

This Model World

**Travels to the Edge of
Contemporary Art**

Anthony Byrt



A whip-smart, travelling survey of contemporary New Zealand art and the global world it inhabits, ranging from Berlin to Marfa to Detroit then home to the farthest edge of the Hokianga.

In April 2011, Anthony Byrt was living in Berlin and building a career as a critic, writing about the world of contemporary art for magazines like *frieze* and *Artforum International*. Then one day his world turned upside down. A baby boy, two weeks in intensive care, and Byrt, his wife and new-born son suddenly found themselves booked on a one-way trip home to New Zealand.

This Model World is a portrait of what Byrt found when he came back. Built around hundreds of hours spent in galleries, artists' studios and on the road from Brisbane to Detroit to Venice, this is a deeply personal journey through the contemporary New Zealand art world.

It's a book about major figures like Yvonne Todd, Shane Cotton, Billy Apple, Peter Robinson, Judy Millar and Simon Denny, and emerging artists such as Luke Willis Thompson, Shannon Te Ao and Ruth Buchanan. It's about severed heads and failed cities; about hot young things and old men with a final point to prove; about looking for God and finding Edward Snowden; and it's about what it means to investigate the boundary where our bodies hit the world.

This Model World is a riveting first-person account of one author's travels to the edge of contemporary art.



Anthony Byrt is an award-winning critic and journalist. He is a regular writer for *Metro*, and contributes to the world's two leading contemporary art magazines, *Artforum International* and *frieze*. In 2013 he was Critical Studies Fellow at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, and was New Zealand's Reviewer of the Year at the 2015 Canon Media Awards. He lives in Auckland with his wife and son. This is his first book.

Contents

Prologue: The First of May	1
Clammy Pipes, and Other Monsters: Yvonne Todd	2
Luke Willis Thompson/Kalisolaite 'Uhila, The Walters Prize 2014	3
Death in Palmerston North: Shane Cotton	4
Fiona Pardington, <i>Moonlight de Sade</i> , 2010	5
Live Forever: Billy Apple	6
Steve Carr, <i>Transpiration</i> , 2014	7
Scattered Pieces: Peter Robinson	8
Shannon Te Ao, <i>two shoots that stretch far out</i> , 2013–14	9
Parallel Worlds: Judy Millar	10
Ruth Buchanan, <i>The weather, a building</i> , 2012	11
No Place to Hide: Simon Denny	12
Postscript: 4 January 2016	13
Acknowledgements	14
List of Illustrations	15
Sources and Further Reading	16



Gravitas Lite, 2012

Scattered Pieces

The first time I met Peter Robinson, he made me sing Sam Cooke's 'Chain Gang' with a group of strangers. Robinson handed out sheets of A4 with the lyrics printed on them, hit play on his iPhone, and after a few tinny opening bars, set us to work. We mumbled along and avoided each other's eyes, while he took the lead.

This happened in March 2012 on Cockatoo Island, in the middle of Sydney's harbour. Robinson was part of that year's Biennale of Sydney, his contribution a work called *Gravitas Lite*: a massive installation of polystyrene plinths and chains of varying sizes, which wrapped around and through the island's defunct machinery.

As well as being a home of Sydney's Biennale, Cockatoo is one of the city's most haunted sites. In its early days it had been a prison – a place where inmates cracked rocks from the sandstone cliffs, material that helped build Sydney's signature stone buildings. Later, it was a shipbuilding yard. 'Chain Gang', then, was Robinson's waiata for his installation and for the place: a musical parallel for the material transformation he'd performed in turning a space of forced labour into a Lilliput of restraint and entanglement. Cooke's tribute to the toughness of prison life during America's civil rights era had found another life half a world, and half a century, away.

Most of my fellow mumblers were Robinson's patrons, a group of New Zealanders who'd helped fund his massive installation. They shuffled off quickly after the song was done.

‘That seemed to go pretty well, didn’t it?’ Robinson asked me.

I muttered something in reply. In Robinson’s world, everything is a question. Everything is always something else. And everything is about hard work.

ROBINSON’S STUDIO IS in a 1970s office block in central Auckland, which he’s about to be kicked out of because the building is being converted into luxury apartments – another victim of Auckland’s gentrification. Although he shares the space with a few other artists, he takes up the most real estate, working out his large-scale installations and scatter pieces on its concrete floor.

Robinson himself is a big guy too: six foot, with a mop of black, Elvira-streaked hair. There’s a shambling delicacy to him. Catch him when he doesn’t know you’re watching and he’ll be stooped with a kind of depressive thoughtfulness. But once he starts moving his materials around, any physical clumsiness disappears. He is capable of shifting a single metal rod or lifting the edge of a piece of felt, and making the entire room change.

He’s also his own harshest critic; when we meet, he’s going through a kind of existential crisis.

‘I want to change some stuff, rethink things,’ he says. ‘Do a lot of reading. I might go underground for a while. I’m trying to work out where I’m going, what I’m doing, what things could be. I’m starting to lose faith in what I do a bit. Which is probably a good moment. It’s not a very comfortable moment. I’ll either regroup and charge straight back into it or it’ll be a change of direction.’

