work adorning the walls and talk with him. Some of his paintings are five metres high, yet they are still dwarfed by the enormous settings he works in - a space, he says, that gives him the ability and inspiration to create what he does. Mr Robinson rents the studio from a well known potter Ross Mitchell-Anyon. "Ross is a very generous artist that helps other artists with affordable rent. You can't get space like this anywhere in New Zealand", Mr Robinson said. Mr Robinson's works are mixed media - basically any object or design that catches his eye may end up on his canvas. The 36-year-old explained his abstract collages evolve from different origins - some mythical, some from New Zealand rugged landscapes and nature. "My work is very turbulent... passionate and violent. I don't use formula - I change the pattern every time", Mr Robinson said. Mr Robinson has been based in Dunedin for the

past 10 years, but came to Wanganui last year to take up a six-month period as the Tylee Cottage artist in residence, which he concluded recently. Wanganui's Tylee Cottage residency allows artist to stay in the cottage and use its studio for up to a year, living rent free with modest monthly allowance from the Sarjeant Gallery in order for the artist to concentrate on developing their work. Established in 1986, the cottage is the oldest residency in New Zealand. Mr Robinson said four of his murals he worked on during and after his residency will be exhibited at the Sarjeant Gallery from March 28 to June 7. Mr Robinson said there will be a banjo and sitar player at the open studio, which runs both today and tomorrow from 10am to 3pm at the Bedford studio off Heads rd.

Artist breaks isolation for open studio weekend

by John Maslin
john.maslin@wanganuichronicle.co.nz

Holed up in the vast upstairs studio of a desolate Wanganui warehouse is expressionist artist James Robinson hard at work with paintbrush and canvas.

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Former Tylee Cottage artist-in-residence painter James Robinson will hold an open studio this weekend at the Bedford Ave studio he has worked from for the past nine-months.
PICTURE / STUART MURDO (03) 330 0000 (MARTIN)

2009

The Dominion Post
Mark Amery - visual arts
April 1, 2009

The Dominion Post Mark Amery - visual arts April 1, 2009

Just up the road at Mark Hutchins Gallery, James Robinson's enormous wall sculptures are also beginning to resemble landscapes with shifting perspectives, following recent residences in New York and Wanganui.

These can move in a glance between aerial topography, to zoom in on the matted buildup of garbage half buried in the earth, and zoom out again to architectural structures built up into the air. While Robinson's work has sometimes been suffocatingly introspective in the past, there is a wider, more powerful humanistic lens in operations here, with hope

contained in the blossoms of Renaissance colour. While many of the smaller works remain confused, expressionistic fragments to me (they have none of the cohesion engagement with the world the often-made comparison to German painter Anselm Kiefer might suggest), the two large sculptural works here animate the violence of our relationship with the earth dramatically and beautifully. More of Robinson's recent large work is on display at the Sarjeant Gallery in Wanganui until June 1.

Discussions with nature



Mark Amery
VISUAL ARTS

Sculpture often provides us with conversations between nature and culture. In the little regular piles of wood shavings that appeared around the base of Wellington's Rauri Gill Government Buildings last Thursday, like the evidence of individual sermons – Roman Ondak's part of the One Day Sculpture programme – or the curvy outline of a figure against hill and sky, what we shape and construct out of nature is framed by it.

Louise Purvis' *Dog Head Hill* is a large stone magnet that flips the relationship between culture and nature inside out and then, incredibly, inside it inside in again. The contours of her exhibition *Formed Land*, at Bowen Galleries, the flips and mirrors in its design, make it like a giant Rubik's Cube-type puzzle for both eye and mind. It resembles both a computer-designed lump of rock and a brain. The ridges and grooves of its exterior are those of the landscape, the contour lines of topography or meteorology, and have been folded around the stone like a three-dimensional map containing the world. As physically seductive as this work is as a thing of beauty to stroke with your fingers, it's what your brain starts to turn over about our relationship to the land as you do so that keeps you engaged.

The rock is black granite, sculpted into a symmetrical block that has in turn been quartered into sections, held apart from each other by stainless steel rods, like some piece of industrial machinery. It is as if the world has been captured by mathematics, yet metal rods have been put in place as it seems to explode out from our mechanical grasp. As with Purvis' *Formed Land*, with rocks in stone, sculpture, there is a strong tension between human containment and nature that freshens up her elegant blend of minimalist art, as all that put it: "The simple expression of complex thought". Her work speaks strongly to the difficulties of our containing nature in the face of natural wisdom while highlighting the beauty of our industrial and cultural forms.

While the exterior surface of *Dog Head Hill* is flawlessly machined as a rough, almost hairy, coat, the interior granite is as smooth and as quietly an expansive kitchen bench. It is hard to believe they are the same stone. Meanwhile, below, highly finished surfaces in nature contain.

Formed Land pays tribute to fellow sculptor Jeff Thomson, New Zealand's dedicated twister of corrugated iron. Shit, for example, is a large button-shaped disc made out of Corvus marble. It appears to have been put back together after having been smashed into fragments, but with each fragment sculpted with different sizes of corrugations that curve around in directions like the hands of a clock. A sundial, with the movement of light and shadow across the landscape

Flawlessly machined: *Dog Head Hill*, Shanti black granite, stainless steel bush and bolts, zinc-sprayed epoxy-painted steel, 1200 x 930 x 930mm, 2009, by Louise Purvis.

River Tree makes you aware that you are looking ahead of you as if you were flying above the land, the grooves undulating like the Whangārei below you on a flight to Auckland. The lines of the river resemble a tree as the root of a fern. To me it's a symbol of the power of both thought and nature, the tension between our ability to conceptualise the world, and our inability to contain it.

Discussions with nature: *River Tree*, Corvus marble, stainless steel bush and bolts, galvanised steel, 760 x 450mm, 2008, by Louise Purvis.

Just up the road at Mark Hutchins Gallery, James Robinson's enormous wall sculptures are also beginning to resemble landscapes with shifting perspectives, following recent residences in New York and Wanganui.

These can move in a glance between aerial topography, to zoom in on the matted buildup of garbage half buried in the earth, and zoom out again to architectural structures built up into the air.

While Robinson's work has sometimes been suffocatingly introspective in the past, there is a wider, more powerful, humanistic lens in operation here, with hope contained in the blossoms of Renaissance colour. While many of the smaller works remain confused, expressionistic fragments to me (they have none of the cohesion or engagement with the world the often-made comparison to German painter Anselm Kiefer might suggest), the two large sculptural works here animate the violence of our relationship with the earth dramatically and beautifully. More of Robinson's recent large work is on

2009

Storm of Light
David Hall
NZ Listener,
May 9, 2009

David Hall NZ Listener, May 9, 2009

'The Light' by David Hall, New Zealand Listener, May 9th 2009

After a string of artist residencies in New York and New Zealand, James Robinson is squatting in a disused grainstore in Whanganui, painting and wondering what to do next.

It is a vast space, rented out for a pittance when he began the Tylee Cottage residency in mid-2008. Light and wildlife pour in through its unpaned windows. Its corrugated iron roof ticks frantically when the sun comes out. The white planks of the ceiling are stained with tea-coloured rust, and rows of bird-shit line the floor beneath the beams that span overhead.

The ambience is not unlike the artworks that Robinson has been making there. He arrived in Whanganui to begin the Tylee Cottage residency, the results of which constitute The Light. The paintings are a distillation of their surroundings, almost camouflaged amidst the studio's paint splatters, wood splinters, loose bricks and lost belongings.

"I'm a scavenger and an opportunist," says Robinson. "I work with what I've got, where I am. Every time is different. Like the Whanganui logo, 'Discovery is the journey'."

On the white walls of Whanganui's Sarjeant Gallery, however, the paintings are jarring, antagonistic, like overgrown cultures on a sterile laboratory bench. Torn and scorched, their massive canvases are stuck with thick worms of white paint, deflated sacs of resin, coarse sutures of woollen yarn, and mandalas of nails.

"I like big work," he says, "because when a sensation overwhelms us, you are in that world, rather than looking at a world. Sometimes with my work I don't know when to stop, because—y'know—when is a cloud finished?"

Robinson is a painter of effects, captivated by the possibilities of his materials. Blades of grass, black sand, and river pebbles are swamped by acrylic paint, as is a slew of domestic detritus: matches, washers, buttons, beads, plastic toys, loose change, old 45s, circuit boards, a spanner, a handsaw, a broken table leg, a shattered pane of glass, and a post-it note from a friend which invites the artist around for quiche that afternoon.

There is a revelatory spirit at work, a willingness to expose the process, to show the tools of the trade trapped in the painting. It extends to his mind too: Robinson wants to show you how he thinks. He scribbles messages and declarations, auto-criticisms and self-help notes; and gives license to more subliminal impulses, indulging a Gestaltian urge to find faces and figures in the static: ghouls, goblins, mountains and thunderheads.

The canvases are like the tanned hides of endangered

civilisations, like tikis or totems, made by a white man unsettled by the memories of the land (Robinson describes Whanganui as "a cultural war zone, a racial genocide point"). Yet where Robinson's earlier work was mostly monochromatic, its atmosphere spanning from wintery desolation to frenzied brutality, there is now a profusion of colour, an expansion of his emotional palette. The Light retains Robinson's usual onslaught, his sensory excess; but emerging through the smog and grey scud is a flush of rusty reds and muted magenta, aquamarine and azure.

"I want to give the most intense experience I know how to do," he says. "In the past, that was more turbulent and negative, and these days it's more salubrious, joyous and uplifting. The work has become more alive."

Robinson had messy beginnings. Born in Christchurch in 1972, he had a schizophrenic and largely absent father, a precocious descent into drugs and booze, and suffered the suicide of his only sibling, Martin, aged 24. What followed was an equally messy recovery, a rocky road of psych wards, AA programmes (he's been teetotalled since 1993), binge eating, and alternative remedies ("I went to a new age hippy and did rebirthing, and tripped out like Jesus.")

Of course, art-making was his primary therapy, and he practised it with due fervour. (Output has never been a problem for Robinson—knowing when to stop is the lesson he's always learning.) Based in Dunedin from 1998 until late 2007, he has exhibited abundantly through dealers and regional galleries around the country.

Given his intensely personal approach to art, it is unsurprising that, to some extent, his artwork mirrors his nature. He is grandiose, expressive and well worried, much of this fuelled by a ferocious commitment to honesty. It makes him incapable of white lies or tactful silences, makes him capable of shooting himself in the foot when it's already in his mouth, and makes him unsparingly self-critical. And in true yin-yang fashion, his quirks have their counterweights: he is boisterous yet reclusive, self-absorbed yet considerate, frugal yet generous, insecure yet philosophically assured. He's also far calmer, far steadier than he used to be. He eats better, tramps regularly, and practises qigong daily. His recent successes haven't appeased him, but they have tempered the jagged edge of his ambition.

"I'm the kind of artist that's a journey of the wounded healer," he says. "I carry a large bundle of post-colonial guilt towards my place here, and I'm turning that guilt, which is unnecessary and unproductive, into a positive force of growth. It's important to be critical of the culture that birthed us, and ourselves as the perpetuators of that culture, rather than being just a big happy hippy."

2009

Storm of Light
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These concerns were sharpened by his residency in New York in early 2008. "There's a real confusion about identity that I've always walked with," he says. "But I felt more like a South Pacific artist after being [in New York], and felt more permission to be that. "Art is a communal record of a collective impulse," he continues. "Every artist is an MP for their particular community." As for now, he is contemplating his next move—Berlin? Waitakere? Whanganui?—and, as always, creating new

work. "I've always been aware of my own mortality," he says. "The good side of this is that I question who I am, why I am, where I am, and what I'm doing with my life. I'm willing to make a lot of embarrassing mistakes, to be a student out loud in service of the spirit of art. My life is a symptom of the universe." About the author: David Hall is a freelance writer and political theorist. He lives in Auckland, New Zealand, and is moving shortly to Oxford University, England, to read for the

Art
BY DAVID HALL

Storm of light

James Robinson likes big work and admits he doesn't always know when to stop.

A tter a string of artist residencies in New York and New Zealand, James Robinson is squatting in a dilapidated grain store in Wanganui, painting and wondering what to do next.

It is a vast space, with a lot of light pouring in through its unpaned windows. Its concrete floor is cracked and stained with oil. The walls are a mix of white and grey, with some areas of red and blue. Robinson is a painter of effects, captivated by the possibilities of his materials.

"I like big work," Robinson says, "because when a situation overwhelms you, you are in that world, rather than looking at it from a distance. Sometimes with my work, I don't know when to stop, because I know when it's a cloud finished."

Robinson is a painter of effects, captivated by the possibilities of his materials.

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Yet where Robinson's earlier work was mostly monochromatic, its atmosphere spanning from wintry desolation to frenzied brutality, there is now a profusion of colour, an expansion of his emotional palette. The light retains Robinson's usual onslaught, his sensory excess, but emerging through the smog and grey sand is a flush of riotous red and muted magenta, aquamarine and azure. "I want to give the most intense experience I know how to do," he says. "In the past, that was more turbulent and negative, and these days it's more subliminal, joyous and uplifting. The work has become more alive."

Robinson had many beginnings. Born in Christchurch in 1972, he had a schizophrenic and largely absent father, began a precocious descent into drugs and booze, and suffered the suicide of his only sibling, Martin, aged 24. What followed was an equally messy recovery: a rocky road of psych wards, AA programmes (he's been a teetotaler since 1993), binge eating and alternative remedies ("I went to a new age hippy and did reiki, and tripped out like Jesus").

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"I want to give the most intense experience I know how to."

Clockwise from left, *Hapu Contraction*, *Traveller* and *Golden Helmet* (all 2009).

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JAMES ROBINSON: THE LIGHT, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, until June 25, HAPU CONTRACTION, Bath Street Gallery, Auckland, until May 30.