I ask him what he’s losing faith in.

‘It might be the process. Sitting around playing with material, kicking it around. It’s not just the work, it’s the whole enterprise of being an artist: spending so much energy, so much money on production, with very little

return. I'm a reasonably lucky artist, but I've just spent so much over so many years, and I'm really going backwards rather than forwards, financially. I need to think about that. It's probably a strange way to have this conversation. But it's a reality.'

It's easy to look at Robinson's recent career – shows in Istanbul, Sydney, Melbourne, Paris, Jakarta, feted by major curators and included in prestigious biennales around the world – and assume he's living his dream. But it's a tough grind, especially for an artist for whom political questions have always been essential. He now finds himself part of an art world system whose own political and economic motivations – not to mention questions of social and cultural equality – are increasingly hard to negotiate.

'We get caught in wanting to resist that system,' Robinson says, 'but at the same time wanting to be successful within it. It's connected to capitalism, and the split that it causes within the subject. That's interesting in terms of how to perform as an artist. That's not something my work really examines at the moment, and probably can never do on its current course.'

Robinson and I have planned to meet at Artspace on K Road, where he has a solo exhibition. But at the last minute he changes the appointment to his studio, because there's something new he wants to show me. When I arrive, the space is rammed full of stuff, like he's pulled everything he's made in the past few years out of storage and thrown it together. Felt is the dominant material: coloured squares on the floor; circles that slump where the floor and walls meet; poles wrapped in it; different coloured squares arranged in grids or stacks; tiny discs like washers; linear pieces that, from a distance, look more like drawings on the floor or the wall; and the sheets they've all been cut from – squares of fabric that might otherwise have ended up in the bin.

As well as felt, there are bent and malformed steel pipes, either industrial grey or neon-gold. Coke cans hang from thin wire or lie crushed on the floor. Finished bog rolls are propped among traditional Māori gourds. Tiny pinched pieces of aluminum pipe are scattered on the floor, like miniature versions of Warhol's *Clouds*. And everywhere, there are little figurines and

statues: kitschy geishas, samurai warriors, coconut heads, African fertility sculptures, dinky Aborigines leaning on didgeridoos. There's a gold Buddha and a Pinocchio with his nose half-extended. There's even a perfect little wharenui perched on the edge of a black felt square, like it's about to tumble into a sinkhole.

'I haven't quite come to terms with them yet,' he says of the figurines. 'They've been in my work before. They go back to what I was doing around the turn of the century. But the polemic isn't as nasty as it was in those days. They shift the scale of things. They also set up the idea of being lost in language. A sculptural language is a language on its own terms. We recognise it as such, but we can't understand it as we usually understand language. Here, that's exploded. It's as though these figures are trying to make their way through a code. But the code is scrambled in some way, and their gazes seem to be lost in something. The colour of them also seems to key into the colour of the felt. There's a relationship – a vividness.'

It's impossible to take it all in at once. It's also a welcome shift from what I'd seen as a certain politeness emerging in his recent work. Since abandoning polystyrene after the Sydney project, Robinson has used felt again and again. In it, he'd found a material with amazing optical effects – something that slips between object and image and between flatness and form, so that as we enter his installations, we feel as though we're entering a picture and a sculpture. At the same time, the felt experiments had started to feel like formal exercises, like Robinson was developing a visual vocabulary with no obvious grist or politic – just a satisfaction with its own cleverness.

Robinson has also taken the step of letting audiences interact directly with the installations, as a way of democratising making, of breaking down relational hierarchies between artist and viewer. The most substantial example of this was his contribution to the 2013 Auckland Triennial. In the Auckland Art Gallery's mezzanine, he lined up dozens of coloured felt rods, each one around 2 metres long. A team of volunteers picked these up and carried them through the city to the Auckland War Memorial Museum (more

on this project soon). Later that year, at the Dowse Museum, he let people build their own rods from small discs of felt scattered across the floor. And at Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and Artspace in Auckland, audiences were given permission to rearrange his forms in whatever configurations they liked.

It's a perfectly noble and inclusive act, but one fraught with risk. In the hands of amateur enthusiasts, Robinson's subtle, delicate arrangements are easily turned into stick figures, smiley faces and emojis.

'I'm surprised with what people do,' he says. 'I really do feel like a viewer of the audience's work. There are so many things I'd never have done myself – the way people have tied things for example, or gone around the rules. I was also surprised at how free they were – they weren't intimidated by the role or the space whatsoever.'

'In some instances [at Artspace], I found myself being disappointed by the results because they didn't subscribe to my preconception of how things should look, which was as an all-over composition in the space. They became more territorial and isolated as gestures. Then I realised there was something interesting in that. So I learned a lot about my sense of trying to be open but actually being very controlling, or having a propensity to be very controlling.'

Which is all good and well. But it doesn't change my feeling that Robinson is a sculptor who *should* take control, *should* dictate terms to us forcefully, just as he'd done in Sydney. That's why his latest jumble was such a relief. It had a bossiness. It seemed to me that with it, he was back to his best – in a space where his formal games and his deeply felt politics become inextricably tangled with each other.

ON THANKSGIVING NIGHT at the Lost Horse Saloon, beer is a dollar and a turkey dinner costs whatever you want to pay. An absurdly good-looking Texan barman, tall and blond with a tattoo crawling up his neck, looks at me



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Parallel Worlds

‘It’s a sense of the aggression, the anger, the hope, the resistance, combined with everything I see, and everything that represents those things back to me. It’s a translation point where I can communicate all of that to another . . . actually, no, sometimes I don’t give a shit about anyone else. It’s so *I* can see it. And I suppose I always have the vague hope that if I can, there might be a handful of others who do too.’

From Judy Millar’s house, you can see the curve of the earth. White’s Beach seems miles below; you can just make out people walking their dogs and scrawling marks in the sand. The house perches on stilts, flexible enough that it doesn’t blow over in the regular Tasman storms the Waitākere Ranges spare the rest of Auckland from. Out here, way down the Anawhata road, there is nothing between the house and Australia, except a wall of churning ocean.

Sitting here, looking at the view I lived with for three months, I’ve just asked Millar what she’s searching for when she paints. ‘An image that is how I really see the world, and experience it,’ she continues. ‘An image that’s able to actually carry the way I feel and exist and see and am, and to offer all of that as an available form.’

Millar is tall and thin, in her late fifties, with grey-blond hair that just reaches her shoulders and seems permanently blasted by salt and wind. Since 2002, I’ve done at least a couple of studio visits with her a year, either in Auckland or Berlin. Every one of them has been as though the conversation

from the last meeting never stopped, even if months have gone by. Millar speaks with an intense energy, and has a remarkable ability to draw tangential connections. In one recent conversation, we covered 1968 student protests, Catholicism, quantum physics, surrealism and whether Lorde is a better artist than Simon Denny – all before we got anywhere near talking about her work.

Millar had to wait until her forties to get much international traction, but is now one of New Zealand's most successful artists. These days, she splits her time between the Anawhata house and central Berlin, where she and her partner, the German painter Katharina Grosse, have converted an old grocery store, just on the eastern side of where the wall once ran, into their home.

Millar's German move wasn't just for a change of scene; it was the result of her work undergoing a major overhaul. In the 1990s, she'd been making solid, formalist paintings and showing them with her longtime dealer, Gow Langsford Gallery. But around 2001, she changed everything. It was a simple move that had massive consequences: she put a canvas on the floor, took her (extremely corrective) glasses off, and pushed paint around with her bare hands. The results veered between the extraordinarily beautiful and the downright ugly. For Millar, the difference didn't matter. Far more important was that she was finding new ways to imagine, and realise, pictorial space.

The ambiguity of these works came from their strange push-and-pull between figure and ground; it was impossible to know whether her gestures sat on top of the colour field she'd laid down or behind it. Later, she started 'drawing' more consciously – slicing into her swishy marks with rags and squeegees to create defined, although still largely non-figurative, forms.

After toiling for over twenty years, things started to take off. European dealers and curators became interested, so she started to spend more time in Berlin. This had an obvious impact on her work.

'It's gained a toughness,' she says. 'I get the train in Berlin, and a lot of people who get the train there are not doing so well. They're still struggling

with the transition from socialism to capitalism. Then there are the dog people [young homeless people or squatters who keep mongrel dogs]. And the city has a pretty bad heroin problem. When you're meeting that on a daily basis, things have to change. Like those super-saturated colour paintings at Gow Langsford ['Proof of Heaven,' shown in early 2015] – they were made in Berlin. I don't know that I would ever have used those colours here. It was almost a therapy; a way to address or escape what I saw on the train that morning.'

Her other escape is Anawhata. She has occasionally contemplated severing her ties with New Zealand. The loss of both her parents in a short space of time gave her even more reason to go and never come back. But it's her house, more than anything else, that keeps her returning.

Millar started building it in 1984. A couple of years earlier, she'd sold her first café, called Domino's, for a profit, and had used the money to buy a West Coast scrag of bush that sloped so steeply it was pretty much uninhabitable.

'Domino's was designed to be a collective,' she says. 'It was inspired by Gordon Matta-Clark's FOOD [an art-restaurant collective in 1970s New York]. We were all artists. None of us had any money, and we all had time, and we were all working in cafés for other people. So I just thought let's get together, combine our skills. I found the space and set it up, and then nobody wanted to be in a collective. They all wanted wages. So I became the boss. That was a huge disappointment to me. I understood a lot about human nature through that.'

It was also one of Auckland's first cafés to serve real coffee. 'We put espresso with vegetarian food. And it was super-cheap. It was a runaway success. We used to have queues around the block. I'd had ideas that I'd be spending the mornings in my studio, and then I'd go in there. But I never got to the studio, so after a year and a half, I sold.

'I went to New York for three months and blew a lot of the money. But I had enough left to buy the section. I'd been out to Anawhata with John Reynolds, because his parents have a place there. Something in my mind



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