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2009

Weekend Herald
TJ McNamara
May 9, 2009

Weekend Herald TJ McNamara May 9, 2009

James Robinson. The principle quality of Robinson's work is attack. He makes a charge at the canvas with every means available, splashing, dripping, piling the paint on thick, using the lids of paint cans, a button, or soldering iron to give shape to come of the forms. The effect is of wild, anarchic passion. In a group of six paintings, each one is a cracked, lunar landscape which the eye can explore and find incident after incident. Sometimes one incident rises out of the landscape like the dark opening in *Bad Mother*, or the big splashes of paint with there long trails that are a feature of *She's Making Ghost*. Every work makes virtue of rush and

spontaneity. The most impressive of all is a big painting called *Hapu Constraction*. It comprises five hangings, unframed and with irregular edges, with many of stitched with nails. Bits and pieces of the hangings are yoked violently together. What makes this the most important part of the show is that Robinson has arrived at a scrubbed, irregular but very effective washed-out palate. This colour and the associated painting *Nothing Gunna Happen* are outstanding works in a show that could easily fall to pieces because of the sheer vehemence of the approach.

B8 Weekend Herald (Saturday, May 9, 2009)

Vast works offer remarkable insights

Big paintings command attention at the Viaduct Events Centre art fair

WITNESS an awe-inspiring display of art at the Viaduct Events Centre art fair. The show, which runs from May 9 to May 10, features a collection of large-scale paintings by James Robinson, a New Zealand artist known for his bold, expressive style. The fair is held at the Viaduct Events Centre, a large, modern building with a glass facade. The paintings are displayed in a large, open space, allowing visitors to view them from all angles. The fair is a great opportunity to see some of the best art in New Zealand.

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2007

The below text is drawn from the wall label that accompanied **Maker** during its installation at Dunedin Public Art Gallery in

Text courtesy Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Curator of Contemporary Art, Justin Paton.

James Robinson is well known to Dunedin and national audiences for turbulent, densely worked paintings in which the self and the world are constantly tussling. In his works from the early 2000s, webs of psychological pictograms compete for every spare inch of the canvas surface with outbursts of hand-painted text – provoking, imploring, confessing.

Maker feels like something new for Robinson. In this show for the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, he lets his materials do more of the talking than ever before, with results that complicate the common idea of his art as straightforwardly 'Expressionist'. Robinson's trademark cries and proclamations are still present, but you have to hunt for them amidst a surge of sheer stuff – a tumble of objects that includes shattered bottles, paint-pot lids, scissors, rope, firewood, and bathroom tiles, all held in place by gloopy white acrylic that is itself scarred and textured. Even the canvases are scavenged objects of a sort – older paintings that have been cut up and stitched back together like Frankenstein's monster. Putting broken and lowly things in a pristine gallery is Robinson's way to get us wondering about value – about what is 'waste' and what is worth our attention. It's an approach that goes back to assemblage artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Don Driver, veteran scavengers and transformers of society's spare parts. But the questions it raises are especially pressing today, when consumer objects are sold more aggressively and in greater quantities than ever before. Pitting himself against the smooth tasteful surfaces of this 'designer world', Robinson thrusts us into a realm of broken forms and unstable materials – a world

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Text courtesy Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Curator of Contemporary Art, Justin Paton. that is materially 'poor' but rich in energy. In the process, he delivers a grungy retort to the clean-lined look of much recent art inspired by the virtual space of the computer screen.

These are landscape paintings, but of an intense and unusual kind. Where conventional landscape paintings usually offer long views out to a stable horizon, Robinson turns our gaze earthwards. With their crusty, evidence-rich surfaces, the paintings suggest archaeological cutaways, views into the surface of the earth. We see bits and pieces of the early twenty-first century, but altered so they resemble fragments of a long-gone civilization, corroded and impacted by time and geological pressure. The colours here are the colours of earth, oil, rust and mud. And by mounding some of the paintings with perishable fragments of the landscape, such as grass clippings, he provides us with an especially vivid reminder that artworks themselves change and perish over time.

The title offers a clue to Robinson's drama of destruction and creation. Does the 'maker' of the title refer to the artist himself, as he works away at his surfaces? Or does it evoke the presence of some greater force churning away behind the chaotic world of these works? Should we feel daunted by this chaos, which often looks like an aftermath of some kind? Or marvel at the vitality and moments of unexpected beauty to be found within it? Robinson leaves the questions open, and in the process ensures that we viewers also play a crucial part as makers of these works



2007

**Finding detail
in the chaos**
Robyn Peers
The Press,
October 17, 2007

**The Press,
October 17, 2007**

I remember the first James Robinson works I saw. Rough, raw, street influences and angry, they created, as Chris Knox describes in the newly published New Zealand art book, *Look this Way*, a "great, flatulent belch of fresh air amongst all the tight-sphinctered, deodorised boys and girls of the accepted national art world". This exhibition at PaperGraphica is more mature – closer, perhaps, to those art-world figures but powerful nonetheless. There are over 20 large-scale drawings; dense and expressively marked, graphic evidence of the streams of his artistic consciousness. Robinson's use of media is varied and innovative. Graphite, charcoal, printing ink, India ink, tea stains, paint and marker pen are dripped, dribbled, splattered, stamped and scrawled. Materials lie over and under each other, in near obsessive patternmaking. The wealth of detail repays close observation. The drawings may appear random, even hastily created, but huge decision-making has taken place. Circular motifs abound, however the predominant motifs are figural. There is a child-like paper cut-out body and a comic-style alien figure. But there are shadowy heads everywhere,

suggestions of humanity glimpsed through the surrounding textures. Reinforced by handprints, sometimes by ranks of stick figures, these poignant figures speak eloquently of isolation and desolation. Punctuating the show are several dark drawings, simply multiple layers of thick pencil. Though lacking Robinson's trademark symbols, the artist's style is evident in the aggressive marks, the scrawls of graphite, at times so forceful that holes have been punched through the paper by this uncontrolled, strident mark-Basquiat, Kiefer, de Lautour, Peter Robinson; many artists are suggested as influences on Robinson's art. You can play hunt the source, but James Robinson is quite clearly his own artist and in these works has continued to develop his individual style. Early works were turbulent and angry, but now there is a little more order in his chaos. The seemingly haphazard compositions work; his mark-making and his symbolism has evolved into a personalised language. The end result is enormously satisfying – close reading will be rewarded.

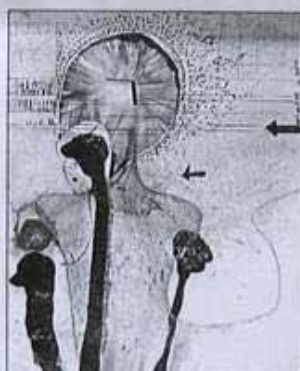
Finding detail in the chaos

Drawings; works by James Robinson at PaperGraphica until October 27. Reviewed by Robyn Peers.

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2007

Paper dragon wins
\$35,000 art prize
New Zealand Herald,
September 04, 2007

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September 04, 2007

Dunedin artist James Robinson is off to New York for a six-month residency and with \$35,000 in the bank after winning the Paramount prize in the Annual Wallace Art Awards at the Aotea Centre last night. Robinson, 35, who is on a six-month residency at McCahon House in French Bay, Titirangi, won the award for Taniwha/ Dragon, a mixed media work on sewn paper and canvas. The awards were presented by the Governor-General Anand Satyanand. Lianne Edwards, of Nelson, won the \$15,000 development award, which comes with a three-month residency with the Vermont Studio Centre in the United States, for her work, 4d Piwakawaka: 1d Health, made from 1965 4d used health stamps. Two runner-up awards of \$1500 each went to Kirsten Roberts, of Auckland, for an untitled pink oil painting, and Andrea Du Chatenier, of Whangarei, for Love Sanctuary, made of handdyed wool. The jury prize - awarded by judges Peter Gibson-Smith, who

was the 2001 Paramount prize winner, art writer Warwick Brown, Unitec lecturer Richard Fahey, 2006 Paramount winner Rohan Wealleans, and Art Research Centre director Linda Tyler - was awarded to Megan Jenkins, of Auckland, for a digital print, Atmospheric Optics V. The Wallace Art Awards, set up by Auckland arts benefactor James Wallace, are in their 16th year, and are the longest running awards of their kind in Australasia. All the finalists' works are held by the Wallace Charitable Trust. The collection will go on loan to institutions such as universities and hospitals and an exhibition of this year's winners and selected finalists is on show at the Aotea Centre until October 1, before appearing at the New Dowse Gallery in Lower Hutt.

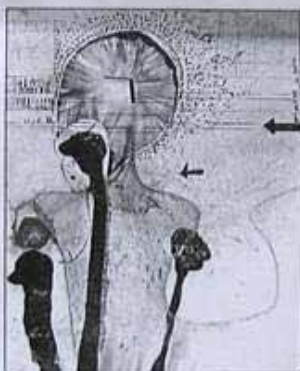
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Decemeber 20 2007

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The New Zealand Herald

television, entertainment and arts

ARTSGUIDE

TIMEOUT TODAY:
Will Smith's solo act
in I Am Legend

History in the making

VISUAL ARTS: It's been a great 12 months for art and variety was the key to it all

On the day that the exhibition of the past year at the Tūhono Theatre in Auckland opened, the New Zealand Herald's Arts Guide was written and presented by Tūhono Theatre, which was the first to open the Herald's Arts Guide to the public. The Herald's Arts Guide was the first to open the Herald's Arts Guide to the public. The Herald's Arts Guide was the first to open the Herald's Arts Guide to the public.

The year in review was a year of 'history' and 'variety' in the arts. The year in review was a year of 'history' and 'variety' in the arts. The year in review was a year of 'history' and 'variety' in the arts. The year in review was a year of 'history' and 'variety' in the arts. The year in review was a year of 'history' and 'variety' in the arts.

T.J. McNAMARA
for galleries

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'In the outlying suburbs there is a vigorous art scene and the quality of work is high.'

new scene of art in the suburbs.

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ALL THAT ENERGY: Clockwise from top left, Martin Kaiti brought The Big Picture to our screens, James Robinson took up a residency at the Tūhono Theatre, Tony Farrant's Posing Madonna, and Peter Paterson's art was extraordinary and Martin Kaiti's huge portrait, Look.



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2007

New York awaiting
former city artist
Jeff Harford
Otago Daily Times,
November 1, 2007

Otago Daily Times,
November 1, 2007

Wallace Art Award paramount winner James Robinson doesn't know if or when he'll return to his Dunedin home. Something, or someone, has left him in a funk about the town. "Tall poppy syndrome," he suggests. A residency at McMahon House, Titirangi has thrown Robinson from "semi-reclusive, Dunedin working-class artist mode" to a "cloistered, semi-celebrity artist mode," he says. The diversity of the Auckland arts community is sitting well with him, for the time being. Whether Dunedin has earned his lasting wrath is doubtful – Robinson (34) tends to shoot from the hip, happy to follow a tangent to its extremes. Conclusions about the man, most often drawn from his work, need to be tested. An upcoming six-month residency in New York, bankrolled by last month's \$35,000 cheque from the James Wallace Arts Trust for prize-winning mixed-media work *Taniwha/Dragon*, will at least provide a "leg up", says Robinson. From the supported international studio environment, a future in Dunedin will merge with other, as-yet-unknown possibilities. "It will be just wicked to have a studio," Robinson says of the post he'll take up in January. "I get to go to a place where there are 20 other international artists, people from Poland, Korea... People like me – battlers. "Whether they've earned it like I've earned it over the years, I don't know." With that, Robinson prides open the gift horse's mouth, shining a searching beam on a rotten molar or two. He's unafraid to challenge the public perception of such grants and quick to New York awaiting former city artist Jeff Harford Otago Daily Times, November 1, 2007 remember his 12 years as a beneficiary as a hard-fought apprenticeship, "making work and processing my garbage through my means".

"I'm really grateful," he says. "And I'll use the money to the best of my ability. But in many ways it's chump-change. The studio in New York costs 20 grand – I get 15 to find a flat and live. Your CEO of any corporate spends three times that on a new car. "It's nice to be regarded but the work's the work and all I can say is, 'thanks very much', take the handshake and use the opportunities I'm given." Originally from Christchurch, Robinson has an art and craft diploma from Hungry Creek, north of Auckland, and completed a bachelor of fine arts degree at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in 2000. He has exhibited regularly in private and public galleries, with the Dunedin Public Art Gallery recently featuring "Maker", a series of free-hanging mixed-media canvasses that include rope, glass, cut grass, acrylic, oil, enamel, ceramic, paper, wool and sundry found objects. In other works, tiny figures populate

scarred, text-strewn patchwork canvases that resemble hellish battlegrounds of black and grey. Words such as 'anger', 'sadness' and 'trauma' have dotted reviews of Robinson's work, pointing to its apparent cathartic nature and to the demons that apparently plague him. Robinson finds such assumptions "bizarre". "I had a school group through yesterday and I said, 'Well, do you guys think about the guys who programmed the computer game Doom or Lara Croft? Do you think about them as being raving schizophrenic, violent, abusive people?'. "It's an alter-ego. Sometimes I get carried away and I turn up the stereo and drink too much coffee, but put me in jail if I start beating my wife or something. Not that I have a wife..." Anticipating the next question, Robinson pauses to acknowledge the bipolar condition that makes him "a little wobbly" from time to time. It is, he says, just like "crime, addiction, burglary and all the rest of it". "I'm quite Jungian in that way. I think that if society has too much trouble, it bubbles up. You get a pimple if you eat too much chocolate." A prolific painter, Robinson also finds time on most days to add writings to the "internal performance narrative" on his website. His combined forms of expression are aimed at "locating what's real about being a human being", he says. "I think we've lost something to do with our core nature as whole human beings. Any real art is trying to locate something that's essential and whole and human against non-human influences. "But painting is the more physical language – an experiential tool that engages as much with your body as with your mind. That's what my intent in doing those big, cathartic works is – to get out of my mind and into my body a bit more." Robinson celebrated both his Wallace Art Award win and McMahon House output with friends, performance artists, dancers and musicians at a recent Queen St event. The multimedia show, aimed at fostering a "general arts vibe with a Fringe Festival-type approach", said more about his need to share common ground than it did about his discomfort with what he calls the elitism of academic art. "Culture", he says, "is something that we live." Having made a coffin-sized crate with which to transport several incomplete "skins" and a series of works on paper, Robinson is looking forward to drawing his McMahon residency to a close and going tramping at Arthurs Pass before heading to New York. Whatever the future holds, his fondness for home – warts and all – can't be denied. "I've loved Auckland. I love the South Island," he says. "I've really made this place home and as much as I have a hard time here, there are a lot of things about New Zealand that would be hard for anyone. "I'm basically going into unknown social terrain and it's very exciting and humbling."



2007

James Robinson
Chris Knox
From Look This Way, New Zealand writers on New Zealand artists, Edited by Sally Blundell

New Zealand writers on New Zealand artists, Edited by Sally Blundell

immediately associate with this young man's scatological version of human reality. But it turns out that the good women of Bath Street have picked a winner, for this show is a total mindfuck, a blast of sheer visceral beauty and power that left all who saw it in little doubt that they were looking at what just might be the first stirrings of a potential Hotere/McCahon-type icon. Me, I thought this work was more consistently, relentlessly good than either of those guys and way less mired in McCahon's syrupy mysticism and Hotere's fetishistic love of surface. The sheer strength of these pieces was amazing.

Virtually all of the urban scrawl was gone, tiny figures replacing the feverish, desperate words of his earlier stuff and a real, live painterly sensibility was in abundant evidence. Good grief! Had this other Robinson sold out to the need of the art lover/ soul fucker to have mere shapes and colours and textures on their pristine walls? Had he bowed to the pressure to remove his intuited, invidious invective from these massive works? Had some sweet gallery type told him to do more of the same but without the nasty bits? Bugged if I know but it didn't matter – these vast, engorged and gorgeous paintings were more powerful in their comparative silence than anything he had previously done.

They seethed and boiled with bitter blackness, ripped and torn and stitched back together with old rusty nails like autopsy corpses or the sails of some Stygian super-yacht, off-kilter and threatening but always sumptuously, gloriously beautiful.

They thrilled all who saw them and sold like Google shares. Except the big black gaping vulva that was too much, even without words...It was probably my favourite.

Then it was the last third of 2005 and another show was heading north. We received a CD burn of a million images and I thought he'd sent us the wrong files 'cos all this stuff was covered in words and, last we'd heard, he was doing paintings even starker, blacker and muter than ever. These canvases were obviously from the pre-Bath Street period when he was tearing up his drawings and prints and pasting and stitching them into huge collages. They looked great on our computer but I emailed him to tell him he'd got his burns confused, had sent us backcatalogue stuff and where was the new work, huh?

A puzzled phone call was the immediate response and I quickly realised that I was in the wrong. These were new works. He'd decided that, fine as the previous batches of work may have been, there was dilution of his reality going on and he really needed to start screaming again, not to fall into making pretty/ugly pictures for the unthinking rich, and that maybe he needed to find out if his fan base could handle the real him. Or some approximation thereof.

So the second Bath Street exhibition was a whole different beast. The paintings were even bigger than the previous show's already sizeable chunks and were all made up of two 1300 x 1400 mm frames horizontally hinged, one above the other. And, rather than being hung, they were, in turn hinged vertically down one side to the gallery walls, all the better to reveal their ripped backsides, their skeletal back stories. And they exploded with words. Confronting and comforting, condemning and confiding, bitter, spiteful, hateful, loving, caring, reassuring, blasphemous and spiritual, rapacious and tender, as contradictory

and self-mutilating as any mind at rest.

We were blown away, marvelling at the overkill of images, the projectile vomitstream of unalloyed angst and joy that sprayed so many damned words all over these huge, lumbering, fuckedup fabric monsters, these creatures born of a graphic Frankenstein, torn from an antediluvian alchemical text, from some H. P. Lovecraft nightmare. Forced to abandon our preconceptions of silent black monoliths we soaked in the fantastic excesses of these new phantasms, grinning in wonderment and babbling in tongues. They must surely be recognised for the wayward masterpieces that they so obviously were...

Not this time.

From memory, one sold. Auckland wasn't quite ready for this man's black heart to be fully displayed on his ragged, spattered sleeve, for his generously proportioned ego and bottomless id to be so plainly, unambiguously on view, its walls not quite prepared for this kind of hanging, more Newgate than New Gallery.

James didn't seem too disappointed, almost happy in his confirmation of the realities of the art-buying world and his tenuous place in it. Maybe the popular acceptance of his previous show was more worrying than the rejection of the present one, maybe it's too tough to play the suffering holy fool when your paintings are getting whisked out of your studio before you can say 'Bill Hammond'. Maybe he needed a bit more of the good and desperate struggle before settling into some sort of cruisy immediately associate with this young man's scatological version of human reality. But it turns out that the good women of Bath Street have picked a winner, for this show is a total mindfuck, a blast of sheer visceral beauty and power that left all who saw it in little doubt that they were looking at what just might be the first stirrings of a potential Hotere/McCahon-type icon. Me, I thought this work was more consistently, relentlessly good than either of those guys and way less mired in McCahon's syrupy mysticism and Hotere's fetishistic love of surface. The sheer strength of these pieces was amazing.

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two small prints, show them his beautiful Giants, Saints and Monsters book and maybe dump them in front of the telly and roll his great little DVD – mostly shot in time-lapse fashion from a tiny, head-mounted camera as he made his paintings and drawings – and hope that their curiosity is sparked. Idiot dancers deserve no less.

2007

James Robinson
Chris Knox
From Look This Way, New
Zealand writers on New
Zealand artists, Edited by
Sally Blundell

New Zealand writers on New Zealand artists, Edited by Sally Blundell

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Maybe obscurity is its own reward.

Maybe – just maybe – he was a flash in the pan.

Damn, I wish we had the bucks to buy half a dozen of those last paintings and had the space to show them off to all the bodies and minds that pass through our home, to spread the word about this marvellous mess of a man and his uncompromised concoctions.



2007

Gods and monsters
Dan Chappell
Art News New Zealand,
Summer 2007

Art News New Zealand, Summer 2007

Broken glass, sand and nails crunch underfoot, slashed canvases are strewn on the floor, coffee grounds and paint trails arc drunkenly across the walls and there are graffiti scrawls and scribbles everywhere – no it's not the aftermath of another mindless burglary – welcome to the world of James Robinson – artist in residence since July at Titirangi's McCahon House and winner of the Paramount Award of the 2007 Wallace Art Awards. So, what are the denizens that inhabit the murky, frenzied, pre/post apocalyptic whorl that Robinson strives to capture in his art? Like it or not, this man is building up momentum, and after his six-month residency next year in New York's International Studio and Curatorial Program, courtesy of the Wallace win, who knows what's next? For nearly four months in 2007, Robinson has been resident at McCahon House, where the studio windows frame the same tapering kauris McCahon painted, a million miles away from his old shambolic church hall studio in Port Chalmers. He travelled north with a vanload of huge canvases, and a truckload of self-doubt and angst, as a trawl through his blog indicates: got me a can load of cruddy canvases to assimilate into some show. rich in famous failure. and a new ream of drawing paper. 100 sheets. for collage n wot not. got a computer in th studio. heatpumps secreting from every eall shwer that looks like it needs a team of cheerleaders in it with me (hint) good pressure im telling ya. new teddy bear. familiar vacuums n lifestyle suburban solitude. cloistered. – Robinson's blog entry

What makes James Robinson run? Those who've seen his regular shows – with Bath Street Gallery, Milford Galleries and Mark Hutchins Gallery, as well as a recent exhibition, Maker, at Dunedin Public Art Gallery – will be familiar with his massive scarred and crudely-stitched canvases, sutured with nails, covered with slumpy paint, layered with grass, rope, coal, scavenged objects and festooned with profundities, profanities and inanities. The emotions are taut, feral, sad and emboldened: he's a dysfunctional yet curiously erudite rebel with a cause. In the dappled light of the McCahon House studio, are we seeing a change from the in-your-face, visceral, leached-out monochromes or inky-black wells? Have the structures of a residency, and the attendant goldfish-bowl existence with

frequent visitors, cramped his freewheeling style? Had a amazing amount of pple thru 2day 1st Aug. feel drained. And too open, sorta its my 'job' but is it? The mental health kids were cool. If im not 'open' they just miss out. But then others just...take. – diary entry

"Sometimes there's a danger with residencies and fellowships that the art you create just talks to the people that created the situation you've been placed in. I feel my responsibility is to talk to the whole culture, to be true to my roots. In a lot of cases art is owned and controlled by those who consume and 'understand' it," says Robinson. "I wouldn't want to feel hemmed in by the class supporting me here, but I'm grateful to be able to continue. Money makes me uncomfortable. What I value most is having freedom and space, not necessarily status and kudos. I want my work to be received but I don't want to have to be a politician as well." And just what are James Robinson's roots? What is the story his art tells? "I was brought up in a gender war between my parents – one was a biblical tyrant cripple, the other an angry feminist, strong, independent socialist solo mum. Born in 19972, I was pretty young during the Springbok tour in '81. But I was part of the marches and saw my mum get beaten up, so there's never been safety for me in the worlds. Then there was my brother – white punk, mental health consumer, suicide in 1998. His life was his life but it's part of the forces that created me. I see myself as a filter of my time and my job as being a reporter on my own state in the world, not blaming anybody for what shaped me. "Because I felt insular, insecure and unconfident, I turned to art as my way out, my voice. I'd been unemployed for a long time, a sickness beneficiary, almost unemployable – so I guess every show I've had since leaving school has been me trying to give myself a job, a job that seems to create itself through me." First pruppa art session here! found the way 'in'. Different than home, the light feeling all around me sort of. Configured sizes and stuff. Ripping Raw Bits up. And Rough Spacious Line Drawings – diary entry

The studio is bursting with Robinson's works; large canvases hang on all the available wall space and are piled haphazardly



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Art News New Zealand,
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successful work, incorporating fascinating original ideas presented in an interesting way". Robinson explains the genesis of the work. "In my qi gong training lectures, we sat listening for six hours a day. The others took notes, I doodled little images – whatever triggered in me at the time – they came from my subconscious, a meta-narrative of connections, a bit like synapses connecting in the brain. "I also incorporated my body fluids in the totem as a token of putting myself into the work, which talks about genealogy and origin. The whole piece can be seen as a chromosome, a string of chemical interconnections. If we think of the concept of 'ancestor' we're made of a whole tree of people who have gone before us, so each fragment of the work could represent a life. "The taniwha / dragon came from when I was walking in the Central Otago mountains, when I was thinking about the creative energy of life itself. The taniwha is a protector of energy, which in turn is a protector of human ideals, emotionally, spiritually and socially." Slept in McCahons cottage – Ghost locked me out. Did Qi gong with Colin. – diary entry For robinson the residency has been a revelation, providing him with a healthy respect for McCahon and the deprivations he and his family faced. One night, accidentally locked out of the residency house, Robinson spent the night in the tiny resored cottage next door, an experience he feels all residency artists should undergo. He sums up his feelings on the residency experience: "I'm not perfect but niether is the situation or society that brings the residency into being, but it's part of an arts commitment to real identity – even if it's honest, and a little painful, and at times bizarre. The opportunity to create, here in the bush, in the footsteps of a truth seeker artist model from another time is an amazing privilege. I consider it part of my ongoing training, and personally fronting up to what has been largely a solitary amplified private art practice." He celebrated the residency and Wallace prize with a multimedia artwork/totem/photographic installation and dance/music/performance gig at the James Wallace Art Gallery in mid October.

all over the floor, reminiscent of an oriental rug gallery on acid. Small detailed works on canvas blocks are stacked on a table. There's a pile of works on paper – delicate pencil shadings, whorls, tea and and coffee stains merging into collage, doodles, diatribes – and a similar stack in the house. Since July he's added 100 pages to his blog and filled the visitors' book at the studio with diary entries, drawings and musings. Robinson will never be accused of sleepwalking his way through the residency. Went for Run... having truble in this rich situation – getting psychie in ART. What am I about? Etc... Ran hard through pipeline... From here... I remember again. Who where how I am. – diary entry "I need to run and eat well. When I'm working, I'm holding the exhibition in my mind's eye for six months – it's like being pregnant and being the midwife as well. "Most days I like to work a lot. It's like talking to your best friend. It understands you and lets you be who you are. Art gives you a licence to explore and play in a way you can't with other human beings. I need to talk to that person every day; it has moods, shapes and flavours – effectively it's the muse. "I'm not trying to earn brownie points with a big stack of drawings. It's more the reality of how desperate I am to find out who I am. I don't have much of a sense of self unless I do that." So it's Day 3 after th Wallace Award announcement. That Gods and monsters Dan Chappell Art News New Zealand, Summer 2007 my picture won. Im quite sensitive still. Been sitting at the table here... Doodling lil ochre coffee pictograms on nice white paper. had pple in and out... Flowers from bath st... 13 ph messages – feel like a new born – diary entry In September th McCahon House Trust extended Robinson's residency by one month, and to cap off an already successful year, he picked up the Paramount Award at the 2007 Wallace Art Awards for his mixed media work, taniwha / dragon (qi gong notes / spirit bones). This large work comprises strips of joined small images on paper that are reminiscent of fluttering prayer flags and votive offerings; they're watched over by a large totemic figure. Chairman of the Wallace Art trust, James Wallace, commented that it was "a very provocative yet

2007

Gods and monsters
Dan Chappell
Art News New Zealand,
Summer 2007

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- Fat Cunt Buys Pork
- Neo Con Rapture Borg (Departing Spirits In Storm)
- The Information The Voices (Lone Gunman)

If I was able to locate those dearly departed two and a half senses I have misplaced I would have had enough sense to stay at home and simply list the titles of his work as its own explication. Mr. Robinson is at the vanguard of a subtle change in the mood of artistic output. I state it – subtle, for the international artistic community is still grappling with aspirational post-modernism; they all want ‘star’ status and the concomitant lucre they believe has been vested their right, apropos Warhol’s ‘fifteen minutes of fame’. Ask any hedge fund manager, or currency trader – there’s a lot of money to be made in fifteen minutes. Quid pro quo, it’s just business. Seemingly, there is little unusual about such a statement. It has been apparent for decades, for scores of decades. Wherein then is the whiff of difference?

Mr. Robinson is a worker, a maker, a working-class anti-hero. He is a picaresque spy garbed in Rasputin’s oily sack-cloth carefully and precisely burning the weft and the warp and the woof of monied mythology attendant at the close of late capitalism’s speakeasy. Mr. Robinson is the antipodal equivalent of the ‘radical picture-makers’, as expressed by Dushko Petrovich. For nearly two decades now, Mr. Robinson has been living the life that, ‘seeks out low rent and private time, and (it) concentrates on powerful objects’*. There is though paradox in this land, our land, our Aotearoa. Mr. Robinson is not recognised as avant-garde, and seldom Gods and monsters Dan Chappell Art News New Zealand, Summer 2007 considered practical, (truth be known he does not consider

himself avant-garde – when I first met James, some fifteen years ago, I had to smile, delightfully, at a poster in the hallway of his house that stated “avant-garde is French for Bullshit”). In this land, our Aotearoa, the avant-garde is a received conceit. It is imported from the charnel houses’ of New York city and London. We are colonised (again) by a parochialism that offers few (with Petrovich an exception, not a contradiction), if any resolution for our own sophisticated, outward looking aspect. One must remember with respect, that such a luminary as Karl Popper conceived his brilliant analysis, The Open Society and Its Enemies - that will go a way towards enabling Humanity to begin to dismantle this charade we know as pro western late capitalism – here in my home-town of Christchurch, Aotearoa. Beyond this received avant-garde, ahead of the curve, is the avant-savant. Mr. Robinson is one of many working artists in Aotearoa and we are still to be fully recognised for more than just air points collected, for more than just the networks of upper middle class global hegemony, for more than simple, twee post-modern statements of indifferent apathy. Here, at the margins of the world, there is nothing to stare at except the maddening humanity playing out its blind obsequiousness on the walls of Plato’s cave. There is nothing below us and there is nothing to the right of us, we are Huxley’s archetype. Just as Huxley issued forth his biologists from these Islands to observe the contagious remnants of humanity, we now send some artists to offer the West an alternative. For though we seldom have influence within the centres of power that are the Western Hemisphere, we know the West, for we are, nearest to truth, The West. And we will number in our Billions.

Scott Flanagan – Disquisitio Discipulus
Christchurch, Aotearoa

*Dushko Petrovich, For A Practical avant-garde, P.S.1 Symposium: A Practical avant-garde, n+1
Research Branch Pamphlet Series #1, 2006

2006/07

Kathryn Mitchell
Art New Zealand,
Summer 2006–2007

Kathryn Mitchell Art New Zealand, Summer 2006–2007

... Ancient aptly describes James Robinson's new body of work shown at the Milford Gallery. Sculptural surfaces present a cacophany of found objects; nails, sticks and bones litter Roinson's inner landscapes. Surfaces are pierced, stained, stretched and stapled. There is a sense of evolution—a feeling that layers have formed gradually over time following an environmental disaster that has scattered debris across the land. These geological offerings embody a sense of history and question what it is that remains when all human presence is exterminated. The viewer seems to be positioned at a vast distance from the works as if seen the surfaces from another planet. Works appear as apocalyptic visions presenting remains—mutilated, burnt and bruised. The viewer may identify with the illusion of the work of art as the artist's body or of the artwork filling in for the artist's absent body. As the body becomes a site of exchange between the self and the world one may see the work as performing the body. Through transference the viewer suffers the perceived physical pain inflicted upon the artworks as if it were the artist's body. Although the works are clearly not a body in themselves, one often expects or desires the artwork to deliver the artist in a consumable way through the image or representation of the body. Often perceived as a sign of self the body may be viewed as detachable or transferable as one seeks to interpret and experience the artist through the artwork. In considering this, does the artist see the works as a performance of the body? Like the filming of Jackson Pollock engaged in the physical act of creating a painting, Robinson has with the aid of a head-mounted camera created a series of video works shot Kathryn Mitchell Art New Zealand, Summer 2006–2007 one-frame-per-second which when exhibited have been sped up

and therefore depict a frantic making process which appears in contrast to the finished works which are quiet, still, and controlled in comparison. The video work allows the viewer to identify with the origin of the works and also positions the works in the past reminding one that the work is communicating a past moment that is being maintained at the present. Titles such as Climate Consciousness Change and Automatic Weapons for the Poor Kids are suggestive of the artist's concern with contemporary issues. Climate Consciousness Change portrays a dry, dusty wasteland; black paint runs in dribbles from a crack which has been roughly repaired with white nails giving the appearance of a dark and toothy grimace. Dark voids drop the viewer into infinite and desirable blackness which comes as some relief from the treacherous terrain which has been resurfaced by disaster, Wandering amongst Robinson's ruins one is haunted by the smoky, suffocating beauty of these foreboding predictions. If one were perhaps, like an archeologist, to undertake an excavation of these landforms one may discover the concrete scientific evidence which would identify the origin of this disaster. Disturbingly however one feels an acute awareness of the origins of this scarred and flayed surface littered with modern day remnants and feels the guilt of passively looking or bearing witness to the devastation.



2006

Following clues to the
mystery Mark Amery

Katy Corner Art News, Spring 2006

Drawing broke free of any hint at restraint in a triple whammy exhibition at Mark Hutchins Gallery in July. In this group show Richard Lewer, Scott Kennedy and James Robinson sparked off each other, carrying on a noisy conference in (mostly) shades of grey. Robinson exhibited large and small works, each one 'crunchy' with levels of paint, earth, detrius, nails, gravel and an old address book. Surfaces were scorched, slashed, singed and re-jigged like an archaeological dig in reverse. The works are perversely appealing; once you're past the initial onslaught, they can be generous, allowing may routes in to Robinson's anxious scenarios. He is often asked if he's manic and he responds, "Our whole culture is this fast-forward thing. We've got this obsession with the future – we're so ungrounded, our whole industrialised world. If we are manic maybe it's a reaction to the world out there." Robinson sees his work as "part of a graphic tradition that's been going on since comics. It's such a well-trodden path for New Zealand artists, especially at the moment. I'm trying to find a way between that and abstraction and I'm tweaking expressionism with my materials as well. I'm walking in the footsteps of giants, really," he says.



Katy Corner Art News, Spring 2006

Preview, a survey show of 40 contemporary NZ artists curated by Natasha Davies, a post-grad student at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, is on display at CoCA. The exhibition, which carries work by established and emerging artists such as James Robinson, is a chance to look at the works before bidding for them at auction...



Exhibition Richard Lewer, Scott Kennedy and James Robinson Kiran Chug Dominion Post, July 1, 2006

... Robinson's pieces bring together the graphic and the abstract in a collection that bombards the senses. The graphic works tell stories and express the psychological, while the abstracts draw attention to the artistic processes behind them.



2006

Following clues to the
mystery Mark Amery

Dominion Post,
June 30, 2006

It's not what's obvious in a work of art that's captivating. It's what lies on the edges of the familiar and dazzling that draws us in. It's the power of suggestion, that whiff of something other. The easily explained provides merely the clues on the way into the wonder of a mystery or complexities of a concept. That mystery tends to be captivating because it is both familiar and unfathomable, the work promising to grapple with hard-to-explain ideas and perceptions at the very heart of our experience of life. It's to this effect that the three artists showing at Mark Hutchins Gallery move between the figurative and abstract. In surrealist-inspired dances, line, shape and form take the easily readable in hand and into emotional, metaphysical and psychological territory. Any one of these emerging artists could be from the 1950s, moving pop cultural influences into the shifting, cracked planes of modernism's revelations. These artists affirm that we're still digging back, exploring the rich ground only just touched upon last century. Dunedin maverick James Robinson gets welcome representation in Wellington. Robinson's bigger works still tend to fall into two camps. First there's the gritty, crusty abstracts, their surfaces cuttings from compacted detritus or earth — gouged, cracked, burnt, blasted, pissed-upon, torn and then sewn and glued back together. There's nothing radical here, its materialist area well mined by Europeans as diverse as Tapiers and Kiefer, but, at their best, Robinson's abstract works can create a bodily response, the impression that an emotional vein has been located and opened

within the compressed matter of all things. Unfortunately, I've seen better than shown here. For all their impressive gravity, these works lack that tension. Then there's Robinson's work made out of an equally obsessive violent action of layering of sheets of paper with doodles of heads and text to create a whole. They create a fug of thoughts, a kind of confused mind map, providing, like the abstract works, a compressed accretion of matter. In the impressive *They Fight in Me*, a background layer of old personal phonebook pages and a multitude of heads creates a chorus of voices in the artist's head, the impression of someone frustrated and swimming in a cloud of impressions. Yet I begin to get frustrated with Robinson's frustration. For all the brilliant energy and the artist's clear raw talent, his work doesn't appear to be moving on from startling beginnings. He bludgeons me into dislike. His action is of furiously making things over and over in a vacuum of faith, calling up symbols of life and death in reference to his own (apparent) frayed state and humanity's belief in violence in service of beliefs. There are occasional moments of great beauty, but, depressingly, the work ultimately doesn't offer charge or change. Rather it wallows in uncertainty. Robinson scrawls in one work, "This one's no good" and proceeds to mumble on about whether the dealer might like it or understand it, implores me to buy it and wonders whether patron James Wallace might hit on him. Who cares?

...



2006

Ritualised anger
Fran Dibble

Ritualised anger Fran Dibble

Normally, my reviews are based on artists' work that I have a long interest in and affiliation with, so I can mull over the work and figure out what I think. Instinctive reactions have to be reasoned and rationalised. But this fortnight snuck around in a whirl and so I have taken a punt and, with no time to spare, gone to James Robinson's exhibition, *Rise*, in one of the galleries at Te Manawa, showing until mid-December. In a sense, this is probably the best way to experience Robinson. It is artwork that is all about reaction and apprehension. No amount of imagery on paper prepares you for the works in the flesh. They photograph badly (by seeing the list of media used in each work, you can guess this), as they are more or less a monotone relying on a contrast of textures and surface. Robinson is a young artist, born in 1972 in Christchurch, with training at the Otago School of Fine Arts. Otago is where he now lives and works and somehow he and his work have a Dunedin flavour to it, where you think of alternate music, and youth. He has had a packed exhibition history since 1989. He hit the ground running, from what I read in a novella-sized account of carefully collated reviews, articles and biographical information passed on to me. You get the impression that he is earnest in his ambitions. He has won the praise of writers whose names ring familiar from art journals and magazines, but I confess I have ever heard of him. Can we blame it on the great gulf of the Cook Strait? However, I think I can still figure out what Robinson is about. A straight description of the works is that they are canvas stretched over frames all of a similar size; about 2.5m by 1m – so tall and long, but the frame is not square. The misshaping adds to the sense of disorientation the works are trying to instil. The canvas is coated with paint mixed with all kinds of grungy stuff: It looks like rocks, sand and just coagulated, lumpy paint. Then the canvas is partly destroyed. It is burnt to produce holes in areas (you can see this by the scorched black of heated paint), rows of nails are hammered into it, and nails are also punched in from the back of the painting, producing rows of dangerous looking points. Where there are holes from the burning, it is lined behind with black felt or velvet that has a very flat, dense quality. Visually, this gives the effect of an infinitely deep, dark hole, some terrific abyss that you could drop into, a neverending pit

that produces an instant of vertigo. It gives the surface a bewildering feeling of space. In *Fool*, a box is even inserted into the surface. Markings and graffiti are doodled on the bottom edges and corners, some with expletives (like a schoolboy on the lid of his desk), others with words like insectoid, unstable, mutant, fragmentation, or brief lines and phrases. Large nails are used to try and restitch some of the holes and splits, often lined up in rough rows. The surfaces created give a sense of all kinds of structures. They could be records of topographical maps taken from a surveillance plane, perhaps, of the ground after the ravages of war – a no-man's-land where battles have scarred the land as well as taking men's lives. Or they could be some sort of weird reptile skin hung out to Ritualised anger Fran Dibble dry in the sun with stitching holding parts of the hide together. The rows of nails in some works remind me of the backbone of some fossilised creature caught in an old swamp. But although they are harsh and aggressive, there is a great deal of subtlety to them. This working over the surface to create the lines (fine and thick), the texture (flat and coarse), and the reduced colours of greys, whites and blacks is what gives them interest. Although the works are so obviously harsh and brutal, this is not a wild purging from the depths in frenzy (you don't put in rows of small nails in a rage). The aggression is ritualised, the violence a bit make-believe, created like an actor with his craft, from a person who is actually quite thoughtful and detached. So it is part set-up. But this pretence isn't unusual in art and isn't an invalid method of communication. Many a well-trained graduate will intentionally paint to look like a naive. Robinson is not necessarily some head-butting, agro macho depravity; he is too organised to be that. But he is interested in depicting anger, trauma, aggression and wounding in his works. His ways of doing this are quite logical and systematic. An aside: One thing that is interesting with having this exhibition up when I went to see it was its pairing with Jeffrey Harris (unfortunately, the Harris show is just about to come down). While both are expressionists, they are vastly different. Harris is all high colour and big strokes. A generation on, Robinson has the colour removed and constructs with tears and nails



**The New Zealand Herald,
November 9, 2005**

Some exhibitions make an initial impact but fade on close inspection. Others offer dense amounts of material to explore after the initial whammy. Two such strong shows this week need long and careful scrutiny. In one case the meaning is spelled out and explicit. The other has fine detail to absorb and the meaning is more oblique. The larger show, *Giants Saints Monsters* is by James Robinson at the Bath Street Gallery until November 26. The gallery is hung with a couple of dozen big paintings, mostly hinged to the wall by one side so they swing out aggressively into the viewer's space. The immediate impression overall is of violent attack. Every sort of texture has been vigorously applied to the paintings. Their surface is rough with sand and gravel, with pitch, collage and bits of wood. Most of the paintings have been slashed and the wounds pinned together with rusty nails or crudely stitched. Chris Knox was guest artist at the opening, and the work is similar in mood to a song such as *Squeeze* played by his band, *Toy Love*. The work is mostly in brown, black and grey

but there are bright notes of colour where the stitching is vivid red. And there is red in the shining lining of the slashed wounds. At one point, one of the many holes is backed by a battered tin lid which makes a bright jewel when hit by the overhead lighting. Covering everything are the messages – endless lettering, large and small, on all the paintings. There is a huge amount of text – attacks on paedophilia, families, capitalism, government, politics and religion. Any target that could possibly be shot at gets a burst, usually of obscene words. What pulls all these violent paintings together, as well as their pitchy colour and raucous messages, is a device that links their hysterical Expressionism with classical figure painting. In the best of the paintings is a dramatic large figure or head, or, in one case, a vast bosom. These giants and monsters give a unity to individual paintings and variety to an installation that would otherwise bellow just one loud, pessimistic note.

THE GUIDE

The New Zealand Herald • Wednesday, November 25, 2010

B7

Giant shocks loaded with emotion

VISUAL ARTS: Two shows need careful scrutiny to tease out true narrative

SOME exhibitions make an initial impact but fade or show misdirection. Others offer dense sequences of work but no answers after the initial whammy.

Two such recent shows this week, one local and one overseas, are one from the museum is quoted and explained. The visitor has to be able to absorb the meaning to make sense.

The large show, *James Hume*, is by James Hume, an artist from the North Island (1940-1990).

The gallery is hung with a range of dark paintings, mostly things in the world, but some are not. The paintings are not especially into the viewer's eyes. The technique is somewhat of a visual attack.

Many of the paintings have been rejected by the gallery.

One of the paintings, *James Hume*, is a painting of a man, and the work is similar to that of the artist. The work is a painting of a man, and the work is similar to that of the artist.

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T J McNAMARA
the artist

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INTENSITY: The stark features of *James Hume* is evident in *Monarchy at Constantinople*.

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Roger Boyce
Art New Zealand, Number
117/Summer 2005–2006

I am an artist and I nail my pictures together.

Kurt Schwitters to Raoul Hausmann

At least since Schwitters built his Hannover Merzbau and El Lissitzky his Berlin Prounenraum painters have regularly elbowed their way past the bounds of fictive space and into the world of things. Early Modernist motivation for painterly incursion into three-dimensional space was chiefly two-fold. Russian Constructivists and artists of the influential De Stijl movement saw dimensional investigation as a calculated means of moving (aesthetically argued) ideological advocacy beyond painting's established boundaries, and into public space.

Another succession of materially innovative painters, including Schwitters, Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni were more interested in extracting (for its intrinsic associative and emotive baggage) tangible fragments of the real world—relocating the selected fractional elements inside the formal boundaries of painting, to build the argument of the work itself. These related, but contrarily disposed, cool and warm 'schools', dedicated to the investigation of materiality in painting, continue to the present. Contemporary examples can be found in the contrasting work of artists Richard Artschwager and Anselm Kiefer. The respectively gelid ratiocinative and melodramatically allusive work of these aesthetically diametric practitioners, perfectly exemplifies the double branch of an age-old, materials oriented, visual lineage. Similarly, the materially informed paintings of Scott Flanagan and James Robinson, recently exhibited together at Christchurch's 64zero3, revisit this well trod but productive companion track.

Much has been written and said, of late, about James Robinson. Most of the writing has focused, unfortunately, on the artist himself—comparing Robinson to stereotypically self-destructive art world caricatures of Vincent Van Gogh, Colin McCahon, and Jean-Michael Basquiat. The is nothing the domesticated art spectator loves more than to watch, from the comfort of home, a wild-man in freefall. And if the work, of the artist in question, theatrically evidences the forces of his own undoing—well, so much the better.

Once collected, the artist's paintings can (pre or posthumously) serve as titillating souvenirs of the artist-as-spectacle, and stand as a visible measure of its owner's liberality and comparative normality. This unsound social and economic contract holds no real long-term benefit for artists. And it is a doubly tragic compact if the artist demonstrates potentially

formidable gifts, as is clearly the case with Robinson.

Robinson makes bodily-scaled, emotionally cathartic paintings that take full advantage of rude processes and relocated materials. Like Burri, Fontana and Yves Klein, before him, Robinson burns, punctures, cleaves, slices, and tears at his tarpaulin canvases until they are a visual shambles. After physical violation of the surfaces the artist employs nails and thread to imperfectly suture the lips of his paintings' wounds. Conversely, Scott Flanagan thoughtfully (albeit eccentrically) joins industrial material—such as pigmented closed cell foam, asphalt, raw plywood and lead sheet (among other things) into volumetrically flattened, modestly scaled, puzzle-like *Une Chance de Trop* Scott Flanagan and James Robinson at 64zero3 Roger Boyce

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compositions. Unlike Robinson's current paintings Flanagan's slight bas-reliefs are overtly figurative. Like sitters in classical portraiture, Flanagan's silhouetted generic figures are stiff, cold and mute in their shallow tray-like wooden frames.

In the last six years James Robinson's paintings have done everything except sit still. His early works drew liberally from the high dudgeon iconography of latter-day punk and hardcore fringe culture—filtered through his apparent, but stylistically submerged, familiarity with art historical antecedents. It would be fair to speculate that, early on, Robinson came across artists who spoke to his condition—artists along the lines of Otto Dix, George Grosz, Egon Schiele, and the unschooled and institutionalized artists apotheosized by Jean Dubuffet's advancement of L'Art Brut.

Like the original champions of Art Brut, Robinson pits himself strategically against the reigning academy. He is, by all evidence, sui generis but he has been looking. It is apparent from his paintings that Robinson has been incorporating notable visual ways and means - and taking heart from the aesthetic condonation afforded him by historic familiars.

The best teacher is the studio itself and Robinson's commitment to practice and ferocious level of production is admirable. He has churned out thousands of drawings and scores of ambitious paintings in a relatively short career.

Scott Flanagan, by contrast, is a ruminator. His production, while sparse by comparison, is densely knotted in cerebration. Flanagan's selection of materials and measures has less to do with any potential associative value than with their possibility

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Une Chance de Trop
Scott Flanagan
and James Robinson at
64zero3

**Une Chance de Trop Scott Flanagan
and James Robinson at 64zero3
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for disassociation and emotional distance. Flanagan recycles materials and images from show to show. A femur and skeletal foot that served as the fourth leg of a wooden table—(supporting a thick asphalt silhouette of New Zealand) in Flanagan's Physics Room installation—Dr. Don or how I learned to stop worrying and love Helen—shows up in two photographic images hung with paintings in his current exhibition.

In one self-portrait (Double Entendre) the artist has the reused bony foot shoved into his clenched mouth. In another image (Pro Bono Publico) the black-hooded (à la Abu Gharib) artist stands and faces the camera, wearing the familiar fleshless leg-bone and foot, like a macabre prosthetic. Flanagan sports a T-shirt reading 'Terra Wrist' and maintains precarious balance with a flimsy stick. The artist's rebus-like works are chancy balancing acts, enterprises that play out in shifting twilight between the work's' obscurantist images, obfuscating wordplay, and the flat-footedness of his understandable but taciturn materials.

The figures in Flanagan's current bas-relief portraits are rectilinearly transcribed and awkwardly worked up in unprepossessing construction materials. Painted after pro forma artist-bio-type snapshots of Flanagan in various guises—the originating photos concocted for a catalog, which accompanied a 'group' exhibition 'curated' by Flanagan at Christchurch's CoCA gallery. The fictional artists—Ann Sagan, Alan Lacan, Las Soln, Ngo Tan Tsan, Taf Aston, and Stan Long—were actually the artlessly disguised Flanagan.

For the aforementioned exhibition, titled, Looking After My Friends and Influencing People, Flanagan invented multiple personas (along the lines of Rose Selavy or Lionel Budd), giving each artist-personality a contrived biography and a pseudoanagrammatic-like-moniker, derived from the artist's full given name—Scott Alan Flanagan. Familiarity with this artist's ongoing body of work sets up a reverbeant succession of potential associations that are quickly distanced from any explicit meaning, by subsequent and purposefully perverse disassociation—via material transmutation and oblique reiterative ideation—making Flanagan's past production, through to his recent 'paintings', a continuous, albeit fractured, hall of mirrors. Continuing in this manner for years, the artist sets up a disorienting self-reflective passage, that moves one haltingly, both backward and forward in Flanagan's slipstream of creative time.

James Robinson's strongest early works (exemplified by his tour

de force diptych Raw Pwer) were made of collaged aggregates that teemed with small persons. Multitudes of tiny heads were stirred in with legions of Lilliputian bodies and body parts—all awash in a sea of logorrheic text. Seen from afar this mass of benighted humanity provided a full range of descriptive value, adding up (tonally) to monumental portrait heads of the artist and his deceased brother.

As Robinson's paintings shed their figurative inhabitants—still evident in the artist's cornucopian outpourings of drawing (to which an entire salon style wall at the 64zero3 exhibition was devoted)—he turned increasingly to raw material for psychological evocation. Faux-naïf figures (recalling Tony de LaTour's afflicted and addicted actors) wandered away from the Une Chance de Trop Scott Flanagan and James Robinson at 64zero3 Roger Boyce

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painter's canvases. The haxily ambiguous and indeterminately atmospheric grounds (billows of smoke and veils of earthy washes)—which hosted the despairing and haunted denizens—firmed up into uninhabited landscape-like grounds. In his shift from figurative to geologically non-objective Robinson deployed transitional, vertical, totemic elements conjured up with vigorous perpendicularly brushed passages and erect nigrous voids—echoed by rudely stitched vertical lacerations whose upright bristly margins acted as stand-ins for absent human frames. As if in dispositional opposition, Flanagan's six recent Transportrait paintings (all 930 mm x 630 mm) while anthropomorphically occupied, are hardly human. The figures' hard, silhouetted edges are a result of perverse anti-aesthetic manufacture. Figure and ground are bth raggedly cut collages of purposefully uninspiring stuff. Foam, plywood, and lead sheet puzzle-pieces are in-filled here and there with asphalt and plastizote, as in Transportrait as Ann Sagan—one of Flanagan's more optically engaging works.

The industrially speechless compositions of the Transportrait series are limited in chroma to factory yellow, gray, and institutional white. Retinally abrasive passages of grainy asphalt, raw plywood, and stippled gray plastizote provide textural breaks from unrelieved planar sameness. Flanagan's physical re-imaging of his fictionally authored 'artist's collective' results in an inventively paradoxical alloy of unornamented truth-in-material (what you see is what you get) joined to a false conceptual underlayment of fancifully fabricated origination.

James Robinson's six newish paintings are all-of-a-piece, in

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Une Chance de Trop
Scott Flanagan
and James Robinson at
64zero3

**Une Chance de Trop Scott Flanagan
and James Robinson at 64zero3
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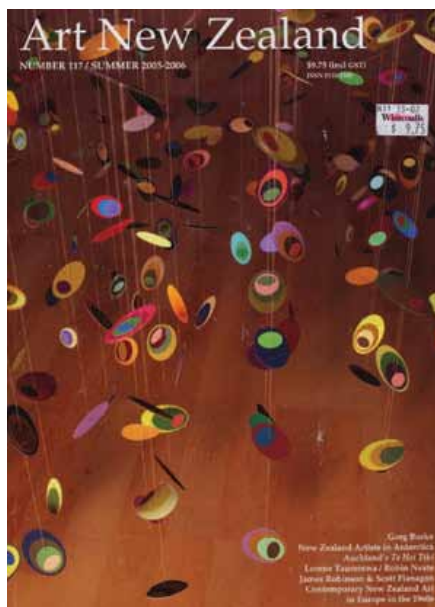
terms of incorporated materials –aggregates of coal, thickets of sticks and straws, stitched thread, whitewash, and smoke—and at times scatterings of inexplicably vulnerable and heartbreakingly human clothes buttons. The smallest work (1010mm x 890mm) Holy Mountain (incest knife fight) 2004, is almost wholly dismembered—the gaping cavities in its savaged face have been frantically stitched and stuffed with broken twigs. The artist's final whitewashing of the painting's blackened corpus unifies the picture's flayed skin and lends an otherworldly lustre to the all-too-physical carnage.

In two works, Birth and Qi, unequivocally pronounced landscape horizons (in the painting's lower foregrounds) demarcated by dark agglomerated anthracite bottoms, contrasted with the painting's blindingly blanched upper stories(denoting illuminated sky) risk becoming cavalierly literal. Isolated islands of glued on straw and broken crockery draw the paintings dangerously close to the habitat of an estimable 500-pound Teutonic bear named Anshelm Kiefer (straw), and within the contagion zone of the scabrous Julian Schnabel (broken plates). Although the ravenous and omnivorous Robertson's own plate is overflowing with rich fare he tries, with Birth and Qi, to eat something bigger than his own head.

The exhibition's most auspicious work, and reportedly Robinson's most current, is the monumental (1660 x 2780mm) diptych, Inner Eye/Overview, 2005. Comparatively introspective in tone, the

painting bears mute witness to hard won gains in studio and in life. It is a visually stunning and accomplished journeyman work—from its first macroburst of blinding white to its finely forged detail—it stands to mark the beginnings of Robinson's maturity as a painter.

The wall-sized ash-white work exudes a funeral air akin to Piero Manzoni's kaolin washed and timelessly sepulchral Achromes. As rubble strewn as Manzoni's rocky facades, but more labyrinthine in surface incident, the painting rewards extended viewing with illimitable optical unfolding. The diptych's deft symphonic grace notes include a subtle roseate-brown blush, near the painting's dark eye, that reads as incipient bruising, the post-conflagration carbon under-painting, that glints slightly and malevolently through the ghostly whitewashed surface, the tightly gathered stitchery that binds and puckers the margins of the painting's scars, and the convincingly variegated scale of the picture plane's tortuous rubble-strewn field-of-fire, Beginning assertively with the image's crepuscular, light-sucking, velvet-holed oculus, and working down to the delicate tracery of its linear architectonic notation—fashioned of fragily sewn thread—Robinson's sure-handed orchestration of material, scale and reticent color results in an eye-expanding masterwork that speaks promisingly of things to come



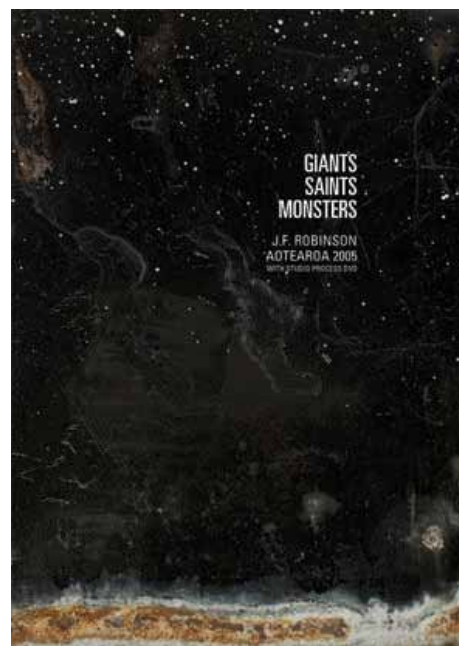
2005

Who Killed JR?
Chris Knox
Giants Saints Monsters
Book

Giants Saints Monsters Book

Off the top of one head to another First saw James' work in the late '90s when he submitted some etchings to a shortlived arts and stuff mag that a bunch of us were doing at the time. He sent a few photocopies which sparked our editorial interest so we asked for some originals to scan, expecting five or six prints. But no. Instead a vast parcel of corrugated cardboard and brown tape, graffitied to death and a work of frenzied, pulpy art in itself appeared on our doorstep and, upon being carefully ripped open, revealed god knows how many prints, drawings and paintings on paper. Clearly the work of a committed and driven artist a, for want of a better word a, we were compelled to print a dozen pieces over two issues of Loose without comment, explanation or any context other than the surrounding pages. It looked scatologically, confrontationally great. I bought two of the filthiest. First saw James sometime further back when, dressed in a, from memory a, a capacious kaftan, he whooped and hollered through one of my South Island gigs, making a monstrous artwork of his cranky self as irritant and inspiration combined. I liked the kid's attitude. Then I met him in the fine, fine, superfine art context during his Bath st show in late '03 where he showed the most consistently inventive, brutally accomplished set of raw, anguished canvasses that I have ever seen. The unrelenting quality of these things was astonishing, humbling and it was no surprise that they all sold. We bought one (mate's rates, he'd dedicated it to me and Barbara) and it graced and raged beautifully at our bedroom wall. Felt privileged. Now it's another show and this is different. Pulling back from the art game at which he proved himself so successful, these are no longer mute howls of monochrome roughage, off-kilter applications and explosions of mixed media madness, weirdly acceptable to them what choose on a decorative basis, but a return to his word-choked diatribes that will repel as many as they will attract. This is back to a street-bred, editorial approach to visual/ intellectual/emotional stimulation. No chance here of missing the message, these things scream, whisper and growl their import to ya in a direct, almost didactic fashion. I don't think we're s'posed to do that, we artists. We're s'posed to let you, the punter, put yr own make on things with as little help from us as possible, right? To couch this stuff so enigmatically, so ambiguously, so subtly that you may make anything of it that you will. Well, fuck that, sez James, here's what I'm thinking. Unequivocally thrust into yr face with all the demure pastel panache of a WWF beefcake spinebusting mass of ferocious muscle and spume. Buy this shit at your peril. Hey, you bought McCahon with his safe-as-houses Christian twaddle and any number of Maori artists with their sweet ethnic epithets and that other Robinson with his dainty swastika anarchisms so you can buy this too. It's only money. But can you love it? Can you embrace its rage, horror, grief, joy, ecstasy and turmoil, there's the challenge. This ain't Van Gogh's wheatfields, nor even his self-portraits, this is the flesh of his ear, blood coagulating and attracting flies. Nah, just kidding, they're only drawings and paintings. ONLY drawings and paintings. MERELY art. Glorified comix, really, as harmless as Goya, Blake, Hogarth, Grosz, Crumb, Tracey Tawhiao and Anthony Ellison, skilfully made images wedded to unfiltered verbiage to look good and entertain, nothing more. Cos art can't make you think. Only you can make you think. He said glibly. But it's hard to love this stuff that is so obvious. I mean, Giants Saints Monsters Book so OBVIOUS. Wasn't it better when he was doing huge canvasses,

devoid of verbalised thought, splendid, deep, ravaged and strangely dignified? Acceptable? Wasn't this a sign of artistic maturity, that he'd left his juvenilia behind, that he was gunna let the art world ease into his work with their suffocating acceptance and their gorgeous, comforting money? Wasn't this the James Robinson we all really wanted, the one who would give us what we want? Well, yeah, that's what I thought, I loved this new direction, his work was the most bloody MAJESTIC stuff I'd ever seen by a local artist and every one a winner. But, y'know, after proving he can do this stuff in his - admittedly disturbed - sleep, where could he go but down that self-defeating, self-referential, masturbatory road to beautiful, pure - and highly commercial - minimalism? Like so many before him. Not good enough. So a, BANG a, back come the words and the complex, randomly kaleidoscopic images, clashing, complementing and flying off the page in glotted, fragmentary maximalist splendour. This is brave. No, not brave, merely necessary. For the man's continuing existence as a person. Not as a "James Robinson". And he's augmenting it with his head movies. Literally for the little bugger attached a camera to his noggin, taking a frame a second while making these things and showing the process as a fractured, flickering smorgasboardwalk freakshow filmshow. Renaissance boy? You bet. Comix? Videos? What's he playing at? He'll never get ahead, he's too confusing. Who knows what the unprictable bastard's gunna do next? Well, I dunno but, such is this guy's abundant, burning energy and his overpowering need to get his head and heart onto paper and canvas, I'm sure it'll be as challenging, deafening, blinding and empowering as any of this stuff here. You go, girl.

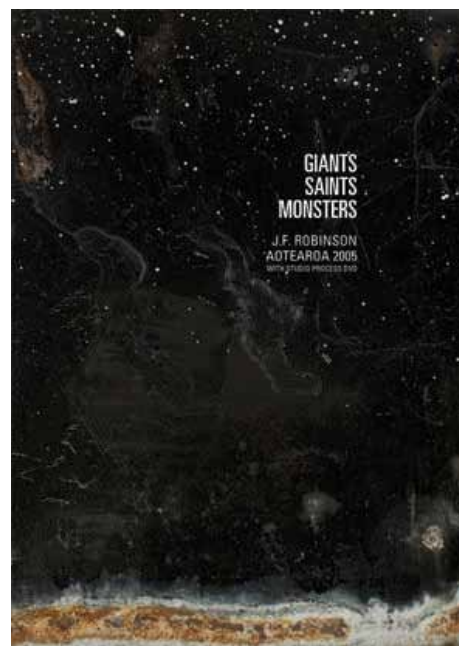


J.M.C (christchurch city mission night watchman) Giants Saints Monsters Book

James Robinson's studio is an alchemist's cauldron. Charred, sooty, crusty, scratched. It's Antihandyandy. The nest where a black tornado stirs in her sleep. There are coffee cups in the detritus whose stains and strata of dried grinds speak dark ages and medieval torture machines. None of it is affectation. It is the exhaust of his industry. The place is large and cold, a kind of ex-engineering warehouse something or rather. It is a big manky woollen beany steelcap industrial hole for cranking out char grilled art. It's the kind of place flame throwers find romantic. Out of its squelta of torn magazines, squashed tubes, dried glue, coagulant, tape, tins, thucked brushes, branches, rust, nails, stand The Paintings. The Big Bad Babies, screaming, complaining, staining their undies, crying for mommy, threatening murder and bawling like outsized delinquent brats demanding to be heard. They chronicle the first trans-national-anti-globalisation riot by the world's A.D.D. sufferers. They personify zombie spastic jerks. They smell like a used electric chair. The artist's claim to be sampling and mixing information is inaccurate, He is in fact chomping and mincing. He uses his media in a similar way. The resulting liquific skagg is more the bio-flora of a cannibal's gut than any tame post-mod pussyfooting. I just dunno how it's gonna go with your curtains darling. 2 so??..after the photo shoot in leather pants with the SLR?..after the interview and rave review in Art News??..after the monologue unwinds till the bones of a whisper poke through?and your culture ferments into a heady brew?we will stumble out into that great intersection that is the world and scream..'cause..the herd must be heard?.but..really..I only want a hug..a hug..and a great big love. I don't need intelligent moving from head to head till we ALL PUFFED UP?paying tolls to key holes to get let in?I don't want to kidnap fat cats or blow up a bus?.i only want a love..i only want a little hug. 3 Because when the pie in the sky fell, it fell on one of J.R's canvases. Now he

doesn't know what to do?He sends a message out to the world. "This is a shocking mess?it's all over the place and it's especially all over me". He'll scrape some up and shove it in your face. "I know..I know" He says,"I'm a fat bastard but what do you expect." Next minute He's at the kitchen sink..seeking to realign the ingredients, apply some heat, bake the cake and climb a spindly ladder of scratched white lines to stick it back up again. There's a keen sense of responsibility, an earnest search to find a place in the scheme of things?but..the pastry burns his fingers and the content leaks?so?it's back to the kitchen sink which he tears from the wall and heaves at the canvas along with the pie in the sky?"Look I'm sorry" He pleads "I'm only a man, my scrotum has the texture of a turkey's neck..what do you expect"???. J.M.C (christchurch city mission night watchman) Giants Saints Monsters Book ?..you can knock up a sign on cardboard with cheap felt pens, it can say "coffee one dollar cakes for free" you can walk around town all day with it nailed to your forehead and still no one comes to your party.

The Pupil asked the Master "What is Buddha nature"
The Master replied "Dog shit"
That's why I'm not a Buddhist.
That's why James Robinson paints



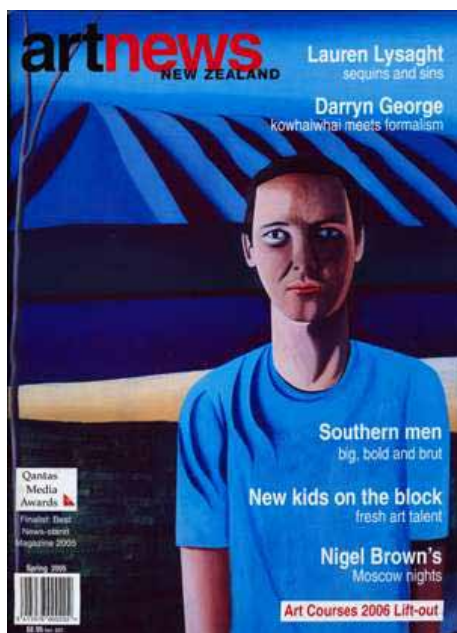
2005

Southern Men
Dan Chappell
Art News New Zealand,
Spring 2005

Art News New Zealand, Spring 2005

... Across the railway tracks, hidden in an anonymous warehouse bounded by panelbeaters, cabinetmakers and industrial dross, is the stygian world of James Robinson. Originally from Christchurch, Robinson has carved himself a gritty, eyeball-to-eyeball, no-holds-barred niche in the local art firmament. He has an Art and Craft Diploma from Hungry Creek, north of Auckland, attended Otago Polytechnic; performed at fringe art venues through the 1990s; had more than 50 shows in venues ranging from cafes and video parlours to the Robert MacDougall and Bath Street Gallery; exhibited in Greymouth, Sydney, Melbourne and New York. The stacked up works in his vast studio are uncompromising, gaunt and spectral – eight-foot high canvases, which have been slashed and roughly sutured with six-inch nails, wire or cord. They are splattered, stained and scored with lumps of coal, coffee grounds, tea bags, gravel and paint – all of it encrusted or oozing down the face of the works. Critics have mentioned names like Schnabel, Kiefer and Basquiat – but on looking at his deft, delicate charcoal sketches and his intricate stream-of-consciousness sketchbooks, it's clear Robinson's art is very much his own. The attempts to categorise Robinson as an outsider/art brut artist have begun and words like "self-contempt", "demons", "dysfunction" and "self-medication" pepper the reviews of his work. The ghosts of McCahon, Baxter and Fomison have also been evoked. There is little doubt a new talent has been identified –

a sell-out show at his Auckland dealer gallery in 2004 and an upcoming exhibition at Te Manawa in Palmerston North confirm this. But trying to compartmentalise James Robinson is doing him, and those he is compared to, no favours. The wide sweep and energetic intensity of his recent work means he defies categorisation. He is the embodiment of the driven artist, creating on every surface available in his studio – walls and notebooks – twenty four-seven. The individual groups of work have a visceral hum but, placed side by side, the dissonance between them is visible. Robinson himself plays the devil's advocate, struggling to stop adding to, painting over, slashing, splashing and extenuating his monsters. Preparing for his November exhibition at Bath Street Gallery in Auckland, James is currently in a multi-media creative swoop. "I'm wearing a security head-camera, which is taking one frame per second as I'm creating the works. That footage, sped up and burned onto disc, will be running at the exhibition – showing the creative process in relation to the finished static," he says. He sees himself as a throwback to the 1950s artists – always with sketchbook in hand, working on big paintings with no easel – and he finds Dunedin's art ethos gives him freedom. "Here in Dunedin we have this honest working-class artist ethic. Here I have the psychic space to create. I'm down here to work but I can still survey the whole art scene. I need to work the country but based in Dunedin I have this great mental elbow room..."



Rise Catalogue November 2004

James Robinson lives and paints within the mythic role of the artist, fighting with demons, making explicit the distress and confusion of being in the world. The word artist means at once too much and too little. It has to do with making things, and here there is much deliberate and skilled making. The word has also come to indicate a sense that the job of the artist is to carry, make clear or possibly to solve the soul's troubles. This is Robinson's context. Secure knowledge of dysfunction is the seedbed for such work, which moves between the sadistic and the redemptive. Some artists reference historical situations, for instance the 1980's rediscovery of expressionism by German artists uncovering the wounds of the Holocaust. Sometimes the provocation stems from more individualised contexts. David Eggleton has referred to Robinson's personal history, much of it made explicit in earlier work. (New Zealand Listener, July 5-11 2003). But not all those who have such histories want to see them again on canvas. And when a certain equilibrium has been attained, how does the artist continue? While personal experience informs his work, much of Robinson's imagery draws from the telecast information stream we all live with, images of the chaos of global politics. With it comes a kind of machismo, evinced here by this Quixotic soldier using the auratic power of art. Since Hanz Prinzhorn began to collect the obsessive drawings of psychiatric patients, a kind of graphic mark has become both vehicle for and signifier of extreme experiences. Painting's inherent orderliness is both problem and salvation: in this sort of work the field is opened up, disorder created and order regained. This opening up and closing is literal. Slashed canvases are sutured with nails; surfaces of broken glass, coal, various kinds of hard muck are built up and ground down. The work's physicality is insisted on, again and again. But this physicality is always in competition with a desire for transcendence. It's impossible to make such mucky, scratchy and sometimes dangerous work without the sense that the world is a place full of resistance, dangerous and uncomfortable. In this context, making painting is a redemptive process. In this series that redemptive process is also associated with a keying in of the body, a straight spine, a balance across physical and mental spaces. These images are about standing upright. In many of

them a central spine is exposed, sutured or generates various charges, signified by flares of tone, or scattered incisions. The term "Rise" has an immediate biblical resonance; "rise up and follow me"; "rise from your bed and walk": the whiteness becomes sheets. "Rise from the dead"; again sheets, but now a shroud. In contemporary thinking about art, such an emphasis on the vertical aligns itself with the tradition of gallery painting - not simply for the obvious reason that a vertical painting is easy to hang on a wall! A concern with the metaphors of humanism imply humanity's tendency to stand upright; the gallery viewer mentally reads the spine and adjusts her own to suit. Standing tall is a common enough injunction against disorder. The artist Mark Rothko said, in 1951: I paint very large pictures. I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however - I think it applies to other painters I know - is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger pictures, you are in it. It isn't something you command. (Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, 1996, p. 26) But playing with the being-in-it of painting sees Robinson working vertically and horizontally, back and front. He plays it both ways. He is a delightful drawer. In reproduction, with their obscenities and angry gesticulations diminished into graphic marks, these could be elegant miniatures, drawings of plant species elaborately described. Or they could be graphic diagrams of the sort that Rudi Gopas drew in his last years: virtual worlds that only exist in the media of pen, pencil and paint. The slicing and stitching create holes that are lined with soft pure black velvet which offers no reflective surface. Coal, anthracitic black, is glued against tea-stained white that moves quickly to apricot. The problem with such imagery is when it becomes imagery. It becomes beautiful; it becomes ordered. The languages of art propose symmetry. The canvases, here buckled and asymmetrical, are only so in relation to a known template. This new work continues to be hurt and stitched, reduced and added to, but is grounded by white; the blank page of the next work.



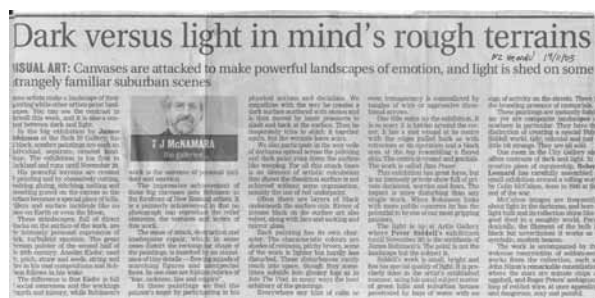
2003

New Works Catalogue
Bath Street Gallery,
November 2003 below

Dark versus light in mind's rough terrains T J McNamara New Zealand Herald, 19 November 2003

Some artists make a landscape of their painting while other artists paint landscapes. You can see the contrast in Parnell this week, and it is also a contrast between dark and light. In the big exhibition by James Robinson at the Bath Street Gallery, his 25 black, sombre paintings are each an individual, separate, created landscape. The exhibition is his first in Auckland and runs until November 29. His powerful terrains are created by obsessively cutting, slashing, gluing, stitching, nailing and spreading gravel on the canvases so the surface becomes a special place of hills, valleys and surface incidents like no place on Earth or even the Moon. These mindscapes, full of direct attacks on the surface of the work, are the intensely personal expression of dark, turbulent emotion. The great German painter of the second half the 20th century, Anselm Kiefer, used tar, pitch, straw and seeds, string andin his vast compositions and Robinson follows in his wake. The difference is that Kiefer is full of social awareness and the workings of myth and history, while Robinson's work is the outcome of personal incident and emotion. The impressive achievement of these big canvases puts Robinson in the forefront of New Zealand artists. It is a painterly achievement in that no photograph can reproduce the relief elements, the textures and layers of this work. The sense of attack, destruction and inadequate repair, which in some cases distort the rectangular shape of the paintings, is matched by an abundance of tiny details - flowing squads of marching figures and unexpected faces. In one case are hidden rubrics of "fear, sickness, lies and empire". In these paintings we feel the painter's angst by participating in his physical actions and decisions. We empathise with the way he creates a dark surface scattered with stones and is then moved by inner pressures to slash and hack at the surface. Then he desperately tries to stitch it together again, but the wounds leave scars. We also participate in the way veils of darkness spread across the painting and dark paint runs down the surface like weeping. For all this attack there is an element of artistic

calculation that shows the theatrical surface is not achieved without some organisation, notably the use of red underpaint. Often there are layers of black underneath the surface cuts. Rivers of intense black on the surface are also velvet, along with lace and sacking and mirror glass. Each painting has its own character. The characteristic colours are shades of resinous, pitchy brown, some of the work is lighter but hardly less disturbed. These disturbances rarely reach into space, though they sometimes subside into gloomy fogs as in Into The Void, in many ways the least arbitrary of the paintings. Everywhere any hint of calm or even transparency is contradicted by tangles of wire or aggressive directional arrows. One title sums up the exhibition. It is so scary it is hidden around the corner. It has a vast wound at its centre with the edges pulled back as with retractors at an operation and a black area at the top resembling a flayed skin. The centre is wound and genitals. The work is called Raw Power. This exhibition has great force, but is an intensely private show full of private decisions, worries and fears. The impact is more disturbing than any single work. When Robinson links with more public concerns he has the potential to be one of our most gripping painters...



New Works Catalogue
Bath Street Gallery,
November 2003 below

2003

John McDonald, Director,
newcontemporaries
Set Fire to Self -

Drown Catalogue February 2003

God, it is all dark The heart beat but there is no answering hark
Of a hearer and no one to speak These lines, written by the New Zealand poet, John Caselberg, were admired by the country's leading artist, Colin McCahon (1919–87), who transcribed them onto his paintings. Caselberg's poem is called Van Gogh, but it uses the tortured, visionary Dutchman, as a symbol for the artist in New Zealand – a land where physical and cultural isolation has pushed painters and writers to extremes. McCahon's case is exemplary, but think also of the poet, James K. Baxter, or the painter Tony Fomison, to name but two famous examples. For the artist, New Zealand is a kind of earthly paradise, a land of rolling green hills and sublime scenery – but with a human landscape that displays all the characteristics of a small village community. In such a setting, artists have come to feel, and to express themselves, with extraordinary intensity. New Zealand's art and literature is filled echoes of the Old Testament, with works that may be ruthlessly modern in style but medieval in content. There is a monastic dimension to the place, and no prophet seems to avoid martyrdom – whether it be McCahon and Baxter drinking themselves to death, or Fomison's heroin addiction. Enter James Robinson, a young artist in that extreme, New Zealand tradition, who draws, paints and writes with an intensity that makes one think of Van Gogh, or perhaps Antonin Artaud. Like those artists, he seems devoid of those social and psychic skins that allow us to exist as cool, autonomous beings in the workaday world. We make choices and decisions about our lives on a daily basis, but for these skinless creators, even the smallest events may lead to ecstasy or catastrophe; may open a window onto the void that has to be neutralized by frenzied, creative activity. It is difficult to avoid comparisons with the kind of lukewarm, 'radical' art so beloved by today's public galleries. Look for example, at the supposedly scandalous work of young British artists such as Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst, currently showing in museums all around the world (including Sydney), and then look at Robinson's work. If New Zealand were a medieval monastery, James's home town,

Dunedin, would be the dungeon. The nine large paintings in Set Fire to Self – Drown, are not so much a descent into the lower depths, as a circuit of the walls of a cave from which there is no way out. Like Virgil guiding Dante through the Inferno, Robinson takes us on a tour of his private heavy-metal hell: the distillation of a life spent on the edge of psychosis. All the bad things that have happened to James – and the catalogue is a long one – have been transmuted into a viral outbreak of signs and symbols, a splattering of cosmic graffiti, built up layer upon layer. Robinson's cave walls seem to be covered with animal hides – the residue of some bloody ritual – stitched and nailed together by a latterday caveman. Yet they are also visionary landscapes, reminiscent of the teeming vistas of Bosch or Breugel. The artist has mined the drawing books he has kept since 1995, to provide the thousands of individual images that lurk beneath his dark, resinous surfaces. On the facing wall there are hundreds of other images, spread over dozens of tiny canvases. The pictures are disturbing and violent, the artist's working methods compulsive and spontaneous. It approaches a form of Art Brut, but Robinson cannot simply be classified as an 'Outsider' artist. Beyond all the frenetic activity, there is a creative intelligence at work – a hyper-literate, passionate imagination that leaves its mark on all these images. Reviewers in New Zealand have themselves been driven to extremes, trying to find ways of describing Robinson's work. It has been called brooding, nightmarish, confrontational, anarchic, and "somewhat surreal", but nobody seems to have left one of his exhibitions without feeling stirred and impressed. To brave the initial onslaught and enter into Robinson's universe, is to discover a vision of exceptional delicacy, vitality and humour. It is as though all the shadows are ultimately cancelled out by the sheer superabundance of his invention. In this work, we recognize an art to blow the lid off a world where everything is progressively more sterile, pre-packaged and bureaucratic. It is a convulsive surge of the psyche, an angry monster art that refuses to doze quietly on a gallery wall.



2003

Jean-Michel Basquiat
lives in Dunedin
David Eggleton
New Zealand Listener,
5 July 2003

New Zealand Listener,
5 July 2003

"Yeah, we go to the hurt places first, because they hurt; we only know we're alive because we hurt, sometimes." Coming on like some skateboard punk, some feral streetkid raised on video games and precious little else, James Robinson has clawed his way to notice with some of the most confrontational painting currently being produced this side of the Tasman. Earlier this year he had an exhibition, *Set Fire to Self – Drown*, in Sydney's Queen Victoria Building, curated by Australian art critic John McDonald, complete with a fulsome catalogue essay. At Dunedin's Temple Gallery, Robinson reprises the title, but features different paintings – yet Robinson's paintings are less about seeing than about feeling and the incandescent feelings remain the same. These canvases are so raw that you want to reach out and staunch the bleeding. Born in the 70s, brought up in an urban commune in Christchurch and resident in Dunedin for a number of years, Robinson is a youngish painter from an impeccably dysfunctional background, carrying a swag of influences that he has condensed, shredded and collaged to establish his own signature. Robinson's artwork is at once bombastic like that of Anselm Kiefer, scumbled like that of Julian Schnabel, graffitiscrawled like that of Keith Haring, ostentatiously dumbed-down like that of Jean-Michel Basquiat and death-haunted like that of early Philip Clairmont. There are links, too, to the school of Bill Hammond, and devouring such a huge legacy with such gusto creates its own problems. In the past, Robinson's work could resemble regurgitated pavement pizza. But also one sensed an artist driven by a quality absent from a lot of today's art, and 2003 that is powerful overt emotion: anger, sadness and, above all, a sense of aggrievement. Here, rebelliousness and self-contempt have slugged it out in a saga of self-medication and the result is fugitive, fleeting images drawn from a personal demonology boiling with horror and fear and loathing, as well as dark humour. These

paintings harbour a menagerie of folk monsters, a phantasmagoria of apparitions that might be beatific angels or might be ghoulish extraterrestrials. Armies of stick figures, of ant-like people, swarm across the margins, while galvanised nails, rope fibres and bits of costume jewellery glisten in among gunk, resembling body fluids dripping from a cadaver on an autopsy table. Festooned with doodles – a pointy-eared gargoyle over here, a flaccid balloon head on a thin neck over there – and hung on walls like flayed hides whose scraped and stitched-up surfaces evoke sacrificial victims, fundamentalist martyrs and crucifixions, Robinson's paintings are built up out of so many found objects and recycled substances that they seem as much fabricated as painted, and beyond that seem to have taken on organic life, seething and festering like wounds, or pullulating like psychotic states of mind. You imagine the artist as a theatre or movie director ordering up more running sores, more rotting flesh. So Robinson's paintings don't offer eye candy or cuddly-toy comfort. Instead they suggest how the utopian dreams of our recent past might be turning into dystopian nightmares. Robinson's trampled-on scraps and sewn-on shards – his landfill offerings – manage to get at the contradictions of the modern condition: our simmering shopping-mall discontent in the teeth of the bright shining lie of advertising, the teasing sense of shame and ignominy that coexists with globalisation's overdriven technologies, the awkward knowledge that one person's hoodwearing terrorist is another person's freedom-fighter. Scorched, soaked and scavenged, Robinson's paintings are a testimony to modern life as a chapter of accidents, where menace mingles with grief, and aggression with abjection. Studiously fragmentary, sometimes deliberately indecipherable *Set Fire to Self – Drown* offers art that is beautiful, harsh and weirdly heroic



2004

Hinting at meltdown
Margaret Duncan
Christchurch Press,
May 2004

Christchurch Press,
May 2004

James Robinson has risen to critical acclaim over the last two years with canvases that have been thin on paint but heavily impregnated with recycled objects and graffiti-like texts. These defining, earlier compositions have given way to canvases in this exhibition which are thin on text but heavily laden with paint. Gone also is the phantasmagoria that inhabited previous works, while this body of work emphasises the abstract and sensory thrust of Robinson's work. Content and narrative are only suggested with a few defining lines of self-deprecating text and pertinent signifiers, such as groups of stick figures, ghoulish faces and clusters of nails. Works by Anselm Kiefer, in particular the scorched-earth paintings of 1974, come to mind when viewing the large mixedmedia canvases in the gallery. These canvases have been torn and scorched, then crudely joined with patches of black velvet, wool and string. Robinson has used a myriad of objects such as stones, sticks, nails and wool to evoke a textured coarse

finish. This coupled with the thickly painted and varnished surfaces gives the works a liquid fluidity evoking a type of toxic meltdown, as if the works will disintegrate before you. On entering the gallery you are greeted by a suite of drawings on opposite walls. These small drawings are more reminiscent of Robinson's earlier work and read like an autobiographical time capsule. The relationship between the artist and life, his fears, state of mind, the passing of time and the injustice of it all is graphically conveyed and accompanied by small jottings. These works appear fresh and spontaneous, and are the antithesis of the larger works. A fragile balance exists within this exhibition. While you wander from canvas to canvas you are hammered with a body of work that is striking in its brutal physicality, while tentatively reaching for equanimity. These works suggest a shift, as Robinson finds a new voice that is quietly rancorous,



2003

Robinson's work shocks
because it really hurts
Peter Entwisle
Otago Daily Times, Early
2003

Otago Daily Times, Early 2003

James Robinson, whose show I mentioned last December, has been exhibiting at the newcontemporaries gallery in Sydney, where he has been hailed as a new and vital force in the tradition of Colin McCahon, James K. Baxter and Tony Fomison. The show is called Set fire to self-drown and newcontemporaries director John McDonald wrote a laudatory essay, placing Robinson in the New Zealand and international context. His account of our tradition, while flattering and, I think, true, is written for an Australian audience and would grate at times on local sensibilities - although you could also just laugh. He calls New Zealand "a land where physical and cultural isolation has pushed painters and writers to extremes". It "is a kind of earthly paradise... but with a human landscape that displays all the characteristics of a small village community. In such a setting, artists have come to feel, and to express themselves with extraordinary intensity." They make works "ruthlessly modern in style but medieval in content. There is a monastic dimension to the place, and no prophet seems to avoid martyrdom..." He goes on: "If New Zealand were a medieval monastery, James's hometown, Dunedin, would be the dungeon." Hmmm. How very Australian - managing to insult us while offering a compliment. But he is essentially right. When you look at our tradition, not only in the visual arts, but including writers such as Janet Frame, there is no mistaking the voices of anguish and metaphysical anxiety raised to a remarkable pitch. And it's difficult to avoid the impression that Dunedin is, if not the dungeon, at least the engine room of much of this angst. I think the conditions which generally shape New Zealand art are just at their most Robinson's work shocks because it really hurts Peter Entwisle Otago Daily Times, Early 2003 intense in Dunedin. (One gets a bit tired of the gothic imagery.

One sees why it's used. But there are other ways of putting it.) This view of our art and what it reflects about our national character is not received everywhere with glee. This is meant to be the clean green land of adventure sports and fun. Which in some degree it is. But it does have this darker soul, reflected also in things like our high suicide statistics, which mostly we don't want to know about. (A recent ODT editorial on this subject was an excellent counter-example.) In our art scene, while people

doff their caps to McCahon, there is also an impatience and a desire to get away from him, partly because living artists don't want to be overshadowed by predecessors, but also a moral and intellectual shuddering before the yawning cracks he opened.

Internationally, McDonald properly compares Robinson to Van Gogh and Antonin Artaud. This is the tradition he belongs in. You can mock the angst-ridden artist, preparing to cut off his ear. It has become a stereotype for all artists and as such is wrong, but is also real. There are such creative personalities. This is where Robinson belongs, though when I saw him last, his ears weren't in any danger. McDonald also compares Robinson's production "with a kind of lukewarm 'radical' art so beloved by today's public galleries. Look... at the supposedly scandalous work of young British artists such as Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst, currently showing in museums all around the world (including Sydney), and then look at Robinson's work." Again he is right. Ms. Emin's My Bed, 1998, an installation, caused a frisson when it was exhibited in London because it is a kind of diary of her private life, complete with soiled knickers and used condoms. But it is actually rather delicate and polite compared to Robinson. As Hirst's Love Lost, 2000 is an interesting construction featuring an operating bed submerged in a tank, which might be sinister, or frightening, but it isn't, this kind of art is effete compared to Robinson's, who isn't just some kind of mad paint-splatterer, either. His carefully constructed works reflect an extensive knowledge and technical grasp of history and methods of image-making. There's a certain amount of this effete "gallery radical" art around here, too. Without saying it has no merit, this is what leaves me less than overwhelmed by, for instance, Peter Robinson's efforts with crates and swastikas. This stuff looks as if it has its grant from Creative New Zealand, is paid-up legitimate to thrill and shock. By contrast, James Robinson's is authentic. It shocks because it really hurts in what it's saying, very effectively. We are still isolated from the big world. The nearest outpost is probably Sydney. This facilitates some of our artists, but cuts them off, too. We don't see the comparisons which show how truly remarkable they are. That ultimately destroyed McCahon. I trust that it will be different for Robinson.



2003

From the Dark
Depths of Dunedin
Brett Moodie Staple,
August/September 2003

From the Dark Depths of Dunedin

The first time I came across James Robinson was in 2001, a lone, wild dancer at a Snares gig in Dunedin. Speaking to him recently I wondered how this live, local music affected his paintings and how he might explain his far-out dancing.

"Oh I just pretend I'm someone else to overcome selfconsciousness...

let the primal-type body catharsis move through me. Music gotta be good though! Dark churning geetar from the balls mate. You can't spectate life, gotta do what ya want... fuck fear. How can people not respond physically to huge amounts of energy comin' at them via amplified original rock? It's the urban type equivalent to some pagan thing. No wonder folks need sedatives to not act like gibbering morons."

James has been based in Dunedin for many years now; his last studio was in an ex-video game parlour (Wizards) in the centre of town that was open to anyone. How was it working in such an environment?

"Well at first being there was real good - big free space; lots of foot traffic; public freak art for education; the 'artist' in his own habitat. Translating all the ghost energy of my own psyche to the manic-virtual, sperm-shooting-boy, twenty-cent-games of the redundant '80s (I was one of them!). But then it was a real drag being so open and exposed, vulnerable even. It did motivate me to achieve more than I might have been capable of without the attention. It was an antidote to years of isolation and invisibility, especially as a beneficiary-type, get-a-real-job artist. Being seen in the studio and a rigorous exhibition schedule (self-imposed) helped me to come out of the shadows of despair and despondency as a legitimising cultural act of becoming. I consider Wizards as my unofficial residency from the universe. As other more favoured, correct, fashionable, cool-list artists of the state get residencies, so did I! As weirdo, underground do-it-yourself, hard-working art guy."

One of your most recent paintings (Raw Hardcore, 2003) is an impressive double portrait of you and your brother who died in 1997. How do you feel about projecting private/personal emotions into a public space?

"Isn't that the artist's job for fuck's sake? In this distanced, post-modern, heavily conceptual detachment thing, why is it so

weird to splutter on about my own experiences and expect them to be received as legitimate? ...Death and loss are human stuff. My bro hung himself on heavy psych drugs and cocktails of selfmedication

but without my emotional charge to the work it wouldn't be as it was. Art of all sorts is transformational. If I don't put myself into everything I do, it's worthless. Am I supposed to pretend to be someone else? That's what art school assholes want... to construct a self to be when I reckon you gotta be yourself in order to begin. Just check out any art school open day across the land. They can simulate a theorist's concerns about culture and sexual political identity and crap, but can they blow you away with shit hot art? ...Emotions are fuel."

After over 60 exhibitions in the last 10 years and shows most recently in Melbourne and Sydney, how do you approach the art industry and the process of building your public profile as an artist?

"Fairly randomly, intuitively, with a lot of risk, shit-loads of work and some friends' help, but the bottom line is belief. I can't fail if I try 'cos my shit is wicked. The best thing an artist can do is just do the goddamned work! Then wander round getting assholes to notice... I was chanting an evocation in my studio to Peter Jackson in a manic crazed screech. I thought he'd hear me 'cos I was doing good work that he'd like; it didn't work. The only control of external shit I got is the quality of my work and that integrity of beating up on my self, 'cos I ain't good enough yet! You can spend all your time networking and all that ass, I'd rather do the fucking work, let 'em come to me. But it's a balance. I need to show the paintings, that's a constant. It's a job; it's satisfying. Finding people to sell them to has just evolved through the years. I show in dealer galleries now. That's sometimes awkward and feels like a bit of a class shift for me. I'm not comfortable with the scene but it's necessary and as long as the work is real and of me then I'll find my correct audience and all will be as it is meant to be..."

From the Dark Depths of Dunedin
Brett Moodie

Staple, August/September 2003



2003

New Zealand Listener,
7 June 2003 ...
elliptical poems by
Suraya Sidhu Singh and
quite dazzling drawings
and collages by James
Robinson. He's a brilliant
talent...

With passion for angst
Warren Feeney
Christchurch Press, February 1997

James Robinson wants it all. Touch his emotional scars, his work begs as it explodes and screams, "I Don't Feel Very Good About Myself Today". At last, a show that avoids Post-modernist detachment and 90s political correctness, telling good taste where it can stick itself. "Touch My Wound" is, thankfully, an uncool exhibition. Robinson shares the gallery with SA Flanagan and although the latter is more cautious in his aesthetics, (his work in mixed media appears somewhat tentative), both artists share a passion for angst. A series of small paintings by Flanagan, "Myth Maker" and "Three Angels", define a dangerous ethereal world in which beings are violated, bashed, and trapped in the glare of a spotlight as they dive for cover in the picture plane. Robinson's work would be happy to indulge in such comfort. Painting with a barefaced dynamism, propelling ink on to soiled white surfaces, his art unfolds a tragedy and teenage anxiety that steals from all the right Expressionist sources and totters dangerously close to unbelievably bad cliché. So what saves it? Robinson's art is just too loud, hazardous, and personal to ignore. A grunge-inspired Philip Clairmont pervades "Never There... Touch My Wounds", but Robinson's painting is more than style. Amid the visual steals and swirling disorder of the canvas, phrases such as "Do you think he can paint?" and "looser" act as questions from both the artist's audience and the painter himself. Demonstrating a lack of maturity, Robinson's work has its vices. (In a number of images the paint veers dangerously towards being critically out of control.) However, the candour of this show is a reminder of why artists take up their brushes in the first place. Apparently unconcerned with the trappings of the art world, "Touch My Wound" is slovenly refreshing.

Gruesome Catalogue
Robert McDougall Art Gallery, April/May 1999

... James Robinson's He Kept Saying There Was Something Wrong With Me (1997) utilises words in an evocative and expressive manner to heighten the power of the image that they accompany. The large and ominous He that looms over the emasculated figure in this work threatens to engage further harm, while the shaken, rapidly fading phrase, 'we get home no one there.' acts as a disappearing cry for aid. The words share equal billing with the image as conveyers of the work's message.



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2002

Force of nature
Helen Watson White
Sunday Star Times, 19
May 2002

Sunday Star Times,
19 May 2002

It's hard to write an ordinary sort of review about what James Robinson (in the title to another show) calls his "weird and quirky bastard art". Words don't seem to fail Robinson, though - whether in the paintings, about the paintings, or in bastard poetic performances, such as past gigs with "experimental noise band" Creeping Jesus Shitman, or the multimedia Militant Angels Public Awareness Poetry Tour. But words are only a part of the 29-year-old artist's fighting attempt to express himself, which undoubtedly succeeds. His painting surfaces bear every possible sign of this effort, some being reworked from older canvasses - marked, textured, layered, go-over, like the urban land-base which by now doesn't look like land. Even before September 11, the tiny people in his wasteland worlds appeared lost, blown about like litter. Powerlessness personified.

In Holy War they are still tiny - like bits of paper raining down - but importantly, they are still whole; a head, a body, stick arms and legs, as primitive painters drew them on cave walls.

I was transfixed, as I was before the monumental themework Special Forces, by the extraordinarily positive force of its negative energy. A slow river of graffiti slides down the painting, between vast banks of small, pointed images - a mass of crude faces, cartoon people with no necks and phallic tongues, figures of horror, figures of fun, a church blazing out in the carpark/rubbish-heap desert of scraps of canvas stuck on like patches, CRUD ON CRUD.

Something says WE WERE HERE - an undeniable reality, much more shocking than rows of crosses in the fields of France.

The main thing about these works is that even the most abstract (such as Frag N Respawn) is alive. It has the same life-river dragging through it, if invisibly, if underground. Fragile ghosts of people past or present appear in most images, including Spiritual War and the untitled work bearing the legend I MOVE MY ARMS INTO THE SHAPE OF A PLANE. That sense of time, suggesting the "Fear of death/Fear of living" in Shape of the Sound, makes these elegies more than what Robinson calls "nebulous mind marinades".

The strange image of an agentless gun is seen in the context of a whole body of work about actions and consequences, from the point of view of those without trigger-power.

The clouds of white pasty junk in many of the paintings are certainly not just clouds. Like the title Special Forces they are, says Robinson, "intoning some power greater than ourselves (sic) shaping and forming the patterns of our life, perhaps like a storm". Storm, or river, or ongoing war, the dynamic in his art comes, he says, from his "personal sense of history and struggle". This is Expressionism - not in art books, or in the past - "a personal thing a political thing a social thing a spiritual thing a ritual thing a product thing a belief thing a process thing..." The artist's "alter ego experiment" began with his first solo exhibition in Christchurch in 1989, entitled Sick of fighting for a peace. A veteran exhibitor, and past finalist in the Wallace Art Awards, Robinson has still got plenty to say about that fight, and about the "landscape music that carries us till we fall".



1999

James Robinson
// loose

NCC Reclaimed Material Catalogue, May 2003

James Robinson is a Dunedin-based artist who has exhibited nationwide since 1989. His work includes painting, mixed media print work, drawing and etching. He has also been involved with performance art, presenting his own poetry as well as organising shows with other artists and musicians at galleries and cafes. In 1999 he exhibited at the McDougall Art Annex alongside Bill Hammond, Peter Robinson, Tony De La Tour and Dick Frizzell and in 2000 was a finalist in the Wallace Art Awards. Recently he established a connection in Melbourne with the Steven McLaughlan Gallery where his solo show in August this year is entitled *Unutterable Loud Obviousness* (Dark Mutterings From Dunedin New Zealand).

James believes it is important for artists to use whatever is at hand, and incorporate something of their everyday life into their art practice, be it as material or subject. *Untitled* is made from demolition material out of the old Wizards Video Game Parlour in Dunedin, his studio, as it was being dismantled around him. The shape of *Untitled* is cruciform, as well as referring to the figure eight symbol for infinity. The product of a fluid, spontaneous though process, the artist describes his work as a richly textured symbolic landscape, evocative of mystery and magic; a device for transcendence into a realm of beauty, love and infinite redemption.

Departure from landscapes Greymouth Evening Star, 2 April 2003

After two landscape exhibitions at the Left Bank Art Gallery, the new show will shock and challenge - one art work includes a broken chair the artist was attacked with by a lover. Dunedin's James Robinson says his latest exhibition, *Set Fire to Self - Drown*, is a legitimisation of underground creative culture. "Some people may identify with it and not fall through the cracks." An intense young man, Robinson uses two words to describe what inspired the latest exhibition. "Internal weather."

Although he is initially shocked at a question asking him to explain further ("are you serious?"), he goes on to say it is about emotions. He's been down a long bumpy road in life, he says, which noone else has driven down. One exhibit contains a picture of a friend who committed suicide, then there's the piece with the broken chair. There are also beautiful, if disturbing paintings charged with emotion. One is an album cover for a Dunedin band, which he painted as the group were actually recording their album. It's not surprising that an art gallery director said Robinson's intensity reminded him of Van Gogh, and claimed no-one had left one of his exhibitions without being stirred. *Set Fire to Self - Drown*, opens tonight at the Left Bank Art Gallery with a spoken word performance by the artist, and runs until April 22.

